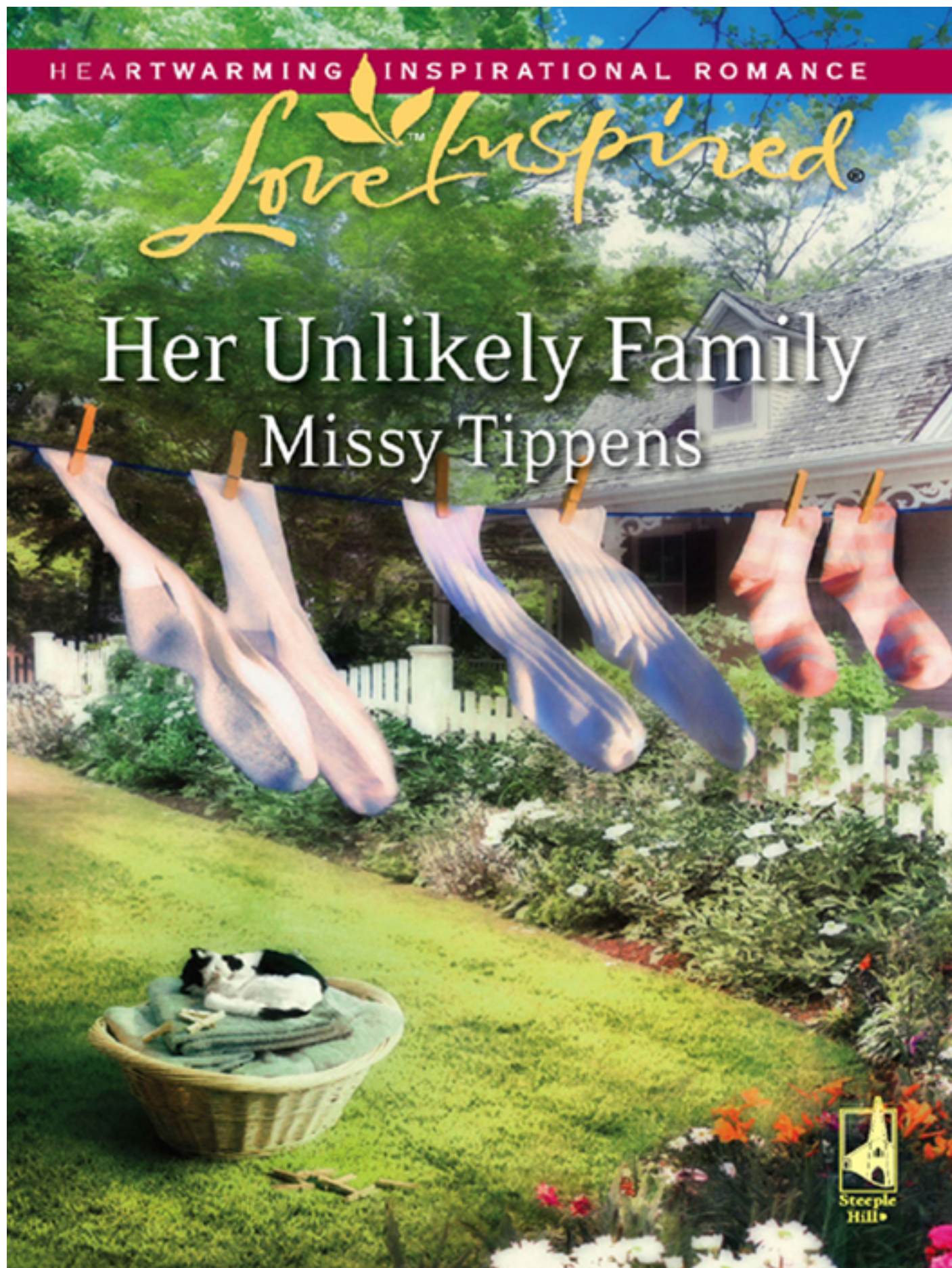


HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired™

Her Unlikely Family

Missy Tippens



Missy Tipples
Her Unlikely Family

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Take responsibility for his orphaned niece, yes. Raise her himself, no. A good boarding school was what the girl needed, not an uncle who was never home. But then Michael Throckmorton's niece ran away. And the big-hearted, beautiful diner waitress who'd taken her in wasn't letting her go so easily. Josie Miller had a few conditions for Michael. Oddly enough, he was willing to listen. Yet days later, why wasn't he hauling the teen back to school and himself back to the city? Could it be that an unlikely family was forming?

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Содержание

Her Unlikely Family	6
Contents	7
Acknowledgments	8
Chapter One	9
Chapter Two	16
Chapter Three	25
Chapter Four	32
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

Her Unlikely Family

Missy Tippens



To my husband, Terry, who has read every word
I've ever written.
To my children, Nick, Tyler and Michelle,
who have cheered me along on this journey.
To my parents, Frank and Celia Conley; my sister,
Mindy Winningham; and all my extended family
who love me no matter what.
And to God for giving me the stories.

Contents

Acknowledgments
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 Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Epilogue

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Chapter One

If there was one thing Josie Miller knew, it was the smell of a rich man. And whoever had just walked into the diner smelled like Fort Knox.

She sniffed the aftershave-tinged air once again and, following her nose, popped up from behind the counter with the half-filled straw dispenser in hand. She spied the man leaning into a booth, wiping the seat with a napkin. When he sat, she got a glimpse of his face and nearly dropped the straw holder.

Black hair, black golf shirt and black mood—if the slant of his brows meant anything—said he might very well be trouble.

“I’ll be right with you,” she said as she spun around and hurried through the swinging door into the kitchen.

“Bogey at table one,” she warned the girl at the dishwashing sink.

Lisa, up to her elbows in suds, gave Josie a typical teenager roll of the eyes. “Huh?”

“I think it’s your uncle.”

Genuine fear replaced Lisa’s insolent expression. “No way!”

“Tall, dark, smells expensive?”

Lisa shook the bubbles off and dried her hands. “That could be anyone.”

“Not my regular clientele.”

“Does he have black hair and blue eyes?”

“Yes on the hair. I’m not sure on the eyes.”

“All the girls at school say he’s too gorgeous for words.”

Josie opened the door a crack and took a quick glimpse. “Definitely gorgeous. In a stiff, formal kind of way.” The kind of man who had never interested her. “Hurry, look. He’s thumbing through his wallet.”

Lisa peeked, then groaned and began to chew on her black-polished fingernail. “What am I going to do?”

Josie was wondering the same thing. She’d let down her guard after two weeks and had assumed the guy would never show up. “Go tell him you’ve found a job and want to stay.”

“He won’t let me. He’ll make me go back to that school.”

“I thought you said you got kicked out,” Josie said.

“I did. But his little donations to fund new buildings can work wonders.” She started pacing, running her fingers through her spiky green hair. “I’ll die if he sends me back there.”

“Calm down, Lisa. If the man’s as bad as you say, surely he’ll leave without a fuss.”

“You don’t know my uncle Michael.”

No, but she knew his kind. Work and money meant everything. She could also hear the snob alert clanging in her head. “You’re dealing with a pro, here.” Josie smoothed her hands down the front of her uniform, then grabbed a piece of bubble gum from the shelf over the sink. “I’ll give him a taste of what he’d expect from a small-time waitress, and he’ll be out of here in a flash. Leave the man to me.”

Michael H. Throckmorton III leaned his arms on the table, then thought better of it. He’d already had to wipe crumbs and grease off the cracked vinyl seat of this fine eating establishment, Bud’s Diner.

A bald old man—Bud?—covered in sweat, wearing a filthy apron, squinted at a blaring TV perched precariously on a shelf in the corner. When a commercial came on, he turned and began raking a metal spatula across the sizzling surface of the grill.

The air, thick with the overpowering smell of grease, nearly choked Michael. A fly buzzed on the window ledge. He couldn't imagine how the place had passed health-department inspections.

Tuning out all but the task before him, he examined the outdated photograph of Lisa he always carried in his wallet. She was only fourteen at the time. A time when she used to laugh and tease him. When she used to hug him.

No time for nostalgia. It's unproductive.

Besides, Lisa's generous hugs were a lifetime ago, and so much had changed.

"What can I getcha?"

Rings adorned almost every finger—and the thumb—of a hand holding a stubby pencil poised over a pad of paper. Silver charms and beaded bracelets jangled on the woman's wrist. His gaze moved beyond multiple necklaces and gaudy dangling earrings to her face. A pretty face, once you got past the loud jewelry.

The petite waitress had what appeared to be pinkish-colored hair. Or was the light giving it that strange cast? He narrowed his eyes, studying the shade.

She popped her gum, then forced a smile, looking anything but friendly. "Did you want to order?"

"Bottled water, please."

"No bottles. Just tap."

He needed to order something. Anything. The latest report from the private investigator led right to this greasy spoon.

"You know, we scored a hundred percent on our last inspection." She pointed her pencil at a certificate on the wall by the door.

Though he was perfectly within his rights as a customer to worry about such things, his face heated. He hadn't meant to offend with his hesitancy. "Fine. I'll have a glass of ice water with lemon. And..." He flipped open a menu and ordered the first item that caught his attention. "A grilled chicken sandwich with lettuce and tomato."

"Fries with that?"

"No, thank you."

She grinned. "Where're you from?" Then she snapped her gum again.

If she would stop that annoying chewing, she'd have a nice mouth.

Her brown eyes sparkled, as if she could read his mind.

"I'm from Charleston," he finally answered.

"So you're in Gatlinburg on vacation?"

He nailed her with his oft-used intimidating expression, the one that cowed most people. "Actually, I'm looking for my niece. Lisa Throckmorton." He showed her the picture. "Have you seen her?"

"I can't really say." She didn't flinch. The woman was either good at hedging, or she was telling the truth. And she obviously wasn't easily intimidated.

"This photo is two years old," he said. "She threatened to dye her hair green the last time I talked to her. I have no idea whether or not she followed through."

"So what did you tell her?"

"Pardon me?"

"When she threatened about her hair. What did you say?"

He ran his hand through his own hair, determined to get the waitress back on track. "Never mind that. She's a runaway."

"Oh, that's too bad."

He scooted the picture across the table. "She's been missing nearly two weeks, but we think she may be close by. I plan to find her and take her home."

"Take her home, huh? How old is she?"

“Sixteen.”

The waitress’s eyes filled with suspicion. “Not quite old enough to be off on her own. Why’d she run away?”

If he didn’t know better, he would think her tone held accusation that he was a poor guardian. But she wouldn’t have any idea he was raising his sister’s daughter.

“It’s really none of your business,” he said. “She has a family who loves her and wants her back.”

“So you won’t answer my question, huh?”

The impertinent waitress had just about frayed his last nerve. Not what he needed while wasting precious time. He glanced at his watch, thinking for a split second of the weekly loan committee meeting he was missing. “No, I won’t answer it.”

The woman’s gaze bore into his as if she were trying to decipher his thoughts. The air between them crackled with unspoken censure, and for a moment he feared she could see through to his worry that he was failing his sister yet again, even now, after her death.

He shook off the crazy, morbid thought. “So, have you seen my niece?”

“She may have passed through.” She stuck the pencil behind her ear. “Gotta put your order in.”

She walked to the end of the counter, leaned across it and yelled, “Grilled chick, dressed,” to the man with the shiny forehead and five-o’clock shadow. The sweaty cook acknowledged the order with a jerk of his head and then eyed the waitress; some kind of message seemed to pass between them.

Michael sat back in the booth, crossed his arms and settled in. He wasn’t going anywhere until he found out if the message had anything to do with Lisa. She wasn’t going to spend one more night alone on the streets. He would find her, even if it meant having to eat another meal in this dive.

After Josie delivered Michael’s water, she made a bee-line to the kitchen.

Lisa stood beside the door, chewing on her fingernail. “What did he say?”

“He’s searching for one Lisa Throckmorton, sixteen-year-old runaway.” She arched her brow at the supposed recently turned eighteen-year-old. “You showed me a fake driver’s license.”

“I’m sorry. I was afraid you’d send me back if you knew.”

“You’re right about that. I could probably go to jail for harboring a minor.”

Lisa squinched up her nose. “You didn’t tell, did you?”

“No. But I was tempted. You’d better not lie to me again.”

“I won’t. I promise.” She held her fingers up in a Girl Scout promise. “Did he leave yet?”

“No. He ordered a sandwich.”

“Great. Now I’m stuck here. I was invited to a gallery opening tonight up at the craft school.”

“This is serious, Lisa. I really should tell him you’re here. He must be worried sick.”

“Please, please, please don’t. I guarantee you he’s not worried. He’d rather be off counting his money right now.”

Josie spun her Mickey Mouse watch around—7:00 p.m. “I want you to tell me the truth about your uncle. He didn’t seem like the monster you’ve painted him to be. He came all the way from Charleston looking for you, after all.”

“I told you before. He doesn’t want me. He shipped me off to boarding school a year ago, only a week after my mom died.”

“Well, maybe he thinks that’s best. The school has a really good reputation.”

Lisa’s eyes brightened, and she blinked away tears. “He doesn’t want me, okay? I heard him tell my grandmother the day after the funeral.”

Josie wanted to shake the man. “Does he call you or visit?”

“He always cancels. He’s too busy. And I hate that place.”

A sixteen-year-old girl whose mother had just died shouldn’t be shipped off to boarding school. She should be with her family. And Josie knew all too well about craving attention from family.

“What’s your uncle like? Not as a parent. As a person.”

Lisa rolled her eyes. “He’s always on the straight and narrow. Churchgoing. Law-abiding. Serious.” She thought for a second. “He, like, owns the bank. He’s worked there since he was five or something.”

“Sounds like a good role model to me.”

“You promised me, Josie.” She backed away, as if heading for the door. “If you tell him, I’m out of here. ‘Cause he’ll send me right back to that horrible place and all those snobby kids who won’t have anything to do with me.”

“And you’ve told him how they exclude you?”

“I think I mentioned it.”

“You think?”

“I did tell him about the three girls on my floor who’ve spread lies about me. But he didn’t believe me, because he knows their parents really well.”

Well, that decided it. Josie wasn’t about to turn the girl over to an uncle who would deny a problem and pack her off to school with kids who mistreated her.

Then again, she probably shouldn’t take Lisa’s word for it. Josie would stall answering his questions about Lisa’s whereabouts until she could find out for herself what kind of guardian he was.

A serious, law-abiding banker, huh? He would be as easy to read as Bud’s menu.

Michael finished the last bite of his sandwich and had to admit the chicken was tender and spiced to perfection. However, after the exhausting day he’d spent driving without stopping to eat, anything would have tasted good.

The waitress with Josie printed on her name tag jangled as she hurried toward his table, waving a slip of paper. “I’ve got your check right here.”

She certainly was trying to rush him out the door.

He wasn’t budging. “I think I’d like some dessert. What’s the chef making today?”

The woman snorted a laugh. “Chef? If Bud over there is a chef, I’ll eat my orthopedic shoes.”

He glanced down at the old-lady shoes, which suited her personality about as well as a tiara on her head would. “Believe me, Josie, I had already deduced he wasn’t trained at Le Cordon Bleu.”

She smiled, but the tilt of her brows made her seem confused. She touched her name tag. “You know my name. What’s yours?”

“Michael Throckmorton.”

“Well, you’re a funny man, Mike.”

“It’s Michael. I’ve never been called Mike.”

“But Michael sounds so stuffy.”

“Maybe I am stuffy. Now, what’s on the dessert menu today?”

With a mischievous gleam in her eye, she parked one hip on the edge of his table, leg swinging, and pointed to the far wall. “The dessert menu’s on that chalkboard. Same today as yesterday and every day for the past year or so. Pecan pie, apple pie or chocolate cake?”

“Make it apple, with black coffee.”

“I figured you for an apple-pie man. Coming right up.”

Now what was that supposed to mean? “Would you please ask Bud to come take a look at this picture of Lisa when he gets a moment?”

“He’s real busy. But I’ll try.” She shoved her pencil, not behind her ear this time, but into her bird’s nest of a hairdo, then moved to wait on another table where she flirted with two men in dirty work clothes.

In observing her at a distance, he decided that somehow, miraculously, she equaled a whole lot more than the sum of her parts. Extreme jewelry, plus funky hair and rubber-soled shoes equaled... attractive waitress.

How could that possibly be?

When Josie returned with Michael's pie and coffee, she slid into the booth across from him. She blew a pink bubble, then popped it with a loud snap. "So, tell me about you and your niece. Are you helping her parents search for her?"

He lifted Lisa's photograph and stared at the innocent, trusting smile. A smile that used to come so easily before her mother's drinking had gotten out of hand.

"My sister, Patricia, was a single mom. She died in a car accident a year ago."

"Oh, no. Don't tell me it was a drunk driver."

"Yes. Her." Way to go, Throckmorton. Tell her your life history, why don't you?

His unintentional revelation was greeted with silence. And a pitying look—which he detested.

"Anyway, she specified in her will that I be named guardian," he added.

"Why'd she pick you?"

He bristled. "Why not me?"

"Well, you appear to be single." She waggled her left ring finger. "No ring."

Yes, he was single. Definitely single since Gloria had dumped him. "An unmarried man can be a suitable guardian."

"I didn't say you were unsuitable. I'm just wondering why she chose you."

Josie was acting a little too interested. As if she was stalling.

The longer this woman gave him the runaround, the more likely it was he would be stuck in Gatlinburg, missing his appointment with Tom Mason. And Throckmorton's Bank needed Mason's company to take out that construction loan.

He checked his watch. "You know, I really want to find her and get back to Charleston. I have an important meeting tomorrow. Do you have any idea where she could be?"

"So this is all about getting back to your important meeting, huh?"

He sighed. This woman was impossible. Since when was it a crime to work hard? "No. It's about making sure my niece is safe. About getting her back to school—and round-the-clock supervision—where she belongs before she makes a stupid mistake." Like her mother made sixteen years ago.

"What kind of mistake?"

"Some of her friends thought she might have left with an older boy. A troublemaker."

Josie thought about her one encounter with the troublemaker boyfriend and said a quick prayer of thanks that the creep had ditched Lisa and hit the road—even if he had "borrowed" her car.

She figured another prayer for guidance wouldn't be a bad idea either since Michael Throckmorton didn't seem as awful as Lisa had made him out to be. In fact, he seemed downright concerned. Except for wanting to get back for a meeting. That bothered her.

But maybe she should at least let him know Lisa was safe.

But then Lisa would feel betrayed and might run again.

What a mess.

"You know, Mike, if you'll hang around until I'm off tonight, I might be able to help you."

His all-business, I'm-in-a-hurry-to-get-out-of-here scowl lit with a hint of hope. "I knew it. You do know where Lisa is."

"Order's up," Bud called.

What should she do? Mike obviously cared for his niece. Maybe he just didn't know how to show it. "Okay, I admit I've met her, and I can tell you she's safe. But she doesn't want to see you."

He winced at the truth. "She's made that fairly clear."

Bud impatiently clanged the little service bell and nodded toward a customer. "Hamburger's getting cold."

"Look, I need to get back to work. I'm pulling a double, so I don't get off till ten."

She hopped up and went to pick up the order, but when she turned to take it to the table, she glimpsed the back of Mike's broad back as he disappeared through the swinging door into the kitchen.

By the time she caught up to him, he stood alone in the middle of the spick-and-span room. Lisa was nowhere in sight.

“She’s not here.” He sounded deflated.

“No. But like I said, she’s safe.”

He zeroed in on the exit leading to the alley. “If I don’t find her, I’ll meet you outside at ten. But I expect some answers.” In four strides of his long legs, he was out the door, his head snapping left and right to search the darkening alley.

Bud stuck his head into the kitchen, saw the intruder was gone and said, “She left with Brian after he delivered the bread.”

“Do you have any idea where they went?”

“No.”

A flutter of panic beat against Josie’s chest. “What if she ran again?”

A worried look deepened his wrinkles, but he shrugged. “The girl’s your mission project. Not mine.” The door flapped closed as he went back to the dining room and his grill.

Josie wondered if protecting Lisa had been the right thing to do. Instinct had told her the girl needed some time away from peer pressure family pressure, and the burden wealth could put on a person—just as Josie had needed at that age. Lisa needed time to figure out who she was and what she wanted out of life.

But Josie had thought she was dealing with an unwanted eighteen-year-old. Now she had to find a way to prevent the girl from running away again while being responsible to the hunky uncle. Maybe she could hold him off until she talked to Lisa—providing Lisa showed up at home that night.

Lord, I thought You sent Lisa to me like You sent the other runaways. I thought You wanted me to help her. But I don’t have any business keeping her from an uncle who seems to care about her.

God had sent Lisa to her for a reason. She simply had to figure out what that reason could be.

Michael hunkered down in his car. The late March temperature had dropped and couldn’t be over forty. Not exactly what he’d dressed for earlier in the day, back before he’d known he would have to hang around to deal with a frustrating waitress as the only link to his niece.

He had a view of the front of the diner and of the alley leading from the back. So far, he’d only seen customers come and go. No sign of Lisa.

He pushed the button to light his watch. Eight past ten and still no sign of Josie, either.

The woman certainly worked hard. Unless, of course, she’d spent her time warning Lisa not to come back to the diner. The fact that Josie had misled him earlier didn’t bode well for how truthful she would be tonight.

The fact that Lisa had told Josie she didn’t want to see him didn’t bode well either.

A sigh escaped from some weary place deep inside. How was he supposed to deal with a teenager who was so rebellious she broke every school rule twice? Surely the school, with female role models like her teachers, was better than his bachelor home. Once again, he would have to find a way to get Lisa reinstated.

He steeled himself for her objections. He would find her and take her back where she belonged. Maybe someday she would thank him for it.

The door of the diner opened, and Josie, without any wasted movement, walked toward his car. Before he knew it, she had climbed in and shut the door.

“Hi, Mike. Nice night.”

“Would you care to join me?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Light from a streetlamp spilled into the car, illuminating her sassy smirk.

He stopped himself from telling her she had a nice smile, even though she did have a very nice smile. Instead, he sat in silence, turning to the quiet neighborhood outside, remembering the more

touristy area a few blocks away where shops sold handmade candles, homemade fudge and funnel cakes. Why would a teenager head to this town?

When he recalled the many wedding chapels in the area, his gut clenched. “I’m not too late to keep her from trying to marry the punk, am I?”

“No. The guy dumped her. But—”

“So you do know about him.” Anger pushed away the chill in the air. “What else have you kept from me?”

“It’s not like I—”

His cell phone rang. He unclipped it from his belt. Caller ID showed it was the investigator. “Throckmorton.”

“They traced your niece’s car to a town in North Georgia,” the man said. “A young couple was seen getting out. We’re not sure if it’s Lisa. The female’s hair is black.”

“Did you call the police?”

“A patrol car is on its way now.”

“Georgia, huh? What about credit-card activity?”

“None since the day she disappeared.”

Michael drummed his thumb on the steering wheel. “Okay. Thanks.”

“I’ll call as soon as we find her.”

Snapping the phone closed, he watched Josie. She had her legs crossed, foot jiggling. She spun her bracelets around her wrist. Either the woman couldn’t sit still or she was nervous.

None of this made sense. Was Josie lying? He had thought for sure he was on Lisa’s trail. He prayed he was right.

“So that call was about Lisa?” Josie asked.

“It was the P.I. I hired to locate her.”

“What did you find out?”

“He says Lisa may be in Georgia with a guy. Her car’s there, anyway.”

Josie sat up at attention, then frowned. “The creep took her car. So I assume he’s with someone else.”

“Took her car? Why didn’t she report the theft?”

“Lisa wanted to wait. She thinks he’ll bring it back.”

“Could he have come back for Lisa today?”

“Well, she was here at dinnertime. But she lit out once she saw you.”

He breathed in through his nose, trying to control the urge to yell. “You mean to tell me she was at the diner, and while you chatted and stalled, she snuck away again?”

“No, I—Do you think she could have gotten to that town in Georgia in the three hours since you got here?”

“I have no idea.”

She clicked her fingernails on the leather interior, then opened her door. “Let me run and get a phone directory, then make some calls.”

He reached over her to close the door. “Wait just a moment.”

Josie, who’d been jerking him around all evening, was trying to make an awfully sudden exit. And now she acted as if she feared Lisa had run away again? Well, he would bet the last dollar in Throckmorton’s Bank that Lisa wasn’t in Georgia with her car.

“I want you to tell me the truth, and tell me right now,” he said.

“I have told you the truth. She’s most likely still here. Then again, I’m not positive.” She reached for the door handle. “Let me try to find her and talk her into meeting with you.”

“No. You’ve had your chance. Tell me where to look.”

“Come on, Mike, I promised her. You’re putting me in a tough position.”

“If you think you’re in a tough position now, wait until I have you arrested for kidnapping.”

Chapter Two

Think, Josie, think.

Mike looked so imposing in the dimly lit car. All angles and shadows. If she hadn't heard from his niece that he was a law-abiding citizen, she would be pulling out her pepper spray right about now.

She forced a carefree laugh. "Kidnapping? Now you're being ridiculous."

"I'm dead serious. You're keeping a minor away from her legal guardian."

"Okay, I admit I was uncooperative at first. But she'd told me she was eighteen. And, for the record, I didn't have anything to do with her sneaking out of the diner this evening."

With his dark brows drawn together, he glared at her. "You could have told me as soon as you noticed her missing."

"She's not necessarily missing. She said something about having plans tonight. I imagine she'll show up later either here or at my house."

"She knows where you live? Let's go check there."

Josie tentatively touched his forearm, surprised at the warmth against her cold fingers. "I can't betray her. I promised I'd protect her from you."

"Protect?" He jerked his arm away. "What on earth did she tell you? That I beat her?"

Josie hesitated.

"Come on. I would never do a thing to hurt Lisa. I just want her safely at school."

"Mike, she'll come around eventually. But right now you need to do what's best for Lisa."

"I know what's best for my own niece."

"I'm not so sure about that." Before he could argue, she said, "I need time to talk her into meeting with you. Promise me you won't ambush her, or she may truly run again."

He gripped the steering wheel so tightly it was a wonder it didn't bend. He shook his head and exhaled. "Why are you doing this for a runaway teenager—a stranger?"

"Because I was in her shoes once."

"You ran away?" he said as if surprised.

"Yep. Twice."

"Did your parents find you?"

"They did the first time. The second time, I had just graduated from high school, so they didn't do anything about it."

As he digested her story, she relaxed against the seat and said, "I guess I should head home and wait. Lisa has about two hours before her midnight curfew."

"Curfew? Is she living with you?"

Forget relaxing. She had almost let that piece of information slip. If she told him yes, he would be sitting on her doorstep around the clock. "She's been staying somewhere safe. I keep tabs on her. That's all I'm saying for now."

He tried the bending-the-steering-wheel trick one more time. The man oozed tension.

Of course, she would, too, in the same situation.

"You know, I hate to sit and wait," he said. "If you're wrong about her whereabouts, she could be getting farther away by the minute."

"There's a possibility she's at the nearby craft school. I'll drive up there and make sure."

He slowly turned his head and stared at Josie with his night-darkened blue eyes. "Why couldn't you have said that as soon as you came out here?"

His intensity sent little sparks of awareness along her nerve endings. Which was absolutely crazy. His type usually made her want to shudder. "I had to make sure I could trust you," she sputtered.

"Trust, Josie? I assure you, you can trust me."

His inflection said exactly what he thought of her. He would understand her wariness, though, if only he knew how a rich, domineering man had let her down before.

Her conscience pricked her for being judgmental. Lord, help me not to compare Mike with my dad, not to judge him. But most of all, protect Lisa. And please, please, let her be at the craft school.

Josie continued to plead with God as she directed Mike to park at the entrance to the campus. He'd insisted on coming along. As she'd discovered, when Mike insisted, a person didn't have much choice.

"Wait here. I'll walk up and look in the gallery," she said.

"It's after ten. I would think it would be closed."

"If I don't find her in the gallery, I'll see if I can find Brian's truck."

Mike thunked his head against the headrest and closed his eyes. "Brian?"

"The bread delivery guy. Bud said she left with him."

With a not-at-all-happy laugh, he shook his head. "I'll give you ten minutes. Then I'm driving up to take a look around."

"Come on, Mike. If you chase her down now, nothing will have changed. She'll just run again—if not tonight, then another day. Don't blow it with impatience."

He leaned closer, right in her face, and boy, did he smell good.

"You haven't begun to see my impatience, Josie. Ten minutes. Not one minute longer."

She moved closer until her nose almost touched his. "I'm not some peon crawling to you, begging for a loan."

Without moving an inch away from her challenge, he said, "Ready, set..." Then, somehow, his watch beeped. "...Go."

As much as she would love to argue with the maddening man, she resisted and slung the door open. She jumped out and started running up the drive. Forget your pride, Josie. Think of Lisa.

Huffing and puffing, she stopped at the main building, but it was dark. A trip around the building revealed music playing up the hill at one of the visiting artists' cottages.

She followed the sound and about collapsed in relief when she heard Lisa's voice. Now she had to somehow send Lisa home without giving away the fact that Mike was only two hundred yards away.

A brisk walk to the porch of one of the houses found Lisa, Brian and a group of students talking over the strains of jazz.

"Hi," Josie said.

"Josie! What are you doing here?" Lisa's gaze darted around, no doubt looking for Mike.

"I came to tell you to get on back to the house."

"What about my uncle?"

"We'll talk about him when you get there."

"Curfew isn't until twelve."

"I just changed it to ten-thirty."

"But it's that time now."

"Then I suggest you get going."

"But, Josie—"

"As long as you're under my roof, I expect you to play by my rules." Please don't let this backfire!

Lisa looked at her new friends and shrugged. "I guess I'll see ya later. Thanks for telling me about the gallery opening. It was awesome."

"Hey, anytime," a young woman said. "I hope you'll consider taking some classes."

"Sure." Lisa glanced at Josie guiltily. "When I'm old enough." She took the hand of the tall, lanky kid next to her. "Come on, Brian."

"Brian, I expect you to take her directly home," Josie said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

As dignified as she could, Josie traipsed down the hill, then started into a full run as soon as she was out of sight. She met Mike’s headlights halfway up the drive and stepped in the middle of the road, putting up her hand to tell him to halt.

Once he stopped, she hurried to the passenger’s side and climbed in. “She’s here. Back up and go out the way we came in before she sees you, or she’s liable to tell Brian to head to the state line.”

Michael looked ahead up the road and thought for a moment about staying put, blocking the drive.

“If we’re lucky, they’ll take another minute or two to get to Brian’s truck.” Josie breathed heavily, her hair a wild curly mess falling out of confinement.

“How do I know you really saw her at all?”

She growled her irritation. “If my running all the way up there was for nothing, then I may just...” She growled again.

Josie might have a point. He didn’t want to risk scaring Lisa away. He’d have to believe the crazy woman beside him.

He backed the car up, then squealed out of the parking lot.

“Hey. Watch it,” she said. “You might get your Beemer dusty or something.”

He let off the gas. “I’m sorry. I don’t usually drive so carelessly.”

“I suspected as much.”

“It’s just so frustrating to get this close and not see her.”

“She’ll meet you tomorrow. I won’t take no for an answer.”

Josie didn’t seem to be jesting. “You’ll do that for me?”

“I’ll do it for Lisa. Whether she realizes it or not, she needs you.”

“Exactly. She needs my influence to get her reinstated in school where she has stability, where she has female role models.”

“I said she needs you—your love—not the substitute you’re trying to provide.”

Love. He almost laughed out loud. Hadn’t Gloria, as she’d returned his great grandmother’s engagement ring, told him he wasn’t even capable of loving? And what about his own sister? Patricia had certainly made her opinion of his love perfectly clear on the night she’d died.

Love? A stab of guilt knocked him deeper into his seat. What could he possibly offer Lisa besides a prestigious private school, a fine college education and a position at the bank?

“I’ll take you home,” he said. “I’m holding you to your word about tomorrow.”

“My car’s at the diner.”

“You know, I’m struggling with leaving this all in your hands. Do you promise you won’t help her escape tonight?”

“Of course I won’t. Trust me.”

In his world, trust was only secured once there was a solid, no-loopholes contract signed. Somehow, he didn’t see her signing anything at the moment. He arched one brow at her, but she merely smiled. Which didn’t reassure him at all.

“Mike, you never mentioned Lisa’s father. Why isn’t he the guardian?”

“Lisa’s father has never been in the picture. He and my sister never married.”

“Then it must have been really hard for Lisa when her mother died.”

Difficult for Lisa, yes. But at least she didn’t have to live with the guilt of being at fault. He was the one who’d said horrid things that had upset Patricia that night. “I don’t think she’s fully dealt with Patricia’s death. Other than with excessive rebellion.”

“I imagine it’s been tough trying to love a troublemaking teenager.”

He clenched his teeth to keep from griping about how tough. “We’ve had our rough spots.”

“Why did she run away? Honestly.”

He hesitated. Of course, Josie probably knew the whole story. Lisa tended to tell things like they were. “She doesn’t like boarding school. She wants to live with me, but I can’t take care of her. I’m at the bank twelve hours a day, and I travel.”

“It’s not like she’s a toddler. She could be home a couple of hours a day by herself. You could even send her to her grandparents or hire someone to help.”

“She’s landed in too much trouble to be left to her own devices. And my parents can’t take on that responsibility.” He stopped at a red light. “As far as hiring someone to function as a sort of nanny, well, I didn’t like any of the candidates I interviewed.”

“Maybe you should make some adjustments to your schedule for the welfare of your niece.”

As he turned up the street to the diner, he fought the temptation to defend himself. Ultimately, his schedule was none of her business. “I make decisions as I see fit, and I’d appreciate it if you’d keep your advice to yourself from now on.” He motioned to a lone parked car. “Is that your vehicle?”

“Yes, that’s my heap of junk. And I’ll try to keep my opinions to myself.”

Try was the operative word.

“How am I going to be sure Lisa is secure for the night?” he asked.

“Give me your cell-phone number, and I’ll call if she doesn’t show up at my house.”

“Ah, I see. So she is staying at your house.”

A smile spread across her face. “Man, Mike, you’re good.”

“What can I say?”

She pulled a scrap of paper out of her pocket. “Do you have a pen? I need your number.”

There was no way he would go to bed tonight without catching a glimpse of Lisa. “How about I follow you home? I won’t let Lisa see me.”

“That won’t be necessary, Mike.”

“Michael.”

“That won’t be necessary, Mike.” She smiled so sweetly it made it difficult to stand firm.

Difficult, but not impossible. “Oh, yes it will.”

Michael followed Josie to within a block of her house. After she went in the front door and flashed the porch light, their prearranged signal that Lisa was there, he pulled his car closer.

A light came on in a side window. Maybe he could take a quick look, just to confirm Lisa was really there. And that they weren’t packing her bags.

He parked, got out, then crept around the corner of the tiny, vinyl-siding home. Strangely, it appeared to be pink in the glow of the streetlights.

Pink hair, pink uniform, pink house. Strange woman.

After surveying the height of the window, he quickly grabbed an empty metal garbage can from the neighbor’s yard to stand on, then eased along the wall of Josie’s house. A cat darted out of the bushes, scaring the life out of him. He nearly dropped the trash can.

But he carried on with his mission and set the can upside down, then climbed up, standing on the edges to keep the bottom from denting in. He rose up on his toes. As he reached the window, he realized it was raised about two inches. Voices carried out the opening.

Jackpot!

“I can’t believe you let him follow you here,” Lisa said in an angry whisper, as if he might somehow be near enough to hear.

“He didn’t exactly give me any choice.”

Josie had her back to him, but he could see the top of Lisa’s head. Green head.

Though relief at finally seeing her eased the knot in his stomach, irritation that she had carried out her hair-coloring threat sparked through him. It would be one more battle Lisa would wage with her grandmother.

Lisa moved to the side. Her hair wasn't only green. It also looked as if a lawn mower had gotten hold of it. "You promised you'd get rid of him, Josie."

"That was before I realized he's not as bad as you said he was."

"But you didn't try. You sat right down and started chatting with him at the diner like he was some long-lost friend."

"And he wasn't even scared off by my interrogation or gum-snapping small-time waitress act."

"Scared off? He probably hasn't had a date since snooty ol' Gloria told him to take a hike. The poor guy must be desperate."

Incensed, Michael said, "I beg your pardon."

The screams of the two women startled him, but he managed to stay balanced. Josie, on the other hand, dropped to the floor, and Lisa practically dove under the bed.

"It's only me, the desperate one," he said.

Josie hopped up and fully raised the window. "You...You Peeping Tom! I should call the police."

"Go right ahead. I'll tell them you're hiding a minor here. For all I know, you kidnapped her."

He squinted, peering through the screen into the tiny bedroom. "Speaking of the minor...Lisa, come out from under there."

Silence.

"Lisa..."

"Oh, give it up, Lisa," Josie said. "Come on out. We're busted."

"And so are you, buddy," said a gravelly voice behind Michael. "Police. Put your hands up."

Josie had to fight the incredulous laugh that nearly bubbled out of her. It wasn't very often the president of a bank found himself in Mike's position. She pressed her face against the screen and found a frequent patron of the diner and member of her church. "Hello, Officer Fredrickson."

"You okay here, Josie? Your neighbor called saying someone was sitting in a car casing out your house. Do you know this man?"

Mike glared at her, and she bit her lower lip to keep from grinning.

"I don't really know him..." This would be one way to get Mike off Lisa's back. But did she dare?

"So, do you want to press charges against this pervert?"

"Pervert? This is ridiculous. My name is Michael Throckmorton. My niece is in there." He leaned his face closer. "Tell the man, Josie. You do remember what we talked about?"

Yes, the supposed kidnapping. She couldn't risk it. "I actually met him today, Officer. And his niece is here in, uh, on the floor."

Lisa slung the yellow-flowered bedspread back and scooted out from under the bed. She approached the window, her furious gaze spearing first Josie, then Mike.

"Is this your uncle, Miss?"

She jammed her hands on her hips. "Yes."

"Then what's he doing out here peeking in?" the policeman asked.

"It's not something I do every day," Michael said through clenched teeth, scowling at Josie. "Can I put my hands down now and explain?"

"Sure, if you'll hop off there and show me some ID."

While Mike complied, Josie coaxed Lisa to go outside with her. They joined Mike on the lawn as the officer checked his license with a flashlight.

Josie figured she'd better not push him any further. "You can go, Officer Fredrickson. We were about to discuss his niece."

"You're sure? I won't leave if you're not totally comfortable."

Recalling the full name printed on the business card Mike had left at the diner with Bud, she knew she would never be totally comfortable around one Michael H. Throckmorton III. “We’re fine here. Just a misunderstanding.”

“Okay. You can relax now, buddy. Call if you need anything, Josie.” He pressed the button on his shoulder radio to call the station and lumbered away.

Mike stood nearly nose-to-nose with Josie. “Let’s go in the house. Now.”

Each word was its own sentence. The man meant business.

Well, she meant business, too. She jabbed at his nose with her forefinger. “Talk to me in that tone of voice and I’ll call the cop back over here.”

“Go right ahead. I’ll throw around the word kidnapping this time.” He tried to peer around Josie. “Lisa, get packed. You’re coming with me right now.”

“No.”

“I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Then you’ll have to drag me kicking and screaming. What will the neighbors think about that? Huh?”

Michael thought his blood pressure might blow out the top of his head. Never in his life had he been this frustrated. There was only one solution.

He barreled toward the front of the house. “Officer Fredrickson!”

The man heard him and rolled down his window. “Yes, Mr. Throckmorton?”

“I want to press charges.”

“What on earth for?”

“Kidnapping, against Josie.”

“Kidnapping?”

“Or delinquency against my niece. Whichever will get a runaway sixteen-year-old home the quickest.”

Michael had to hurry each step to keep up with the irate, stomping pace of Lisa.

“I cannot believe you,” she raged in her staccato fury—the same words she’d repeated a dozen times on the way to the police precinct.

He was beginning to regret his hasty decision. It didn’t look as if it would work in his favor. Especially since Josie had offered herself so the cop wouldn’t haul Lisa in to the station.

Michael reached around Lisa to open the door to the building, but she grabbed the handle and flung it outward, nearly hitting him in the face.

“I just cannot believe you did this to her.”

As he started to ask a man at the front desk where to find Josie, Lisa squealed her name and ran into an adjoining room.

The “prisoner” sat perched on the edge of Officer Fredrickson’s desk, her busy foot swinging, while the man laughed at something she’d said.

She didn’t look too traumatized, yet Lisa threw herself at Josie as if Josie had been abducted and tortured for a month.

“I’m okay, Lisa. We were just talking.”

“You mean they didn’t, like, lock you up with murderers?”

“You may be watching a little too much TV, darlin’,” the older officer said in a kind voice. “The first thing we have to do is fill out form after form.”

Lisa’s eyes teared up. Michael assumed it was from relief. He hadn’t realized having Josie arrested would frighten his niece so much.

Lisa grabbed the officer’s arm. “Josie didn’t do anything wrong. She never made me stay. She’s been helping me.”

Lisa turned to Michael. Her anger seemed to have vanished, and her eyes pleaded with him. “I don’t ask for much. But I’m asking now. Tell them to let her go.” She swallowed. “Please.” It came out in a choked whisper.

How could he refuse?

“We haven’t filed any paperwork yet,” the officer said.

Josie patted his niece and gave Michael a mother-bear look. “All you’ve managed to do is scare her to death. You’re not helping yourself a bit.”

With a wave of his hand, he said, “Fine. I won’t press charges.”

Instead of rushing into his arms and thanking him, Lisa glared daggers at him, took Josie’s hand, then tugged her back to the entrance as if racing away before he changed his mind.

“Josie’s a good woman,” the cop said. “You can trust her with your niece. Our church has referred a couple of runaways to her. She’s worked wonders.”

He was coming to the same conclusion himself, but didn’t have to like the fact. Michael nodded to the man. “Thank you, sir. Sorry to have caused you any trouble this evening.”

“No trouble at all. Added a little excitement to an otherwise boring night.”

Michael’s night had been far from boring. And what now? Waiting in his car were two indignant females.

“For the last time, no,” Lisa said.

Michael sat across Josie’s coffee table—actually it was an old crate painted bright yellow—from his niece. They were at a standoff. He had said come home, she’d said no. Repeatedly.

There seemed to be no middle ground. And he was exhausted.

Against all odds, when they had arrived back at Josie’s house, she had invited him in to talk to Lisa. Since he had survived the ride home without any violent outbursts, he had assumed Lisa had settled down and would be reasonable.

Apparently, she hadn’t, and wouldn’t. Out of desperation, he said, “Your grandmother said to tell you that you need to be back in school.”

With a little snort and sarcastic laugh, she said, “Oh, okay. Then give me five minutes to pack.” Of course she made no move to cooperate. As she sulked, slouching in a tattered blue recliner, he studied the room. It was clean, but definitely not tidy. The decor was modern thrift shop.

Then he noticed the walls. It seemed every inch of space was covered by the most eclectic collection of framed prints he’d ever seen. Watercolors, oils, photographs. Landscapes, flowers, portraits, posters, strange and unidentifiable—

“Here’s your Coke,” the art collector herself said as she walked into the room from the kitchen.

He pulled his attention away from the weird sketch. Except for that particular one, he rather liked the feel of the room.

She handed him his drink. “I see you’ve been admiring my artwork.”

He glanced at her sheepishly. “Yes.”

“Just so you know, every piece has sentimental value.”

“Really?”

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said, eyes sparking.

“I’m sure you don’t.”

“You can’t believe I have such a hodgepodge hung up all over the place.”

“No, actually—”

“You don’t have to deny it, Uncle Michael. I could see it on your face, too.” With her forefinger, Lisa pushed up the tip of her nose. “All the Throckmortons are such snobs.”

“Lisa, don’t talk to your uncle that way,” Josie said.

Michael stopped with the can halfway to his lips. The spit-fire waitress was full of surprises. He would have expected her to agree.

Lisa appeared as surprised as he was. "I can't believe you're taking his side, Josie."

"I'm not taking sides at all. You just need to learn to respect your uncle." She sat on the opposite end of the sofa from Michael. "Now, have you two solved anything?"

"No," he said. "It seems we're at an impasse."

Josie kicked off her work shoes and wiggled her stockinged toes. "Can I make a suggestion?"

"Go for it," Lisa said. "Anything that'll help him see I'm never going back to that awful school where the teachers try to make us cookie-cutter copies of each other."

He pointed his finger at Lisa. "They're trying to make you, at a minimum, fit for polite society."

"Mike, talking like that isn't going to help one bit," Josie warned.

Lisa grinned as if she'd won the skirmish. But he knew Josie was right.

"Speaking of the school..." Josie said. "Has Lisa told you about the kids mistreating her?"

"She claimed some girls on her floor have spread outrageous rumors about her. But I know their families and find it highly unlikely."

"You don't believe me."

"Maybe the girl that informed you of the situation misunderstood. Or maybe you misunderstood."

"I'm not hard of hearing, and neither is she."

"I'm just saying you may be looking for trouble where there is none. Maybe you saw it as a means to manipulate me into giving you your way."

Lisa jumped to her feet. "Are you calling me a liar?"

Michael shook his head and heaved a tired sigh. This conversation wasn't progressing at all as he had hoped. "No. I'm just not sure what this has to do with anything. If you don't like the girls, you simply avoid them."

"Mike," Josie said, "that might not be as easy as you think."

"What's hard about finding new friends?"

"Finding new friends?" Lisa's face flushed in anger. "Are you a hundred years old, or somethin'? Don't you remember how hard that is?" She appeared ready to turn on the tears again.

Not what he needed at the moment.

"You know, this has been a stressful night." Josie refrained from blaming him. "You two haven't accomplished anything, and I have to get up in less than five hours."

"How long have you been residing here, Lisa?" he asked.

"Residing?" Lisa rolled her eyes and threw her arms up in exasperation. "Do you always have to talk like you're a dictionary?"

Josie rose to her feet. "Okay, you two. We're all testy. How about we meet tomorrow at the diner at ten-thirty, after the breakfast rush, and try this again? I'll attempt to act as moderator."

Lisa crossed her arms. "But—"

"That's final." With a clink-clink of silver jewelry, Josie pointed toward the bedrooms. "Lisa, good night."

Without another word, Lisa marched down the hallway, her ragged-edged jeans dragging along the hardwood floor. Amazed that Josie had such control over the firebrand, he couldn't help a twinge of admiration.

Though he hated to have to go through Josie to get to Lisa, at least now he knew Lisa was safe and had a roof over her head. He should be grateful to Josie for that much.

She took three steps to the front door and held it open for him.

He stepped out onto the front porch. "By the way, can you recommend a hotel?"

"You're not going to find the Ritz."

"I don't expect the Ritz."

"No?" She attempted a tired smile. "Go right at the end of my street. Once you hit the main road, take a left. The Comfy Inn's on the right. I know the owner. She's a fanatic about cleanliness."

Apparently, Josie was starting to know him as well as she knew Lisa. “Sounds perfect.” He put his hands in his pockets and inspected his shoes. “I’m sorry about tonight.”

She shrugged. “No harm done to me. You ought to be apologizing to your niece.”

“I’ll try. If she’ll even listen.”

Josie gave a quiet laugh. “We’ll find out, won’t we?”

“I also owe you a debt of gratitude. For taking care of Lisa. I’ve worried where she might be resid—” He glanced across the room where she had disappeared. “...Where she might be staying.”

Josie smiled, and he sucked in a breath. This time her smile seemed genuine, not nervous or forced. And it really packed a punch.

“You’re welcome, Mike. I view it as part of my calling.”

“Your calling?”

“From God. To care for people like Jesus did.”

It was one thing to attend church regularly. Michael, himself, did that. But hearing God call you to take in runaways? “I see. Well, good night.”

As he drove past the row of tiny wood and stone houses, he pondered his options. Not only did he have to fight a teen who hated him, but he also had to deal with a woman who, because of a calling from God, might try to come between him and that teenager.

He wondered which one would prove the more worthy adversary.

He suspected the pink-haired waitress.

Chapter Three

Josie crouched behind the counter restocking the to-go boxes and paper cups. The bell on the front door clanged as someone entered. It was almost time for Mike to arrive, and her pulse kicked up a notch.

She hurriedly stacked the items and wadded up the plastic they came in. By the time she finished, a hint of Mike's rich, enticing aftershave had wafted her way.

It's definitely him.

Was she forever destined to be stooped behind the counter when he arrived? Her nose would know him better than her eyeballs would.

She stood up, smoothed the wrinkles out of her uniform and found him in the same corner booth he'd sat in yesterday. She could have guessed he would be a creature of habit. "Mornin', Mike. How'd you sleep?"

When he looked up at her, she wanted to groan. The morning sunlight streamed in through the window she had cleaned earlier. It reflected off his shiny black hair. The blue of his eyes was so deep it appeared blue-violet. Thick, dark lashes made her want to shout that it wasn't fair.

The creature was even more spectacular in daylight.

He scanned the grill area. "My niece better be here."

The suspicion in those intense eyes snapped her right back to reality. He might be beautiful, but he wasn't someone she should be thinking about that way.

"I asked you how you slept last night," she said. "Shouldn't you answer before you start barking orders?"

One eyebrow lifted ever so slightly, and she thought for a second his mouth would follow suit. "I slept fairly well, thank you."

"So everything was up to snuff?"

"The accommodations were fine. I appreciate the recommendation."

"Good. I'll run and get Lisa from the back. She's washing pots and pans."

"Bud hired her?"

"Sort of. He pays her a little. But mostly, she's here to help me. She gets a cut of the tips. And room and board."

"I'll certainly reimburse you for any lodging and food."

Yet another reason to ignore his gorgeous eyes and yummy smell. Everything had a price for men like him. She waved off his offer and went to holler through the kitchen door for Lisa. Then she returned and slid into the booth across from him. Fiddling with her bracelets, she tried to look anywhere but at those amazing eyes.

"You like jewelry, I see," he said.

"It's one of my weaknesses. I don't shop for clothes or shoes. But get me in a bead shop, and I go crazy."

"Do you mean you make the pieces yourself?"

"Most of them. It's relaxing."

"I don't think I've ever met anyone who made her own jewelry."

At the tone of his voice, a burst of irritation flared through her chest and right out her mouth. "Well, I can't quite afford to shop at Tiffany's."

"I didn't mean—"

Lisa plopped in the booth beside Josie and said, "I'm not gonna, like, jump when you say jump or anything. But I promised Josie I'd listen."

Wishing he could take back his careless comment about the jewelry, Michael refocused his attention on the problem at hand. "I want to apologize about last night, Lisa. I know it scared you."

“Forget it. It doesn’t matter.”

“Well, I want you to know I’m sorry.”

“I said forget it, okay?” Lisa practically shouted.

Stunned by her vehemence, he gave Josie a look that asked, What now?

“Okaaay...” Josie rubbed her hands together. “Now that that’s out of the way, let’s see if we can get you two to come to some kind of agreement about what Lisa is going to do. The rules are no shouting, or Bud’ll kick you out. No name-calling and bad-mouthing each other, or I’ll kick you out. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Michael said and waited for his niece to say the same.

Instead, she crossed her arms protectively in front of herself, her chin almost touching her chest.

“Lisa?” Josie said.

“Mmm.”

The sound could mean anything, but Michael assumed it was acquiescence.

“Good,” Josie said. “Now, Michael, tell Lisa why you’re here.”

“I think that’s fairly obvious. I came to find her.”

Josie nodded toward his niece. “Tell Lisa, not me.”

He sighed, but leaned his arms on the table and looked at the top of her green head. “Lisa, I was worried about you. I want you to agree to come home with me.”

In one quick motion Lisa’s whole demeanor changed. She sat straight up, eyes on him. “Do you mean it, Uncle Michael? You really want me to come home with you?”

The expectant look on her face nearly undid him. He would have to explain his plans carefully. “Home to Charleston. You need the supervision and care they give you at school. Come back, and I’ll talk to the headmistress about changing the expulsion to a suspension, about letting you make up your missed work. I’m sure she can...”

As he watched, the life seemed to drain back out of Lisa. What do I do now? He looked to Josie, who rubbed her forehead as if he’d given her a headache. “Surely you both understand,” he said.

“Understand, nothin’,” Lisa said. “Just go on back to the bank. I’m fine here.”

“But you belong in Charleston with us. With your family,” he said.

“Yeah, well, I’m sure you’ll get along without me.”

“Mike, why don’t you tell Lisa why you want to send her back to boarding school,” Josie suggested.

“Everyone needs a good education. You’re getting the best money can buy.”

Josie winced. “Tell Lisa why you worry. Why you want her somewhere safe.”

He watched as Lisa slunk a little lower in the booth. Another inch or two and she’d slither onto the floor.

Somehow, the pitiful green hair and slight frame made her seem vulnerable. His heart lurched. No matter how you dressed her up—fingernail polish, hair color, body piercings—she still looked just like her mother.

“I worry about boys taking advantage,” he blurted. “I worry about you being on your own at sixteen. It’s my responsibility to keep you safe.”

“It sounds like Mike is scared you’ll have some of the same problems your mother had,” Josie said. She searched for confirmation.

He nodded.

“I don’t want to talk about my mother.”

“Even though I wasn’t able to help her, maybe I can help you,” Mike said.

“I’m not going to talk about her.”

Silence.

“Okay, Lisa,” Josie said. “Can you try to tell your uncle how you feel?”

She shook her head no.

“Come on, tell him some of the things you’ve told me.”

“Won’t make a difference.”

“I do care, Lisa,” Michael said.

“Big whoop.”

“I really do.”

“Then prove it,” Lisa said.

“Okay. How can I prove it to you?”

“Take me home. Home. Not to that snob factory.”

She stared directly at him. A spark of something—challenge?—lit her blue eyes, but then it was gone. Couldn’t she see that he wasn’t suitable? That he couldn’t possibly take care of a teenage girl?

Lisa jumped up and stalked toward the kitchen. “Yeah, I see how much you care.”

He tried to hustle out of the booth, but flinched in pain as his knees struck the underside of the too-small table. “Lisa, wait.”

“Whatever,” she called back over her shoulder.

Standing by the grill watching the scene, Bud frowned. Michael raced past him and stormed through the kitchen door with Josie close on his heels.

“Stop right there, young lady,” he said.

“Uh-huh. And what are you going to do if I don’t?”

“I’ll, I’ll...”

Josie approached and put an arm around Lisa’s shoulders. “Come on, let’s go try to talk some more.”

Lisa shook off Josie’s arm. “I’m outta here.”

As his niece rushed out the back door, Michael thought he saw tears on her cheeks. He looked at Josie, who stood there looking at him, shaking her head as if he’d blown everything.

He threw his arms out. “What?”

“Is this how it always goes with you two?”

“I tried. I don’t seem to be good at relating to Lisa.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“You’ve got a lot to learn about this parenting business, Mike.”

He glared at her. “And I suppose you think you’d be a great parent?”

“Well, you have to admit I’m doing a little better with your niece.”

“Only because you don’t have to be the bad guy. Try sending her back to school where she belongs and see how long you stay her hero.”

“Where she belongs? Does she belong separated from everyone she loves?”

He reeled from the unexpected barb. “Fine. Maybe I should simply wash my hands of this mess and get back to running my business.”

“That’s not a bad idea. She could live with me for a while, and I can get her enrolled in the local high school.”

The worst part was that Josie probably could get Lisa to go to school when he couldn’t even manage to have a normal conversation with her. Which infuriated him. “No Throckmorton’s going to mooch off a stranger. She’ll finish school where I put her.”

Josie shook her head and looked away as if she couldn’t stand the sight of him. “I’ve gotta get back to my shift. I’ll find Lisa when I get off at two o’clock to make sure she’s okay.” Josie pushed back through the door to the diner.

Michael walked in a circle, so furious at his ineptitude that he started to kick the refrigerator. But he stopped right before his foot connected with the stainless steel industrial-sized appliance. It would most likely win the match. And he wouldn’t feel any better anyway.

Mortified at his outburst, he checked the back of his shirt to make sure it was still neatly tucked in.

No, he wouldn't feel any better. Not until he got out of this tourist trap town, with Lisa in tow, and back to the bank.

When Josie left the diner after her shift, she shielded her eyes from the bright sun, then took a deep breath of fresh air. When she got to her car, she found Mike leaning against the driver's side door.

He held up one hand to stop her. "Before you chastise me, let me say I'm here to try to make amends for how poorly I handled this morning."

The anger she'd fed all afternoon vanished. He stood with ankles crossed, arms folded in front of himself—he in his designer-brand clothes against her clunker car. She grinned. "I can't imagine a more mismatched pair than you and Betty."

"Betty?"

"My car."

"So you're one of those people." He smiled.

"You got it. Betty and I, we're pretty attached to each other."

"Then maybe Betty would like to meet Jeffery sometime."

Her mouth fell open. "No way. Not you."

"Yes, ma'am. I repeatedly refused my parents' offer of a driver. Finally told them I already had Jeffery. They never asked again."

Trying to picture him doing something so whimsical, she burst out laughing. Then again, for him, it had been practical. "Just when I think I have you all figured out..."

He opened her door for her.

She searched the street, but didn't see his car. "Did you walk here?"

"Yes. Thought I could use the time to think."

She squeezed past him and slipped into her split, vinyl car seat. "So why are you here?"

"I thought I'd offer to help check on Lisa."

Josie considered his offer for a few seconds. "Can you manage not to upset her again?"

One side of his mouth quirked up. "I doubt it."

That was for certain. They were like oil and water. "Oh, all right, get in."

As Michael climbed in, he thanked God that Josie was willing to help out with Lisa. He'd replayed the morning's scene over and over in his mind since he'd left the diner.

"You know where you went wrong this morning, Mike?"

He watched her profile as she drove. "Are you a mind reader?"

"No. Just assuming you're here because you feel guilty."

"I never should have used the word home synonymously with school."

"Bingo."

"Contrary to what you might think, I do learn from my mistakes."

She sucked in her breath. "You? Mistakes?"

With a smile, he faced the road again. "Never. Just lapses in judgment."

"I see. Well, I suggest you tread carefully from here on out. Remember, Lisa is an injured girl who craves a family who loves her and wants her."

Michael's heart and stomach hurt simultaneously. How could I forget? "You know, taking care of a teenager is quite an undertaking even for family. Doing so just because you were a runaway yourself doesn't make much sense."

"Oh, it's more than that. I told you, it's my calling. To help people like Jesus would."

"How did you discover your calling?"

"After I settled here in Gatlinburg, I realized that I didn't really have a purpose in my life. So I asked God to give me one."

“And he sent you Lisa?”

“Yes. But he sent a few other girls first, through a ministry at my church.”

“What happened with them?”

She slowed to a stop behind a line of traffic. “Are you sure you want to know?”

He wasn’t sure at all. “I should probably know your track record.”

“Two have gone home, reunited with their families. One, Regina, is living on her own here in town and attending the community college. Another couldn’t get off drugs and ran off when I got tough with her.”

“At least you tried.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you for saying that. I still worry about her.”

They pulled up to the craft school, and this time she let Michael go all the way up to the campus with her. They stepped out of the car and into what looked like an art gallery and found doors leading to, presumably, studios. Josie seemed to know where she was going.

“Have you been here before?” he asked.

“Yes, I took a jewelry making class a couple of years ago.”

“Impressive.”

“Lower your brows a notch. You don’t have to look so surprised.”

“I’m not at all surprised. Your passion for what interests you is to be admired.”

Color flooded her cheeks, and he had a powerful urge to run his thumbs over their warmth.

Instead, he clenched his hands. “Let’s find Lisa.”

“I have a feeling she’s in there.” She pointed to a door marked Fibers, peeked in, then motioned him over.

He looked over the top of Josie’s head, the wild bits of hair tickling his chin. She smelled like the diner, which made his empty stomach rumble. But her hair also held the faint aroma of peaches. Intriguing. He would have expected something sassy, something spicy.

Lisa, deep in conversation with a guy working at a large loom, didn’t see them. Josie backed into Michael, pushing him out of the way, so she could quietly close the door.

“Has she come to watch that artisan before?”

“Yes, and anyone else who has a talent that interests her.”

“You mean she’s truly interested in art?”

Josie cocked her head to the side and gave him a smile just short of friendly. “Shouldn’t you know?”

She was right. And he didn’t like it at all. It seemed that he, who was so proficient at work, was failing more and more on a personal level. Most recently at his engagement to Gloria. But with far more devastating consequences, he’d failed at protecting his sister.

Now here he was, a dismal failure at guardianship. He didn’t even know what kinds of things Lisa liked—other than outrageous hair color.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s leave before she sees us.”

As Josie and Mike sat in silence, stuck in traffic on the main drag, Josie prayed for Lisa and her uncle. It was as plain as an egg over-easy that Lisa craved his love and attention. But he was clueless. Clueless of her needs. Clueless about what to do to meet those needs.

Lord Jesus, give me wisdom. Help me know what to do to help the two of them. It seems that somehow, I could teach them how to relate. How to— “That’s it!”

“What?” Mike asked.

She pulled into the parking lot at the Comfy Inn and stopped next to Mike’s Beemer. “I have an idea.”

“Is that a good thing?” The skeptical look on his face was almost comical. And he couldn’t seem to get out of the car fast enough.

He came around to her window, and she grabbed the duct-taped window crank. After she spent an exhausting thirty seconds rolling it down, he said, “I guess I should ask what it is.”

“Look, Mike. I have a suggestion. An offer, really.”

“Okay.” There was that skeptical look again.

“Lisa needs you. And you need to get to know Lisa so you can be a better parent.”

“Guardian.”

“Parent. What’s so hard about admitting that you’re more than an uncle now?”

“You said you had an offer?”

“How about you plan to hang around for several days. I’ll try to get a few afternoons off to help you get to know your niece.”

“And what do I owe you in return?”

“Don’t start grabbing your wallet. I just want to help.”

“Like Jesus did.”

“Exactly!” She laughed with the sheer joy of finally getting a point across to him. But then she noticed his hands in his pockets and that he was studying his feet. “You don’t believe in God, do you?” she asked.

Though Michael was surprised she’d drawn such a conclusion, he immediately began to wonder about practicalities, such as how he would stay away from the bank for several more days. “Oh, I believe. I’m a Christian. It’s just that...well...” He checked his watch.

“Oooh,” she growled. “I forgot. You don’t have time for your niece.” She slung her arms in the air, setting off an alarm of jangling bracelets. “You’re hopeless, Mike.”

She backed up the car and squealed out of the motel lot. All because he’d looked at his watch.

Well, he couldn’t help that he had responsibilities. He had stockholders depending on him. And his family’s good name.

And Lisa, his conscience tried to tell him. He pushed the thought aside as he fumbled with the key to his room. When he finally unlocked the door, he stormed in and kicked the door shut behind him. He would check in with his brother at the office to see how the Mason account was going. Then he would know how much time he had left to persuade Lisa to go back to the boarding school.

He reached his secretary who put him through to Gary’s secretary. Finally, his brother picked up. “Hello, Michael. How’s Lisa?”

“She’s fine. Just not too happy to see me.”

Gary chuckled. “Did you really think she’d make it easy on you?”

With a deep sigh, and feeling older than his thirty-two years, he collapsed into a chair. “Do you think you and Dad could spare me for a couple more days? She’s refusing to come home.”

“I’d be glad to. You’ve got more important matters to take care of.”

Maybe Josie was right—he was hopeless. Because he would rather be dealing with fluctuating interest rates than with the fluctuating hormones of a teenager.

“So, are you managing okay?” Michael asked. There was a pause, and he began to fear the worst.

“To tell you the truth, I’ve never been happier.”

Happy? Michael had been challenged, fulfilled—and lately, suffocated—by the job. But it had been a while since he could claim he was happy. Probably not since the first year or two when he’d had his dad’s full attention and approval.

“Sounds like you’re handling things nicely, Gary. Just be sure to call me if Tom Mason needs anything. I think he’ll do his financing with us this time, then we’ll aim for the umbrella of all their business.”

“I promise, I won’t let you down big brother,” Gary said before he hung up.

Michael had a perfectly capable brother who didn’t need him. And a perfectly rebellious niece who did.

He clasped his hands behind his head.

Dear God, I know I haven't spent enough time in prayer lately. I've felt cold inside since Patricia died and left me with Lisa to care for. Please give me guidance. I'm not used to having a living, breathing creature depending on me—not beyond a paycheck, anyway. Now Josie's made this offer to help me get to know Lisa.

With interlocked fingers, he massaged the back of his neck where a dull throb pounded out the beat of his heart.

It galled him to think he could need the help of the infuriating woman. Who was she to tell him how to do anything? Why, he could buy—

He stopped, a sick ache gnawing at him.

Forgive me, Lord, for the sin of pride.

If he could only find some way to persuade Lisa to leave Gatlinburg, then he wouldn't have to depend on Josie. God, help me do this Your way, not my own.

The shrill ring of the ancient motel phone jerked his head up. He stared at the rotary dial a moment, perplexed, as if God Himself were calling. Then he laughed at the ridiculousness of the notion and answered it. "Hello?"

"I'm sorry I told you you're hopeless."

Stunned to hear Josie on the line, he didn't respond.

"I felt guilty all the way home. And I can't concentrate on anything."

He waited, a smile creeping up on him, to see how apologetic Josie could be.

"Mike, are you there?"

Amazingly, the sound of her voice cheered him, and something warm released inside him. "You're having a nice conversation all by yourself."

"Why, you smart-aleck, good-for-nothing—"

"I thought you were calling to be nice."

She made that funny little growling sound again. The one she made when she got aggravated. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? God has been convicting me like crazy. I'm convinced He's been urging me to call you. So here I am."

The hairs on his arms prickled with chill bumps. "So what now?"

"My offer still stands. I'm willing to help you."

"If you really wanted to help me, you'd talk Lisa into going home."

"Not until you prove to me you'll be a good father to that love-starved girl."

Love-starved? A good father? It was enough to send him running the other direction.

But he had just asked God for guidance. Maybe He was providing it through Josie.

"Deal," he said before he talked himself out of it.

"Deal?"

"Yes. You just promised to talk Lisa into going home with me if I learn to be a good...father."

She remained silent.

"Josie?"

She sighed. "Okay. I'll do it."

He knew he'd accepted a deal she hadn't meant to make. But despite the short time he'd known her, he was certain she would keep her word. Now he better understood why Lisa trusted Josie.

Out of the blue, his sister's face flashed though his mind, jarring him to think rationally. He'd just agreed to learn to be a guardian, a protector—a father—to his niece.

He'd just agreed to the impossible.

Chapter Four

Josie set a box of beads and tools on the end table, then grabbed her mug and inhaled the rich aroma of coffee. She exhaled all the stress of the day. After a tense twenty-four hours, she deserved this break, a chance to make a pair of earrings she'd recently designed.

As she curled up on the couch in her oldest sweatpants and sweatshirt, wet hair wrapped in a towel, satisfaction washed over her like the hot shower she'd just finished.

I've done what God asked me to do for Mike and Lisa. Nothing feels better.

Of course, she had no idea what the next step would be. But for now, all was well in the Miller household. She could enjoy the rest of her afternoon off and—

The doorbell rang. She was going to have to kill Lisa. "I'm coming," she yelled, then groaned as she climbed out of her comfortable cocoon. So much for a peaceful afternoon.

She opened the door. "Lisa, if you forgot your key, I'm—"

Mike stood on the doorstep. "Looks like I interrupted."

She held up her coffee mug. "Only the first relaxing moment I've had for myself in a week."

"Oh. No big deal, then."

"No big deal?" You big selfish jerk.

He smiled. A dangerous smile that sent her insides into a tailspin.

"Seriously, I'm sorry," he said. "I should have called first."

With a confused tug on her sweatshirt, she said, "Well, yeah. And remember it next time."

He laughed. "You shouldn't take life so seriously all the time. There is such a thing as kidding."

"Don't talk to me about being serious. Take a look in the mirror."

"I'm the one who dropped by spontaneously, aren't I?"

"You know, Mike, I never know what to expect from you." She stepped back from the door. "Come on in. I guess you're here to see Lisa."

"I am. I thought we could start getting to know each other by having dinner out."

"Good idea. But she's not here yet."

"She's still at the studio with that artist?"

"I assume so."

His eyes narrowed. "Shouldn't she be supervised?"

"She's too old for me or you to be following her around."

"I guess I do need to give her some room."

"Room to make mistakes. To live and learn."

After he sat on the couch, he spread his big hands over his knees. "I plan to help her avoid the mistakes her mother made."

"Maybe your sister wouldn't have made the big mistakes if she'd been allowed to make smaller ones along the way."

Instead of replying, he leaned his forearms on his thighs and studied the floor as if it might hold the answer to all his problems.

Josie left him to his thoughts and went to remove the towel from her hair and to grab the hairbrush from the bathroom counter. She returned and plopped down in her favorite chair—the one that was so well worn she had trouble getting out of it sometimes. "I have no idea how your sister was raised. It's just something to think about."

"You may be right. We were all overprotective."

As she brushed the tangles out of her matted hair, she watched the emotions play across Mike's face. "I take it she was rebellious."

"Always."

"Did your parents pressure her to fit their mold? Like they're pressuring Lisa?"

He thought for a minute. “No. But all three of us were expected to act like...well, Throckmortons.”

“Yep. Just like me.”

“Your parents expected you to act like a Throckmorton?” His mouth twitched in a near-smile, but he still looked sad.

She grinned back. “No, I didn’t have to reach such lofty ideals. I only had to be a mere Miller.”

“Ah. I see.”

“You know, you’d probably be surprised at how much your sister and I would have had in common.”

“But you turned out fine.” He shrugged. “Obviously, she didn’t.”

“So it’s been about a year since she died?”

“Yes.”

Her curiosity—and intuition—made her ask, “Were there unusual circumstances surrounding her death?”

“Besides driving drunk at ninety miles per hour and careening off the road?” His tone cut off further questioning. It made Josie wonder exactly what had happened. Then again, maybe he’d simply never grieved and didn’t want to face it now.

She would drop the subject since he seemed so determined. “So, do you want to take Lisa out by yourself tonight?” she asked.

“I had planned on it.” His eyes widened when he finally quit studying the floorboards and noticed Josie brushing her hair. His mother had probably taught him it was all kinds of rude for a woman to brush her hair in front of a man. Josie’s own mother would pitch a fit.

“I’d love a nice quiet evening at home,” Josie said. “But it might not be best for Lisa.”

“In other words, she’ll probably refuse to go with me.”

“I didn’t say that. Not exactly.” Josie laughed. “Where were you planning to take her?”

“Somewhere nice so we can talk.”

“As your official adviser...forget it.”

“I’m not taking her to a fast-food joint.”

“A fast-food place would be perfect.” She pointed her hairbrush at him. “Remember, she’s not a client you’re trying to impress.”

“Give me a little credit.”

Josie pushed her way out of the chair. “Let’s go find Lisa. It’ll just take me a sec to fix my hair.”

As she fought a stubborn tangle, he nodded toward her head. “It’s a fairly normal color when it’s wet.”

She stopped mid tug. “You would never say that to anyone else.”

“Since I’ve been here, I’ve surprised myself a few times.”

She had sensed subtle changes in him already. “Hey, no problem. I think a person should speak his mind.”

“Okay, then. Why’s it pink?”

That was Lisa’s story to tell. “Let’s just say it was a disastrous adventure.”

“Then why haven’t you gone to a salon to have it corrected?”

Because that would make a dent in my savings. “I’m cheap.” She shrugged. “And I figure my pink with Lisa’s green brightens up the diner.”

Michael sat in the fast-food restaurant’s indoor play area across from Lisa and Josie. The artificial light turned their hair hideous colors, which did nothing to brighten up this dining establishment.

And this wasn't just any establishment. Lisa, who'd insisted Josie come along, had also insisted they drive until they found one that had an indoor playground. They'd passed two perfectly good hamburger places. Now he knew why.

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