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The Cowboy and the Countess

DARLENE SCALERA

Darlene Scalera

The Cowboy And The Countess

«HarperCollins»

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As a boy, Kent Coleman Landover played "K.C. Cowboy and Countess Anna" with the housekeeper's daughter, Anna Delaney. As a man, Kent drove himself to the head of his own financial empire. On the brink of worldwide expansion and an in-name-only marriage, amnesia made Kent believe he truly was K.C.–and he began desperately searching for his countess…Anna had never forgotten the young man who'd captured her heart so completely. But she hardly expected to see the billion-dollar bachelor her her doorstep…proposing! On doctor's orders, Anna agreed to play the part of K.C.'s bride, knowing she had to make him remember he was practically pledged to another–and wishing she could become Kent's real-life countess even after her fantasy's clock struck twelve.

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Содержание

Books by Darlene Scalera 7
Contents 8
Chapter One 9
Chapter Two 17
Chapter Three 25
Chapter Four 32
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 33

"Come with me, Anna," he beckoned.

"There's no cowboy named K.C. There's no Countess. There's only Kent Coleman Landover, and he most definitely isn't in love with a cleaning lady. You don't remember now, but one day, you will."

He grasped her arms. "There is a lot I don't remember. I don't remember how I made all this money or why I built a big white box of a house or why I spent my days behind a desk in a room where the windows don't open. They tell me I did all of that, and at this point, I've got to believe them, because I don't remember anything…except for one thing."

He reached for a stray strand of her hair, lifting it gently. "I remember you, Anna. You and me."

Dear Reader,

Spring is coming with all its wonderful scents and colors, and here at Mills & Boon American Romance we've got a wonderful bouquet of romances to please your every whim!

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So this March, don't forget to stop and smell the roses—and enjoy all four of our wonderful Mills & Boon American Romance titles!

Happy reading!

Melissa Jeglinski

Associate Senior Editor

The Cowboy and the Countess

Darlene Scalera

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To my children, J.J. and Ariana. You are my heart.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DARLENE SCALERA is a native New Yorker who graduated magna cum laude from Syracuse University with a degree in public communications. She worked in a variety of fields, including telecommunications and public relations, before devoting herself full-time to romance fiction writing. She was instrumental in forming the Saratoga, New York, chapter of Romance Writers of America and is a frequent speaker on romance writing at local schools, libraries, writing groups and

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Books by Darlene Scalera

MILLS & BOON AMERICAN ROMANCE
762—A MAN FOR MEGAN
807—MAN IN A MILLION
819—THE COWBOY AND THE COUNTESS

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter One

"If he's a cowboy, then I'm a kielbasa," the man declared.

"Kielbasa." The word felt full, fun on K.C.'s tongue, and he smiled. To the man at the foot of his bed, he asked, "You're a foreigner, then?"

The man looked down the length of the bed. He was squat and fierce. His cheeks were red as if burned by a fast razor, and he spoke in spasms broken by greedy gulps of air. But when K.C. looked him in the eyes, he felt the familiarity of an old friend. He liked this man.

The man attempted a smile. The effort only diminished some of the slack in his razor-scraped cheeks. "I'm not a foreigner, and you're not a cowboy. Your name is Kent—"

"Landover."

"You know your name?" Now the man smiled, his neck bulging above his shirt collar. A red dot rose on the expanded flesh, a lone pimple beheaded. Another victim of the wounding razor.

"Yessir, I know my own name."

The man glanced at the white-coated trio behind him. He looked back at K.C., his eyes rich velvet triumph.

"But everyone calls me K.C."

The man's eyes dulled.

"Now I understand your confusion about the cowboyin'. Tethered to this bed, trussed up in this get-up—" K.C. plucked at the faded front of the gown "—I hardly look like a man who can brand several hundred calves in a day and birth a few more in the night, if need be. But believe me, in here —" he flattened a palm across his chest "—there beats the heart of one of the last true wranglers."

The man looked at him, his expression glazed. He muttered several profanities. "Listen to me, you're no cowboy. You're the founder, the CEO of Landover Technology. Generation X's golden boy. The digital era's David. The youngest head honcho of a company ever to earn a Fortune 500 ranking. Cowboy?" The man's fleshy cheeks jiggled as he spoke. "Cowboy?"

One of the white-coated trio stepped forward and touched the fat-faced man's elbow.

The man turned. "You know he's Kent Landover." His voice ballooned; his body seemed to expand. He looked at the other two men in white. "You know he's Kent Landover."

The white coats were doctors, K.C. decided. The one now murmuring to the florid man had fine lines around the mouth and eyes that spoke of too many deaths and too few miracles. He held a chart in one hand and, with the other, steered the sputtering man toward the hall.

"I'm telling you, the man lying there is the same man named 1994 Man of the Year by PC Magazine. CEO of the Year by Financial World in 1996. We land this deal with Sushima Components, and that man in there will be on the cover and in the headlines of every business publication in the world. Three-fourths of the civilized world knows he's Kent Landover. Everyone…" The man halted at the door. His flushed face turned to K.C. Their gazes caught and held. "Everyone except him."

The doctor ushered the man into the hallway.

"Is he going to be okay?" K.C. asked.

One of the other doctors looked up from the bag of yellow fluid attached by a slim hose to K.C.'s arm. He smiled with already-perfected reassurance. "He'll be fine. You rest now. We'll be right back."

The doctors left, closing the door halfway. K.C. looked out the wide room window, seeing a slice of gauzy sky wedged between too many buildings. He heard the spurt and crackle of the short man's voice outside the door. That's what comes from living too close to concrete for too long, he thought.

He laid his head back against the propped pillow and closed his eyes. He saw the mountains in the bleached light of a high noon sun. He missed home. He missed Anna.

The door swung open. The man, his neck no longer inflated and now almost too thin for his large jaw, came back into the room. He smiled at K.C., but his features kept a nauseous cast.

Behind the man came a woman, her head held erect, her beauty carried like a brocaded mantle. She smiled full, colored lips at him. He nodded, courteous, curious. She was handsome, and he was intrigued but not drawn. Her beauty was too hallowed. Where was Anna?

The woman came to his bedside, her smile serene. She leaned over and touched her smooth cheek to his forehead. His brow furrowed against her glassy flesh. His skin felt tender, bruised.

"Oh, my darling." It was between a song and a sigh. The sweep of the woman's hair fell in a dark curve, curtaining K.C.'s vision so he only saw the lower half of the short man's face. The man's lips were pursed, triangling his jaw.

The woman straightened. The white-coated chorus of doctors had returned and was watching. The woman's hand lay against his cheek. "You remember me, don't you, darling?"

He looked up into bottle-green eyes, their whites iridescent with expectation. "Are you a friend of Anna's?"

The woman's touch tensed against his face. Her eyes deepened to emerald. With a slow, elegant twist of her neck, she turned to the short man at the end of the bed. "Who's Anna?"

The man shrugged. "All he told me was he's a cowboy named K.C."

The woman's head swiveled. She looked down at him. "K.C.?"

"Yes?"

Her hand made small strokes against his cheek. She was gimlet-eyed. Her teeth were tiny and glistening. "Who's Anna?"

"The woman I love."

Her hand stilled. He watched the muscles in her slim throat ripple.

"The woman you love?"

He nodded. "I'm going to marry her…if she'll have me."

The woman's smile came back less full. Her hand stroked his cheek once. "Why would she say no to you?"

"She's a countess."

"A countess?" There was a quiver in her well-modulated tone.

"And I'm an ol' cowpuncher."

"An ol' cowpuncher named K.C.," the woman repeated. She stared at him. Her smile spread soft, indulgent.

He nodded.

"Your name isn't Kent Landover?"

"In fact, ma'am, it is."

"It is?" The woman threw a glance at the man at the end of the bed.

"That's my given name—Kent Coleman Landover." He winked at the woman, pleased she looked less upset, almost happy. "K.C., for short."

The woman's smile vanished. She straightened.

"He's only been awake for a brief time," advised the doctor holding the chart. "Any family?"

"His parents divorced when Kent was in high school. Father passed away about five years ago—heart attack," the short man said.

"His mother is on her third or fourth marriage. I've lost count. She lives somewhere abroad—Denmark, Sweden, Norway," the woman said. "One of those Scandinavian countries. She sends fabulous Icelandic sweaters at Christmas."

"No brothers or sisters?"

The man and woman both shook their heads. "Only child," the woman said.

"I knew three boys grew up on the Ponderosa Ranch in Nevada. One father, three different mothers." K.C. rolled his eyes. The others stared at him.

He sat up. There was soreness when he moved, as if he'd sat too long in a cheap saddle. "I realize I must have been off my feed, doc, but I'm feeling spry now and ready to move on."

From the corner of his eye K.C. saw the woman mouthing "off my feed."

"When do you think I can move 'em up and head 'em out?"

"Move 'em up and head 'em out," the woman's lips formed.

The doctor came to the side of the bed. "How many fingers am I holding up, Kent?"

"Call me K.C. Everyone does."

The doctor nodded. "Okay. How many fingers am I holding up, K.C.?"

K.C. smiled. "Three."

The doctor touched his forehead. "Any headaches, dizziness, nausea?"

He shook his head.

The doctor pulled down the lower lid of his right eye, then his left. "Any double vision?"

"Nope. I'm ready to saddle up and be on my way."

The doctor laid his fingertips against the inside of K.C.'s wrist. "Where would you be heading?"

K.C. looked to the window and the smog-shrouded cityscape. "I'm here to find Anna."

"She lives here in L.A.?" The doctor lifted K.C.'s arm, bent it up and down at the elbow.

K.C. nodded. "Somewhere in one of those big mansions. Bel Air or Brentwood or the Hills. She's a countess."

"So you mentioned," the doctor said. "And you're here to find her?"

K.C. nodded once more.

"To ask her to marry you?"

K.C. looked around the room, at the strange faces he didn't know. Still, he could see what they were thinking. "You all think I couldn't drive nails in a snowbank, don't you?"

Blank faces looked at him.

"It's okay if you think the fodder isn't full in the silo. It's nothing I haven't thought of myself. I mean, why would someone who has everything—fine looks, intelligence, wealth, breeding, not to mention the pick of the crop—marry someone the likes of me? You're right. I'm crazy. Crazy in love with Anna. And crazy people do crazy things. So here I am, in La-La Land, to find her, to ask her to be my wife…and make me the happiest guy alive."

The woman moved back from the bed.

"I know this might not make much sense to you all—"

A choking sound came from the woman.

"But if you'll unhook me here—" he nodded toward the tube attached to his arm "—and pronounce me fine and dandy, I'll thank you for your fine care and hospitality and be on my way." He started to shift his weight off the bed.

The doctor laid a hand on his arm. "K.C., do you remember having an auto accident this morning?"

He looked at the doctor, then up at the circle of faces again. He leaned back, smiling with relief. "Is that why you all look so worried? Here I am, spouting away like a hot spring." He started to sit up once more. "Again, I'll thank you for your concern and care, but besides feeling as if a bronc got the better of me, I'm fine." He pushed back the sheet.

Again the doctor's hand pressed on his forearm. "K.C.—"

"Kent. Kent. His name is Kent." The woman's voice split the air.

K.C. looked at her anguished face. "Ma'am, I don't mean to—"

"I'm not your 'ma'am.' Good God." She came to the bed, grasped his hands. "I'm your fiancé."

He pulled back from her imploring gaze. "Ma'am, I'm sorry, but—"

"Kent," the doctor interceded, "this morning you lost control of your vehicle and ended up in an embankment off I-5. Fortunately, your air bag engaged, and you suffered a few bruises and a concussion. However, a blow to the head often results in a loss of memory, a blocking out of critical personal information."

"What're you saying, Doc?"

"You've got amnesia."

"Amnesia?"

"Most cases last only a few days or, at the most, a few weeks. The rate of recovery is often quite amazing during the first six months after the head trauma. Often the brain just needs time to recover from the impact. Impairments could begin to disappear within days. I'd like to schedule a few more tests, but preliminary indications suggest you can expect a full recovery."

K.C. looked up at the white marble woman, the full-faced short man. He looked back at the doctor. "No one else was hurt, were they?"

"No." The doctor allayed his fear. "According to the report, you were following too close behind a bus and when it braked to take the ramp, you steered right to avoid hitting it, lost control and went over the side."

"You rolled the Range Rover good a few times," the short man noted.

K.C. looked at him, studying him. "You're…?"

"I'm your business partner, Leon Skow."

"Business partner?"

Leon chuckled, his soft cheeks shaking. "We're not exactly even-Steven, but I've been with you since you started beefing up surplus PCs and selling them from your dorm room."

"And I'm your fiancé, darling," the woman said.

He looked her way.

"Hilary Fairchild." She brushed a hand across his arm. "Don't worry. I'll take care of you, and we'll get you better in no time. After all, the wedding is less than a month away."

K.C. studied the woman's beautiful face. He saw a stranger. He looked to the man. Nothing.

Business partner, fiancé, beefed-up PCs, wedding?

"I'm sorry, but there's been a mistake. You must have me confused with another Kent Landover."

The man chuckled again. "Believe me, there's only one Kent Landover."

K.C. looked to the doctor for an explanation. The doctor watched him, said nothing.

K.C. said, "Where's Anna?"

The doctor looked at the short man, the beautiful woman.

"Darling." The woman stroked his hair, but her voice was sharp. "There's no Anna."

K.C. pulled away from her touch. He grasped the doctor's arm. "What's happened to Anna?"

The doctor looked down at the hand too tight on his wrist. "Was Anna in the Range Rover with you at the time of the accident?"

"No, she was on the bus."

"On the bus?" Hilary questioned.

"She was wearing her crown."

"Wearing her—"

He didn't hear the rest. Instead, he saw Anna as he'd seen her then. First it'd been a glimpse, so fast he wasn't sure. He'd accelerated. She'd come back into focus. The tilted tiara, the wide-set eyes, the crooked grin that made him feel good just looking at it.

How long had it been since he'd last seen her? A lifetime.

Lying there in the hospital bed, he remembered—he'd been driving on the freeway, and he'd seen Anna bigger than life on a passing bus. He'd followed the bus, memory welling into emotion. Happiness, for a few short seconds, was his once more. His life contracted to a square no larger than

the narrow panel of a bus's backside. He'd seen the lights come on beneath the square, warming to red, guiding him like a beacon in a storm.

Then there'd been nothing…darkness deepening, becoming complete. Yet he hadn't been afraid. There was peace, a long, deep sigh such as he might have imagined. There was silence all around. Nothing except for his own cry, his own call.

Don't leave me, Anna.

"I saw Anna," he told the faces curved above him.

"When did you see her?" the doctor asked.

"Right before the accident."

"You remember this?"

He nodded.

"Do you remember anything else?"

"No."

The doctor glanced at the others. "Nothing?" K.C. laid his head back against the pillows. He closed his eyes.

"I remember only Anna."

HE MUST HAVE SLEPT, because when he woke it was dark, and he was alone except for the sounds of the hospital coming from the hall. The tube that had led into his arm had been removed. An untouched tray of green Jell-O, ginger ale and a covered plastic coffee cup sat on the thin table beside his bed. He sat up slowly. He was stiffer than the day after the Laramie River Rodeo when Big, Bad Blue had bucked him high, and he'd landed low.

He slid his legs over the side of the bed and stood, then sat down as a wave of dizziness curled his knees.

"Shoot." He shook his head to clear it, scolded himself with a rueful smile. "That's what you get for taking off your boots for too long."

He made his way to the bathroom. The face that stared back at him would've been more familiar with a Stetson pulled low along the brow. He had a purplish bruise on his right cheek tender to the touch, dark circles under his eyes and a swollen shape to his brow. His blond curly hair had been cut much too short. He wondered when that had happened. Had it been necessary to treat his head injury? Didn't matter, he thought, stepping back from the mirror and going to the bed. Soon enough it'd grow back. The important part was he was alive and in L.A., and so was Anna.

He sat on the edge of the bed, poured a glass of water from the plastic pitcher on the table and took a sip. He grimaced. City water. How did Anna stand it here?

He set the cup down and pushed the table away. Leaning back on the pillows, he looked at the lights of the city, thinking. People had been here earlier—nodding doctors, a pug dog of a man, a T-bone of a woman. They'd confused him with another Kent Landover who owned some big company and was engaged to marry the lady. He stretched and folded his arms behind his head, wincing as his muscles protested. He hoped they got everything straightened out, because he didn't intend to lie around here as useless as a .22 shell in a 12-gauge shotgun. He had plans.

Wide awake, he looked around the room. He could take a walk down the hall, but then one of those nurses would be in here, prodding and poking him again. There was only one lady he wanted prodding and poking him, and tomorrow he was going to find her and pledge her his heart.

His gaze landed on the small television set angled above him. He picked up the remote control on the nightstand and pressed On, muting it as the television came to life. He didn't want to alert the nurses. He flipped through the channels, stopping at an old John Wayne movie—Red River, one of his favorites. He'd seen it well over a hundred times. He leaned back against the pillows, smiling as he mouthed the dialogue.

The film broke for commercials. He was stretched out and smiling. He had John Wayne tonight. Tomorrow he'd have Anna. He was a happy man.

An ad came on for A Little Bit of Seoul on Olympic Boulevard—the best in Korean barbecue. The next commercial promised you could learn to sell real estate in your spare time. Then a woman was on the screen, tap-dancing, singing. She moved her head. The light caught the gems in her crown.

K.C. sat upright. He rose, and on his knees, crossed the bed until he was below the television set. His hand reached up slowly, shaking, as if to touch a dream. He placed it full-palm on the screen. The crowned woman did a high kick.

"Anna," he whispered.

"ANNA," MAUREEN DELANEY cried as her daughter came in the back door. Breathing heavily, Anna stopped in the doorway. Maureen took a step back.

Ronnie, sitting behind the faux walnut desk, clapped her hands to rouged cheeks. "Chickie-boom-boom, was there a rumble at Sushi Boy?"

Ignoring them both, Anna moved to the middle of the room and was about to collapse into one of the chairs angled before Ronnie's desk.

"No!" her mother cried.

Anna poised midcrouch.

"Not the crushed velour."

"Oh, doll." Ronnie's hand fanned the air. "I'm penciling you in for a steam cleaning at eleven."

Striking a wide stance, Anna exhaled a breath of exasperation. Her bangs lifted, and the wisps of hairs fallen from her hasty topknot stirred.

"Come on." Now Ronnie's wave expressed impatience. "Spill the beans. Oops! That's just a figure of speech, doll face."

She and Anna's mother burst into laughter.

Anna's lips drew together. "Mrs. Lindsay stopped me during my morning run."

"Uh-oh." Ronnie rolled her eyes.

"'Child, the boy who walks my babies couldn't make it this morning,'" Anna uttered in falsetto. "'Since you're already in the midst of your morning constitutional, couldn't the puppies keep you company?'"

Ronnie, her face cradled between her palms, said, "And?"

"And? The 'puppies' are two full-grown greyhounds with legs longer than Michael Jordan's."

"Do tell?" Ronnie's eyebrows did a Groucho Marx dance.

"It would've been easier to ride one of them."

"Bareback?"

"The 'puppies' caught sight of a stray Siamese nosing around the garbage cans out back of Phil's Fine Fish Fry, and…" Anna looked down at her oversize fuchsia T-shirt and favorite striped bike shorts. They were flecked with moist green bits she prayed were relish. A glob of white creamy stuff clung to the hem of her shirt. Please let that be mayonnaise, she prayed, staring at the shivering form.

"Go no further. We get the picture…." Ronnie eyed her. "In glorious detail. Now go upstairs and take a shower in tomato juice or something. We're the Clean Queens, not the Grunge Girls. Any minute now, someone is going to walk through that door, and what's the first thing he sees? You prancing around the place, smelling like last Friday's flounder special."

The phone rang. Ronnie whooped. "Business is booming!" She waved her hand once more, dismissing Anna, then picked up the phone. "Clean Queens. We'll give your castle the royal treatment, and you won't have to ransom the family jewels to pay for it."

"She loves saying that, doesn't she?" Anna said to her mother as she crossed the reception area. To the left was another room with a folding table, metal chairs and easel. Anna would be training several new girls in there this morning while her mother interviewed other applicants in the opposite office. It looked as if Clean Queens would survive its first month of operation.

"Are you sure you're all right, sweetheart?" her mother asked.

Anna nodded. "As soon as I shower and change."

"Go on upstairs. Take a bubble bath," her mother told her. "You've been working too hard. If you're not here in the office, you're cleaning with the afternoon and night crews."

"How else am I going to make you a rich old woman?"

Her mother smiled. "Make sure you have some breakfast. You're getting too skinny. The scones are still warm on top of the oven. We'll be fine down here. The schedule's all set, and so far, none of the girls have called in." She crossed her fingers.

Anna stopped at the doorway that connected the offices to the apartment upstairs. "So, is business booming?"

Her mother looked up from the schedule book. "Ronnie and her theatrics aside, let's just say we're building…one dust bunny at a time. But you know those TV commercials you did?"

"Yeah?"

"They've brought in three calls."

"They only started airing two nights ago." Anna gave the thumbs-up sign.

Her mother blew her a kiss. "I'll hug you later, sweetheart, when you don't smell like Charlie the Tuna."

Anna started toward the stairs, smiling. Her mother had invested everything she could in opening her own commercial and residential cleaning business. It was a huge risk, but it had always been her mother's dream. Anna wanted to see it come true, and would do anything to see that it did—from insisting her mother borrow the money Anna had been saving toward a down payment on a house to dressing up like a cross between a bag lady and a Las Vegas chorus girl, donning a rhinestone crown, grabbing a feather-duster scepter and pirouetting across a dusty sound-stage, singing the praises of the Clean Queens.

She was at the stairs when she heard the front door chimes, announcing a newcomer. Another customer, she hoped.

"Well, hello, sailor," she heard Ronnie say. "Can I help you?"

She was at the first step when she heard a voice say, "Is Anna here?"

She stopped, a wash of heat drowning her. Everything stopped. Time reversed. Dimensions narrowed. There was nothing but that voice. A voice from her dreams.

"Who-o-o-m-m-m shall I say is calling?" Ronnie would be eyeing the man, giving him a good onceover.

"Kent? Kent Landover? Is that you?"

"Ma'am?"

"It is you—little Kent Landover. You don't remember me? Of course you don't remember me. The last time you saw me you were no more than knee-high. I'm Anna's mother, Maureen…Maureen Delaney."

"Anna's mother?" First it was a question. "Anna's mother!" Now it was glee.

"Little Kent Landover." Her mother would be shaking her head in amazement. "Look at you now, all tall and handsome and grown-up."

"Ma'am, it's an honor."

"Oh, honey, no need to stand on formality. You always were such a serious little thing. Come on over here and give an old lady a hug."

Anna heard Ronnie laugh. "Yeah, sure, little Kent Landover. One of the most eligible men in America—until recently. I keep my list up-to-date, honey. Little Kent Landover waltzes into the Clean Queens, simple as you please and—"

"Oh, I'm not that Kent Landover," the man said.

Anna gripped the stair rail, her knuckles arranged in a white row.

"No? Which Kent Landover would you be?" Anna heard the upward sail of Ronnie's voice and knew the large woman was standing up now, erecting a barrier. "The poor-as-a-church-mouse illegitimate twin?"

"I'm K.C."

Anna sank down to the bottom step. Her hand, a bony relief, clung to the rail.

"My name is Kent Landover—"

"Uh-huh." Anna heard the guard in Ronnie's voice. She'd be circling the corner of the desk, bringing her substantial bulk closer to the stranger.

"But I'm not that fella who owns some company out here in California."

"No?" Ronnie had her weapons drawn and cocked.

"No, ma'am. There seems to be some confusion about that other fella and me. I'm nothing so grand. I do a little cowboyin'—"

"Cowboyin'?" The word, uttered in Ronnie's south Bronx accent, seemed to bounce off the ceiling and around the room.

On the step, Anna sat, listening. She felt the smile soft on her face, the tears soft on her skin.

"Okay, K. C. Cowboy, what brings you to the Clean Queens?" Ronnie's accent was more pronounced, her voice wary.

It was quiet, the moment before a storm. The breath holds. Wind stills. Birds go mute. Animals raise their heads, look with wonder. Anna's head rose now, too, turned toward the doorway and the man beyond.

"I've come…" The voice paused, then came back stronger, clearer. "I've come to ask Anna to be my bride."

Chapter Two

"What?" Ronnie exploded. The gale of voice filled the room and reached to where Anna sat. She didn't react. Shock had already stilled her.

"Ronnie." It was her mother's steady voice. "Perhaps our guest would like a cup of coffee or tea?"

"Sure. With one or two lumps of reality?"

"Ronnie." The calm was still there, but warning had been added.

Anna heard the man's voice again. "I understand you being upset and all, Miss Ronnie—"

It was different, deeper than the voice of Anna's childhood. It was the song of one girl's every fantasy.

She heard Ronnie's heavy tread. "Don't you 'Miss Ronnie' me, buster." She'd be shaking her finger in his face now. "Don't let my delicate demeanor fool you. Do you remember 'The Bam Bam Bomber' who led the Rocking Rollers all the way to the nationals in '79?"

Oh no, Anna thought. That remark always prefaced trouble. Mama, she prayed, break it up before Ronnie goes for a choke slam.

"No, ma'am, I can't say that I do, but I do understand your reservations regarding Anna and me."

"You better, buddy." There was the even, full thud of steps. Ronnie was stalking now.

"I could never be good enough for her."

"Damn straight."

"Her being a countess and all…"

Anna's hand rose to her open mouth.

"But I love her."

Anna closed her eyes.

"Are you trying to make fools of us, boy?"

"Ronnie, let go of his neck. Sit down," Anna's mother ordered. "Kent, you too, child, please have a seat. Let me fix you a nice cup of tea."

"Lace it with lithium," Ronnie suggested.

"Ronnie." Her mother's voice sharpened. Then it was soft again. "Kent, I'm going to make us some tea, and there's some scones baked fresh this morning. Do you remember my scones, Kent?"

"No, ma'am, I'm sorry to say I don't, but I've had a little trouble remembering some things lately."

"Don't give it no nevermind. It was a long time ago you last tasted my scones. Ronnie?" Her tone was firm again. "I'll only be a minute. I'll expect everything to run smoothly in my absence."

"Yeah, sure," Ronnie said. "Leave me to entertain lunatic."

There was a pause, then Ronnie said, "Cowboy, I'm not sure this town is big enough for the both of us."

Anna's mother came to the doorway, saw her daughter sitting on the staircase step. She closed the door and sat down beside her.

"You heard?" Her voice was a balm.

Anna nodded. She didn't know what to say, what to think.

Her mother nudged her with her elbow. "Countess." One corner of her mouth tipped up into a grin.

Anna smiled even as the tears began to slip down her face again.

"Oh, darling girl." Her mother slid her arms around her. "You love him, don't you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Anna whispered into the soft cotton of her mother's shirt.

"And he loves you."

Anna lifted her head. She saw the far-off look fill her mother's eyes and knew she'd already lost the fight. Still she had to say, "That's equally ridiculous."

"You fell in love with him when you were young, and you've loved him all this time."

"No," she protested. She laid her head on the wide square of her mother's shoulder. "We were children."

"As were your father and I," her mother remembered.

"That was different."

"I was seven. He was nine. I fell in love with him the first time I saw him. I love him still. It can happen."

She stroked her daughter's hair. "What does age matter? Not at all. Not when something's supposed to be."

Anna raised her head. "Supposed to be? Kent's not a cowboy, Mama. I'm not a countess."

Her mother's bright green eyes met her own. "That's not what he says."

Anna clicked her tongue against her teeth. "You sound as foolish as he does."

The sea-green irises twinkled. "'Children and fools cannot lie.'"

"Another Old Irish proverb?" Anna asked.

"English, I believe."

Anna looked away. "He's crazy." She could still feel her mother's eyes on her.

"I don't know why I didn't see it sooner. All those years…" Her mother's voice dropped. "Sure, I had my own sorrowful heart, but I thought your sadness was from the poverty, the shame…."

Anna looked at her mother. "I had no reason to be ashamed, Mama. Neither of us did."

She stroked Anna's cheek. "No, you were only brokenhearted. You belonged somewhere else, with someone else. You dated others, even almost married, but you couldn't, could you? You've always known it. Now I know it. And so does he. You belong to K.C."

Anna turned away from her mother's touch. She knew her mother thought of her own husband killed twenty-seven years ago. "There is no K.C."

"Yes, there is. He's standing in the other room, waiting for his countess."

She met her mother's gaze. "There's no countess."

"She's right before me."

Anna stared into those luxuriant green eyes and saw the fertile dreams beyond. A practical woman in most aspects, her mother had not escaped her ancestors' love of romantic lore and legend. She also had her own romance to remember. So fortified, she brooked no argument.

Her mother was smiling now. Tales were spinning. "You've known it, haven't you, darling… since you were a child. I understand. Now, so does he. And he's come to be with you."

"Mama, you're crazier than he is. Didn't you hear him? He thinks he's K. C. Cowboy again?"

Her mother laughed softly, her breasts, large enough to comfort the whole world, gently rising and falling. "Lord, he was such a fierce tyke. The bruises he used to get from those silver six-shooters banging his bony hips. And the time he tried to lasso his mother's prize Persian?"

Anna had to smile. "Would've hog-tied her, too, if the cook hadn't seen him out the kitchen window."

"And you, missy, wrapped in a stained linen tablecloth, a foil tiara on your head and your hair halfway down your back, red and blond as the day's beginning. No wonder he fell in love with you."

Anna stopped smiling. "Mama, I'm not a countess. He's not a cowboy."

Her mother tilted her head, regarded her daughter. "Close your eyes, Anna. See with your heart."

She stared at her mother. "Close my eyes? In a world gone crazy?"

Her mother smiled. "Love is crazy, angel." She lowered her voice to a conspirator's hush. "It's a big part of its appeal."

"Great. I've got one nut out there with a former roller derby diva. I've got another nut in here with me."

Her mother smiled serenely.

"You're actually enjoying this. Crazy isn't funny, Ma. Crazy can be dangerous."

Her mother was still smiling. "Go see him."

Beyond the door came Ronnie's voice. "Steer wrestling? That's a day in the park compared to stepping in the rink with Attila the Honey of the Trenton Turbos."

Anna stood up.

"Are you going to him now, child?"

"I'm going out there before Ronnie gets her skates and shows him her patented 'Jackhammer' jump."

"What are you going to say to him?"

She set her hands on her hips. "Hello. Long time no see. You may think you're a cowboy named K.C. and I'm a countess, but you've obviously suffered some kind of temporary break with objective reality. You're Kent Landover, head of one of the fastest-rising computer companies in the country, a self-proclaimed workaholic and a man who was quoted as saying his planned marriage to a member of the company's board, Hilary Fairchild, will be 'a consensual merger that will benefit both their professional and personal lives.'"

Her mother rested her chin on her fist. "You've been keeping a scrap book."

Anna ignored the remark. "Then I'm going to ask Mr. Landover to give me his psychiatrist's beeper number and, depending on freeway traffic, we'll have this all resolved in less than thirty minutes."

Her mother looked up at her. "This man couldn't have come a moment too soon."

Anna rolled her eyes. "I give up." She started toward the door.

Her mother called her name. She looked back.

"You've read the articles, seen the news reports about Kent?"

"How can you miss them?" she defended.

"He looks like he's a man who has everything, doesn't he?"

She shrugged. "Certainly more than most. He always had."

"Then why do you suppose a man who has it all wants only to be a cowboy in love with you?"

"I told you. He's crazy."

"Is he?"

"Yes." She reached for the doorknob, but didn't turn it.

"It's okay to be afraid, darling." Anna heard the gentle smile in her mother's voice.

She sighed. "I'm not afraid. I'm trying to determine the best way to handle this situation. How's he look?"

"Like a man besotted."

"You're not making this any easier."

"Nothing worthwhile ever is, child—especially love."

Anna leveled a stern look at her mother. "How's he look?"

Her mother chuckled. "A whole heck of a lot better than you, Countess."

Anna looked down at her clothes still covered with spots of something dark that smelled like anchovies. She picked at a suspicious yellowish-brown dried smear.

She looked back over her shoulder at her mother. "Some countess, huh?"

Her mother was still smiling that infuriating smile. "Wait until you see the cowboy."

Anna reclaimed her hold on the door handle. "For the final time, Ma. There's no countess. There's no cowboy."

She said it so convincingly, she almost believed it herself. She twisted the doorknob and opened the door as if ready for what lay on the other side.

She saw him. At the same time he saw her. He stood, but didn't step farther. She, too, stopped. She'd seen the pictures throughout the years—the publicity that came with being the son of a wealthy, well-connected family, then an entity in his own right. The photos showcased a serious child, a serious youth, and finally, a serious man. He kept his curly blond hair cropped short, his clothes conservative and tailored. She hadn't seen one picture of him smiling.

He came toward her now, his smile so broad and full of life, she had to smile back.

He took her hands in both of his. Not until his fingers found hers did she realize she was trembling.

"Anna" was all he said. Then again, "Anna." Impossible as it seemed, his smile widened even farther. Suddenly her whole world was in that smile…and went no further.

She looked up into his eyes. Those she remembered most of all. She saw again the ever-present intelligence, the piercing blue, the sky, the sea and all dreams in between.

For a moment, one mad moment, she believed he could be K.C.

She disentangled their hands, stepped back. She saw the dark green hospital scrubs he wore.

"Kent," she said.

He raised a finger to her lips. "No. K.C. Surely you remember?"

Yes, she remembered. She'd never forgotten. His finger touched her cheek now. She raised her hand and captured his touch in her own. He held to her fast.

"K.C.," she allowed. "What are you doing here?"

His gaze remained on her. "I've come for you, Anna. Marry me. Be my bride."

She heard the words as she'd heard them so many times in her imaginings. She looked into his eyes, crescent shaped, cobalt ringed. She'd say yes. She'd promise him anything. Just let him look at her like that for the rest of her life.

"Marry me, Anna."

How, with one look, one touch and a few words, had he wrapped her within his illusion? How could she see K.C. before her when he'd barely existed before, had never been more than the play of childhood, the brief, bold vision of youth?

She was shocked back to simple reality. Kent Landover was before her now. K.C. was gone, might never have been. And she was left as crazy as her mother, as crazy as this man.

She stepped back once more, putting distance between them. His hand tightened on her fingers. She saw his oversize scrubs. What she'd thought were beige loafers she now saw were foam rubber slip-ons. The uniform of the institutionalized. How had this happened? Why? When?

She looked back up into his eyes. He'd come to her. She'd help him. That she could do.

She took a step toward him. Again she wondered what had happened to him to cause such a complete break with reality.

"Kent?"

"K.C.," he softly insisted.

"K.C." She obliged. "Those are rather unusual clothes for a cowboy."

He looked down at his outfit. "Please pardon my attire, Anna," he said with such sincere formality, a bit of her heart chipped away. "I was in the hospital…"

Her heart broke.

"They wanted to keep me there. They didn't believe me when I said I felt fine, actually never better. They said my head was hurt. I've a bump, a few bruises from the blackout, but nothing to keep a man locked up."

Now there was no doubt. He had been institutionalized. The reality of it was worse than she'd imagined.

"Then I saw you on the TV…" he was saying.

Those commercials she'd done for the cleaning business.

"I couldn't find my clothes anywhere, so I borrowed these from the hospital. I'm going to return them as soon as I find mine."

"Of course." She nodded.

"I couldn't wait another minute. I've been looking for you for a long time, Anna. Ever since you left."

She tried to smile. "Now you've found me."

"We'll never be apart again, Anna. Never."

She felt the constriction building through her body. Soon it would require release in tears or screams or a blank, unseeing stare out a window for a long, still moment.

HE LOOKED INTO HER FACE, wishing her thoughts were his. He'd been too abrupt, he thought. He'd been clumsy, raw, spitting proposals at her like a sailor newly dry-docked. She was scared. He could see it in the white circles of her eyes.

He looked away from the crown the color of pale amber and the eyes he'd made large by his rush of words. He looked down, seeing his ill-fitting pajamas worn from too many washings, and felt the fool. He'd seen her, and from that moment on, there'd been nothing else. He'd come like a man possessed, single-minded in pursuit. She, so nobly bred, had been too gracious to show her real response. God, he was as simple as the land and the life he loved. She must think him crazy.

He looked back up into those white-ringed eyes that reflected his own fearful heart. "I'm not crazy."

There was no more than a blink, delicate as a fairy wing. Her mouth opened. He waited for her words bringing either condemnation or resurrection, but she said nothing. He watched the lips curve like a new bud unfurling. He didn't have to touch his own lips to know a smile had found its way there, too.

He wasn't quite sure if he'd been accepted or absolved. He wasn't certain about a lot of things. He didn't know why others kept confusing him with another man, a strange man who shared his name but nothing else. He didn't know why he thought he, no more than a cowboy, could win the affections of a countess. There were a lot of things he was uncertain about. Some moments were even downright shaky. Things he had an idea he'd once believed and understood now made no sense. He didn't understand his ease traveling through the streets of this strange city. Nor did he understand the sudden flash of images in his mind, so different from the life that he knew was his. Then, at times, there was nothing—a complete blank…save for Anna. Anna was the one constant.

"K.C." The sweet voice of his salvation pulled him from his whirl of thoughts. He looked and found the cool, green rest of her eyes. Everything that had seemed senseless made sense once more.

She gave his hand a squeeze. "Let's go have tea and Mama's scones."

She led him, and he had a sense of being very young and very happy for no reason other than being near her. A sense that those same words, these same steps in perfect rhythm, her hand held tight in his, had all happened before. Once upon a time.

"Anna?"

She stopped and turned toward him, smiling that smile he'd also seen before, would remember forever.

"I may be a little crazy."

Those eyes welled into wide rings again, the colors brightening as if wet. Her hand dropped his. As her fingers pulled away, his own still reached out. She stepped toward him, laid her cheek against his in the briefest of moments and whispered, "Me, too."

She stepped back and took the fingers that had never stopped reaching for her. She smiled. "Come on, cowboy."

HER MOTHER FED HIM SCONES and tea, and Anna excused herself to take a shower. But first she slipped back down the stairs to the reception area. Ronnie glanced up from the morning paper as Anna came into the room.

"How's our cowboy?"

"'Our' cowboy? Weren't you the one a few minutes ago sizing him up for a Square Rock Stomp?"

Ronnie smiled. "Any guy who can look at you like that when you smell of herring can't be all bad."

Anna shook her head. "Kent Landover."

She was about to flop down into a chair when Ronnie cautioned, "Not the crushed velour."

She straightened and, folding her arms, leaned against the wall, staring forward, not seeming to see.

"I didn't know your mother and you had such impressive connections." Ronnie laid thick her accent.

"Mom worked for the Landover family for four years."

"No kidding?"

"It was years ago. I was a baby. Mama wasn't much more than a child herself, nineteen. She'd met my father in her first foster home. He'd shown her the ropes, protected her. They were separated, but as soon as he could, he came for her. They married and came to California to start a new life together. He was killed in a car accident not long after I was born." Anna's voice dropped. "Mama never loved another."

She gathered memories. "After my father's death, Mama got a job on the Landovers' household staff. She was lucky. The position didn't pay much, but it included room and board. We lived on the estate, in the back, in a cottage with gingerbread trim."

Her thoughts drifted further. "Kent was about two years older than me. An only child, he'd been left to the care of nannies and nurses since he was born. His parents were busy people. His father had his businesses, his mother her charities and social intrigues. I was Kent's first real friend, and he, mine. His parents didn't approve of the friendship. I was a servant's child. They spoke to my mother, but when Kent came to our cottage, a lonely child wanting to play, Mama didn't have the heart to send him away. Sometimes, when Mama was working and Kent's parents weren't home, we'd even play at the big house. Games children play—hide-and-seek, 'Mother, May I…?'"

"Dress-up?" Ronnie asked.

Anna nodded. "It was our favorite. He was always K. C. Cowboy; I was always—"

"The Countess." Ronnie understood.

Anna had to smile, remembering. "We were happy. Mom was happy, too. She sewed curtains for the cottage, embroidered pillowcases for our beds. She'd never had a real home, but this came close. She had a small salary and a roof over our heads, and, as time went on, I didn't hear her crying so much in the night. Everything was pretty perfect. I thought it would stay that way forever. I was young."

"What happened?"

"We would play dress-up and pretend for hours. Sometimes Kent would bring things from the big house for the dress-up box—a scarf, a hat, a necklace, a bracelet. We only saw pretty colors, sparkling stones, tinted lights. I didn't know until later the jewelry was real. I didn't know its value. I kept them, thousands of dollars of precious gems, in a box in the back of my closet with a tinfoil tiara and a toy six-shooter set. When they were found, my mother was as shocked as the Landovers. I told them I didn't know the jewelry was worth so much money. I told them I'd only borrowed it for dress-up. The Landovers didn't press charges, but we had to leave immediately."

"But when Kent explained how—?"

"I never told anyone Kent had brought the jewelry. I didn't want to get him into trouble. I was afraid they wouldn't let him have any more friends, and he'd be all alone again, like he was before I came. I was five. He was seven.

"We had each other. The rest of the world was ruled by adults who decided what had happened and what would be done. We were only children."

Her throat tightened. "I never got a chance to say goodbye."

Ronnie's eyes widened. "Hold on. The last time you saw this guy, you were five?"

Anna nodded.

"And he walks in here this morning and proposes marriage?" Ronnie shook her head. "He's cute, but he's got to be crazy."

"He said he'd come from the hospital. The back of his shirt says Property of UCLA Medical Center. I came down to check if there was something about an accident or a missing person in the paper this morning. You didn't see anything, did you?"

"Yeah, right here, on the first page of the business section—Kent Landover Goes Loony Tunes."

"I'm only trying to figure this out."

"Honey, if something did happen, they're not going to issue a press release and start a panicked sell-off of Landover Tech stock. I'd say start with UCLA."

"I suppose they might be able to explain everything." Anna sighed. "I'm not sure I want to know. Kent Landover…crazy?"

"I've seen crazier on Hollywood Boulevard in broad daylight," Ronnie said as she went back to scanning the paper. "Maybe he didn't escape from the loony bin. Maybe he got a batch of mad cow beef. Wait—" Ronnie's finger stopped halfway down the newspaper page. "There's something here about Landover Technology."

"What?" Anna rounded the desk and looked over Ronnie's shoulder.

"Never mind. Nothing helpful. Speculation about a possible partnership with some Asian company," Ronnie said, reading. She glanced up at Anna. "You think our cowboy upstairs is interested?"

She shook her head. "Not at the moment."

They heard the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. As the back door to the reception area opened, Maureen was saying, "Are you sure you don't want to lie down a spell, K.C.? Your body is still recovering from your accident yesterday."

"He only lost it yesterday?" Ronnie whispered to Anna. "And the first thing he does is come looking for you? Can you say 'stalker'?"

"S-s-s-h-h!" Anna hushed her.

Kent was holding the door open for Anna's mother. "Ma'am," he said to her, "I don't believe I've ever felt better in my entire life." He turned and smiled at Anna.

"Tea and scones." He looked toward the window. "Sunshine." His gaze went back to Anna. "And finding the sweetest little gal ever to set foot down on God's good earth. That's all an ailing man needs."

Anna mustered a wan smile.

"Whoa, cowboy." Ronnie laughed. "You sure do know how to shoot the—"

"Ronnie." Maureen cut her off. She looked at the two women. "Anna, you haven't even taken a shower yet? The new girls will be here for orientation in thirty minutes. I would prefer my head trainer doesn't smell like fish."

"I was on my way…but then…" She paused, saw Kent eyeing the monitor on the desk. "Ronnie needed help…rebooting the computer."

"Rebooting?" Kent walked over to the desk. "I've heard of reshoeing, but never rebooting." He stood next to her, stared down at the computer screen.

"Come on," Ronnie protested. "You practically invented—"

"You don't know much about computers, K.C.?" Anna interrupted.

He was still studying the screen. "Tell you the truth, darn fangled things scare me to death."

Anna looked at Ronnie.

Ronnie pantomimed picking up a phone and dialing. “Call the hospital pronto,” she mouthed.

Chapter Three

Anna pulled the quilt up closer to Kent's throat. Despite his protests, fatigue had overcome him by midafternoon, and he'd relented to Maureen's urgings to "get a little rest." Anna came upstairs to check on him ten minutes later, and he was already asleep, his lips curved, smiling at his dreams.

Free from watching eyes, she stared at his face, resisting the urge to touch the cheek dark with a day's beard. Her heart rose and fell with the movement of his chest. How long had she dreamed one day he'd walk through her door, throw his arms around her and carry her off to a world of their own? How many hours had she imagined watching him as she watched him now, seeing him sleep and knowing his dreams would be of her? How long had the thought of him formed the foundation of her everyday existence?

Forever, her heart whispered.

Her hand rose, her fingertips hovering where his brow met blond curls beginning. The brow was almost smooth now, padded by a slight swell. The long-formed furrows were no more than thin lines. She saw a bruise blending beneath the day's beard.

Whether he was crazy or not, she'd like to think she'd brought him happiness for brief moments. For he hadn't been happy. She knew. She'd seen him happy once. She hadn't seen the same light in his eyes for a long time. At first she'd thought it was the grainy newsprint or the artificial pose of a publicity shot. But gradually she'd realized it wasn't the picture. It was the man. There was no joy in his features.

Until today.

So she sat inches from the only man she'd ever loved and hoped these short hours together were hours of happiness. She couldn't, didn't dare to hope for more. For those eyes, closed now, would one day open and no longer see K. C. Cowboy, no longer see Countess Anna. They'd see Kent Coleman Landover, CEO, board chairman. They'd see Anna Delaney, clean queen. One day the man would wake.

Their worlds had met, aligned once, a long time ago, when they were both unaware of bloodlines or bank accounts. It had ended swiftly. It would end again. The first time, she hadn't known, and so could be forgiven.

The second time would be pure foolishness.

She rose wearily, suddenly tired herself. She'd postponed calling the hospital, using the excuse of the morning orientation session, then the welcome flurry of phone inquiries. She'd been stalling for time. She left Kent still sleeping, still smiling.

She went into the downstairs conference room, shut the door and dialed. As an electronic voice listed her choice of options, she realized she was uncertain whom she should talk to. Given the public and professional interest surrounding Kent, one word to the wrong person and she risked damaging his reputation and the credibility of his company.

She disconnected and stared down at the receiver. Should she call his office? The company's powers-that-be must be aware of Kent's current condition, and, for the good of the company if nothing else, could be counted on for discretion. The receiver's dial tone began to beep. She punched in Directory Assistance and got the number for Landover Technology.

She asked to be connected to Kent Landover's office, hoping to speak to whoever was steering the ship while the captain played cowboy. When a woman answered, "Mr. Landover's office," Anna gave her name and asked to speak to him. The woman hesitated, then asked what the call was in reference to.

Anna simply said, "K.C."

A man's voice came on the line immediately. "What'd you say your first name was?"

"Anna."

The man moaned. “The countess?”

She was uncertain how to reply.

“This just keeps getting better and better.”

“Who am I speaking to?” Anna asked.

“No. Who am I speaking to?” the man countered.

“I told you my name is Anna Delaney—”

“The countess?”

“No, well, not exactly.”

“This is wonderful. This is rich. Miriam?” the man yelled. Anna pulled the phone away from her ear. “Where’s my Tagamet?”

Without taking a breath, the man demanded, “What exactly is the nature of your current relationship with Kent Landover?”

“I don’t have a current relationship with Kent Landover—”

“But you did?”

“Yes…once…but it was a very long time ago.”

“What was it? A back-seat session in the limo after your coming-out ball? A fling in between semesters at Stanford? That weekend conference in Tahoe? Miriam, the Tagamet!”

Anna struggled to keep her tone controlled. “I’d like to speak to someone else, please.”

“No, sister. I’m your best bet. First of all, only a handful of others know about this situation, but they all have valid incentives to want to keep it that way. However, I doubt the motives of a one-night stand called The Countess. Unless you can fax me the family tree, I say you’re not even royalty.”

“I’m not.” Anna could almost hear the man’s blood pressure rising. “I’m also not a one-night stand.”

“Ha! Listen, lady, I don’t care what kind of relationship you had with Kent. In fact, I don’t even want to know, but if it could threaten the reputation of Kent Landover and this company, I’ll make it my business to know. I’ll dig up every time you so much as crossed against the light if I have to. Then try to go public with the story of your meaningless little affair with Kent. Just try. Do you really think they’ll listen to someone who goes by the name The Countess?”

“Probably not.”

“Probably…not.” She’d stopped the man cold. “Still, you’re still planning to go to the papers with your story?”

“Of course not.”

“Of course…not,” he parroted again, puzzled. “What do you want, then?”

“I called to tell you that Mr. Landover is here with me.”

“Good God!” His voice burst through the speaker. “You’ve kidnapped him.”

Anna waited a second, then put the phone back to her ear.

The man was still talking, threatening. “…and I’ll hunt you down and personally throttle you with—”

“I did not kidnap Mr. Landover.” Anna made each word distinct. Her initial indignation, however, was tempered by the concern she heard in the man’s voice.

“No, he just signed himself out of the hospital and walked in your door this morning?”

“Is that what the hospital told you? When did they start letting patients sign themselves out of the psychiatric ward?”

“Psychiatric ward?” The phone in Anna’s hand vibrated. “He wasn’t in the psychiatric ward. He’s not crazy.”

“I see.” The more enraged the man’s voice became, the calmer Anna kept her responses. “Then the cowboy thing is a midlife career change?”

There was a pause, then the man said, “Kent Landover had an accident yesterday. He swerved to avoid hitting a bus and lost control of his vehicle. Fortunately, he only suffered a concussion. Unfortunately, as a result of the head injury, he has amnesia.”

“Amnesia.” She said it once, then twice more as if the word had magical powers. “That’s wonderful.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“He’s not crazy?”

“Believe me, Kent Landover is the sanest, most sensible man I know, and I can assure you, and the doctors can assure you, he’ll return to that sane, sensible man any minute now. But until then, he believes he’s a cowboy named K.C. in love with a countess named Anna.”

“I know.” She spoke quietly.

“Ms…?”

“Delaney,” she again filled in.

“Ms. Delaney, my name is Leon Skow. I’m executive vice president and one of the original investors in Landover Technology. I’m also Kent’s friend. I’m beginning to think you are, too. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then maybe you’d like to tell me how you fit into all this?”

Leon listened in rare silence as she explained everything. He didn’t speak again until she was at the part when she’d decided to call Landover Tech instead of the UCLA Medical Center.

“How’d you know he’d come from the medical center?”

“Their name was stamped on his scrubs.”

“He’s wearing scrubs?”

“And foam rubber slippers.”

“He walked through the streets of L.A. like that?”

“I’m sure no one even noticed. After all, this is L.A.”

“Do you know if he’s talked to anyone else besides you?”

“My mother and Ronnie were here when he came in this morning.”

Leon moaned.

“Don’t worry,” she assured him. “My mother doesn’t think he’s crazy. She thinks he’s finally come to his senses. After some initial resistance, I think he’s charmed Ronnie, also.”

“Who’s Ronnie? Your boyfriend?”

“No, Ronnie’s our receptionist. Her real name is Veronica, but ‘Ronnie, the Bam Bam Bomber’ played better in the roller derby circuit.”

“Exactly what kind of a business do you run, Ms. Delaney?”

“Call me Anna. My mother just opened a cleaning service. The Clean Queens. Perhaps you’ve heard of us?”

There was silence, then Leon was chuckling. “I think I’ve heard of you.”

“Really? We wanted a name that’d attract attention.”

“I think you accomplished that.”

“We’ve been advertising, of course. Newspapers, a billboard, couple of late-night TV spots—”

“Buses?” Leon asked.

“You’ve seen the ads?”

“Not me. Someone else.”

“We’re trying to hit the ground running, if you know what I mean.”

“These ads?” Leon asked. “They show a woman with a crown?”

“I’ve got a feather-duster scepter, too.”

“You’re the woman in the ads?”

“As a former roller derby champion, Ronnie thought it was beneath her dignity.”

"Now I understand." Leon relayed to Anna everything Kent had remembered right before the accident.

"Seeing you on the back of the bus must've triggered some long-buried memory in his mind," he concluded. "I wouldn't even be surprised if now that he's seen you, his memory comes back. What's he doing now?"

"Sleeping."

"Sleeping? Good. Sleep is good. Why, he could wake up right this very second and be back to his old self. And all this nonsense will be over."

Anna heard the hope in Leon's voice.

"Any minute now, everything could be back to normal. Give me your address, and I'll be right over to get him."

She recited her address.

"And Anna," Leon cautioned before hanging up, "keep an eye on him. The CEO of Landover Technology wandering about L.A. in pajamas and slippers isn't exactly the image the company wants to project."

She promised, hung up the phone and went out to the reception area. Ronnie was taking a call. Anna's mother was on-site with a new group of girls. Anna started toward the stairs.

At the doorway, she heard Ronnie say, "How's our cowboy?"

Anna turned around. "I spoke with a vice president at Landover Technology. Kent had a car accident yesterday. He has amnesia."

"Amnesia?"

Anna nodded. "Right before the accident he saw me in a Clean Queens ad. Seeing the ad, then taking the blow to his head somehow altered his memory. When he woke up, he believed K. C. Cowboy and the Countess were real. It makes perfect sense."

"I suppose—"

"Of course it does." She wasn't going to allow any alternative speculations. She'd already heard enough nonsense about destiny and fate and the power of true love.

"The man has a big bump on his head. It's as simple as that." She started again toward the stairs, ending the discussion. She made her steps on the stairs quick and light.

He was still sleeping, smiling. Again she pulled the quilt up to his neck, even though she knew the gesture was done more for her than him. The comfortably warm temperature in the room made any covers unnecessary. She would go now. Soon, so would he.

She had even taken a step when his hand closed around her wrist and pulled her back, landing her in the curve of his resting body, his mouth meeting hers in a movement fluid, fine, like the first taste of wind.

Another's breath, another's being, one she had longed for her whole life, found her and filled her. She felt her lips widen, her need expanding, grasping. He touched his tongue to her, and her need breathed, ballooned, banishing all else. Reason, protest, rationale, all to blackness.

She went to him, pressing close to the reclining angle of his body, feeling the warmth of his body through the thin shirt. She lay full on the hard relief of his chest, feeling the sheer solidness of him, reveling in the cocoon of his arms. Hold me, she prayed, even then, in the delirium of her desire, hearing the folly of her thoughts. Still, her incantation played: Don't let me go. Don't let me go.

She bid his tongue into her mouth, the press of her body matching the press of her desire. Her hands found his face. As she touched the day-old beard shadowing his cheeks, she smiled beneath the circle of his lips. Her fingertips feathered across his forehead, arced across his eyes closed to the world. There was only her; there was only him. She drew her fingertip across one blond brow, then the other, needing to touch, to feel, to remember.

Her hands moved on, touching each temple, the beginning border of thick curls. One hand threaded through the wave to curve about that magnificent blond crown. The other passed again across his forehead, feeling the slight swell of skin there, remembering, remembering too much.

She sat up. Her hands touched him a second longer as if her responses had slowed, and her very body was denying her demands. She stood up, angry only with herself. She turned her back to him. Her eyes closed, seeking once more the blackness, but this time, the blackness of complete control.

It came, so that when he stood and touched her back, she was able to silently step away.

"Anna?"

Such a sweet voice, she thought. She alone could hear the child in it. The child she had known. Sometimes before, when there had been only pictures to indulge her foolish fantasies, she had looked hard, seeking the child. Beneath the sharp lines of tailored suits, the determined angles of his profile, the slashes drawn across his brow, slanting down his cheeks, she looked and there was the child. She would peer closely, remembering the boy, the smile willing, the body knobby and awkward before the hardness and denial had drawn it up stiff. She remembered herself and him and the happiness they alone believed possible.

And now, finally, although it made no sense and would be short-lived, so had he. It was enough to allow her to smile and, smiling still, turn and face him.

She hadn't been prepared for the confusion, the despair she saw on his face. His hands were lifted to her, offering, entreating.

"Anna, I love you. Is it wrong?"

She took those hands in hers, but when he began to step toward her, she tightened her hold, halting him.

"Let's sit down," she said, leading him back to the couch still warm from their presence.

"Kent—" she began.

"K.C." he insisted.

"K.C." she started again, concentrating on his face, keeping her voice kind, "I spoke with the vice president of Landover Technology a little while ago."

He looked at her, puzzled.

"Leon," she said. "Leon Skow."

His brow wrinkled. "Leon," he murmured. "Short guy? Talks fast?"

She laughed. "I've never seen him in person, but he does talk fast."

He smiled. "Bit abrupt but a nice enough fella. I met him yesterday at the hospital."

"You remember?"

"Sure, he was there with some dark-haired woman." He smiled again as he remembered. "They were so confused."

"They were confused?"

He nodded. "They thought I was some other guy named Kent Landover. Some big shot here in L.A. who owns that company you mentioned."

"Landover Technology."

"That's it. He must be pretty rich."

"He is," she confirmed.

"You know him?"

She looked into the blue wash of his eyes, so clear and light, they seemed to spill silver.

"Kent…"

His eyes clouded to the color of shadows on snow.

"Anna, we need to talk about us," he said. "Not these strangers."

"They aren't strangers, Kent."

Despite the tight hold she had on his hands, he pulled free. "K.C., Anna," he pleaded. "I'm K.C."

"Leon told me you had an accident yesterday."

"I told you that, too." He stood and went to the window as she'd done only moments ago. It was his time to turn his back.

"That's right, you did. You said you hurt your head but you're fine now."

"I wasn't lying to you." Small clouds formed as his breath touched the glass. "I am fine."

She stood up, took a step toward him. "Do you remember the doctors saying you had amnesia?"

He turned. "I know you're worried, but there's nothing wrong with me, Anna. I love you. I can take care of you and make you happy."

He came to her, placing his hands on her shoulders. She looked into the silver sheen of his eyes. "Believe in me, Anna. Believe in us."

She did believe, she thought. She always had.

They stood together, the belief in themselves and what could be full in their hearts. In that moment, it was possible. Everything was possible. A computer wizard could be a wrangler. A cleaning girl could be a countess. If they believed…

"A-n-n-n-a!" Ronnie called from below. "Some people are here to see you."

She received the summons with a smile, knowing she'd been saved. She and Kent walked downstairs, still hand in hand, their descent unhurried. The ground level beckoned, but Anna's steps remained slow and measured. She would reach the flat surface soon enough.

She heard Leon even before they reached the reception room.

"Within a year, you're going to want triple the megabytes on this baby," he was telling Ronnie as he examined the back of her computer's central unit. "What speed modem do you have?"

A beautiful brunette, perched on the edge of one of the red velour chairs, jumped up.

"Kent!"

Anna recognized the woman coming toward them as Kent's fiancé. The woman scanned Kent's outfit. She hesitated. Her smile dissolved.

Leon looked up. "Buddy!" He came toward Kent, arms outstretched. "Out stalking the streets, huh? I don't blame you…not after I heard it was chipped beef on toast day at the hospital."

Leon embraced him in a back-patting hug. Kent stood, body stiff. He looked from Leon to Hilary.

"What're you doing here?" he asked. "I explained everything to you yesterday. I'm not the man you think I am."

Leon glanced at Anna.

"I called them," she said.

Kent looked at her. "Why?"

"They're very worried about you."

He glanced at Leon and Hilary again, then back at Anna.

"They're your friends. You just don't remember them."

Kent shook his head. "No, these people don't know me. Not like you do, Anna."

"You remember them with you yesterday in the hospital, don't you?"

Kent looked for a long moment at Leon and Hilary. He nodded.

"Do you remember the doctor talking about amnesia?" Leon asked.

Kent nodded, still looking at Leon and Hilary.

"Do you remember him saying the blow to your head caused a temporary memory loss?" Hilary asked.

Again he nodded.

"But there's no reason you won't fully recover in a few weeks," Anna said too brightly. "You'll be your ol' self again in no time…and everything won't seem so confusing."

Kent shifted his gaze to her. "I'm not confused, Anna."

"You left the hospital before the doctors could perform necessary tests," Leon pointed out. "They need to take X rays to determine your condition."

"My condition?"

"But all those tests can be done on an outpatient basis, darling," Hilary added. "However, you do need rest to recover fully. That the doctor was very adamant about. So we've come to take you home." She took a tentative step toward him.

"There's nothing wrong with me."

"Probably not," Anna said. The cheerleader smile had become frozen on her face. "But this way, you'll be sure."

He looked down at her. "You're worried, too?"

She nodded. Her throat had grown too tight to speak.

"You think I should go with these people?"

She swallowed hard. "You don't remember them now, but you will. They're your friends."

Kent looked about the room. "I'll go," he said. "Only because this seems a way to resolve this mix-up once and for all."

"Good choice," Leon said.

But Kent was looking at Anna. "I'll be back for you." He bent down swiftly and kissed her hard on the lips. His mouth slid to her cheek. "I'll be back," he whispered against the yield of flesh, the opening of pores.

He pulled away, turned to the two others. "Let's go."

They walked to the door. He turned only once. He looked at her.

Sound welled within her, climbed up her throat. Her mouth opened, her lips drew back. The tendons in her throat contracted. Yet no sound came.

Then he was gone.

Her mouth closed. Her lips met, their tight line echoed in her flat stare, the erect, still way she stood.

The first time, she hadn't been given the chance to say goodbye. The second time, she'd been too much the coward.

Chapter Four

The Lexus came to another upward concrete curve. Centrifugal force pulled K.C. toward the latched door. The seat belt pushed against his chest. Hilary sat strapped beside him. She gave him a wide smile, her teeth white pearls echoed in the beads wrapped around her throat.

K.C. turned his head and saw the shiny skeleton of L.A. below. Soaring bends of concrete arched over one another, while others seeped ground-level—supine planes of highway meeting, then moving on, smooth, glossy with traffic.

The car crested the incline. Leon braked hard, throwing K.C. forward. Before them was a white, sterile structure, frozen even in the strong L.A. shimmer.

K.C. studied the building. The words cold, clinical came to his mind. Where had they brought him? Why? He had agreed to undergo the recommended tests, but it was his understanding they were to be done at the UCLA Medical Center. The fortress before him, with its blank walls and flat top, had more the look of a prison.

He glanced at Hilary, seeing her white smile. He looked front, seeing the flushed ripple of skin rimming the back of Leon's collar.

As if feeling eyes upon him, Leon twisted around and grinned at K.C. from over the seat's leather curve. "Here we are."

K.C. looked to the low, white rise before them, then back at his escorts. Nothing looked familiar.

Hilary laid a cool palm on his forearm. "Shall we go inside, darling?"

He stepped out of the car into the thinned air and walked with Hilary and Leon to the white box of a building, its corners sharpened by the sun's albino sheen.

Inside was as unrelieved as the outside. Great walls of unbroken white, cool, uncovered floors of pale maple, broad, boxy furniture. No baseboards, no moldings, no lamps, no drapes. Everything had been stripped to its barest possibilities.

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