

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

*Love Inspired*

# Waiting Out the Storm

Ruth Logan Herne



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# **Waiting Out the Storm**

«HarperCollins»

**Herne R. L.**

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When family tragedy strikes, Sarah Slocum steps in as guardian to her two nieces and nephew. But raising children isn't like raising sheep, and the beautiful shepherd soon finds herself in over her head. Who'd have guessed that new neighbor Craig Macklin would jump in to lend a hand? Craig's always held a grudge against Slocums—Sarah included. Now the handsome local vet is helping with her livestock, giving her young nephew a job and smiling at her every chance he gets. Sarah must decide whether she can trust Craig—and God's plan—and allow him into her family.

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## **“I’ve never met anyone like you, Sarah.”**

Craig extended his hand. She placed hers in it. He invaded her space, inhaled and smiled. “Your perfume. Meadow Romance.”

“You remembered.”

“Couldn’t possibly forget.”

Sarah stepped ahead of him, then turned and caught him appreciating the view. Her heart stuttered and his grin made her feel young. Pretty. She had no clue what to say or how to react.

Then she noticed the amazing smells wafting from the kitchen. “You’re cooking? Really?”

“I said I would.”

Despite her internal admonition, her heart leaped at his promise to spend time with her. She slanted him a quiet look. “If you cook, I’ll clean.”

“Promise?”

Craig’s expression said he was two steps ahead of her in a game she’d never played. But she was beginning to like being on the board. “Promise.”

## **RUTH LOGAN HERNE**

Born into poverty, Ruth puts great stock in one of her favorite Ben Franklinisms: “Having been poor is no shame. Being ashamed of it is.” With God-given appreciation for the amazing opportunities abounding in our land, Ruth finds simple gifts in the everyday blessings of smudge-faced small children, bright flowers, fresh baked goods, good friends, family, puppies and higher education. She believes a good woman should never fear dirt, snakes or spiders, all of which like to infest her aged farmhouse, necessitating a good pair of tongs for extracting the snakes, a flat-bottomed shoe for the spiders and the dirt....

Simply put, she’s learned that some things aren’t worth fretting about! If you laugh in the face of dust and love to talk about God, men, romance, great shoes and wonderful food, feel free to contact Ruth through her Web site at [www.ruthloganherne.com](http://www.ruthloganherne.com).

## **Waiting Out the Storm**

### **Ruth Logan Herne**



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

—James 2:15–17

To my earthly favorite fisherman, my husband, Dave, who glimpsed the woman within the girl....

And married her anyway.

And to Helen Dunn and her family, whose lives were touched by sadness at a young age. If only there'd been an Aunt Sarah around back then.

God bless you and keep you, Helen.



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## Chapter One

Dr. Craig Macklin saw nothing but the massive creature before him, a huge, white and hairy Maremma guard dog beleaguered by a face full of porcupine quills. The obvious suffering in the dog's dark eyes implored Craig to help.

Craig squatted to examine the embedded bristles. The animal's curiosity had pushed him beyond caution. The face full of quills—a nasty lesson learned. Porcupines were best left alone.

Murmuring to the shaggy white canine, Craig positioned the adjustable light and peered into the Maremma's face. The dog's whimper made Craig's decision easy. "I'll have to put him under for a few minutes. The depth and quantity make it tough to handle without a tranquilizer. I'd be causing him a lot of pain otherwise. What's his name?" Turning, Craig looked at the owner for the first time. Sarah Slocum.

Well. That explained Julie's initial hesitance, the concern he'd heard when his assistant summoned him. But his veterinary partner had left for the day and Craig was here. That left no choice but to treat Sarah's dog.

Her face washed pale under rich tones. Eyes as dark and deep as the dog's stayed trained on the beast's muzzle. She didn't make eye contact with Craig. "Gino. From Sofia's last litter." She emitted a half sigh, half shudder as the dog whined. She stepped forward, crooning, her melodic tone soothing the animal much as a mother would a small child.

Julie watched as if expecting him to do—what? Scream? Shout? Berate the woman before him for her genealogy and refuse to treat her dog?

He wouldn't do that. But his medical duties didn't mean he had to go out of his way to be nice, either.

There was a reason he avoided Slocums. A real good one. The thought of the criminal history between their families tightened Craig's jaw. Sarah's older brother had pioneered a Ponzi scheme, bilking a fair share of locals out of their hard-earned money, including his grandparents. Grams and Gramps Macklin had invested everything in Tom Slocum's guaranteed-returns package, and lost it all when Tom's misappropriation was discovered. Gramps had passed on over a year ago, but Grams was living out her later years dependent on others' kindness, with nothing but small Social Security checks to call her own. A tough old bird, Gramps used to call her, and he was right, but strong people have a hard time accepting handouts. Charity. Grams was no exception.

A true craven, Tom spared New York State the cost of a trial by taking his own life, leaving a wife and three young kids to sweep up the remnants of his actions.

Sarah had established a farm nearby. Goats? Sheep? Something wool-bearing, cleft-footed and ridiculously stupid. In Craig's estimation, the description applied unilaterally. Al though he treated a wide range in a country animal practice, he'd developed favorites. Cattle. Horses. Dogs. Cats. Even pigs were a step up from sheep. At least pigs were intelligent. Sheep? Other end of the spectrum, entirely. No one in their right mind ate mutton, did they?

Hank Townsend, the senior veterinary partner, generally handled Sarah's veterinary needs, allowing Craig a wide berth. But he wasn't there, and Craig couldn't ignore the besieged dog. He glanced at Sarah. "You squeamish?" The question came out harsher than intended. A lot of people handled their own pain better than that of a loved one, including pets.

Julie stepped forward. "I can stay, Craig. I'll just call Glenn. He'll understand." Julie had a date tonight. Craig knew that because she'd chattered about it nonstop. Ralph, the other vet tech, had left over an hour before. And Maremmas...

Craig kept his gaze on Sarah, noting her lowered eyes. The dark sweep of lashes against honey-toned cheeks. High cheeks, at that, smooth and unblemished, not a freckle or mole in sight. "I know

you'd stay, but Maremmas are singular creatures. They're bred to identify with their owner. They don't shift allegiance readily."

"I'll help."

Sarah's lack of inflection offered nothing. He eyed her, appraising, noting the air of capability belying her small size, then jerked his head toward the door. "Head out, Julie. We'll be fine."

"You're sure?" At his nod, Julie moved back. "Thanks, Craig. I owe you."

"No problem." Craig prepared the anesthetic as he spoke, studying the animal scale. "Ninety-six," he observed, glancing up.

Sarah nodded, jaw set.

Julie turned, then swung back. "Bagels in the morning?"

"With garden vegetables cream cheese."

"Can do." She shifted an uneasy glance from Craig to Sarah, then left, her footsteps soft against the tiled floor.

Turning full attention to the suffering dog, Craig bent. "Sorry, fella. I'll be quick."

As Craig administered the medication, Sarah eased small, capable hands down the dog's ruff, her tawny skin a contrast to the dog's white coat. She whispered to the dog, occasionally dropping her face to the thick fur, nuzzling. She seemed oblivious to Craig, which was probably best. Small talk options were limited. Her family?

No.

His?

Ditto.

Her farm?

Not if he wanted to be anything construed as sociable. The finer points of sheep were lost on Craig, and lamb wasn't a dish his Irish mother offered except at Easter.

That left the weather. Or...

"Beautiful dog." Craig eyed the Maremma with a hint of envy, remembering his Lab's youth. Rocket was nearing fifteen now, slow to rise, and mostly deaf. Old age didn't go easy on big dogs, and his barrel-chested chocolate Lab with a graying muzzle was no exception. "Yes."

She wasn't giving him much to work with, but maybe a quiet surgical intervention was better than empty words. Head bent, Craig snipped the quill ends with surgical scissors. Seeing her look of question, he explained, "Cutting the ends releases air pressure, making removal easier. Less painful."

"But he's under."

Her stoic tone caricatured Native Americans, her deep voice calm and unemotional. Craig nodded. "He wouldn't feel it now, but withdrawing the quills with the pressure would make the punctures more painful during recovery. The holes have to get larger to withdraw the spines if I don't cut them."

"Oh."

Silence stretched again, the passing seconds marking time from the old analog wall clock. Tick. Tick. Tick. "How old is Gino?"

Sarah's long, dark braid fell across her cheek as she soothed the dog. Her mother had been a Native American mix, Craig remembered, though he'd never met her. She'd died, when? Twelve years back, give or take. Long enough to have her self-absorbed stepsons grown and gone, while Sarah would have been a teenager.

At least Peg Slocum hadn't lived to feel the shame of Tom Jr.'s crimes. Craig thinned his lips, concentrating on the sensitive mouth of the Italian guard dog. The uncomfortable recovery could enervate the young dog, but he should be fine in the long run.

"Ten months. Nearly eleven."

Her answer took so long, Craig nearly forgot the question. "Did you rebreed his mother?"

"Next time."

“Must make it interesting during heat cycles.” Craig eyed the dense mass of Gino and envisioned his sire. Substantial, like the son, and probably difficult to discourage when a nearby female was in heat.

“Neighbors take him.”

“I see.”

His cell phone vibrated. He glanced at the numerical page and bit back a twinge of guilt when Maggie James’ number flashed in the small display.

He’d dated the local nurse several times over the winter, making her what? The third nurse he’d dated? Fourth, he realized. Amy, Kayla, Brianna and Maggie. Hadn’t his buddy Marc joked that the hospital installed a new warning system designed to alert the female staff when he was on site? Very funny.

He’d ended the short-lived relationship after the Maple Fest. What should have been a fun late-winter day had been relegated to shopping indoor craft booths because Maggie hadn’t dressed warmly enough for the outdoor festival, more concerned with her outfit than the event.

Craig liked people. He embraced country life, the rigors of treating animals in all kinds of conditions. He felt equally at home in office or barn.

But not sheep barns.

Employing gentle twists and flicks, he withdrew the last barbs from the dog’s muzzle, then stepped away to gather ointment and antibiotics. After glancing at his watch, he wrote instructions on a small prescription pad.

“You know how to administer pills to a dog?”

“Yes.”

He handed Sarah the vial and the salve. “Apply the salve twice a day. The pills are an antibiotic to prevent infection. Some of those quills went deep. You’ve got enough for ten days. If you see signs of infection or need a follow-up, give Hank a call.”

They both understood the meaning of his words. Nodding, she sank her hand into the dog’s ruff. “Come on, fella. Let’s go.”

“He’ll be woozy. Might want to wait a few minutes, let him shake off the effects of the anesthetic.” Regardless of the human awkwardness, the dog should have a few minutes of quiet, rejoin-the-world time. Walking the thick-set dog through the door, Sarah nodded, her chin tucked.

“We’ll wait outside so you can close up.” The weight of the dog listed her step. At the second entry she turned. “You stayed late,” she said, her deep tone a blend of smooth gold and rough, gravel roads. A different sound, unique to her. A voice that suited her caramel skin, the long, thick braid, the high cheekbones that hinted at her Native American ancestry. She looked anywhere but at him. “Thank you.”

He had no pleasantries to exchange with her. Nothing that wouldn’t sound trite and manufactured. He huffed a breath as he shut and locked the door.

Minutes later he cruised out of the lot. Slowing his SUV to negotiate the turn, he noted the woman and dog in the cold front yard of the veterinary clinic.

Straight and still, she perched on the verdigris-armed bench outside the main entrance. The dog, equally quiet, sat upright, his chin angled with pride, mimicking her stance.

Maremmas. Great guard dogs, good bonders when housed with a flock at an early age. Smart. Independent. Faithful, not easily cowed. Willing to go their own way, awaiting no man’s guidance.

As he observed the dignified profiles of dog and woman, Craig couldn’t help but see how well they suited one another.

## Chapter Two

Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and forgettest our affliction and our oppression? Sarah finished the words of the forty-fourth Psalm mentally, kneading Gino's ruff as he sloughed off his grogginess.

The poignant words touched her with their talk of sheep and oppression. Enemies. The poem was an aged song of lament and pathos. It helped smooth the dent to her self-worth, gouged deeper by Craig Macklin's disdain. How she wished...

Nope. She wouldn't go there. Refused to go there. Craig Macklin was entitled to his opinion, no matter how unreasonable it might be. Craig's reticence toward sheep was no secret among the local herders. The vets worked things out between them, leaving Hank the man to consult for sheep and goat problems.

By default, being a shepherd and a Slocum gave the younger veterinarian a two-fold reason to avoid Sarah, a task he did well. Knowing his grandmother's circumstance, Sarah understood why, but wished she didn't bear responsibility for her half brother's actions.

But she'd get nowhere feeling sorry for herself. No way, no how. She led Gino to the scarred pickup. The old Ford wasn't snazzy like Craig's polished 4X4, but it had a certain dignity in its aged finish, a little rough around the edges. Like me, she noted, shifting to allow Gino access.

The thought made her smile.

The memory of Craig's face erased it. The tall, handsome, sandy-haired vet usually steered clear of Sarah. At community functions he looked around her, avoiding eye contact. His animosity toward Slocums was unspoken but obvious.

She had never sought his help in a farm crisis. Today was an aberration.

Craig Macklin knew his stuff, though. In her years of farming, she'd never heard a complaint against him, and North Country farmers were not easily appeased. His thick, sturdy hands had been firm but gentle as he treated Gino.

She stopped by the local grocery before heading to her sister-in-law's home in Potsdam. Leaving Gino sleeping in the cab, she approached the front door.

No one answered her knock. She leaned on the bell with more force than should be necessary, if it were working. Obviously not.

Unlocked, the door swung inward with ease. She stepped in, her nose telling her the whole place could use a thorough cleaning. Her eyes took time to adjust to the darkness Rita called home.

"Rita? It's Sarah. I've brought things."

No answer.

Sarah shifted the sacks and pushed through the antique swinging door between the rooms, its warm russet grain a comfort.

The kitchen was empty of people, but littered with debris.

Sarah grimaced, shifted piles of mail and old newspapers, then set the groceries on the table before she headed upstairs, calling Rita's name. A glance out the landing window showed Gino still asleep on the bench seat of the F-250. The driver's-side window was cracked open, but she didn't dare leave him long untended. A good dog, but young. He could get into mischief without direction.

Calling Rita's name once more, Sarah crossed the upstairs hall and twisted the knob on her sister-in-law's room. "Reet? You sleeping?"

A slight movement revealed her sister-in-law's presence on the bed. Sarah stepped in, reached for the light, then rethought her choices. "I brought a few things. Where are the kids?"

"Movies. Liv took them."

"Nice. What did they go to see?"

Rita shifted, then rolled, a pillow clutched to her chest. "Some animated thing."

Sarah blinked. There was no animated movie playing in town. Did Liv take the car? Drive to Canton? She was two years shy of her license but she'd pulled some interesting deals recently. Sarah scanned the driveway through the nearby window. "Is the car in the garage?"

Rita's old-fashioned garage was behind the home, not visible from this angle.

"In the drive."

Sarah bit back words of recrimination. Obviously Liv had taken off with the car and the kids, with Rita clueless as to their whereabouts. Dear Lord, she prayed, trying to ignore the dank smell of despair. The room reeked of hopelessness. Loss of faith. A keen smell, the mix of body salts, sweat and sour breath.

"Come downstairs, Reet. I'll make us a quick supper." Then I'll tackle my niece, she promised silently, her anger rising. Couldn't Liv see her mother's desperation, the depression that seized her?

Of course she could. In her own adolescent way, Liv was trying to fill the shoes her parents vacated. The same thing that pushed Sarah to buy a farm on Waterman Hill instead of south of Albany like she'd planned. Rita and the kids needed sensible family around, and that was a scarce commodity in the North Country.

Sarah grasped Rita's hand. "Come on, Reet. Come down and talk to me; I'll straighten up the kitchen while we chat."

"Go away, Sarah."

The response brought Sarah's chin higher. "Won't work, not with me. That's the one part of Slocum that bred true. I'm stubborn as an ox and you need to eat. Embrace the sunshine. It's almost spring, Rita. Let's go down together. Please?"

Rita clutched the pillow tighter. "I can't. I need to rest."

All you do is rest, thought Sarah, impatience rising. That's all you've done for over a year.

"You can. You have to. Liv, Brett and Skeeter are counting on you."

"Not anymore."

"Reet—"

"Sarah, I'm tired." Rita's gaze shifted to the curtained window. She blinked as if the shade-mellowed light hurt her eyes. "So tired."

The first months following Tom's death had seemed almost normal. Rita had gone on, looking neither right nor left, as if everything were okay.

But then the insurance company rejected Rita's claim because of a two-year "no suicide" clause. It had been eighteen months since Tom changed companies.

His smaller policy was intact, but the monetary value was minimal compared to the loss of his income. He had developed a retirement portfolio of stocks and mutual funds outside of his illicit investments, but they were inaccessible to Rita because Ed Slocum's name was included on the portfolio. Without Ed's blessing, the fund's worth remained out of reach until retirement. Twenty-plus years, give or take. And Ed had no intention of divesting the portfolio, regardless of Rita's financial situation.

Rita had crashed with that realization. Just slid right down into oblivion. Rita, who made eyes widen and mouths water with some of the most beautiful and innovative cakes and pastries the area had ever seen, now lived in a hovel, with ovens that hadn't been fired up since... Well, probably since the last time Sarah cooked a meal.

Watching the prone figure, Sarah felt overwhelmed. How do I help her, God? How do I ease her out of the pain, out of the darkness?

No answers came in the fetid room. Rita lay still, eyes open but unseeing, wrestling demons Sarah could only imagine. And had no desire to.

A scramble of feet and voices headed toward the kitchen a short time later. The door burst open. Gino, comfortably ensconced on the back porch, ambled to his feet, watchful and curious.

"Hey, Aunt Sarah!"

“Hey, yourself, Skeets. Come here.” Arms wide, Sarah enfolded her youngest niece in a hug, then pressed raspberry kisses to the little girl’s neck. The answering squeal and giggle was justified reward. “Gotcha.”

“That ticklth.” Skeeter’s giggle displayed a gap in her teeth.

“They both fell out, huh?”

“Yeth. Brett says I look like a vampire.” Augmenting the words, she bared her teeth and hissed.

“Oooooo... Brett’s right. You’re positively terrifying. How about setting the table for me?”

“Really? By myself?” Skeet’s excitement quickened Sarah’s heart. Such a little thing, to help a grown-up. Did Skeeter remember such things with her mother? The good times they had? Half her life had been clouded by her parents’ choices. Olivia burst through the door, nose twitching at the smell of food. Brett followed.

“Something smells good. Hey, Gino.” Approaching slowly, Brett let the dog give him a once-over, allowing space and time. Gino offered Brett a measured look, then a good sniff, ending in a typical Maremma token of acceptance. He licked Brett’s face.

“Yuck.” Livvie frowned, disgusted.

Brett grinned, accepting the dog’s ministrations easily. “You’re just jealous ’cause he likes me best.”

“Yeah. Right. Hey, Aunt Sarah.” Liv moved to the stove, her brows lifting in interest. “Smells great.”

“Good.” Sarah eyed her adolescent niece and stirred the extra pot of gravy. Chicken and biscuits were a favorite, but biscuit topping robbed the gravy beneath. Extra was never a bad thing. Shifting her attention, she complimented Skeeter for setting the plates, then turned back to Liv. “What movie did you see?”

“Jinx, the Wonder Dog. It’s about a dog that turns into a cartoon action hero.”

“Really?”

Her tone put Liv on the defensive. “Yeah. Why?”

“Was it good?”

“It was really good,” interjected Skeets, setting forks and knives in random fashion. Sarah re-directed her, showing her where each utensil belonged.

“How did you get there?”

“Drove.” Opening the fridge, Liv pulled out a jug of juice and tipped some into one of the few clean glasses.

Sarah hiked a brow Liv’s way as she set out a fresh green salad. “When did you get your license, Liv?”

“I didn’t drive.” Liv laughed, emphasizing the pronoun. “Shannon Connors did. She got her license in February. They moved into the old Rafferty house.”

“She drove your mother’s car?”

“Sure. Her parents both work and our car just sits here. Mom said it was okay,” she added.

Sarah fought the sigh. No doubt Rita okayed the trip, then promptly forgot she’d given permission for someone to use her car. How long would it take two normal adolescents to realize the advantage they had when their one authority figure lay motionless, hour upon hour?

“She’s a careful driver?”

Liv shrugged her dislike at being questioned. “We’re alive, aren’t we?”

Sarah changed the subject. “Supper will be ready in ten minutes. Anybody need help with homework?”

“I don’t have any.” Skeet’s lack of teeth swirled the words together. Sarah smiled.

“Got mine done in study hall,” Brett confirmed, his hand buried in the ruff of Gino’s coat.

“How about you, Liv? Anything I can help you with?”



“For starters, you could stop playing mother.” Her harsh tone brought Brett and Skeeter’s heads up. They stared. “I’m tired of people showing up out of the blue, telling us what to do. We manage on our own.”

Her anger reminded Sarah of herself at a similar age, her mother recently buried, her family divided. Oh, yeah, she had no trouble identifying with Olivia, but she wasn’t big on placating mouthy teens. “Really? That’s good to know. But it would be more convincing if the entire house didn’t resemble a dump.” Sarah cast a look around the kitchen. She’d made some headway. The dishwasher hummed, the counters were clear and the table set. The floor still needed scrubbing, but all in all, the room looked better.

Liv glared. “Maybe we have better things to do than clean up after her.”

“You’re mad that your mother’s sick?”

“She’s not sick, she’s...” Liv hesitated, stumbling over words. “Lazy,” she filled in. “Feeling sorry for herself. Look at this place.” Liv waved her hands, half spinning, half pacing. “It’s gross.”

Sarah opened her mouth, but Liv kept ranting.

“Skeets wet the bed the other night and went to school smelling like pee. Mrs. Besset pulled me aside in the lunch-room and said the elementary school nurse wanted me to make sure Skeets takes a morning shower if she wets at night. I have to be at school at seven-fifteen,” the girl expounded, staring at Sarah. “How am I supposed to make sure Skeets is up and clean for an eight o’clock bus when Brett and I leave an hour before?”

“Who puts Skeeter on the bus?”

“Mom. Or no one.”

Groaning inwardly, Sarah figured the likelihood of no one. Skeeter’s rapt expression said she understood too much. “Brett, can you take Skeeter into the living room while Liv and I finish up?”

“I want to hear the rest of the fight.” He darted a look from his aunt to his sister.

“We’re not fighting,” Sarah corrected. “Your sister needs to vent. It’s perfectly understandable.”

“Don’t patronize me.” Liv stalked to the door and put the flat of her hand against the warm, cherry tones. Sarah was surprised to note the contrast, how pale Liv’s skin had become. “You’re not some social worker who thinks I’ll work out my aggression by molding a lump of clay for thirty minutes a day. You’re a sheep farmer. A smelly sheep farmer who wasted a good education to clean up animal crap.” She pinched her nose to make her parting shot more pointed as she pushed through the door.

Ouch. Sarah said a silent prayer for patience, then one of gratitude for lack of available weaponry. Strangling one’s niece because she insulted your pungent profession wouldn’t sit well.

Definitely not worth it. Besides, who would watch the sheep?

She turned back to Brett and Skeeter. “Wash up, guys.

Supper’s ready.”

Skeeter sidled up to her. “Aunt Sarah?”

“What, sweetcakes?” Sarah bent down, cradling Skeeter’s cheeks in her hands.

“If Mommy never gets up, can we come live with you?”

Sarah’s heart froze. Brett went still as well, his hands immobile beneath the water. Eyes down, he listened for her answer, just like his little sister.

Rita, get down here. See your children. Feast your eyes. Delight in the gifts of the Lord, your God.

No gentle footfall answered her prayer. No warm motherly presence brightened the dark corners of the room. Sarah pulled Skeeter in for a hug. “Farms do get stinky. Sheep aren’t the freshest smelling animals I’ve ever met.” Sharing a wink with Skeeter, she rose and guided the little girl to the table. “But there’s always room for you guys.”

“Even if I wet the bed?”

Sarah made a mental note to buy protective mattress covers for the twin beds in the room adjoining hers.

“Everybody wets the bed when they’re little,” she comforted. Turning slightly, she noted Brett’s stance. Silent. Still. “If your Mom needs extra help, of course you can stay with me.”

“But you live in a different district.” Brett turned, eyes wary. The faucet gurgled behind him.

“I can get you back and forth if need be, Brett. I promise.”

Hopefully a promise she wouldn’t need to keep. Come on, Rita. Enough’s enough. These guys need you. They’ve already lost one parent. Let’s not make it two.

Fear stabbed her. The look of Rita upstairs, clutching her pillow instead of her faith, seeking total solace. What would be more complete than to end it all, like Tom did? Unsure what to do, Sarah pushed down the frustration, made heavier by the events of the day. Gino’s painful confrontation with a sharp-quilled beast, Craig Macklin’s disdain and Rita’s loss of control.

Shoving it all aside, Sarah drew a deep breath and mustered a smile. “Dinner’s ready. Let’s eat.”

## Chapter Three

The ginormous “Welcome to Doyletown” banner waved in the early spring breeze as Craig angled his SUV into a parking spot at the elementary school. Deceased for nearly a decade, Myra Doyle had created the Doyletown concept when Craig was a boy, and the Potsdam district continued the event in her honor. Children picked a pretend identity and profession, then approached a similar local professional to spend the day and talk about their work. Honored to be chosen by his nephew Kyle, Craig blinked back nostalgia as he approached the entrance.

He remembered his Doyletowns like they were yesterday, and having Kyle request his presence today? Sweet.

He walked into the huge gymnasium and paused, taking in the spectacle of cardboard and balsa wood storefronts, the smell of kid paint and craft glue tunneling him back.

He grinned, caught Kyle’s eye, waved and threaded his way through various exhibits. “Uncle Craig!”

“I’m here, bud.” Craig noogied the boy’s head, laughed at the expected reaction, turned and looked straight into the chocolate-brown eyes of Sarah Slocum.

A waif of a girl clutched Sarah’s fingers. The child eyed Craig, wary, and slid further into Sarah’s side. Her actions went beyond normal shyness, her gaze almost furtive, as if she’d rather be any other place in the world.

“I’ve assigned groups,” the classroom teacher called out, drawing their collective attention. “Our class will do morning exhibit tours first, followed by lunch in the cafeteria, then professional presentations from our invited guests, then play time.”

Talking briskly, she announced each group followed by six names. Kyle Macklin was followed in quick succession by Braden Lassiter, Glynna McGinnis, Jacob Wyatt, Carly Arend and Aleta Slocum.

Kyle groaned. “Not her. She smells.”

“Kyle,” Craig scolded, embarrassed. He turned, wishing he didn’t have to, knowing he had no choice. “Apologize. Now.”

Sarah’s expression appraised him, one hand cradling the girl’s dank hair, cuddling her, trying to assuage the hurt. “Sorry.”

Craig cringed inside. The sad awareness on the little girl’s face broke his heart, regardless of her last name. Determined, he stepped forward and thrust out a hand, wishing he could undo the last three minutes. But if he possessed those powers he’d have hit reverse a long time ago and erased the adolescently stupid financial advice he’d given his grandfather a decade back. Maybe then...

Craig bit back a large ball of angst. There were no do-overs, unfortunately. Not in real life. The best he could do was set a better example for his nephew. He bent to the child’s level. “Nice to meet you, Aleta.”

She shrank back.

Determined, he stood and met Sarah’s gaze. “Sarah.”

“Dr. Macklin.” Cool disdain colored her tone and Craig realized it looked like the apple didn’t fall very far from the family tree, an assessment that bore some accuracy at the moment. Kyle grabbed his hand and tugged.

“It’s almost our turn.”

Chagrined, Craig dropped his gaze. “Kyle, you’re being rude.”

The boy’s face crumpled, but Craig refused to cave. No time like the present to offer a show of good manners. He turned back toward Sarah. “Are you presenting today?”

“Yes.”

“About?”

“Farming.”

Duh.

She offered no help in the conversational court, but he deserved that. And more, no doubt. “Bring any sheep?” He swept the room a searching glance.

A ghost of a smile softened seal-brown eyes, the irises dusk-tinged. No hints of ivory or gold softened the deep tone, but the hinted smile brightened the depths from within.

Tiny laugh lines crinkled, then smoothed as she regained control. “I did.”

Craig let his arched brow note their absence, then he bent low, catching Aleta’s eye. “Do you see any sheep?”

A tiny grin eased the earlier discomfort. “No.”

Craig slanted his gaze up to Sarah. “I think Bo Peep here has got herself a little bitty problem.”

Aleta giggled. The laugh offered a glimpse of the pretty little girl hidden beneath a rumpled surface.

Sarah’s expression softened, noting the girl’s more relaxed countenance, but when she turned his way, her look flattened. “Live exhibits are penned out back.”

“Ah.”

The teacher’s direction interrupted them and for the better part of an hour, Craig found himself on one side of the tour group while Sarah and her niece were on the other. Intentional on her part?

Most assuredly. Somehow he knew Sarah could command a situation as needed. Like any good strategist, she flanked the outer edges, skirting the perimeter, maintaining her distance.

Until lunchtime seating put them side by side.

Resigned, she stared at the small placard as if willing it to read something besides his name.

No such luck.

Craig pulled out her chair for her.

Her immediate reaction was half dismay, half surprise with a sprinkling of pleasure.

A very small sprinkling.

But it was a step in the right direction. After all, this young woman wasn’t responsible for Grams’ current circumstance, despite Sarah’s family ties. And the fact that Tom’s little girl sat alongside them, her innocent face shadowed by affairs beyond her control, piqued Craig’s protective instincts.

“The wolf will live with the lamb, and a little child will lead them...” Snips of Isaiah’s verse nudged Craig’s conscience. No doubt he’d remember them better if he got to church more regularly, but on-call weekends interfered with all kinds of things, including church attendance. Hadn’t his mother tweaked him about that very thing last week?

Aleta eyed the box lunch offered as part of the day’s program. An instant frown morphed to a practiced pout. “I don’t like this, Aunt Sarah.”

“You don’t even know what it is, Skeets,” Sarah replied.

“I only like peanut butter and jelly and apple pancakes,” Aleta whined.

“Have you looked in your box?”

“No.”

“You might be surprised,” Sarah noted. Opening hers, she pulled out a chicken salad sandwich. The little girl pretended to gag.

Sarah frowned. “Open your box and see what you have, please.”

“PBJ” marked the top of Aleta’s box, but Craig appreciated Sarah’s attempt to encourage the child’s independence. Scowling, she lifted the lid and peered inside. “Peanut butter and jelly!”

“Yes.” Sarah pointed to the box top. “Those initials mean peanut butter and jelly.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” Aleta demanded.

Zing. Craig’s protective instincts rose, surprising him. Why in the name of all that’s good and holy would he want to protect Sarah from a six-year-old’s onslaught?

And yet he did.

Sarah maintained a patient expression and tone. “You need to look beyond your feelings and see the things around you, Skeets. You make too many assumptions. Trying new things is good for you.”

The kid didn’t look like she bought the theory, but she stopped arguing long enough to eat, a concept Craig understood. Food ranked pretty high on his list of desirables, too.

Kyle chatted with Braden while they ate, a momentary peace established.

Craig should have known it was too good to be true.

Sarah sat alongside Skeeter on the bleachers, watching as various professionals fielded audience questions. People rambled in and out, picking which speakers intrigued them.

There was no small number of cute, female elementary school teachers in the room when Craig Macklin spoke. Surprise, surprise. They reacted like eighth-grade schoolgirls—exchanged looks, little giggles, smirks of appreciation.

Please. He was just a guy. A really cute guy, if Sarah was being completely honest with herself. With great hands, a firm jaw and a quick smile.

But that smile...

Too practiced, too glib, too smooth. Oh, Sarah was privy to the chick chat regarding Craig Macklin. Not only did the “doctor” title enhance his standing with the feminine contingent, his good looks and quick humor sent ripples of anticipation through a three-county area. But Sarah had been around long enough to recognize Craig’s preferences. Fashion-doll pretty and dressed to kill. Since Sarah was a plain-Jane-in-barn-clothes girl, it mattered little. She’d take her small level of satisfaction in his more pleasant demeanor that morning and call it enough.

As Craig finished his spiel, Sarah’s sheep were brought forward by two high school helpers. Sarah passed Craig without making eye contact, focusing on the two ewes and three lambs being herded into the circle’s center. With the high school volunteers monitoring the sheep’s antics, Sarah faced the audience.

“As you probably guessed, I work on a farm.”

A chorus of “ohs” followed that statement.

Sarah nodded Craig’s way as he retook his seat next to Kyle. “Because I work with animals all the time, I sometimes use veterinarians like Dr. Macklin to help me. Animals get sick, just like people and when they get sick, they need a special doctor. An animal doctor.” Allowing a pause, she met Craig’s eye in challenge, a silent reminder that he made himself singularly unavailable to sheep farmers in general and her in particular. He squirmed.

She smiled.

“Sheep are wonderful creatures,” she instructed, moving to the small flock. “They’re dependable and docile. Very easy to manage. I brought two ewes, or ‘mama’ sheep, that just had babies. This sheep,” she indicated the shorn ewe with a wave of her hand, “has been sheared. We shave their wool in the spring and sell the fleece to be made into thread for blankets and coats.”

“People wear sheep?” asked a little boy, perplexed.

Sarah smiled his way. “Not with the animal attached,” she promised. One of her teenage helpers hoisted an exhibit board while the other raised a blanket in one hand and a wool coat in the other. “Sheep products go beyond meat,” Sarah explained.

“You...eat...them?” A middle-school girl’s voice took a tone of pure, unmitigated disgust. “You actually eat your pets?”

A chorus of “eeeewwwws” met her question.

The teacher reminded the group of hand-raising protocol, then shifted Sarah’s way, awaiting an answer.

Sarah met the girl’s gaze. “These sheep aren’t pets,” she corrected. “Meat comes from animals. Every time you grab a chicken nugget, you’re eating a bird. Hamburgers and steaks come from cows. Spare ribs and pork chops from pigs. And since protein is an important part of a daily diet, someone has to raise the meat you buy in the grocery store. I’m one of those people.”

The girl looked freaked out, so Sarah switched her attention to the younger kids. “Baby sheep are called lambs. Aren’t they cute?”

“Do you eat them, too?”

Obviously this girl wasn’t about to give it up, and Sarah had no intention of lying. “Many cultures use lamb as food, yes.”

The girl half stood. “You’re kidding, right? You eat babies?”

Could this get worse?

Oh, yes. At that moment someone bent to drink from the water fountain at the back of the gym. The full-coated ewe heard the sound of running water and charged the fountain, eluding the teenager’s hold and threading her way unceremoniously through the crowd. Pushing up, the ewe balanced on strong back legs while she licked the water basin, obviously thirsty.

Cameras clicked. Kids shrieked. Some parents laughed, some groaned, while others looked dismayed at sheep tongue fouling a water basin.

Pandemonium threatened until Craig Macklin crossed the room, commandeered the thirsty sheep by her collar and led her outside.

The circus scene squelched the rest of Sarah’s presentation. Her antagonistic young questioner looked smug. Sarah swallowed the temptation to wipe the self-satisfied expression from the youngster’s face, and realized she’d voiced what so many people felt.

As long as meat came without legs and a tail, modern society embraced the concept. Add a dose of reality? Big round eyes? Round wooly ears? Instant vegetarians.

Sarah didn’t buy that mind-set, but now wasn’t the time to weigh pros and cons of meat production. Embarrassed that she needed another rescue by Craig Macklin, she kissed Skeeter goodbye and herded the remaining sheep into the penned school yard, chin down, gaze straight. She didn’t need to see the humor in his eyes to feed her mortification.

Ignoring everyone and everything, Sarah loaded the errant sheep into her scuffed-up animal trailer and headed home, eager for the peace and quiet of her small farm.

## Chapter Four

Craig watched Sarah as she ably loaded the five sheep into the small animal trailer hitched to the back of her worn tan pickup truck, her head down, looking neither left nor right.

Her tight jaw and stiff hands were the only indicators of her inner feelings, but Craig had little difficulty reading the body language. Downright mad.

But handling it well. Weighing choices, he considered offering help.

Her capable moves proved she didn't need it.

Or he could offer commiseration that would be unwelcome and more than a little in-your-face. Hadn't he professed the lack of intelligence in sheep loud and long?

No, he'd be the last person she'd want help from right now, and since she was just about set, he walked back into the gymnasium to rejoin Kyle for the last minutes of the day.

But he couldn't shove aside the look of her, the dusk-toned skin, big brown eyes, dark mass of hair threading down her back, softly arched brows. She had an earthy beauty that probably rarely saw makeup and didn't need it in any case. Breathing deeply, he remembered the scent of her at lunch, the soft, sweet smell of wildflowers on a summer's day, the sun shining warm on a field of heather.

But mostly he remembered her look of chagrin as the sheep charged the water fountain, a fairly smart move for a thirsty animal. He might have to rethink parts of his opinions on sheep. At least this one was smart enough to drink when thirsty. Didn't he know people who got dehydrated every summer because they weren't smart enough to grab a glass of water?

Today's situation had embarrassed Sarah and he felt bad about that, but there was little he could do. She'd mistrust his sympathy and reject his help if offered. He knew that.

Still, inner guilt rose because he didn't offer.

Kyle spotted him and charged forward, redrawing Craig's attention to the day's festivities. He glanced around for Aleta but didn't see her. Maybe just as well. Neither of those Slocum girls needed any more embarrassing moments.

Sarah cast a wistful glance around the warming room of her weathered bungalow and refused to sigh, despite the late hour. Most women would come home, stoke the fire, shower and go to bed. An appealing thought.

Her gaze fell on the dusty spinning wheel to the left of the wood stove, unused, untouched. She longed for peaceful evenings of spinning yarn, her fingers guiding the carded wool while her foot rocked the treadle. Someday there would be time for such pleasures again.

But first, the farm. Its success depended on her efforts. Long evenings spent crunching figures for area businesses left no time for spinning and knitting. She gave the wheel one last, long glance. Someday.

Stoic, she left the inviting flames, donned farm boots and headed to the near barn. As she trudged across the drive, Gino kept pace, head up, attentive. Maremmas were great night guardians. Perfect for her, a shepherd alone. With them on guard, Sarah could actually sleep. Mostly.

But lambing loomed. With the front barn full of soon-to-deliver ewes, a turn around the lambing quarters was essential. While she'd specifically chosen a Dorsett/Finn cross breed because of their less seasonal cycles, Sarah still engineered a strong spring lambing. Her January lambies were being marketed now for the Easter trade. This new batch would be sold in Albany and New York City come late spring and early summer, where eastern European immigrants celebrated love and marriage with roasted lamb, much as their Biblical forebears.

Sarah flicked the barn light switch then paused, her eyes adjusting, her ears tuned to out-of-sync noises.

All was calm.

Walking through, she found a new set of twins. The sloe-eyed ewe must have delivered late afternoon. Both babies strong and healthy, the caring mother uttered soft bleats of comfort to her offspring. The number of animals provided plenty of heat in this foremost barn, even in the bitter cold. Regardless of the calendar date, night temps could drop on the heels of a Canadian Clipper, a steep down surge of the jet stream. Tonight promised to be one of those. The wind blew intemperate, but the barn was snug. Secure. She'd made sure of that when she first considered this parcel. A cozy barn, good pastureland, large hayfields. Essentials to a northern shepherd on an accelerated breeding program.

And a house that needed cleaning. Cleaning she didn't have time or energy for most days. Satisfied with the scene before her, she retreated, closing the door with a firm hand, ready for a cleansing shower and a warm bed.

Baaaaaah.

Sarah turned, ears perked, drawing her coat closer.

A sharp wind chilled her neck. She eyed the dark field, knowing the next group of expectant mothers huddled in the second pasture. Not due for six to eight weeks, they should drop late-spring lambs that would be market-ready mid- to late summer, in time for the ethnic festival season in New York City.

As she turned back toward the house, the bleat sounded once more, followed by a bark, sharp and commanding.

Gritting her teeth, Sarah headed to the pickup, wondering why she ever thought sheep were cute.

Hours later, she was still unsure. The tiny lambs born in the cold meadow were taking their own sweet time to warm up. Sarah was sure she'd hit every rut in the farm lane as she traversed the pasture's edge in the pitch-black. An early-waxing crescent moon had dipped below the horizon long ago. Starlight did little to pierce the woods-edged fields and her long-handled flashlight kept blinking out.

She loaded the new family eventually, tempting the mother up the ramp by tucking the half-frozen triplets at the end of it. Then she prodded and prayed.

"It's a good thing Jesus liked you guys well enough to put you in His stories," she grumbled to the three newborns flanking the woodstove. At the moment, Sarah didn't find them all that appealing as she massaged the shoulder she'd wrenched during loading. She loved Christ's soft spot for shepherds, the parables and analogies. He kept it simple, and that worked for her. You couldn't get much more mundane than shepherds and fishermen.

Exhausted, she lounged her head against the worn cushion, the lambs snug in a garage sale playpen. Clutching an afghan to her chest, Sarah watched as the heat of the stove gradually chased the chill from the fragile bodies. Since the newborns needed to re-acclimate with their mother, she set the alarm for a two-hour nap, dozing with them, their quick-pace heartbeats offset by the strength and steadiness of hers.

The phone shrilled as Sarah adjusted the angle of the Pritchard teat to feed lamb number three the next morning. The others had rejoined Mama with little fuss, but the ewe butted this one away repeatedly. Frustrated and frantic, the hungry lamb needed food and reassurance. Frowning, Sarah let the machine pick up, knowing these first feedings were crucial. Hearing the message, she dropped the retrofitted soda bottle and snatched up the phone.

"This is Sarah."

"Sarah, it's Cade Macklin."

"I know. I heard your voice. I was busy with a newborn lamb." She inhaled nice and long, slowing her anxiety. "What's happened?"

"There's a petition regarding Rita and the kids. Someone turned her in for neglect. They want the children removed. Livvie's last prank opened a few eyes."



Liv and some friends had decorated the school superintendent's office with graphic posters when news broke that the administrator was cheating on his wife with the middle-school principal. Their little gambit caricatured the administrators with complex artwork, employing a parody on the superintendent's theme for the year: Ethics in Education. An eye-opener, for sure.

Oh, man. Where were these people when her sister-in-law needed help? When kids needed rides, or trips to the dentist? Nowhere to be found. But let a teenager step out of line and she was marked for life. At least if her last name was Slocum and she lived in a Podunk little...

Sarah choked down a sigh. "What happens now?"

"Social Services sent someone by Rita's, found it lacking in supervision, and will request the court place the children in foster care."

"Over my dead body."

Cade's voice deepened. "Can you take them? Judge Hicks won't grant guardianship to your father or Ed. Rita's people are in Albany, and you know how kids are about being moved around."

"Why are you doing this, Cade?" She didn't mean to sound blunt. Blame it on lack of sleep. Total surprise. The Macklin family owed the Slocums nothing. Zip. Zilch.

"Because Rita and those kids have suffered enough." The police chief's voice firmed. "They did nothing wrong, Sarah. Nor did you. And I can't see how sending those kids away will help a woman who's fighting depression. Maybe even suicidal."

Sarah thought quickly. "What about school? I'm not in their district." Sarah's farm lay mostly in the Canton school district, although a small portion of her land crossed the border into Grasse Bend. Rita's house was north, in Potsdam.

"We can get that okayed by the board. They're good people. It might be tricky to arrange transportation for the next couple of days, but between the two districts it's doable in the long run. I'll work it out. That way the kids can finish the year in Potsdam. Maybe summer will be Rita's turning point. If summer ever gets here."

Since the winter had been cold and gray with little sun, the entire region would welcome warmth. Sarah agreed. "I'll do whatever it takes, Cade. This house isn't all that big, but I can stretch it."

"Good." Relief thickened his voice. "I'll talk to the caseworker and the child advocate. They'll probably come see you."

"Great." Sarah's living space longed for time and effort she didn't have right now, a touch she'd give it if she weren't constantly working on either sheep or business accounts or helping Rita. Her degree in business accounting kept her tending books at night for a growing number of local farms and small businesses, the steady funds helping her bottom line until the farm was better established. She breathed deep, contemplating. She'd started this enterprise willing to do whatever it took to make her farm successful.

Throw three disgruntled kids who disliked farms into the mix...

Ugh. She swallowed hard. "What should I do now?"

"Hold tight. I'll pass the word and have them get back to you. They're swamped, but a petition for removal is serious so it shouldn't be too long. Then the question is how do we help Rita?"

Sarah pictured her sister-in-law. Silent. Distant. Morose. "I don't know. I... She's..." Her voice tapered off.

"We'll figure it out." Cade's voice reassured. "No one wants to see Rita hurt. Or those kids. It's time for everyone to move on."

Cade's magnanimity seemed ironic when she'd been face-to-face with his brother's animosity too many times to count. Of course, he'd been nicer yesterday. Much nicer. Still... "Not everyone feels like you do."

"They will."

His assurance heartened her. The lamb, impatient, bleated an entreaty. Cade laughed. "Go feed your little friend, Sarah. I'll be in touch."

A small part of Sarah's heart loosened at this overture, the olive branch extended. "Thanks, Cade."

"You're welcome."

Sarah reached for the lamb. Angling the bottle, she mulled Cade's words.

Losing the children could push Rita over the edge and the fear of suicide worried Sarah. If they could get help for Rita while the kids stayed on the farm, that might help.

Liv wouldn't like this. She was a town girl. Her daddy had looked down his nose at farmers, and the girl took after him. That should be interesting.

Brett? A little uncertain, but definitely an easier-going personality. And he had an intrinsic love for nature, if not for sheep dung.

Both in the thick of puberty. Adolescence. Oh, man. An additional form of insanity right there.

And Skeeter. Skeeter needed someone to care for her, watch over her. Share in the joy of each new day when she wasn't whining or complaining about something, which was fairly often of late. Simple, by comparison.

But not one of them was accustomed to the sights, sounds and smells of a working farm.

St. Lawrence County boasted multiple classes of people. Those who farmed, including the Amish, their quaint wagons and roadside stands dotting a countryside thick with agriculture.

Then there was the upscale staff and alumni of Clarkson and St. Lawrence Universities. Throw SUNY Potsdam and Canton into the mix, and you had a diverse dynamic at odds with itself. Town kids might be raised within two miles of some of the best northern farmland in the U.S., but have little association with product or producer, fairly certain food came from the local grocer.

Sarah grimaced, remembering her family's expressions when she announced she was starting a farm.

They blamed her mother's Abenaki blood. The urge to be at peace with the land, one with the Spirit.

The aspersions to her mother's memory stung. Peg "Bent Willow" Slocum had been a good woman, a strong Christian who cherished her mix of heritages. Maybe if she'd lived, things would have been different.

But she hadn't and Sarah could pinpoint the day and time when she'd known where her own destiny lay. It was her first summer away, the end of her freshman year of college. She'd stayed in Cortland, working a sheep farm by day and waiting tables at night. She'd made enough money to guarantee her second year of studies and celebrate her freedom from the Slocum domain, the "me first" mind-set prevalent at old Tom's table. Her father was not a nice man.

She found the faith her mother inspired at a white clapboard church and a Bible passage that brought shepherds to a newborn babe, laid in a manger.

She found home.

Practicality insisted she finish her degree. A girl had to eat and farms weren't an easy venture.

Angling the bottle to keep the lamb from sucking air, a smile tugged Sarah's mouth as she regarded the tiny creature before her. Not easy, by any means. But worthwhile.

## Chapter Five

Craig careened to a stop and pushed out of the car, instantly enamored of the view. “This is it.”

His home site. He was sure of it. His new house would sit there, right there, at the apex of the hill, its south-facing windows benefiting from the winter’s sun. Evergreens rose beyond the hill, close enough for privacy, far enough to let the winter sun shine unfettered. The slope angled toward the road in an easy climb, nothing too difficult for winter months. The adjoining land was farmed, but this parcel lay unplanted, ready for building. Native trees surrounded enough open land to offer fun. He pictured Rocket ambling through the woods, ears perked, hunting new sights and sounds. Maybe it would pep the old boy up, to have fresh grounds to explore.

Craig strode forward, oblivious to the weariness he’d felt moments before. He grabbed his cell and dialed Laraby Realty. “Steve? Craig Macklin. Listen, I’m staring at a piece of property on Waterman Hill. It’s perfect. It lies between two farms. Across from another. Probably seven to ten acres I’m eyeing up. Yeah, that’s right. The south side.” Walking as he talked, Craig studied the site.

Home. He was home. He knew it the moment he rounded the bend. Now, depending on who owned the parcel—

Craig turned, his signal fading. “This is part of Ben Waters’ land? I was at his place this morning, treating a cow.”

Craig paused, listening. “I’ll head there now.” At the Realtor’s caution, Craig shook his head. “I understand, but you know how old-timers are. If Ben’s interested in selling, he’ll be up front with me. Who’s got the property on either side?”

To the west stretched old cornfields, stubbled and brown. Beneath the rise to the east lay a hay lot. Alfalfa. Across the street pastureland extended right from a barn adjacent to the road. He could see the peak of another building, back and behind. Left of the barn a small, dark house nestled among trees. The scent of wood smoke tweaked his nose, increasing the ambience. “I’m heading to the Waterses’. I’ll call you after I’ve seen Ben.”

Excited, Craig retraced his steps. Arcing a U-turn, he headed north. An hour later he emerged from Ben Waters’ kitchen, stuffed with Etta’s banana bread and the promise of a deal. Ben’s handshake was aged but solid. “Have Laraby draw up the papers. I’d always thought little Ben would build there, but he’s gotten used to the city.”

Craig choked back a laugh. Little Ben was fifty-plus, and the city Ben referred to was the edge of Canton, off Route 11. Young Ben didn’t have his father’s farming instincts, but had made a good name for himself in investment circles. He’d orchestrated the retirement plans for half the county, both business and personal, doing well for his family. Things would have turned out quite different if Gramps had used Ben instead of Tom Slocum, but that was a useless complaint at this juncture.

“Thank you, sir.” Craig clasped the offered hand, then surprised the old man with a hug. “I’m grateful. I love that piece of land.”

“Well, now...” Old Ben scratched his chin, thoughtful. “I might hold out for another thousand or two if you’ve taken that kindly toward it.” Craig’s chagrined expression drew the old farmer’s chuckle. “Gotcha. Tell your Realtor to come by with papers. I’ll sign ’em. The building approval is up to date. I jes’ kept renewing it, thinkin’ it would pay off.”

“I’ll subcontract the work right away. That way I can finish the interior by the end of summer.”

“I’m a good hand with plumbing,” acknowledged Ben. “You need a hand laying pipe, I’ll step in.”

“Thank you, sir.” Craig gazed into the worn, blue eyes of the smaller man. “I’ll remember that.”

“Congratulations, son.” Jim Macklin clapped Craig on the back. “That’s pretty country up there. And nice that it’s a quick closing, no contingencies.”

“Which means we can get things moving ASAP,” Craig replied.

His mother seemed happy but unsurprised. “I prayed you’d find the right piece.” She smiled as she handed him a hunk of fresh-baked bread, slathered with butter, her confidence that God had time for such little things amusing to Craig. “I asked God to provide everything you needed in a home site.”

“Like God doesn’t have better things to do than diddle with my building lot.” Craig spoke around a bite of bread, then waved the chunk in appreciation. “This stuff’s perfect. I was starved. I didn’t stop for lunch and made do with cookies in the car.”

“And coffee, I’d wager.”

He grinned. “Long day. Longer yet,” he noted, eyeing his watch. “I’m supposed to meet Marc at the park. We’re running an eight-mile loop tonight.”

“So showering now would be useless.” She wrinkled her nose in his direction.

Craig laughed and frowned. “Sorry. I should have showered and gotten rid of the clothes before I came into the kitchen.”

“That would be a switch.” She nodded to the large kettle on the stove. “Can you shift half that pot into the eight-quart kettle for me, please? Dad’s got a fishing crew on the Deborah I and they’re due back. I want supper ready when they get here.”

“Will do.” As he poured half the soup into the smaller kettle, he angled a brow his mother’s way. “So. What did you ask God for?”

Her quick smile brightened gray-blue eyes. “The usual. Affordability. Hills, trees, land, good neighbors and room for dogs.” She didn’t mention Rocket by name. They both knew the inevitability of the old boy’s future. Talking about it didn’t make the outcome easier, although Craig hoped the Lab could make the move with him. Time would tell. “And I love that section of the county, so close to the state park. Beautiful land, Craig.”

“It is.”

“And it’s a family home you’re building.”

“Yup. Me and Rocket.”

At his name, Rocket almost perked an ear, but it was obviously too much effort. The misnamed hound let out a whine, passed gas, then stretched, his paws kneading air in his sleep.

“I was referring to the human variety, but...” His mother slanted a grin Rocket’s way. “He’s a solid beginning. Kind of.”

“I don’t think finding the right girl is as easy as you make out,” Craig argued. “Can’t say my luck’s running any too good in that direction.”

“Depends on where you’re looking,” she shot back. “Probably wouldn’t hurt to expand your horizons, my boy. Search outside the box.”

“Girls don’t come boxed,” Craig pointed out. “That would make things way too easy.”

“Or Stepford,” Deb replied. “When God puts the right woman before you, you’ll know it. There’ll be no doubts.”

“None?”

“Nope.”

“Like you and Dad?”

“Exactly like that,” she agreed. “We’ve weathered some storms, but haven’t capsized yet.”

“And you knew right off the bat,” Craig teased, grabbing another slice of bread, then re-thinking the decision. Eight mile runs and full stomachs weren’t a great mix.

“I was sixteen,” Deb laughed, poking his arm. “But yes, Craig. I knew.”

On his way upstairs to change into running shorts and shoes, Craig spotted Grams sitting on the side porch, a blanket drawn around her shoulders as the evening air cooled. He decided to drive fast and take a minute with her. Life had been crazy busy this spring and their shared moments had been few and far between. “Grams?”

She smiled and turned. “Craig. I was just thinking what a beautiful day this was and now it’s even better.”

He grinned and sank into the rocker alongside hers. The wraparound porch, barren now, would teem with flowers once the nights warmed. His mother didn't care that most of their reservations were hunters and fishermen. She believed people should appreciate God, flowers and good food.

Grams leaned his way. "You've been busy, I hear."

"Crazy," he agreed. "And you?"

She laughed. "Your Aunt Cindy kept me hopping these past weeks. I helped when Lisa had her baby, and oh, my, that was a walk down memory lane." She patted his knee. "I remember you children being born like it was yesterday, your mom and I walking you and Cade through town in your strollers. Then on trikes. The idea that thirty-five years have passed..." she paused, staring outward, then gave a little jerk. "Anyway, it's nice to be part of this new generation. Watch you youngsters have babies of your own. Your grandpa would have loved that."

The wistful look in her eye magnified Craig's inner guilt. If Gramps hadn't died of a heart attack, he might be here to play with Lisa's baby. Or her little boy, Jack.

But no. Gramps was gone and hadn't known the joy of his great-grandchildren, except Kyle.

And whose fault is that, his conscience prodded.

Craig surged from the seat and noted the time, then hurried off, unable to meet Grams' look, a mix of trust and loss. Would she hate him, knowing what he'd done? That he'd spurred the old man on?

Did it matter? He hated himself for the brash actions of youth, the foolish yammering of a young man who thought he knew so much.

He was living proof of the old adage his grandfather liked to quote: "Better to close your mouth and let people think you're stupid, than open it and prove them right."

If only he'd learned the lesson sooner.

## Chapter Six

The first scream brought Craig's head up. It was followed by a second and a tirade of crude words Craig hadn't heard since party nights in college.

"I hate you! I really, really hate you! I'll kill you when I get my hands on you, you little worm!" The threat was followed by the slamming of a door, first once, then twice. As Craig hurried down the drive, a runner hurtled toward him, full tilt, arms pumping, an expression of half fear, half triumph lighting the boy's face.

Behind him pounded a girl, tall and lanky, her athletic prowess outstripping that of the huskier boy. Reaching out an arm, Craig caught the boy, noted the look of surprise and confusion, then held tight while the girl barreled toward them. "What's going on?"

"Let me go!" The boy struggled against Craig's grasp.

Craig tightened his grip. "Be quiet. Now." He directed a calm look to the agitated girl whose knowledge of words unsuited for God-fearing ears was most impressive. Keeping his eyes impassive, Craig stared her down. "Swearing isn't going to help your situation. I'm not turning him over to you until I know what he did to deserve the beating you can't wait to dish out."

The boy squirmed. Craig sent him a look meant to quell. It did. Keeping his body between the antagonists, he angled his head. "What'd he do?"

"Besides reading my journal to his stupid friends over the phone? Even the most private parts?" The girl's pitch heightened significantly. With good reason, it seemed.

Craig squelched the boy with a stern expression. "Her journal? You would stoop that low?"

Trying to wriggle away, the boy realized the futility when Craig's arm clenched tighter. "It's just a stupid old diary."

"It's hers." Craig's tone allowed no leeway. "Private. Confidential. What were you thinking?" Staring into the boy's light eyes, he issued a challenge, man to man.

"I just wanted to see what girls write in those things." Reading Craig's expression, the boy turned sheepish.

"You've got a lot to learn about women, kid," noted Craig. He was about to continue when a swift-moving figure emerged from the far side of the barn. Startled, he recognized the tawny skin and raised planes of the cheekbones. Huge brown eyes, deep and dark, complementing the long, thick black braid. She'd obviously been working; she bore the look and scent of barn labor.

The girl rolled her eyes as Sarah approached. Then she sniffed, unimpressed, the sound insulting. The boy stilled as if ashamed.

"What's going on?" Sarah's voice held the same calm, flat intonation he'd come to know. Tilting her chin, she met Craig's eye. "You may let go."

"Of course." Irritation at being told what to do rose within him. "Now that I've saved his life, I'm expendable."

She didn't smile. Grim, she addressed the girl. "Who's watching Skeeter?"

The girl flinched. "She's watching cartoons."

Silent, Sarah didn't move. She used the full force of those dark, impenetrable eyes to subdue the teenager. Defeated, the girl fidgeted. "I'll see to her."

The teen flounced back to the small green house set in the trees, her posture indicating displeasure at life in general.

Sarah's gaze turned to the boy while the sound of a motor bore up the rise of the hill. As a group they moved the few steps to the road's edge, allowing room for the oncoming vehicle. "What have you done, Brett?"

Craig started at the name. Realization set in. Brett. Brett Slocum. Tom and Rita's son. The girl must be the older daughter. Thinking back, he remembered her from her father's funeral. She'd been in junior high then. Must be high school, now. Pretty name, too. Liddie? Tivvie? Something like that.

The approaching car drew abreast. Glancing up, Craig recognized Maggie James' polished silver coupe. She smiled and waved, then tooted the horn before she pulled ahead, angling her car to the side of the road.

Brett's look turned hopeful, maybe thinking his aunt wouldn't chastise him in front of others.

No such luck.

"Brett?"

He scuffed a toe into the scabbled dirt along the road's edge. "I read her stupid book."

"Her book?" Sarah's exaggerated confusion flustered the kid. "She was upset because you read a book?"

"A journal," Craig supplied, keeping his countenance void of emotion with no small effort. Seeing the boy writhe under Sarah's surveillance brought back plenty of memories. Her interrogation tactics were not unlike his mother's.

Sarah's mouth dropped open. She gasped in righteous indignation. Her look implored the boy to set the record straight, declare the accusation untrue. Oh, yeah. Craig remembered the routine, front to back. Guilt 101. Did they teach that to women in class or was it intrinsic, inherent to the gender?

Brett's toe scuffed harder. Head down, he refused to face the look of disappointment on his aunt's face. Craig couldn't resist. "There's more."

Brett shot him an affronted look and jammed his hands into ragged pockets. Glancing from Craig to Brett, Sarah made no acknowledgement of the approaching woman, focusing on her nephew. "Tell me."

"I told Matt DeJoy what it said."

"You didn't." Her dismay increased exponentially. "You shared your sister's journal? Her private thoughts and dreams?"

The boy's toe dug faster as the charges compiled. His cheeks reddened. His shoulders twitched. He jerked his head. "It's just a stupid diary."

"There is no such thing." Sarah's tone dropped to the dangerously quiet level Craig remembered all too well. Oh, yeah. That tweaked a memory or two. Times a hundred, at least. He fought a smile as Maggie reached them.

With Maggie's intrusion, Sarah raised her gaze. Again Craig was struck by the unflappable expression. The lack of affect. He used to think her unfeeling. Unreachable.

Watching her interaction with the boy, he glimpsed the inner struggle. Saw the work it took to maintain the imperturbable appearance. She grasped the boy's shoulder, her grip unyielding. "Get changed. You can help me in the back barn. Five minutes." She added the last with a pointed look.

He marched off, defiant, much as his sister had done.

An awkward silence ensued. Maggie looked irked at Craig's lack of greeting and Sarah seemed ill at ease. She nodded his way. "Thank you."

That was it? He opened his mouth to say something trite, then paused, reading the look in her eyes. Embarrassment. Shame.

The shadow was brief, no more than a glimpse, but evident. He nodded back. "You're welcome." Feeling out of his element, he turned to make introduction. "Maggie James, this is Sarah Slocum. My neighbor, it seems."

Sarah's look swept the work site cresting the hill. Something soulful flashed in her dark eyes. Pain? Her nod to the well-dressed taller woman was polite but swift. The tone of her cheeks went a deeper bronze. "I should get back to work."

Craig noticed Maggie's subtle appraisal of Sarah's appearance. Smells that clung. The dark flecks dotting her tall boots. A protective surge swept him again. He fought it off. "Of course."

With another nod, Sarah pivoted and strode away, the set of her narrow shoulders rigid. Craig turned toward Maggie. “You came to see me?”

She swept his hillside setting a glance. “I heard you were building a house.”

“You heard right. They just finished the fourteenth course of the basement. Not much to see yet, and probably not a good idea to hill-climb in those.” He dropped his gaze to her spiky heels, about as different from Sarah’s barn boots as you could get.

And why on earth that thought occurred to him was a wonder in itself.

“Probably not,” she agreed. She hesitated, shifting her purse up. “You won’t mind the smells out here?”

Craig crinkled his forehead, then relaxed. “You mean farm smells?”

“Yes.”

He laughed. “Not at all. Especially not when farm visits are all in a day’s work. I don’t even notice it.”

“I would.” She sounded regretful, but resigned. “I just thought I’d stop by and wish you well with your building. I know it’s something you’ve been looking forward to.”

Forward to and then some. He’d had his house plans drawn up nearly three years back, then saved for the dream, living at home a year longer than originally planned.

Now his wish became reality, day by day, emergent from the adjacent hillside splendor.

And directly across from Sarah’s sheep farm. How in the world had that happened when he’d been so careful? Thinking back, he remembered querying Steve Laraby about ownership of the land to either side of him. East. West.

Not across the street. He swallowed a groan with the realization.

As he swung Maggie’s door wide, he mulled the situation. What were the odds that of all the acreage in the largest geographic county in New York State, Craig Macklin would end up building across from Sarah Slocum’s farm?

What had his mother prayed for? Hills, trees, land, good neighbors and room for dogs.

The whole “good neighbor” thing presented a notable challenge. Craig’s collar itched as he considered the situation. Every time he pulled out of his new driveway, Sarah’s presence would remind him of things he’d like to forget.

Gramps’ angst and dismay upon discovering their money gone, rifled by a scheming, two-faced investor. Gramps’ sadness. Their constant worry and guilt over being a burden, an elderly couple who had never burdened anyone all their lives.

That worry hadn’t helped Gramps’ struggle with heart disease. No sir. He’d died crushed and broken under the burden of decisions he thought fiscally sound.

Craig didn’t need reminders, but here he was, building his dream home directly across from a Slocum. A band of them, if appearances could be trusted.

Craig massaged the bridge of his nose. If God had a hand in this, then he obviously had a sense of humor like Craig’s father’s. Dry. Subtle.

And not nearly as funny as he thought it to be.

“She’s your neighbor?” Deb Macklin slid a wide tray of peanut butter cookies out of her convection oven, followed by another. Replacing them with two more, she raised a brow. “A sheep farm, right?”

“I guess.”

“How big?”

Craig shrugged. “No idea. I didn’t see the animals. Well...” He hesitated, reaching for a hot cookie. “I did meet the niece and the nephew trying to kill each other. I don’t suppose that counts.”

“Craig.” His mother’s tone scolded. “She took in all three kids because Rita’s not doing well. I guess the money problems put her over the edge.”



Her phrasing caught Craig's attention. "What money problems? The papers were full of Tom's private insurance and made multiple mentions of his other portfolios." He made no attempt to hide the scorn in his voice.

Deb shook her head as she set the oven timer. "They were wrong." She straightened and met Craig's gaze. "His major insurance policy refused the claim because of a suicide clause. His minor insurance paid, but that was a pittance compared to the cost of raising three kids. Keeping a home." She turned back to the counter and scooped rounded spoonfuls of cookie dough onto fresh baking sheets. "Tom's stock portfolio is tied in with his brother. Ed refuses to give Rita access to it. Rita sued for dispersal, but you know the courts. It'll be a long, drawn-out process. Ed's afraid his part will suffer if Rita withdraws Tom's share, and she's got no money to speak of without it. At least they've got medical insurance still. And Social Security survivor benefits."

"That's it? After all the papers said, I assumed Rita was swimming in cash. Free and easy, while other folks suffered."

Deb gave him a quiet look, not unlike the gaze Sarah Slocum leveled her errant nephew the day before. "You know what they say about assumptions, Craig."

He set his cookie down. "So the kids are living on the farm?"

"Yes. It was either that or foster care. Cade said Sarah wouldn't hear of it, though I can't imagine how she handles running the farm, her nighttime accounting business, and three kids. God love her, she's an ambitious little thing. When we needed sheep for the living Nativity scene last year, Sarah was the first one there and stayed the whole while, making sure everything went smoothly."

Craig hadn't made it to services that December weekend. A firm thwack of guilt smacked him upside the head. Was he really all that busy? Even on call, couldn't he set his phone to vibrate for the hour-long service and show up more regularly than he'd been lately?

Thinking back, Craig mentally scrutinized Sarah's face. Yeah, she looked tired. More, she looked determined. Stubborn. Intent on forging ahead. His mother's voice interrupted his reflection.

"You're not eating your cookie."

The oversized cookie sat on the counter, cool. Untouched. He shook his head, considering. "Not really hungry. I'll grab some for lunch tomorrow."

Deb nodded once more, intent on her task. "Whatever you say."

A slight sound stopped him as he moved to the door. He turned and frowned. His mother presented a calm, serene profile, not a smile in sight. But Craig had been her son a long time. He knew what he'd heard, her distinct low chuckle that said she found the whole thing humorous.

Huh. That made one of them.

## Chapter Seven

Sarah considered the previous day's run-in with Craig Macklin as she aligned a fencing unit along the back hill.

Bad enough that Liv and Brett showed their worst sides, reinforcing current opinion of Slocums in general. But it had to be in front of Craig Macklin. Sheep-hating, sanctimonious...

Who was about to become her new neighbor.

Wonderful. No doubt he'd complain of the dogs' barking at night, the smells of a working farm by day. Sure, he was a vet, but he kept his visits to sheep country few and far between by design.

Recalling her appearance the day past, she couldn't blame him. Craig didn't come off as a guy who got his hands real dirty, regardless of profession. And his current girlfriend fit the profile to the max. Leggy, lithe and lovely.

Sarah tried to thwart a rise of insecurity, but it was no use. Feelings rose within her, how she prayed as a young girl to be normal, look normal, to fit in.

With Tom and Ed ragging on her constantly, she'd longed to be pretty. Attractive, like other girls.

Try as she might, though, nothing paled her deep-toned skin, softened the dense mass of hair or lightened her big, dark eyes. Owl eyes, Tom used to call them, then he'd make bug-eyed faces at Ed until they'd collapse in laughter at her expense.

Sarah scowled at the memory, kicked a raised piece of sod, and shoved the last fencing pole into place with more force than needed.

Standing next to Craig's latest squeeze, she had realized she had nowhere to go but up in the looks department, at least as far as Craig Macklin was concerned. And contemplating her planned showdown with her half brother and father, she didn't have the strength to care. Picking her battles had become a strategic necessity.

"Ain't none of your business, little girl."

Ed's words were typical Slocum. Her father used that phrase as well, a means to keep her in her place. It hadn't worked then, it wouldn't now. Sarah stood silent and patient, staring at Ed.

He twisted, uncomfortable. "Don't try your mother's tricks on me, squaw-girl. This is none of your affair."

Obviously Ed thought the word "squaw" insulting. Maybe she'd e-mail him some Abenaki history. Her squaw legacy was deep and fulfilling, a blessing for a woman of strength. Counting the longnecks on the table alongside his recliner, Sarah saw that Ed was on beer number five.

Great. He'd gotten an early start. Sarah continued to gaze at him, then angled her head. "I have three children who need their mother, one of whom is your godson. It would behoove you to act in their best interests instead of your own. You have no financial problems, Ed. You don't need that money. Why tie it up for Rita? What do you hope to gain?"

"You think talkin' like a highfalutin' college girl is gonna get you anywhere?" Ed blew out breath that smelled of sour mash and onions. "I may be simple, but I know my rights. Tom and I created that portfolio. Until a court makes me split it, it stays put. Rita can get her sorry butt out of bed and get a job. If she'd been more ambitious, Tommy wouldn't have had to take that money."

Sarah's heart hammered. Her lungs swelled. She wanted to smack him for insinuating Rita was responsible for Tom's illicit actions.

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