MICHELLE DOUGLAS

HIS CHRISTMAS ANGEL

Cherish

Мишель Дуглас

His Christmas Angel

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Home for Christmas…Once Sol Adams and Cassie Campbell had been inseparable, drawn to each other when times were tough. Cassie has spent the last ten years trying to move on from her life back then, but now Sol is home for Christmas, more gorgeous than ever, and she can't avoid him–or her memories… Sol can see Cassie's changed–she's now a widow, a woman who tirelessly cares for others. But he knows her too well–he can see the hurt and yearning behind her cheerful smile. Can he get to the bottom of her troubled heart and make this Christmas angel his much-loved wife?

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His Christmas Angel
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To Greg, who made it all possible
and never stopped believing.
And to Maggie, for the walks,
the coffee and the encouragement.

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CHAPTER ONE

SOL slammed through the house and out of the back door to the veranda. Gripping the railing, he hauled in a breath. Then another. Half an hour. He'd been back half an hour and already he was dying to get out of here. Nothing had changed.

For Pete's sake, you'd think after ten years…

He rolled his shoulders, trying to ease the tension that had them wedged up tighter than double-lapped dovetail joints. His eyes swept across the backyard. What a mess. The fence needed mending, the lawn needing mowing, and the—

Cassie's tree.

His angry thoughts slammed to a halt. He squinted into the afternoon sun, but two giant oleanders on the other side of the fence prevented him from making out much of the house in the yard beyond. Did Cassie Campbell still live there?

Cassie Parker, he amended. She'd married ten years ago.

And had been widowed for eighteen months. Some things had changed.

He dragged a hand down his face. Cassie wouldn't live there now. She'd live in the centre of town with the rest of the Parkers. She didn't need to live on the outskirts any more. And since her mother had died…

An ache hollowed out his chest. He hadn't come back for the funeral. He hadn't come back for Brian's funeral either.

He stared hard at what he could see of the house and yard, trying to imagine someone else living there, but he couldn't. His gaze came back to the tree squatting in the corner. His lips curved upwards and the tension seeped out of him. Back then the only thing that had kept life bearable around here was Cassie Campbell.

Cassie Parker, he reminded himself, and his smile faded.

He clenched the veranda railing again. What did he think he was doing? Trying to catch a glimpse of her? He had an insane urge to butt his head against a veranda post. He'd left all thoughts of Cassie behind ten years ago.

Yeah, right. Which is why you're craning your neck over her back fence with your tongue hanging out.

He made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat. It wouldn't even be her fence any more. He went to turn away when a leg dangled out of the tree—a long, lean, female leg. He blinked and shaded his eyes.

Cassie?

His breath hitched, but curiosity propelled him down the back steps and across the yard all the same. That was a damn fine leg, and he was real curious to see who lived in Cassie's old place now.

A mumbled half-smothered expletive drifted out of the tree as he drew near, and for some reason it made him grin. He quickened his step and, without waiting for his eyes to adjust to the shade, glanced up. The breath was punched out of him and a strange choked noise emerged from the back of his throat. He couldn't have uttered a single coherent sound if his life had depended on it.

Dancing violet eyes swung around to stare down at him. They raked across his face, then generous lips formed a perfect O. 'Good Lord, if it isn't Sol Adams, home for Christmas at last.'

Cassie Campbell!

His heart started to pump hard and fast. He swallowed. The sound rolled in the spaces beneath the tree, loud in the summer afternoon. 'Hey, Cassie,' he finally managed to get out.

'Hey, Cassie?' She rolled her eyes. 'After ten years that's all you can think to say?'

Then she smiled. Really smiled. Cassie had always put her whole heart into a smile. It outshone the hot summer sun. He blinked, but he couldn't look away. His groin ached. The entire surface of his skin tightened, as if he'd grown too big for it.

Her smile wavered. 'You didn't even say goodbye.'

Her soft words speared through him, and in that moment he'd never regretted anything more in his whole sorry life. If in this very instant he could go back ten years—

She grinned suddenly, and every thought in his head fled.

'Help me out here, will you, Sol?'

Help…? With…? Then he noticed the kitten clutched in her arms.

She bent down and handed it to him. 'Don't you let it go,' she warned, as she disappeared back along the branch. She returned with a second kitten that she promptly handed to him. Disappeared again. In a daze he took a third, until his arms were nothing but a wriggling, curling mass of kitten.

She grinned. 'It doesn't look as if you have a spare hand to offer the lady.'

Her skin had the look of soft pink rose petals, and Sol wanted to reach out and take her hand, help her down. Touch her. He wanted to know if she felt as cool and soft as she promised. He tried to rearrange the bundle in his arms but it kept changing shape.

'Don't you let those kittens get away, Sol Adams.'

'No ma'am,' he said weakly as she leapt down beside him. Her fragrance filled his nostrils. She smelt of something flowery, tropical, like frangipani. He wanted to bury his face against her neck and inhale.

'I've been jumping out of this tree for more years than I can count. Do you seriously think I need a hand?'

'You are wearing a skirt,' he pointed out. And it fitted her like a dream. It swished around her thighs as if dancing in joy because it was wrapped around Cassie Campbell.

Parker, he amended.

He reckoned he'd be pretty darn happy if he were wrapped around Cassie like that. He blinked at the thought. 'I—umm.' He cleared his throat. 'It could, uh, hamper your tree-jumping, is all. That's what I meant.'

She grinned and lifted the skirt and his eyes near bugged clean out of his skull. How the hell did she expect him to keep hold of an armful of kitten when she—

Bike shorts! He let his breath out in a whoosh. She was wearing bike shorts under the skirt.

Her eyes twinkled mischief before she dived to her knees by the fence and pushed a loose paling to one side. Another kitten, smaller than its siblings, poked its head through the gap. 'Well, come on, then,' Cassie patted her knee. 'We haven't got all day.'

Man, she wouldn't need to call him twice, Sol thought.

Without further ado, the kitten squeezed through the gap and flew straight to her lap. Sol didn't blame it.

Cassie picked the kitten up and rose to her feet. 'C'mon, then.' She hitched her head in the direction of Sol's back veranda and he followed in a daze. Once there she closed the little gate, popped her bundle on the floor, then plucked the kittens from his arms one by one to join it.

Sol glanced at them, then grinned. 'Jeez, Cassie, these are the ugliest batch of kittens to ever grace the earth.'

She drew herself up to her full height of five feet ten inches. 'Ugly?'

Sol was one inch over six feet. Most women had to throw their heads back to look him in the eye. Cassie didn't.

He got a crick in his neck from kissing most women. He wouldn't get a crick in his neck from kissing Cassie.

As if she'd read that thought in his face, Cassie let her gaze drop to his lips and Sol held himself rigid. Nothing moved except the pupils of her eyes, dilating and contracting. Then she shook her head

and stepped back, and Sol heard the soughing of the breeze in the trees again, and the wings of a flock of rosellas as they swooped through the yard and over the house.

'Ugly?' Cassie's voice was strong, dragging him back into the present. 'What would you know about the matter, Sol Adams? These kittens aren't ugly; they're beautiful.'

He made himself look at one. Boy, she was stretching the truth there.

'I love these kittens.' She hitched up her chin. 'And when you love something it's beautiful. So you keep your ugly comments to yourself.'

He glanced at the kittens again. Okay, maybe ugly wasn't the right word. Maybe—

Cassie seized the littlest one and pushed its face close up to his. 'Look at it,' she ordered. 'Can you seriously call that ugly?'

It mewed plaintively and he couldn't help it. He reached out a finger and ran it across the tiny head. 'It's cute,' he finally mumbled, when Cassie kept eyeing him with that ferocious glare. On the spur of the moment he cupped his hands around hers and rubbed his cheek against the kitten's fur. Cassie's skin felt warm and alive. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh at something you love.'

Her eyes widened. Something arced between them. Something sweet and pure he couldn't put a name to. She stepped back and he let his hands drop.

'Hey, Alec,' she called through the back screen door.

Alec wheeled to the door. 'You're early, missy.'

Sol stared at Cassie. Early for what?

'I haven't come to see you.' She winked at Sol. 'But make yourself useful and bring us out some drinks. It's hot.'

Sol's jaw dropped.

'Get them yourself, you hussy. I'm in a wheelchair.'

'Don't go playing the invalid with me. You know how to drive that thing. I'm timing you,' she called back, settling herself in one of the two chairs that sat either side of a small table.

Sol glared at the screen door, then at Cassie. 'Since when have the two of you been so chummy?' This was Alec, the man who'd raised him. Not someone Cassie would usually laugh with or joke with. He scowled and lowered himself to the other chair. At least she wouldn't have ten years ago.

Violet eyes surveyed him across the table. She rested her chin on her hand and for a long moment she didn't speak. 'So…' she said at last. 'He finally talked you into it, huh?'

Her long dark plait had gone, replaced with a sleek bob that brushed her shoulders. When she moved a certain way a curtain of hair fell across her face, dark and shiny. His fingers itched to run through it, to find out if it were as—

He shifted, hoping he hadn't been staring. 'Talked me into…?'

'Coming home for Christmas.'

She frowned when he remained silent. 'He didn't?'

'No.'

She shot a glance at the door and sighed. 'He's his own worst enemy, you know?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean he's been whingeing and moaning at me for months now that you never come home.' Her eyes started to dance. 'I told him it served him right. I told him if I was you I'd never come back either.'

That jerked him around. 'You didn't?'

'Yes, I did.' She folded her arms and lifted her chin. 'I told him he was a mean old man.'

She had. She would. Sol suddenly threw his head back and laughed. It shifted something inside him too long held in check. He glanced at her, and a surge of affection shot through him. Cassie might have changed her name, but she was doing what she'd always done—making bad situations not so bad, making them bearable.

Her smile faded. 'Now he's just a scared old man.'

‘Scared?’

The back screen door slammed open and Alec wheeled out, a tray balanced on his lap. ‘Mind my kittens,’ Cassie warned. ‘I’ve brought them for a visit.’

Alec grumbled, but kept his eyes fixed on the floor. He dumped a jug of iced water and two glasses on the table. Sol blinked. The jug contained slices of lemon and ice cubes. Surely Alec hadn’t —?

‘You’re not joining us?’

‘I’m watching the test match, as you well know, missy.’

‘Well, don’t let me keep you.’

Sol watched in amazement as a reluctant grin spread across Alec’s face. He couldn’t remember Alec smiling for…well, he guessed it’d be eighteen years.

‘Watch your back around this one,’ he told Sol. ‘She’s just as likely to stick the knife in and twist it as not.’

It was the longest sentence Alec had uttered in the last half an hour. Sol had been gone for ten years. Ten years. But when he’d walked through the front door Alec had glanced up and muttered, ‘So you’re back, then,’ as if Sol had just returned from the corner shop.

He’d been tempted to walk back out and book into a motel.

‘And don’t you forget it.’ Cassie laughed as Alec wheeled back inside. She poured out two glasses of water and pushed one towards Sol. ‘He’s getting better. He didn’t bellyache at me about the kittens.’

‘Why do you say he’s scared?’

She frowned, as if he’d disappointed her. ‘Wouldn’t you be scared if you were dying, Sol?’

He stared back, speechless. Ice trickled down the collar of his shirt and dripped down his backbone.

Cassie’s eyes widened, then her hand flew to her mouth. ‘You didn’t know?’

Nope. Nobody had bothered mentioning that.

‘But isn’t that why you’re home? I thought you’d talked to Dr Phillips.’

‘I did.’ He dragged a hand down his face. ‘All he said was Alec needed to go into the nursing home. And that he expected a spot to become available after Christmas.’

Air whistled between her teeth. ‘Of all the spineless…Wait till I get hold of him. I’m sorry, Sol, I’d never have blurted it out like that if—’

‘It’s not your fault, Cassie.’ It was his. He’d stayed away too long. Questions clamoured through him, but as a kitten used his leg as a scratching post one of the least pressing popped out of his mouth. ‘What are you doing with all these kittens?’

‘They’re Christmas presents for my senior citizens.’

Who were her senior citizens? Water sloshed over the sides of his glass as he dropped it back to the table. ‘Good God, you’re not giving one to Alec, are you?’

‘What do you think?’ she snorted. ‘Besides, you can’t have pets at the nursing home.’

A hard ball settled in the pit of his stomach as he watched a kitten attack the shoelaces on one of her sneakers. A sneaker attached to a long, lean leg. His eyes travelled upwards. Man, did she have great legs or what? They were firm and shapely, as if she got enough to eat these days.

She hunched over and smoothed the skirt of her dress over her knees. ‘You never called him Dad, did you? You always called him Alec.’

The huskiness of her voice hauled him back. His lips twisted as he met her gaze. ‘Nobody could ever accuse Alec and me of being close, now, could they?’

‘No,’ she agreed. She ran a finger around the rim of her glass. Condensation gathered beneath it. ‘He’s changed, Sol.’ Her finger stilled. ‘He hasn’t had a drink in two years.’

Was she serious? The hard ball in his stomach grew. Was it the drink that had made him sick? Why else would she…? ‘What are you trying to say, Cassie?’

She hesitated, then her lips twisted into a wry smile. 'Have you come home to make your peace with him, Sol?'

'Or?'

'Or to gloat?'

He leapt to his feet. 'You think I've—'

She held a finger to her lips and hitched her head in the direction of the door. 'Mind the kitten.' It scampered between his feet and settled under his chair. Another one joined it. Gingerly he lowered himself back to his seat, but he couldn't unbend his backbone.

'Look, Sol, I do understand.'

He wished to hell he did.

'I had a mother like Alec, remember?'

Yeah, he remembered. Some days he wished to hell he could forget. 'And you always called her Mum. Did you make your peace with her before she died?'

A curtain of hair fell across her face, hiding her eyes, and he immediately regretted his harshness. He shouldn't take this out on her. She was the last person who deserved it.

'No, I never made peace with my mother. She never stopped drinking long enough for me to try it.'

Hell, she wasn't going to cry, was she? Cassie never cried. He hadn't—

'And now she's dead.' She smiled at him. A sad little smile that speared right through the centre of him.

He reached out and covered her hand with his. 'You didn't deserve that, Cassie.'

She turned her hand over and squeezed. 'Neither did you.'

A great hole opened up inside him when she tugged her hand free.

'I hear you're a hotshot architect these days.'

She didn't want to talk about the past. She'd moved on. He set his shoulders. So had he.

'Have you come home to build me that tree house?'

Her words startled a laugh as memory flashed through him. 'I'd forgotten all about that.'

'I hadn't.'

Something in her tone had his eyes swinging back to hers. She had the most amazing eyes—violet, with the deep, soft texture of velvet. He had a feeling she remembered everything. He shied away from the thought. 'I even drew up plans for that tree house.' How could he have forgotten? He'd slaved over those drawings for weeks.

'I remember those too.' Her laughter engulfed him in warmth. 'We couldn't find a tree big enough to house it.'

'I aimed high.'

'And you succeeded.'

Her words were soft and spoken with real pleasure. It made him ashamed of avoiding…

He drew in a deep breath. 'I heard about Brian. I'm real sorry, Cassie.'

That curtain of hair fell across her face, hiding it. Her hands trembled and a shaft of pain shot straight through him.

Cassie's insides knotted and twisted. Her face tightened. None of the platitudes she normally mumbled rose to her lips or to her rescue. She tried desperately to untwist, unknot, unwind herself.

Idiot. Did you really think you could get through an entire conversation without Brian being mentioned?

She flicked her hair back, recognised the concern in Sol's eyes and hated it. For a moment she was tempted to let her hair fall back to hide her eyes, to help her lie, but she couldn't lie—not to Sol. He'd know.

‘Last Christmas was hell.’ That at least was the truth. She twisted her wedding band round and round her finger. ‘So, I’m making doubly sure this Christmas isn’t.’

Gratitude surged through her when with one curt nod he let the subject drop. She cleared her throat.

‘What are your plans? Are you staying for Christmas?’

‘Yep.’

Delight tiptoed through her. ‘But that’s fabulous.’ Christmas was only nine days away. She risked a glance at his face but she couldn’t read it. It brought her up short for a moment, then she shrugged. Ten years was a long time. ‘What will you do on Christmas Day?’

He raised an eyebrow, took one look at her face, then grimaced. ‘Sorry to burst your bubble and all, but Christmas is just like any other day as far as I’m concerned.’

‘Is that so?’ She folded her arms.

He shifted in his seat. ‘Look, I—’

‘It used to mean a lot when we were kids and we didn’t get a Christmas.’

‘Is that why you have to have a Christmas now?’ he shot at her.

‘Is that why you don’t?’ she shot back, just as quickly.

They stared at each other for a moment, then laughed. But she settled on one thing then and there. Sol was having a Christmas this year whether he said he wanted it or not. Everyone needed a Christmas.

And Sol hadn’t had one since he was twelve.

She glanced across at him. Man, oh, man, it was good to have him home. She drank in the sight of him while he stared out at the yard with that shuttered half-gaze she remembered so well. Sol had always been a good-looking boy. But that was what he’d been when he’d left. He had certainly changed since then. He had grown up now.

He was a man. And what a man.

A pulse started to throb at the base of her throat. He was every kind of hunk she could think of and then some. He was going to set the female population of Schofield on its collective head.

His eyes hadn’t changed, though. Still black, still piercing, still kind. And given half a chance they could probably still see right through her. She lifted the kitten clambering up her leg into her lap. She couldn’t give Sol that chance—not even a quarter of that chance. The kitten settled into her lap, purring.

She glanced around the Adams’ back veranda. It and the attached laundry ran the length of the house. She sprang to her feet and walked its length, glancing right and left then swung back, clutching the kitten to her chest. ‘Sol, I need a favour.’

‘Anything.’

A shockwave rippled through her at the promptness of his reply, at its certainty. ‘Is that wise?’ she demanded. He chuckled, and the sound of it washed over the surface of her skin with the velvet warmth of hot chocolate. She wanted to stretch and purr beneath it.

‘I may not have clapped eyes on you for ten years, Cassie Campbell…Parker, but I still know you.’

‘I might have changed.’

He paused. His eyes raked over her and darkened. ‘You have at that.’

Cassie fell back into her chair. She crossed her right leg over her left. Her foot bounced and wouldn’t stop. She set it on the floor, but that set her knees jiggling. She crossed her legs again and let the foot bounce.

‘Lookin’ good, Cassie.’

Her foot stopped mid-bounce. His eyes roved over her face, and her skin flushed everywhere his gaze touched.

‘Real good.’

‘Thank you,’ she croaked. She seized her glass. ‘You’re not looking too bad yourself.’ But she didn’t look at him as she said it. She took swallow after swallow of cold water, but it didn’t cool the heat rising through her.

‘What’s this favour?’

The favour. Right. She set her glass down. ‘Would you babysit my kittens?’

‘Babysit?’

‘Until Christmas?’

‘Christmas!’

‘I can’t take them home because Rufus will eat them. I’ve kept them locked up in the laundry of the old place—’ she nodded across the yard ‘—while it’s between tenants, but it’s so tiny, and it’s mean keeping them there for such long periods. They won’t be any trouble, I swear.’

He looked sceptical, and she didn’t blame him. ‘You don’t need to do anything. I’ll come over every evening to feed them.’

‘You will?’

‘Then I’ll lock them up in your laundry for the night.’

‘You’ll come over every evening?’

‘Every evening,’ she assured him. ‘So all you need to do is let them out of the laundry each morning. That’s it.’

‘That’s it, huh?’

‘That’s it.’ She shrugged, then slanted him a grin. ‘Though even if you say no I’ll still be here each evening. I’m Alec’s home-care help.’

‘Home-care help?’

‘It’s a community-based programme designed to help people stay in their own homes longer by helping them out with housework, meals and stuff.’

‘You do that?’

She shrugged, abashed by the warmth in his voice. ‘I love it.’

‘How long have you been doing it?’

Her eyes slid from his. ‘Ten years.’

There was a long silence. Finally Sol asked, ‘How long have you been helping Alec?’

‘Two years.’

‘Two years?’ He jerked around to face her fully. ‘He’s been sick for two years and he never told me?’

‘He’s being looked after.’

‘Yeah, but—’

‘But what? You’d have come home, seen he was getting the right kind of care, then left again.’

He raked a hand through his hair. ‘How long has he got?’

‘You’re a better man than I if you can get a straight answer to that one,’ she sighed.

He stared back out at the yard and Cassie’s chest ached. Why did it have to be such hell sometimes? Who had decided Sol should draw the short straw where family was concerned—the shortest of short straws—when Brian had had so much?

She froze that thought. Brian was dead. He didn’t have anything any more.

‘Why didn’t you let me know, Cassie? You could’ve rung or written.’

‘It was Alec’s choice. His decision to make.’ Her hands twisted together in her lap.

‘And?’

His eyes didn’t leave her face. It was almost frightening the way he could still read her. ‘And you didn’t answer the last time I wrote to you.’

His eyes darkened, then shuttered, and something inside Cassie squeezed painfully.

‘I would’ve come back for this.’

But her wedding hadn't been important enough? It was as if he'd wiped Schofield from his mind completely. And her with it. 'You left this town and all of us in it far behind.' And maybe it had been for the best. 'I never thought you'd come back. Ever. I didn't try and get in touch with you because I thought hearing from me, hearing from anyone in Schofield, would be just about the last thing you'd want.'

His hands clenched into fists as he turned and stared at her. 'Then you were wrong.'

'You could've let me know that ten years ago.'

He stared back out at the yard and Cassie shivered. She'd never seen his eyes so dark…so…

Her mouth went dry. 'Why have you come back, Sol?'

He shrugged. 'Curiosity, I guess.'

He met her eyes, but the darkness still lurked in them and Cassie knew he was lying. She just didn't know why.

CHAPTER TWO

‘IT’S pretty hot, Alec. Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer a salad?’

‘Sausages, mash, peas and carrots,’ Alec repeated. ‘I don’t care how hot it is.’

‘Okay, okay.’ She pulled the sausages out of the fridge. ‘Catch.’ She tossed him a carrot. ‘Peel that while I take care of the potatoes.’ She smothered a grin at his grumbling. She knew he liked her being here, bossing him about, not treating him like an invalid. ‘Where’s Sol?’

‘Out.’

‘Out?’ she parroted stupidly, then bit her lip to stop herself from asking, Out where?

‘Why’d you have to go and rile him up earlier?’

Indignation slugged through her. ‘I did no such thing.’

‘Humph.’

Or had she? She popped the sausages under the grill. ‘Maybe being home has riled him.’

‘Humph.’

‘You have to admit he can’t have many fond memories of living here.’

Alec didn’t even humph this time. He stayed silent.

‘Do you like having him back?’ She probably shouldn’t have asked but she couldn’t help it. Alec had not been a kind father. In fact, at times he’d been downright mean. That was what alcohol had done to him. But, as she’d told Sol earlier, Alec hadn’t had a drink in over two years. He’d changed. He’d mellowed. And she sensed he regretted the past.

She sliced the carrot. It didn’t mean he was glad to see Sol, though. Maybe he resented the reminder of a past that filled him with shame?

‘It’s good to see the lad,’ Alec mumbled.

She tried to school her surprise. ‘Good.’ His words made her fiercely glad and fiercely angry all at the same time. ‘Have you told him so?’

‘Humph.’

She turned the sausages. ‘I think you should tell him.’ She met his eyes. ‘Don’t you let him leave like he did last time.’ That would be too awful for words.

The older man’s eyes dropped. ‘He hasn’t come back to see me.’

She had an uncanny feeling Alec was right. ‘Maybe not,’ she agreed. ‘But all the same—’

‘Go on, tell me I deserve it.’

‘Okay, you deserve it.’ A shaft of pity spiked through her as he hunched in his wheelchair. ‘But you’ve an opportunity with him now that you never thought you’d get again. Make the most of it.’

He glanced at her. ‘You think there’s a chance?’

‘There’s always a chance.’ She set a place for him at the table. ‘Just don’t let him leave like he did last time.’

Maybe Alec didn’t deserve a second chance with Sol, but she knew if her mother had given her one she’d have jumped at it.

Maybe Sol was different. Maybe he—

No. She and Sol were two of a kind. Or they always had been, and ten years couldn’t change him that much.

She dropped into the seat opposite. ‘Tell me, Alec, do you have a Christmas tree?’

Cassie bounded up the back steps and into the kitchen. ‘Sorry I’m late, Jean.’ She kissed the older woman’s cheek.

‘You’re not late. You’re right on time.’

Cassie took in the tired lines around Jean’s eyes and a shaft of guilt speared through her. Normally she arrived early on a Thursday night to help prepare the meal. ‘What can I do?’

‘It’s all under control, dear.’ Jean picked up a platter of fried chicken. ‘You could bring those salads through.’

Cassie seized the bowls and followed Jean into the dining room to find the rest of the family already assembled. With a smile she relaxed into them. The Parkers—the family Brian had given her. And Thursday night was family night, when they all gathered here at Jack and Jean’s.

She loved them with a fierceness born of desperation. The desperation of someone who’d never had a family or known family life until they’d hugged her to their collective bosom with a warmth that had taken her breath away.

It still did, really.

She slipped into her seat beside Tracey, Brian’s younger sister, and across from Fran, his older one. Fran’s husband Claude beamed with good health and good cheer beside Fran. Cassie figured he had a lot to be cheerful about. She averted her eyes from the bulge burgeoning under Fran’s dress, tried to dispel the ache that gripped her.

From the corner of her eye she watched Jack as he said grace. He looked tired too. Neither he nor Jean had slept well since Brian’s death. Cassie smothered a sigh. It had been nearly eighteen months. She’d hoped…

Hoped what? Brian had been their golden boy—the whole town’s golden boy. The rugby genius who’d played for Australia and put the town of Schofield on the map. Some things you just didn’t get over, ever. And for Jean and Jack she had a feeling Brian’s death was one of them.

Maybe if she’d produced that much-wanted grandchild…She smothered another sigh and thrust the thought away, averting her eyes from Fran’s tummy as best she could.

‘How is your work going, Cassandra?’

She shot Jack a smile. ‘Fabulous.’ She knew how proud they all were of her community work. But then, they were a community-minded family. It was one of the reasons the town had rallied around so much when Brian had died. ‘Maisie’s twin nieces showed up the day before yesterday.’

‘Ooh, how are they?’ Jean cut in, always interested to hear news of youngsters who no longer lived in Schofield.

‘Great. You’ll never guess what they’ve done.’ She handed the potato salad across to Claude. ‘They’ve packed her a suitcase and whisked her off on a cruise for Christmas.’

‘How lovely.’ Jean clasped her hands together. ‘They always were nice girls, and so was their mother. It was a real tragedy, her dying so young.’

Silence enveloped them. As it always did when death was mentioned. She could almost see the image of Brian sweep across the table.

Tracey cleared her throat. ‘You and Dad should go on a cruise, Mum.’

‘Oh, no, dear, we couldn’t.’

‘Why not?’ Tracey persisted.

‘Well, now…I mean…’

‘Your mother means our life is here.’

Cassie gulped as Jack glared at his youngest daughter. ‘Guess who I saw today?’ she jumped in, before Tracey could argue her point further. ‘You’ll never guess, so I’ll have to tell you.’ She accepted a bread roll from the basket Jean held out to her. She smiled around the table. ‘Sol Adams.’

Tracey and Jack stopped glaring at each other to gape at her. Jean dropped the basket of bread rolls.

‘Sol Adams?’ Fran frowned, as if trying to place him.

‘Yes—you remember,’ Tracey leaned forward, excitement shooting from her in all directions. ‘He was in Cassie and Brian’s year. Seriously hunky.’ She turned to Cassie. ‘Have you actually seen him?’

‘Sure.’ She helped Jean pick up the scattered bread rolls. ‘He’s staying with Alec.’

‘Omigod, all the girls in my year had serious crushes on him.’

Cassie's eyebrows shot up towards her hairline. 'Really?'

Tracey rolled her eyes. 'All the girls in your year just couldn't see past Brian, but we knew better.'

'Tracey Phyllis Parker!' Jean looked as if she were about to cry. 'How on earth can you say such a thing? And with Cassie sitting here and all.'

Tracey glanced at Cassie, stricken. 'I'm sorry, Cassie. I didn't—'

'Relax, Mum. Cassie's fine—aren't you?' Fran's even tones broke over them and Cassie nodded gratefully. 'No sister is going to find her brother a hunk. Not even the sisters of the legendary Brian Parker.'

'Yes, well, I suppose you're right,' Jean sighed. 'But even so.'

'Even so what?' Fran teased.

'Even so, we know that Sol Adams isn't half the man Brian was. Isn't that so, Cassandra?'

A band tightened around Cassie's chest, trying to suffocate her.

'Nonsense,' Tracey scoffed.

'Isn't that so, Cassandra?' Jack persisted.

Cassie forced a smile. 'I married Brian, so that makes me biased.' Though maybe not in the way Jack thought. 'Sol didn't have things easy.' Not like Brian. The words hung in the air unsaid. She bit her lip. 'He was always nice to me. We were neighbours.' She shrugged. 'We were friends.' She could tell Jack didn't like her words.

'So what did he have to say? What did you talk about? Has he changed?'

Tracey's gunfire questions made Cassie laugh. 'It's been ten years. Sure he's changed. We all have.'

'You've got prettier.' Tracey said the words as a statement of fact. 'Is Sol hunkier?'

Is he what? But she couldn't tell them that! 'I, uh, I don't know.' Jack shot Tracey a triumphant glare, and Cassie couldn't help herself. 'He's filled out…grown into all that height. Remember how he used to be kind of gangly and lanky?' Tracey nodded eagerly. 'Well, he's not any more.'

Jack concentrated on the plate of food in front of him and Jean's gaze darted from Cassie to Tracey and back again. Remorse stabbed her. She shouldn't have said anything.

'What did you talk about?'

She wished to heaven she hadn't mentioned Sol Adams now. She seized another drumstick, even though she hadn't touched her first. 'We chatted about Alec, mostly.'

'And?'

And his hand on mine felt fabulous. But she had no intention of telling anyone that either. 'And…' She floundered for a moment. 'And he's babysitting my kittens.'

'He is?' Tracey blinked. 'Sol is a cat person?'

That made Cassie grin. 'No, I don't think he is. He looked as if he'd sucked a lemon when I asked him.' She could tell he wasn't a cat person, but he'd still said yes. The thought warmed her.

Jack smirked. 'I can't say I blame him.'

Jack wasn't a cat person. He wasn't really a dog person either. He was a hunting and fishing kind of person.

Jean leaned across the table. 'We should've let Cassie keep those kittens here.'

'Nonsense,' he chuckled, suddenly smug. 'Sol Adams can look after them. It serves him right.'

For what? Why didn't Jack like Sol? She bit back a sigh. Maybe it was another reminder that a person from his son's generation was alive when his son was not.

'Can you set me up with him?' Tracey suddenly demanded.

Cassie choked on fried chicken. 'What?'

'Could you arrange a blind date for us or…better yet…have a dinner to welcome him back to town?'

Gee, she could just see Sol jumping at that.

‘How about Saturday night?’

No! It was a terrible idea. It was—

‘For Pete’s sake, Tracey, leave Cassandra in peace.’ Jack’s smugness had fled. His jaw clenched and his eyes flashed fire. ‘Let her finish her dinner.’

Tracey subsided, but Cassie could tell by the stubborn light in her eyes that it was only a momentary reprieve. As soon as Tracey got her alone she’d renew her appeal. Cassie glanced around the table and her heart sank. Since when had she been able to deny any member of this family anything?

Sol knocked, then shifted from one foot to the other. He glanced down at his watch. Hell. It was still early. He hoped Cassie was up.

One thing. She’d asked him to do one thing and he couldn’t even manage that. He’d been a fool to come back.

He knocked again. Under his breath he started to count. ‘One, two…’ He’d knock again when he got to ten. ‘Three, four…’ Would she go ballistic? Every other woman he knew would throw a hissy fit. ‘Five, six…’A reluctant grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. He couldn’t see Cassie throwing a hissy fit. ‘Seven, eight…’ The grin disappeared. She loved those kittens. She’d told him so. ‘Nine—’

The door cracked open a fraction. One velvet eye peered through the gap, then the door flew open. ‘Sol! What are you doing here?’

He stared at her, and for the life of him he couldn’t remember. The thin terry-towelling robe she wore would’ve been more than respectable in ordinary circumstances, but not now—not when she was so wet. He must’ve hauled her out of the shower. He gulped. Her wet hair dripped down the front of the robe, outlining a shape that had his tongue fastening to the roof of his mouth. He dragged in a breath. Keep breathing, Adams. You can do it. It’s easy.

No, it wasn’t. It was damn hard. Cassie’s curves were as lush and gorgeous as the woman herself. Need pierced through him. His knees almost buckled. He wanted to haul her into his arms and—

He tried to extinguish the pictures that rose in his mind. He could see Cassie’s lips moving, but no sound reached his ears. He rubbed a hand over his face.

‘Sol?’ Her forehead creased in concern. ‘Are you okay?’

He was a lot of things, but okay wasn’t one of them. And he had no intention of telling her that. ‘I, er, didn’t sleep too well last night.’ At least that was the truth.

‘What are you doing here?’

Aw, hell—that’s right. The kittens. Remember? Ballistic hissy fits and stuff? Ballistic he could cope with. He eyed her warily. As long as she didn’t cry. ‘I, er…’ He scuffed the toe of his sneaker against the top step.

‘Yes?’ She drew the word out as if tempted to shake him.

‘I seem to have lost one of your kittens.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, Sol.’

She was sorry? She was sorry!

‘You’d better come in.’ She grabbed his arm and pulled him inside. She tossed a quick glance outside before she slammed the door, then led him into the living room.

He looked around and his jaw dropped.

‘I lied to you, you know?’

He forced himself to focus on her words, her face, rather than the surroundings. If he didn’t he’d explode. Or implode. Or he’d fall into an abyss he’d never get out of again. ‘Lied?’ He latched onto the word.

‘I told you the kittens wouldn’t be any trouble.’

She started to dry her hair vigorously, as if suddenly aware of how it dripped down the front of her robe. The action made bits of her jiggle. Bits he shouldn't be staring at if he didn't want himself called a male chauvinist pig.

He stared at the wall behind her. An enormous photo of Brian holding up a trophy and surrounded by his Australian team-mates dominated the space. His gut clenched at the triumphant grin on Brian's face. He glanced to his left. An enormous trophy cabinet stood there. He swung away to his right and another wall of photographs rose out at him—Brian scoring the winning try in some grand final, Brian awarded the sportsman's medal of the year, Brian on the shoulders of his team-mates.

Brian. Brian. Brian.

'What is this?' he suddenly burst out. 'A mausoleum?'

He immediately wished he'd kept his fat trap shut when Cassie stepped back from him, her eyes dark.

'I'm sorry.' He took a step towards her and she took another step back. He stayed put and held up his hands. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything.'

'I, uh, the kitchen is through there if you want to grab a coffee. I'll go get dressed.' And then she was gone.

Sol tossed another glance around, then left the room with a grimace. His gut clenched again when he entered the kitchen. Evidence Cassie had shared this house with Brian was everywhere. His eyes rested on a coffee mug on the sideboard. It read: 'Old rugby players never die they just…'He didn't have the heart to turn it over and read the punchline. Brian had been a rugby player, a good one, but he hadn't been old. And he shouldn't be dead.

He pushed through the back door, needing air. An enormous dog lifted his head from a kennel, his ears pricked forward. Sol sat on the lowest step, rested his elbows on his knees and stared back. 'Are you Cassie's dog or Brian's?'

The dog sat up, stretched and shook his head.

'Fair enough,' Sol said, and patted his knee. The dog trotted over. Sol scratched his ears then reached for the tag around the dog's neck. 'Rufus.' The dog's tail thumped harder. 'Ah, the eater of kittens. Well, Rufus, were you sad when Brian died?' The tail kept thumping. 'I wasn't. Not really.' He hadn't been happy either, but it hadn't been till now that the tragedy had hit him—that someone as young as Brian, as full of life as Brian, was dead.

He'd been sad for Cassie, but he hadn't thought about the living hell she must've gone through. Could still be going through. He dragged a hand down his face. She was too young to be a grieving widow. And he hadn't offered her any kind of condolence, any kind of comfort. His lips twisted. He knew Cassie. She'd have put on a brave face for the rest of the world and then grieved alone. He could've helped.

But he hadn't. And if the truth be known his first emotion when he'd heard about Brian's death had been one of hope. He shook his head. It could never be that simple, though, could it? He'd always resented Brian. Resented how easy he'd had it. Resented his offhand attitude to everything he had.

And then there'd been Cassie.

A gasp sounded behind him and he spun around. He met Cassie's eyes through the screen door. They were wide and frightened. A hand fluttered to her mouth.

He leapt to his feet. 'What's wrong?' What had scared her?

She drew in a shaky breath. 'Upon my word, you like to take your life in your own hands, don't you, Sol Adams?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Rufus here likes to eat strangers for breakfast.'

A smile stretched across his face. He didn't deserve it, he acknowledged that much, but Cassie cared. She didn't want him torn limb from limb by a dog.

It doesn't mean anything, a voice in his head said. Cassie wouldn't want anyone torn limb from limb.

It's a start, his stubborn heart returned. 'Me and Rufus here—' Rufus wagged his tail '—have come to an understanding.'

Cassie folded her arms. 'Really?'

'I scratch his belly and he doesn't eat me. He's a big pussycat.'

'Correction. He eats pussycats. And speaking of cats…'

She was right. 'Let's go.' He hoped to hell they could find the kitten. He didn't want to let her down. 'I'm sorry I didn't keep a closer eye on them for you.'

'It's not your fault.' She locked the front door. 'They're the Houdini quartet. I bet it's Rudolph who's missing.'

'Rudolph?'

'The little one.'

He opened the car door for her. 'Yep.'

'Do you know how long he's been gone?'

'He wasn't with the others when I let them out of the laundry.' She bit her lip and fresh wave of guilt engulfed him. The kitten could've been out all night.

'You checked inside the washing machine?'

'Yep.' He'd turned the entire laundry upside down. 'There's a spot under the washing machine where the floorboards have perished. My guess is he wriggled out of there somehow. I mean, it's only the smallest of gaps—'

'Rudolph only needs the smallest of gaps.' She sighed. 'We're lucky the others didn't follow.'

'Well, they won't now. I've boarded it up.'

A shadow fell across the car. 'Is everything okay, Cass?'

Cassie swung around. 'Keith!' She beamed at the other man and something dark and ugly slugged through Sol's gut. She gestured to Sol. 'Do you remember Sol Adams?'

Sol sure as hell remembered Keith Sinclair, Brian's best mate. Keith nodded, but didn't offer his hand. Sol nodded back. He didn't offer his hand either.

'Is everything okay?' Keith repeated.

'Sure it is.' Cassie's smile widened. 'I talked Sol here into letting me use his back veranda for my kittens, but one of them has got out.'

'Again?'

Again? Sol felt a little better. If these kittens had priors for escaping…

'But they're presents for your oldies.'

Sol didn't know whether to laugh or not at the look on Keith's face.

'I'm sure we'll find it,' Cassie soothed, but Keith had already hauled his mobile phone out of his pocket.

'We'll help.'

'Really, Keith, it's not necessary. You'll be late for work.'

'Not a problem, Cass. You know we're here for you.'

'But I—'

'And we know how important those kittens are to you.'

It took Keith less than ten minutes to have a search party organised. A search party that consisted of Brian's old mates—all members of the Rugby League Club. Sol didn't know what to say, and he sure didn't know what to think. Were they all in love with Cassie? Was this some kind of weird collective courting ritual? The dark glares they tossed him had his mind working overtime.

He turned to Cassie and she shrugged an apology. But her eyes danced, as if she wanted to burst out laughing. He glanced around again and had to clamp down on that same impulse. Six grown

men crawled around Alec's backyard calling, 'Kitty, kitty. Here, kitty, kitty.' Any of these men would rather be dead than seen cradling a tiny kitten in their arms, yet here they were—

'What on earth is all this racket?'

Alec burst out onto the back veranda still in his pyjamas, a scowl on his face and a kitten in his lap. Sol and Cassie stared at each other, then Cassie covered a grin with her hand. 'Didn't check the house, huh, Sol?'

'How did it get inside? There's no way—'

'The damn thing was mewling out the front in the middle of the night,' Alec grumbled.

Cassie smiled. 'So you went out and got him?'

What Sol wouldn't do to have her smile at him like that.

'I had to,' Alec grouched. 'In the interests of peace and quiet and sleep.'

Sol noticed he didn't offer to hand the kitten back.

'The search is over, boys,' Cassie called out.

'You want a lift home, Cass?'

'No, thanks, Keith. I promised to help Alec out with something this morning.'

She had?

'You'll make sure she gets home safe, Adams?'

'Nah,' some devil made him say, 'she can catch a cab.' All the men bristled, and he saw Cassie try to hide another grin. 'Of course I'll see her home.'

Muttering, the men left. As the last car drove away, Sol turned to her, arms upraised. 'What was that all about?'

'You didn't get it?' She stared at him expectantly. 'C'mon, Sol. All those guys idolised Brian, right?'

He shrugged. 'I guess.'

'And I'm Brian's widow.' She enunciated each word with deliberate care.

'Uh-huh.' He could've done without that reminder.

She gave an exaggerated sigh. 'You still don't get it? Brian put Schofield on the map and the town adored him for it. As his widow, they adore me too.'

So they should. But for who she was, not because she'd married Brian Parker. Her fragrance curled around him as he followed her into the house. She smelt like Christmas—a cross between pinecones and plum pudding.

'You have no idea how fabulous this widowhood caper is.'

His jaw dropped. 'Fabulous?'

'You bet. I have a whole town that'll do anything for me. You just saw.'

He sure had.

'I'm surrounded by people eager to help me out.' She filled the kettle, then leant a hip against the kitchen sink. 'If I don't get a chance to walk Rufus, Max next door does it for me. Keith and Phillip take it in turns to mow my lawn. If I need an odd job done around the house it's done—' she snapped her fingers '—like that. Every home gardener in the neighbourhood supplies me with more fruit and veggies than I know what to do with. And eggs—I get lots of eggs.' She grinned. 'Everyone looks out for me.'

Unease slugged through him. 'And you like that?' It'd suffocate the hell out of him.

'I love it, and what's more…' she sent him a mischievous grin '…I don't have the mean girls at school saying, "Poor Cassie; she still hasn't found herself a man," and I get it all without the bother of having a husband.'

He gripped the back of the chair. 'Was Brian a bother?'

The curtain of hair immediately hid her face.

Damn, damn and double damn. What had made her go and rattle on like that?

‘Cassie?’

‘From what I hear all husbands are a bother.’ She tried for light. It didn’t work. Or at least Sol didn’t buy it. Panic scurried through her. ‘Brian is dead.’ She couldn’t hide the pain that stretched across her voice. She just hoped to God she’d managed to hide the guilt.

‘So, if you can’t have Brian this is the next best thing?’

No. God forgive her. Being Brian’s widow was the best thing. But she couldn’t tell Sol that. She couldn’t tell anyone.

He sat heavily when she remained silent. ‘I see.’

She doubted that. And she was glad, she told herself fiercely. She didn’t want anyone to see. She lifted her chin. ‘I’m never, ever getting married again.’

‘Don’t say that, Cassie.’ He reached across and took her hand. ‘I swear you can find what you had with Brian again.’

Exactly. That was what she was afraid of.

‘And give up all this?’

Alec wheeled back into the kitchen and she tugged her hand free, tried to slow the stupid scampering of her heart. Alec had changed out of his pyjamas, but he still had the kitten on his lap. Maybe she’d misjudged him? Maybe he’d like a kitten to love?

She glanced at her watch. ‘I’m afraid I have to get going.’ She should’ve taken the ride Keith had offered. But Sol had smelt too good, looked too good, for her to surrender all hopes of sharing at least one cup of coffee with him this morning.

Bad idea. Look where that temptation had landed her. Idiot. She was not risking everything she’d built up here in Schofield because some man smelt good and looked good.

Sol surveyed her for a long moment. ‘I thought you had to help Alec out with something.’

Alec glanced up. ‘You do?’

‘Sure I do. But it’ll have to wait till this afternoon.’

‘You just put the kettle on,’ Sol pointed out.

‘I…umm…habit. I don’t have time now.’ She headed for the front door and tried not to breathe too deeply as she walked past him.

CHAPTER THREE

'HELLO?' Cassie called through the back door as kittens clambered over her feet. 'Anyone home?'

The day before yesterday she'd have waltzed straight in, calling for Alec, but not today. Not when Sol was living here. What if he were one of those people who walked around their house naked?

After all, it was hot.

Heat that had nothing to do with summer temperatures surged through her. She really didn't want to walk in on a naked Sol. She fanned a hand in front of her face, trying to cool down. She really didn't. Honest. Though half naked would be nice. She wouldn't mind seeing him without his shirt, just to see how much he'd changed in ten years. Just to see if his shoulders promised—

Arghh. Can that thought right now, Cassie Parker. You don't fantasise about near-naked men.

'Wrong. I quite obviously do,' she muttered, wondering at the political correctness of such an admission.

'Do what?'

Sol loomed on the other side of the screen door, and for a moment all Cassie could do was stare. 'Uh, make a sterling scratching post,' she gulped. She bent down to detach a kitten from her leg. When she straightened, she prayed her face wasn't red.

Alec wheeled up behind Sol. 'You're early again,' he grumbled.

'Yes, I am.' Alec still had the kitten on his lap. It curled up there as if it never meant to leave. 'Well, aren't you going to let me in?' she demanded, as both men stared at her. Sol shook himself, then pushed the door open. 'Have I got something on my face?' She scrubbed a hand across her face as both men continued to stare. Sol sent her a lop-sided grin that had her stomach falling all over itself.

He pointed. 'On your head.'

'My Santa hat?' She twirled on the spot. 'Do you like it? I wore it specially.'

'Humph.' Alec backed up and wheeled away.

'It looks hot,' Sol said.

Her eyes narrowed. Man, did this place need some Christmas cheer or what? She followed him into the kitchen. 'It certainly captures the spirit of the afternoon.'

Both men swung around to stare at her suspiciously. She beamed back at them. 'We're putting up your Christmas tree.' She held up one hand as they both opened their mouths to argue. 'I have my heart set on decorating your Christmas tree, and don't forget that I'm the town's favourite widow and only blackguards without scruple would disappoint me.

'Furthermore,' she added when they both opened their mouths again, 'if you don't play along, you—' she glared at Alec '—will get nothing but salad for tea tonight. And you—' she glared at Sol '—won't get invited to my place for dinner tomorrow night.' Both men chewed her words over for a moment, then subsided into silence. 'Fabulous.' She dusted off her hands. 'Okay—Alec, you organise the drinks and you, Sol, can drag the Christmas tree out of the hall closet.'

She walked through to the living room and chose her spot—smack-bang in the middle of the front window, so everyone who drove by could see it. Not that many people drove out this way.

The curtains fluttered in the breeze. She lifted her face to it. Sol's doing, she'd bet. For the life of her she didn't know why Alec kept everything so shut up.

Yes, she did. Alec kept his house shut up the way he kept himself shut up. It was a simple as that.

And as complicated.

'Where do you want me to dump this?'

Sol stood in the doorway, a large box in his arms, and a strange pulse fluttered to life in her throat. His arm muscles bulged as if he was used to manual labour. She gulped. Ten years ago—

He shifted the box. 'Have I got something on my face?'

She blinked, then made herself grin. Pushing the coffee table to one side, she pointed. 'I'd like you to place the box there.' He chuckled at her stress on the word, and, oh, heavens, there it was again, that warm hot chocolate glow. He glanced at her strangely, so she shook herself and said, 'Show me your hands.'

He immediately held them out, palm upward, like a little boy proving he'd washed his hands before dinner. She took one of them between her own and traced the calluses with her fingers. His hands matched his arms. Big and masculine. The kind of hands a woman could imagine holding her. Tracing and caressing and—

She dropped the hand and shoved hers behind her back. 'I thought you were an architect.' The words rapped out of her like bullets. 'I mean, I thought you designed houses, not built them.'

'I do.'

His eyes settled on her, and awareness shot up her backbone.

'But I like to get involved in all stages of my projects. I've even built my own house.'

'From scratch?'

'Yep.'

'All on your own?'

He shrugged. 'I had plumbers in to do the plumbing and electricians in to wire the house.'

'But the rest you did all on your own?' Her mouth opened and closed. 'But that's amazing.' She couldn't imagine Brian—

'Nah, it's not.'

But he looked pleased all the same, and as their eyes met that awareness arced between them again. Cassie found her palms suddenly damp. It was the heat, she told herself. Summer day heat. She wiped her palms down the front of her skirt. 'Then this—' she pointed to the box '—should be a cinch for you.'

Alec wheeled into the room with both tray and kitten perched precariously on his knee. Cassie's jaw dropped. 'What do you think you're doing?' She pointed to the tray. It held two cans of beer, a jug of homemade lemonade and three glasses. Wasn't it only yesterday she'd bragged to Sol that Alec hadn't had a drink in two years? And yet here—

'Keep your hat on.' He scowled. 'The beers are for you and Sol. The boy can't be expected to live on my lolly water, now, can he?'

'I suppose not.' Though Alec's lemonade was delicious.

'And I thought, seeing as you're all set on this Christmas spirit thing, that you'd join the boy in a drink.'

'A beer?'

'Anything wrong with that?' Sol asked.

'No.' She drew the word out slowly. It was just that nobody ever offered her beer. Ever. Wine and soft drinks, yes, but not beer.

Her lips twisted. Brian could still exert his influence, even from the grave. He hadn't liked her drinking beer—hadn't thought it was ladylike. So she hadn't drunk it. Just like that. It was crazy to give up your freedom so easily, but she had. Without so much as a whimper. And now she lived in a town that thought she didn't like beer.

'Cassie?'

She lifted her chin. 'I'd love a beer.' She seized one and popped the top. Further, she was going to drink it straight from the can. Sol and Alec wouldn't mind. Heck, they probably wouldn't even notice.

'Cheers.' She raised the can in salute, then took a long swig, savouring its strong flavour. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and beamed at the two men.

Sol grinned, as if her enthusiasm amused him. 'Good?'

'The best,' she vowed. 'Now, chop-chop. Haul that thing out of its box.'

‘Heavens, Alec,’ she breathed later, as she and Sol set about erecting the tree. ‘How tall is this thing?’

‘Nearly seven feet.’ An idle hand stroked the kitten.

He didn’t strike Cassie as the kind of man who went in for Christmas trees—especially not enormous seven-foot monstrosities. But then she hadn’t thought he’d take to a kitten either.

‘Sol’s mum,’ he said, as if he could read the question in her face. ‘She got some freak in her head.’

‘As was her wont,’ she heard Sol mutter under his breath. She understood. Pearl Adams had been one erratic woman.

‘She decided we had to have a Christmas tree, and of course, with Pearl, it had to be the biggest.’ He took a slug of lemonade. ‘It only got put up once.’

‘Twice,’ Sol corrected, then looked as if he wished he hadn’t.

An awkward silence enveloped the room. Cassie looked from one man to the other, both with their closed and shuttered faces. She took another swig of beer and revelled for a moment in her newfound sense of freedom. ‘Third time lucky, then. Isn’t that what they say?’

Sol and Alec both looked charmingly nonplussed.

‘Ooh, look—you’ve even got lights.’ She pounced on them, then winked at Sol. ‘We don’t need a qualified electrician to wire up a tree. Come on—you start at the top. I won’t reach. And here—’ she handed Alec a box of red and green balls ‘—you start with these.’

Sol wound the lights around the top of the tree, then handed them to her to arrange on the lower branches. She hummed Deck the Halls, and sensed rather than saw the two men roll their eyes at each other over her head.

‘Why are you so into Christmas and all anyway, girl?’ Alec grumbled as the kitten took a swipe at a Christmas ball.

‘Maybe ’cos I never had a proper one when I was growing up.’ She finished the lights and leaned back to survey their handiwork. Not bad. ‘So I guess I’m making up for lost time.’

Alec stared at her for a moment and a shadow passed across his face. ‘You trying to help an old reprobate like me make up for lost time too?’

Sol wouldn’t mind knowing what she was up to himself.

‘Ex-reprobate,’ Cassie corrected.

She was right. Sol had to admit Alec had changed. A lot. And not just physically.

‘That mama of yours, Cassie,’ Alec shook his head. ‘She shoulda…’ He sighed. ‘You was always a nice kid.’

‘Yeah, I guess I was.’ She hung red and green balls on the branches Alec couldn’t reach. ‘So was Sol here.’

Silence greeted her words, then Alec chuckled. ‘As a wee mite, if there was trouble to be found he’d be in the thick of it.’

She turned, hands on hips. ‘He was a nice kid, Alec.’

Alec’s gaze dropped. ‘Yeah, Cassie. Sol here was a nice kid too. I’ll grant you that.’

Sol couldn’t believe his ears.

‘He deserved to have Christmas too.’

‘Yeah.’ Alec shifted in his wheelchair. ‘He did.’

‘And he didn’t deserve to have you beat up on him the way you used to.’

What did she think she was doing? ‘Hell, Cassie,’ he shot out the corner of his mouth, ‘drop it. I thought we were going for Christmas spirit here. Just…’

‘Just what?’

She raised an eyebrow. Somehow it only served to define the lush curve of her bottom lip. Sol swallowed. ‘Just keep your nose out.’

Her eyes flashed fire. ‘It’s because people kept their noses out that I went hungry more often than I should have. I made a promise to myself way back then, Sol Adams, to never keep my nose out.’

How did you argue with that?

‘She’s right, lad,’ Alec mumbled, before shooting a glare at Cassie. ‘You sure know how to make a man feel the lowest of the low, Cassie Campbell.’

‘Parker,’ she corrected.

Alec chuckled. ‘You’ll never be a Parker. They’re good citizens and they mind their own business.’

‘They’re nice people, and you wouldn’t feel ashamed of yourself if your conscience was clear,’ she shot right back at him.

Sol laughed. He couldn’t help it. ‘Surrender now,’ he advised Alec. ‘You’re never going to win against the likes of her.’ He doubted anyone could. ‘When did you go and get all bossy anyhow?’ he asked her.

She tilted her nose and kept on decorating the tree. She tossed him some tinsel. ‘Make yourself useful.’

‘She’s right, though, lad. I should never have whaled into you the way I did back then.’

Sol’s jaw dropped. He half turned from twirling tinsel around the tree, then stopped. Discomfort crawled up his backbone and circled his skull. He didn’t want to have this conversation. Not now, not ever.

‘I’m sorry for what I did.’

Sol kept twining tinsel around the tree. Then ran out of tinsel.

‘I don’t expect you to forgive me. What I did back then—it wasn’t right.’

Sol clenched his jaw. Started rearranging the tinsel.

‘But I want you to know I regret it and…and I wish I could undo it or something.’

Sol’s hands stilled. There was no mistaking the sincerity in Alec’s voice. Silence crept into the room. He could feel Cassie’s eyes on him, but he didn’t know what response she wanted him to give. Even if he did he couldn’t guarantee to give it.

She kicked his ankle. ‘Oops, sorry.’

Eyebrows rose in mock innocence. Sympathy, laughter and gentleness all danced in the velvet violet of her eyes and somehow soothed him. He found himself smiling.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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