

MILLS & BOON



**Vintage** *Cherish*

# The Man Who Would Be Daddy

MARIE FERRARELLA

# **Marie Ferrarella**

## **The Man Who Would Be Daddy**

### **Аннотация**

Bundles of JoyTWENTY POUNDS OF PERFECTIONThe moment Malcolm Evans laid eyes on tiny Robin Winslow, he was hooked. An enchantress in pink cotton rompers, she brought back feelings Malcolm would have sworn he'd buried for good.AND A MOMMY TO MATCHChrista Winslow had her baby daughter's blue eyes and blond hair—and the same indefinable spirit. And when Malcolm saw mother and child together, it made him wish for a family, something a man like him could only dream of....WOULD LOVE TURN MALCOLM INTO MR. DADDY?Sometimes small packages lead to the biggest surprises!

# Содержание

Table of Contents	5
“Man,” Robin announced, pointing at Malcolm.	6
The Man Who Would Be Daddy	8
MARIE FERRARELLA	9
Chapter One	10
Chapter Two	26
Chapter Three	43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	54



# Table of Contents

[Cover Page](#)

[Excerpt](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Copyright](#)

***“Man,” Robin announced,  
pointing at Malcolm.***

*Yes, he certainly is,* Christa thought. *With a capital M.*

“Man,” Robin repeated, this time more insistently.

“I think she wants you to pick her up,” Christa prompted. She wondered how he would react. He seemed obviously torn between gruffly dismissing the little girl and giving in to what Christa guessed was a real desire to hold the child.

Robin stamped a tiny, sneakered foot on the concrete. “*Man.*”

“Demanding little female, isn’t she?” he commented. Before he could reason himself out of it, he bent down to the girl’s level and picked her up.

Christa held her breath as she watched them together. They belonged, she thought. Two halves of a puzzle. A man without a child and a child without a father.

It was almost as if they were made for each other. All three of them...

Dear Reader,

From classic love stories to romantic comedies to emotional heart tuggers, Silhouette Romance offers six irresistible novels every month by some of your favorite authors—and some sure to become favorites. Just look at the lineup this month:

In *Most Eligible Dad*, book 2 of Karen Rose Smith’s wonderful

miniseries THE BEST MEN, a confirmed bachelor becomes a FABULOUS FATHER when he discovers he's a daddy.

A single mother and her precious BUNDLE OF JOY teach an unsmiling man how to love again in *The Man Who Would Be Daddy* by bestselling author Marie Ferrarella.

*I Do? I Don't?* is the very question a bride-to-be asks herself when a sexy rebel from her past arrives just in time to stop her wedding in Christine Scott's delightful novel. Marriage? A very happily unmarried police officer finally says "I do" in Gayle Kaye's touching tale *Bachelor Cop*.

In *Family of Three* by Julianna Morris, a man and a woman have to share the same house—with separate bedrooms, of course....

Debut author Leanna Wilson knows no woman can resist a *Strong, Silent Cowboy*—and you won't be able to, either!

I'd love to know what you think of the Romance line. Are there any special kinds of stories you'd like to see more of, less of? Your thoughts are very important to me—after all, these books are for you!

Sincerely,

Melissa Senate,

Senior Editor

Please address questions and book requests to:

Silhouette Reader Service

U.S.: 3010 Walden Ave., P.O. Box 1325, Buffalo, NY 14269

Canadian: P.O. Box 609, Fort Erie, Ont. L2A 5X3

# **The Man Who Would Be Daddy**

## **Marie Ferrarella**



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

To Daddy,  
Who finally got it right after all these years.  
I miss you.  
Love, Marysia.



# ***MARIE FERRARELLA***

lives in Southern California. She describes herself as the tired mother of two overenergetic children and the contented wife of one wonderful man. The RITA-Award-winning author is thrilled to be following her dream of writing full-time.

## *Chapter One*

She never saw it coming.

One minute, Christa Winslow, newly divorced, newly transplanted former senior accountant of a prestigious Las Vegas-based firm, was just pulling her van into a parking space in front of a convenience store. The next, she was being brutally pulled out of the vehicle and then shoved aside by a tall, wiry man with wild, frightening eyes.

Had she seen him, she would have been prepared and just possibly been able to thwart what he did next. Christa's father and two older brothers, policemen all, had spent long hours seeing to it that she was properly trained to defend herself.

But she hadn't seen him, not until he was beside her, not until he had propelled her away, making her stumble and fall to the ground next to the tread-worn tire of her dusty van. He had caught her off guard and off balance. Trying to break her fall, she twisted her wrist beneath her body at an awkward angle. Christa felt the skin on the palm of her hand rip at the same time that she hit her forehead against the curb.

She had no time to react, no time to be afraid. Her heart was pounding wildly, but only in response to the violence, not in anticipation of what might lie ahead for her.

But it wasn't her the thug wanted. It was her vehicle. Which made it all the worse.

Turning the key, which was still in the ignition, the car-jacker gunned the van's engine as if he were thumbing his nose at Christa in triumph. The next moment, he was peeling out of the lot even as she was scrambling back to her feet.

*Oh, God, no. No! Robin!*

The horrified protest drummed madly through her brain. A big lump had formed almost instantly on her forehead beneath the fringe of bangs she wore, and the gash on her palm was bleeding now. She could feel the stickiness against her fingers. But all Christa could think of was the van that was speeding away from her. And the precious cargo that was still in it.

"Stop him!" she screamed. "Stop that man. He's stealing my van. My daughter's in it! Somebody, please help me!" The wrenching plea tore out of her throat, rubbing it raw as if every syllable were made out of bits of glass.

The scream shattered the peaceful morning air surrounding the Sylvan Minimall. The handful of people out early in the huge parking lot jerked to attention, looking in Christa's direction. One man came running over to her. But for the most part, the others were immobilized, frozen in place by icy, stunned disbelief. Car-jackings and kidnappings just didn't happen in a quiet place like Bedford.

Except when they did.

"Are you all right?" the man asked Christa.

"No," she cried, watching the van pull away. "No!"

All right? How could she be all right? How could she ever be

all right again? Someone had just stolen her child!

Fragments of thoughts collided in her head. She wanted to run after the van and rip the man apart with her bare hands; she wanted to crumple to the ground and cry. She did neither. Instead, she ran into the convenience store to call the police.

Malcolm Evans had gotten a late start this morning.

For all intents and purposes, for him time had stopped moving toward any real goal three years ago on a Sunday afternoon in May. That was when his world had ended in flames.

But he went through the motions of putting one foot in front of the other, and somehow one day followed another, until they knitted themselves into a week, and then a month and then a year.

It made no difference. Nothing changed.

There was a sameness to them all, especially in Southern California. Some days were cooler, some not, but there were no seasons to indicate the passage of the days, no way to differentiate one from another. Malcolm found himself merely existing. Marking time.

The only thing that entered into his life, that made any difference at all, was his sense of responsibility. It was the thin, steely thread that still tethered him to life. He had a place of business. People brought him their cars to repair. So he arrived early, remained late and went home to a place that would never be home again. It would never be more than just a building to him, walls to keep the rest of the world outside.

Usually, he managed to keep his thoughts in an iron Pandora's

box, sealed shut. This morning, they had slipped out. The memories. The pain. The guilt.

It had almost swallowed him up, that despair, that loneliness that periodically came out to haunt him ever since Gloria and Sally had been taken from him.

This time, the pain had been almost stronger than he was. But Mr. Mahoney was waiting for him to finish repairs on his pride and joy, a twenty-five-year-old car that defied the odds and continued to run long after it should have become a permanent part of some scrap heap. And God knew if he left Jock on his own all day, the kid would be a basket case before noon.

He had to go in.

So Malcolm had forced himself out of bed, basically proceeding on automatic pilot through his shower and a breakfast a Spartan would have described as meager. He ate for the same reason he did everything else in the past three years: out of an ingrained habit.

Malcolm had just pulled into the northernmost entrance to the minimall, the one closest to his shop, when he heard the woman's screams. The next moment, the van was barreling out of the lot, practically scraping the paint off his car as it passed. The van almost flipped over as it took a turn far more sharply than it should have. Malcolm was so close he could see the wild look on the driver's face.

It violated something within Malcolm to think that crime with its long, dirty fingers, was poking around a city he had always

thought of as unblemished. This was the city he had initially chosen to settle in, the city where he had hoped to see his daughter grow to young womanhood. Grow and flourish.

She could do neither now, but somehow it offended her memory to have someone commit a crime in Bedford, especially in broad daylight. Malcolm reacted without thinking and spun around a full 180 degrees to give pursuit.

Driving was second nature to him. It had been ever since he was twelve years old and had finally nagged his uncle into teaching him the fundamental elements of mastering a vehicle. Of course, then it had been a large, unwieldy tractor, but he had swiftly graduated to his cousin's car. And then his mother's tank of a Thunderbird when she had finally been persuaded to give her permission.

By the time Malcolm was sixteen and legally eligible for a learner's permit, he could make a car stand up and beg and do just about anything he wanted it to. Like a centaur in Greek mythology, he was able to meld with his vehicle and become one with it.

For a while, when he was still in high school, he had entertained thoughts of becoming a stunt-car driver. But the lure of the track had been far too great, and he had taken that road. And abandoned it.

For the past year he'd been driving a LeMans GTO. He had rebuilt the car from the hubcaps on up. It had begun a healing process for Malcolm, and while he hadn't healed, as he worked he

had at least found his way out of the darkness. He had pored over every metal scrap, every rod, every cable. Every piece within the car was indelibly marked with his fingerprints.

As he gave chase out of the lot, his car revved to life, performing like a long-sleeping servant eager to please its master.

Keeping an eye out for any passing vehicles, Malcolm commandeered the thoroughfare, wishing for the first time in his life that he owned a car phone. He wanted to call the police and give them his location so that they could cut off the car-jacker before he managed to get away.

Not that he figured the police were really far away. Car chases were uncommon in Bedford. He was certain that by now the squeal of burning rubber had prompted more than one citizen to hurry to his telephone to register a complaint with the police.

With any luck, Malcolm thought, a squad car would shortly be approaching from the other direction to serve as a barricade.

Main Street went from one end of Bedford to the other, serving as a direct link between two freeways. Developments sprouted on both sides of the street, and were lined with carefully crafted stone walls and framed by lush, towering trees that coexisted in landscaping the way they never would have in nature. Right now, a section of the long, winding road was under reconstruction to make it even wider than it was. Detour signs littered the area sporadically, making passage difficult.

The car-jacker was headed straight for the construction area. Obviously not a clear thinker, Malcolm thought. While Freeway

5 was directly on the other side of the reconstruction and closer as an escape route, the smart thing would have been to make a U-turn and head for the 405.

Good thing for the little girl in the van that the guy wasn't smart, Malcolm thought.

The light ahead was turning red. Malcolm knew that wasn't going to be a deterrent to the car-jacker. The van raced through the intersection as a car coming from the right came to a screeching halt, fishtailing and leaving a trail of tire tracks along the asphalt.

Malcolm never hesitated. He pressed down on the accelerator, watching the needle on the speedometer climb to seventy as he rushed to catch up. Seventy was nothing compared to what he had once been accustomed to.

But that had been in another lifetime. When he had had a life. When Gloria and Sally had been a part of it.

Malcolm thought of the woman he'd heard scream. He hadn't even seen her, only heard her voice, heard the anguish in it. It had ripped at his heart, and he knew he had to do something.

Maybe this was why he was still around—to save this woman's baby. Though by all rights, he should have been dead himself twice over.

It seemed to be the only thing that made sense to him.

He watched the rear of the van as the distance between them became shorter. The driver looked as if he was in danger of losing control of the vehicle.



Damn fool.

Up ahead, the road narrowed considerably. Two bulldozers and a crane loomed on both sides of the freshly dug-up road, while orange-jacketed workers littered the area. Main Street's broad lanes were reduced to a single serpentine path.

If he followed the curving path, he would still be behind the van. And he needed to be in front of it to make the driver brake.

Malcolm made his decision.

Hands tightening on the wheel, he plowed through the wooden horse barricade, then sailed over a mound of dirt and broken concrete that hadn't been hauled away yet. For one moment, he was airborne. The next moment, the earth was there to greet him. Malcolm could feel his teeth rattling in his mouth as the LeMans came down hard onto the road. Dirt was flying everywhere.

He was going to have some heavy-duty work on his hands with the car later, he thought vaguely.

As he floored the accelerator, the LeMans seemed to fly forward, directly ahead of the van. He passed it, then, twisting his wheel hard, Malcolm spun around a full 180 degrees, bringing the hood of his car physically into the path of the van.

He saw the horrified look on the car-jacker's face as the distance between the cars dissolved. The next moment, his curses swallowed up by the scream of tires and brakes locking, the man frantically tried to prevent a crash.

On the periphery of his consciousness, Malcolm saw men in the area scrambling to get out of the way of what looked like

the inevitable. With the skill of a man who had earned his living and his reputation driving at high speeds for the entertainment of others, Malcolm pulled back, avoiding the impact that had seemed so certain a second ago.

And then came the stern peal of sirens as white cars with blue-and-red dancing lights atop their roofs seemed to materialize from every direction. They converged, surrounding the van and Malcolm's LeMans.

He didn't wait for them. Didn't wait for the inevitable questions to assault his sense of privacy. Jumping out of his car, Malcolm hurried to the van. He didn't give a damn about the driver, who was slumped forward over the wheel. At the last moment, his head had come in contact with the windshield, and while the wheel had prevented him from going through the glass, he'd hit his head and obviously been knocked out.

He could have been dead for all Malcolm cared. That was for the police to handle. Yanking the passenger door open, Malcolm climbed in, scanning the interior for signs of another occupant. A high-pitched wail that somehow managed to rise above the sound of the sirens guided him to the car seat directly behind the driver. And to the unwilling participant in the short-lived joy ride.

It was a little girl, hardly more than a toddler. He hadn't expected her to be so young. So much like Sally.

The next second, Malcolm felt someone grab his wrist. The car-jacker had come to. With his other hand, he was reaching for the gun that was shoved far too cavalierly in his waistband.

“Hey, man, what the hell did you think you were doing?” the car-jacker demanded.

The car-jacker had no opportunity for any further questions or threats. A service revolver was trained at his head as the young policeman on the other side of the driver’s window loudly ordered him to remove his hand from the butt of his gun.

Losing his nerve, the man instantly raised both hands above his head. A barrage of impotent curses flooded the air as he was unceremoniously yanked from the van by one of Bedford’s finest.

“You watch your mouth around the baby,” the officer warned.

The baby cried louder.

Memories multiplied and changed, like a kaleidoscope rolling down a hill, bursting through Malcolm’s brain. “Hey, it’s okay,” he said in a soft, low voice as he approached the child.

Wide cornflower blue eyes stared at him as the cries faded into the air as quickly as they had come. The little girl had hair as blond as the rays of the morning sun. Captivated, Malcolm smiled at her as he unbuckled the straps restraining her.

Her eyes, huge with wonder, seemed to look right into him.

“Some joyride, huh?” he murmured as he lifted her from her seat. She was wearing rompers, he thought. And looked to be probably around Sally’s age.

Or what Sally’s age had been three years ago, he amended silently.

Holding the little girl against his chest, he cupped his hand protectively over the back of her head and carefully retraced his

steps out of the van. He murmured softly to the child to keep her from crying again. Bittersweet sensations filled him. It had been so long since he had held a little girl this way, he thought. Much too long.

Suddenly, Malcolm found himself flanked on three sides by policemen, none of whom looked as if he knew exactly what to make of Malcolm's part in this unorthodox chase down Main Street.

"Here, let me take her," one of the policemen said to Malcolm.

He felt the slight nudge of reluctance as he surrendered the child to the younger man. "She looks none the worse for wear," Malcolm observed.

"No, I guess she doesn't," the policeman agreed, his voice thick with emotion.

Only when he held his niece safe in his arms did relief flood Officer Tyler McGuire. News of the car-jacking had crackled over the radio, interrupting a conversation he'd been having with his partner. There'd been instant recognition when the dispatcher recited the van's license-plate number. Instant recognition and instant fear that Tyler had had to hold in check as he sprang into action.

Satisfied that Robin was all right, Tyler raised his eyes to the stranger's face. He didn't know him. "That's in part thanks to you," he replied. "I have no idea who you are, but I'm sure glad you came along when you did. Where did you learn how to drive like that?"

A distant smile quirked Malcolm's lips. "On a farm."

Now that the baby was safe, the adrenaline was slowly wearing off. He was really going to have to do some catching up today, he thought. He'd promised Mahoney the car by two.

Tyler laughed as Robin gurgled at him. "Must have been one hell of a farm," he commented. "If it weren't for you," Tyler told him, sobering, "she might have become just another statistic."

Malcolm didn't want praise or gratitude; he was just happy to set things right. He shrugged away the officer's words as he began heading back to his car. "Just a matter of being in the right place at the right time, that's all."

"Mind following me back?" Tyler called out to him. It was more of an invitation than a question. "My sister is going to want to thank you for this in person."

Malcolm stopped beside his car. "Sister?" What did the policeman's sister have to do with anything?

He nodded. "Christa. The woman whose baby you just saved." Tyler shifted Robin to his other side and thought how good it felt just to hold her. "This is my niece, Robin Winslow."

Malcolm paused and looked into the face of the child he had rescued. He thought of Sally again and felt his heart squeeze a little. "Nice to meet you, Robin Winslow."

Tyler thought he detected a hint of a smile on the man's lips before it faded.

"C'mon back to the minimall," Tyler urged again as he opened the van's passenger door. "Christa's still waiting there." If he

knew his sister, she would remain there indefinitely, praying for a miracle. It looked as if this time she'd gotten one.

They all had, he amended, looking at Robin. "By the way, my name's Tyler McGuire."

"Malcolm Evans," Malcolm said after a moment.

Tyler shook his hand. "I am *really* glad to meet you. C'mon, Robin, let's go see Mommy."

"Mommy," Robin affirmed.

Tyler laughed as he hugged her. "I'll drive the van," he told his partner. "Follow me back."

His partner, Elliott, nodded and started up the squad car. The other two cars had gone directly to the police station with their prisoner in custody. The man would be spending the night in a holding cell courtesy of the city, and tomorrow, after charges were pressed, he would find himself with another mailing address.

Not waiting for the policeman to go first, Malcolm turned his LeMans around and headed straight toward the minimall.

It surprised him that the incident could have stirred so many memories within him. It was like someone poking a stick at the embers of a fire that hadn't quite managed to go out.

It was all because he'd held the child, he thought. Holding her had made him remember. And yearn.

And regret.

He blew out a breath, wishing there was some effective way to permanently anesthetize himself so that he didn't feel anything

anymore. Feeling nothing was preferable to feeling pain.

He took the yellow light automatically and turned down the street that fed into the minimall. And saw her. Even some distance away, he knew it had to be her, the woman who had screamed. The woman whose child he'd saved. She couldn't have been anyone else. The woman, her hair as blond as her daughter's, was standing on the northernmost curb of the minimall, frantically searching the thoroughfare for some sight of her van.

The way she stood, alert, poised, hopeful, made him think of a portrait of a woman from the old seafaring days. Days when women stood watch upon the widow's walk of a Cape Cod house, looking at the sea for some sign of their husbands' ships on the horizon.

As soon as she caught sight of the van, Malcolm saw a smile break out over her face. Even at a distance, it was nothing short of radiant.

So radiant that he found himself caught up in its brilliance. It made him feel good for the first time in years. It felt like sunshine seeping through the pores after months in the gloomy mist.

Malcolm saw the woman hurrying past his car, reaching the door of the van before it had come to a full stop. As she ran by, he saw the tears streaming down her face, tears that were in direct contradiction to the smile on her face.

"You got her back!" Christa cried.

Disbelief, joy and relief all tangled together in her voice. Her

hands trembled as she opened the door and quickly climbed inside. They shook even more as she snapped open the harness that held Robin in place. She was certain that her heart was going to crack through her ribs as it pounded hard in relief.

“Not me,” Tyler told her as he got out of the vehicle. “He did.” Tyler jerked his thumb at Malcolm’s car.

Daughter pressed against her, Christa sobbed her relief into Robin’s hair. Then, pulling herself together, she stepped out of the van. With Robin in her arms, Christa turned to look at the man her brother had pointed out, the man whom she had seen tearing out after the carjacker.

The man who had given her back the life she saw flowing away from her only fifteen minutes earlier.

“I have no idea how to thank you,” Christa cried. Emotion choked her words away, and she threw her free arm about his neck and hugged him.

Caught in an emotional embrace between the woman and the child in her arms, Malcolm was temporarily at a loss. The last time he’d been standing like this, it had been Gloria and Sally whose embrace he’d shared. Sally with her perpetually sticky fingers, and Gloria, who had smelled like roses. This woman smelled of wildflowers. Memories battered at him, threatening to overwhelm him completely.

They assaulted him even harder as the woman brushed a kiss on his cheek.

He swallowed, separating himself from both of them. “I think



that'll do just fine," he told her.

Christa wondered why she saw a hint of longing in his eyes as he looked at Robin before stepping away.

"Glad I could help," he murmured. "Take care of her. Every day is precious."

And then, just like that, he turned and walked away.

## *Chapter Two*

It took a minute before the image of the retreating back registered. He was walking away. The man who had given her back the very meaning of her life was walking away, and she didn't even know his name.

Holding her daughter pressed close to her breast, Christa hurried after Malcolm. Behind her, she heard her brother calling after her.

"Christa, you all right?" Bewilderment tinged his question.

She didn't turn around. Instead, she held Robin a little tighter as she increased her stride. The little girl squirmed and wriggled against her in protest, but after what she'd just been through, there was no way Christa was going to set Robin down. At least, not yet.

"Yes, I'm fine," she answered.

Her Good Samaritan, almost a foot taller than she, had a long stride that took him farther and farther away from her with every step. The only way she could catch up was if she ran. Weighed down, she couldn't, but her eyes never left her target.

Why had he walked away from her just like that, as if he'd only picked up a pencil she'd dropped and returned it to her? Surely the impact of the situation had to have registered. Without even knowing her, he'd risked his life to get her daughter back. Why wouldn't he let her thank him?

Feeling the weight of the huge debt she owed him, that she would always owe him, Christa couldn't allow this moment to pass as if it were nothing.

"Mommy?" Robin whimpered, squirming again.

Christa kissed the top of her daughter's head, but she didn't slow down. "In a minute, honey. Mommy has to see someone."

Her arms were locked tightly around Robin. She wished she could make a haven out of them, a haven that would keep Robin safe forever.

*But she was safe now, thanks to him.*

If nothing else, Christa needed to know what his name was.

Perspiration dripped into Jock Peritoni's eyes as he looked up from the hot, uncooperative engine he'd been struggling with for the past half hour. The test drive he'd just taken the vehicle on had told him nothing. He didn't have his father's or Malcolm's ear. He couldn't just listen and be able to narrow down a problem.

He'd been only vaguely aware of the squealing tires and the life-and-death race that had taken place in the far end of the minimall. The engine had absorbed all his attention. He'd wanted to fix it before Malcolm arrived at work.

So far, all his efforts had been wasted.

Relief highlighted his grease-streaked face as he saw Malcolm approach. He'd begun to worry that something was wrong and his boss wasn't coming in today. Malcolm was never late.

It was only ten minutes shy of nine in the morning, but Jock already felt himself overwhelmed. Wiping his hands on the back

of his permanently stained jeans, the nineteen-year-old noticed the woman with the little girl in her arms. It looked as if she was hurrying to catch up to his boss, but Malcolm seemed completely oblivious to the fact that he was being followed.

That wasn't unusual. Working here over the last year, Jock had noticed that Malcolm Evans had an ability to shut out everything around him when he wanted to.

Circumventing the front end of the car, Jock nodded a greeting at Malcolm. "Hi, boss. You had me worried. I thought maybe you weren't going to come in."

Malcolm hadn't missed a day since he'd opened, though a lot of days he'd wanted to. He knew if he gave in to that feeling, he'd never stop. He'd done that once, and it had taken him almost two years to crawl out of that black hole. "I would have called you if I wasn't going to be in."

The voice was solemn, even. Jock's father had told him that Malcolm had been the life of the party during their racing-circuit days, but Jock found it really hard to believe. He had yet to see a smile on the man. When he had once gathered enough courage to ask him about it, Malcolm had pointed out to him that Jock grinned enough for both of them.

Jock nodded toward the woman who had almost caught up to Malcolm. "Don't look now, but you're being followed."

Preoccupied with memories that had suddenly assaulted him, memories he'd been working so hard to lock away, Malcolm hadn't heard anyone walking behind him. He stopped and turned

around abruptly.

Unable to stop quickly enough, Christa collided with him. Malcolm's hands went out automatically to steady her and the child she clutched to her. He'd thought he'd left her behind with the policeman who claimed to be her brother.

What was she doing following him? Their business was over.  
"What?"

He bit off the question the way he might have bitten off the end of a cigar, spitting it out because it interfered with his goal. Having her anywhere around him, having the child anywhere around him, interfered with his ability to blank out his mind. To forget what only caused him pain to remember.

Christa caught herself swallowing before answering. She felt as if she was being interrogated. What *was* his problem? And why would anyone who was so obviously unfriendly put himself out to rescue her child? He was behaving like someone who didn't want to become involved. But he had.

Why?

Robin was sinking. Christa shifted her, moving the little girl up higher in her arms. "I just wanted to thank you."

"You already did." Malcolm raised his dark eyes to indicate the rear parking lot where her van was standing, buffered by two squad cars.

"I mean *really* thank you," she insisted. "Words don't seem adequate."

"Then don't waste them," he advised mildly.

With that, he turned his back on her and walked into the service area where ailing cars and the various parts that could get them up and running again were housed. In the back was a tiny alcove with a door that served as his office, a place where he retreated to when he wanted to be alone.

He was always alone now, Malcolm thought.

She had no idea what to make of him. Christa exchanged looks with the tall, gangly attendant who in turn raised wide, bony shoulders in a helpless shrug.

A car pulled up to the full-service island, and the attendant retreated. She wasn't sure if it was her imagination, but he looked somewhat relieved about it.

Christa licked her lower lip and tried again. She took a step forward, only to have Malcolm whip around, his hand raised to keep her back.

"This area's restricted," he snapped. "You could get hurt here."

Christa saw nothing that posed any immediate threat beyond the man's temperament, but she took a step back, more in reaction to his demeanor than anything else.

When she spoke, her voice was patient. "Maybe I'm not making myself clear. You just gave me back my whole life. There has to be something I can do to repay you."

Her eyes on Malcolm's face, she stroked Robin's hair to calm herself. The girl curled up against her, sucking her thumb. Her wide blue eyes were sliding closed, lulled by the soothing action.

He could remember Sally's eyes sliding closed just like that.

Sally, sleeping in his arms.

Sally...

Damn it, why was he doing this to himself?

-His eyes had swept over her, and a glimmer of something tender flickered in them as they rested on Robin. But when he spoke, his voice was just as gruff as it had been a moment ago.

“You could get out of the way. I’ve got a lot of work to do today, and you’re interfering with my schedule.”

Stung, confused and just a shade annoyed, Christa retreated. Emotions raw, she felt completely out of her element here. It was clear that the man couldn’t be thanked. Maybe he had reacted before he thought and now regretted the whole incident. Why, she didn’t know. All she knew was that, for whatever reason, he had saved Robin, and that was enough.

She nodded, turning to leave. “All right,” she said quietly. “I didn’t mean to intrude.”

Malcolm was already leaning over the engine that had perplexed Jock. The engine he’d promised Mr. Mahoney was going to be purring by two this afternoon. “Don’t let her suck her thumb too much.”

The advice was carelessly tossed in her direction like a discarded gum wrapper. Surprised that he’d offered it, that he’d say anything that wasn’t yanked out of him, Christa turned around to look at him again.

He never looked up, but he could feel her eyes on him just the same. He knew she was waiting for him to say something more.

She'd probably stand there all day until he did.

Malcolm moved the overhead light clipped to the hood so that it illuminated the area beyond the spark plugs. "If she doesn't stop, she'll distort her palate and you'll be looking down the wrong end of a two-thousand-dollar bill for braces in about eight years."

The prediction stunned her almost as much as the man himself did. Did he have children? She glanced at the sign to the extreme left that told her that Malcolm Evans was the proprietor of Evans Car Service. She wondered if that was him. Something vague, just beyond the periphery of her thoughts, nagged at her, but she couldn't grab hold of it.

"I'll keep that in mind." She waited, but he said nothing else. With a perplexed sigh, Christa walked away from the service station.

Tyler was still waiting for her when she returned to her van. He was leaning against the hood of his car, talking to Elliott. The other squad car was nowhere in sight.

Straightening as she approached, Tyler nodded toward the gas station. He'd watched her brief encounter with Robin's rescuer. Body language told him that it hadn't gone the way Christa had wanted it to.

"What was that all about?"

Christa opened the passenger side and climbed in with Robin. All she wanted to do now was go home, sit holding Robin in her arms and forget about all this.



“I was just trying to thank him. I wanted to do something to show how very grateful I am.” She shrugged as she snapped the seat harness around Robin. “He told me to get out of the way.”

Tyler had surmised as much from the look on her face. “Some people can’t handle gratitude. They get embarrassed.”

Christa climbed out again, then pulled the door shut. She turned her face up to Tyler’s. “I know, but if he hadn’t been there —”

He wouldn’t let her do this to herself. She’d already been through too much lately as it was.

“But he was.” When she looked away, Tyler bracketed her shoulders with his hands, forcing her to raise her eyes to his. “Don’t dwell on *what ifs*, Christa. It’ll drive you crazy. You were the one who taught me that, remember?”

She sighed. “Yes, I remember.”

Her shoulders sagged as if all the fight had been drained from her. Tyler knew better than that, but he let his hands drop to his sides.

“We’re going to need you to come down to the station and make a statement.”

Christa just wanted to put this all behind her. Being a cop’s daughter, she should have realized she couldn’t do that so quickly. “Now?”

Ordinarily, he would have said yes. But this was his sister. And though she was trying to put up a brave front, he knew she was shaken. Hell, he was shaken by what had almost happened. She

deserved a little slack.

“No, why don’t you go home first? Take care of the bump on your head and clean up that scrape.” Taking hold of her hand, he turned it to examine her palm. The blood was already beginning to dry. “You can come down to the precinct later.” She flashed a small smile in response. Even that lit up her face. It was more like the Christa he was accustomed to. “Want me to drive you home?”

Home was a condo she had just leased last week. It was a little more than a mile down the road and still in a state of chaos, but right now, it was a haven.

She shook her head. “No, you go do what you have to do to earn your paycheck.” Christa saw the concern in his eyes. She placed a hand on his arm. “I told you, I’m fine.”

Tyler could only shake his head in response. “Stubborn as ever.”

Her eyes slanted toward the gas station. Malcolm Evans, if that was his name, was bending over the car he’d begun working on when she walked away. Its yawning hood was hanging open over him like the mouth of a shark that was getting ready to deliver a final bite.

“Yeah,” she answered, “I am.”

A deep, cleansing breath that helped her push aside the entire harrowing experience. She pulled open the door on the driver’s side of the van and climbed in. Robin sat dozing in her seat. Poor thing, she was exhausted.

*That makes two of us.*

Tyler shut the door behind her. “Buckle up or I’ll have to issue you a ticket.”

“Bully.” She slid the metal tongue into the clip. It clicked into place. “I’ll be by later this afternoon, all right?”

“Whenever you’re ready. Ask for Detective Harold. He’ll ease you through this.”

“Thanks.”

As she pulled out of the parking lot, she saw her brother in her rearview mirror. He was walking over to the gas station. She wondered if he was going to have any better luck with the solemn-eyed Good Samaritan than she had had.

The police station had grown a great deal since she’d wandered the small, narrow halls as a child. Those times, she had been ushered in by her mother to visit her father at work.

A sense of pride had always shimmied through her here, even though she’d been very young. The pride had multiplied as her brothers joined the force. Christa liked the idea of them being part of what made things right in the world, part of what kept the peace.

The halls weren’t narrow anymore. Renovated, the station seemed like something that belonged on the ground floor of a corporate building, not a police station. But it was a station nonetheless. A place where perpetrators were fingerprinted, where victims told their stories. It was a place where people came after bad things had happened to them.

People like her.

Christa shivered and wished she didn't have to go through this.

*It could have been a lot worse*, she reminded herself as she squared her shoulders.

Detective Harold was a new name to her. She'd known many of the old-timers. Her father had always brought his work home with him, cleaning up some of the coarser, uglier details as he went along. The men he worked with became a phantom part of the family.

The redheaded policewoman at the long reception desk looked up and waited expectantly as she asked, "May I help you?"

"I'm Christa Winslow. I'm here to see Detective Harold."

The policewoman rose, nodding as if she'd been expecting her. "Wait right here." She disappeared behind a wall that separated the long front reception area from the rest of the station.

Christa heard the automatic doors in the rear of the lobby open and close. Curious, she turned to see who had entered the precinct.

It was her reluctant Good Samaritan. He walked across the gleaming tiled floor, the heels of his scarred boots beating out a steady cadence, marking his approach. Even if the foyer had been crowded, she still would have singled him out. There was an aura about him.

A hundred or so years ago, people would have stopped to gawk at the stranger who rode into Dodge. He had an air of quiet power

about him, power that wasn't to be challenged. He was tall and straight like a doublebarreled shotgun and looked to be twice as lethal when crossed.

Something made her doubt that the appearance was deceiving.

Their eyes met at exactly the same moment, and she nodded at him. He slowly acknowledged the greeting.

She looked out of place here, Malcolm thought. She reminded him of a daisy pushing her way through a crack in the pavement.

When he reached her, she spoke first. It didn't surprise him. He wouldn't have spoken at all. The nod was enough for him.

Apparently, it wasn't enough for her.

"Hi."

Her greeting was bright, cheery, as if they were old friends rather than people who didn't even know each other's names. What was her name? Christine? Kristin? No, the policeman had called her...Christa. That was it. Christa.

He didn't have trouble recalling that the baby's name was Robin.

"Are you here to give a statement?"

Malcolm only nodded in reply. He didn't want to be here, but he couldn't very well tell that to the police. So he had worked through lunch and gotten Mahoney's car in running order, then left when the part-timer had shown up to help Jock. Though he had hoped only to have the gas station cover meager expenses, business was picking up steadily. If it continued, he was going to have to hire more help. The thought didn't please him. The fewer

people he had to interact with, the better.

Christa remembered what he'd said to her earlier. "I guess this is really interfering with your schedule." Again, he nodded. Why couldn't he say something? Nerves sharply cut through the veneer of politeness she was attempting to maintain. "You know, they're going to ask you to talk."

The way annoyance appeared and then disappeared across her brow amused him. His mouth curved just the slightest bit.

"I'll talk," he answered quietly.

He *could* smile. The sight of it softened her. "I'm sorry about all this."

It hadn't occurred to him to hold her accountable for the inconvenience. He'd chosen to pursue the fleeing van; she hadn't forced him to do it.

"Not your fault."

She blew out a breath. "I know, but if you hadn't come to my rescue, to Robin's rescue—"

"Then things would be a lot more serious than they are now." He saw another apology or exclamation of everlasting gratitude hovering on her lips. He wanted neither. "Forget it."

It was a curt command, but she wasn't about to obey. "I can't," she insisted, vehemently enough to catch his attention. "I can't forget it. What happened today could have changed my life forever. It could have changed Robin's life forever. Or ended it. You prevented that. It's not something I can just push out of my mind." She paused only for a moment, searching his face. "Why

won't you let me thank you?"

Malcolm didn't want to get into it with her. He looked past the blond head, searching for someone to give his name to and get this all over with. But there was no one behind the long ebony-and-chrome desk.

"Let's just say that this was a small payment on a debt I owe."

His answer baffled her. She found herself wanting to make sense out of it. "I don't understand."

He shook his head, dismissing her part in it. "That's all right. You weren't involved."

There were no landmarks to help her pick her way through the maze. She didn't like being lost. It was clear to her that he was carrying on some inner conversation with himself that she was only accidentally privy to. It was a subject that obviously caused him pain. Because of what he'd done for her, for Robin, she was determined to learn more.

The policewoman chose that moment to return. "If you follow me, I'll take you to Detective Harold." She raised her eyes to Malcolm's face.

"I'm Malcolm Evans. Officer McGuire told me to come in to give my statement regarding—"

She nodded. "Detective Simms is waiting to see you. Why don't you both come around the desk and follow me inside?"

Malcolm stepped back and gestured for Christa to go first.

Malcolm Evans. So that had been his name on the sign earlier. Ever since she'd read it, the name had been teasing her. She'd

heard it before, though the connection eluded her. It fluttered back and forth in her mind like an annoying gnat.

The policewoman ushered them to two adjacent desks in the squad room before disappearing.

For the next twenty minutes, Christa and Malcolm gave their statements to two detectives. Detective Harold questioned Christa about the incident as gently as if he were dealing with his own daughter. She discovered that he had known her father. She answered his questions as completely as she could, all the while trying to listen to what Malcolm was telling Detective Simms. She succeeded only minimally.

Detective Harold offered her the paper he had just finished typing. Glancing over it, she signed her name on the bottom.

Christa laid the pen down. "Is that all?"

"No." Tyler's voice came from behind her. "Now you have to pick him out of a lineup."

She offered an apologetic smile as she rose to her feet. "Sorry, I would have known that if it wasn't happening to me."

"Don't worry about it." Tyler slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Who's baby-sitting? Dad?" She nodded. "You know, he makes a much nicer grandfather than he did a father."

Christa laughed. "Sometimes these things take time. Dad's a late bloomer." A stern disciplinarian, her father had turned into a pushover with Robin.

"Almost finished?" Tyler asked the burly man at the next desk.

In response, the detective took out a pen and handed it to



Malcolm. “Just needs a signature.”

But Malcolm was in no hurry to sign. Instead, he slowly read through the words the older man had typed on the form.

Tyler laid a hand on Malcolm’s shoulder. “We’ll wait for you in the hall.” The question was silent, evident in the set of the wide shoulders. “We’re going to need your ID, as well—separately,” Tyler explained.

Malcolm only nodded in response. Tyler ushered Christa into the hall.

“So, how did it go?”

“Pretty painless. Detective Harold’s nice—just like you said.”

“Nothing but the best for my baby sister.”

Christa looked toward the glass encompassed squad room. Malcolm was signing the bottom of the form. “Do your baby sister a favor?”

He knew better than to say yes right away. “What?”

“Can you get me some information on him?”

Tyler didn’t have to ask who “him” was. It was against the rules to give out information on the forms, but some rules could be bent on occasion, and this seemed a harmless enough infraction.

“Why?”

“I have a feeling I know him, or of him, from somewhere.” She saw the skepticism in Tyler’s eyes. He probably thought she had other reasons for asking. Maybe she did.

Christa had never been the type to drift through life, Tyler knew. She had to be an active player and turn everyone around

her into one, as well. “Isn’t it enough that he was there at the right place at the right time?”

She shook her head. “It’s because he was that I want to know.” She looked toward Malcolm thoughtfully. “There’s something bothering him.”

Tyler frowned. As if she didn’t have enough problems to deal with as an out-of-work single mother with a small daughter to raise and a deadbeat ex-husband who would never make any child-support payments. “There’s something bothering all of us, Christa.”

“I know, but-”

Humoring her, he kissed the top of her head. “Okay, I’ll see what I can do,” he promised.

She grinned up at him. “I never doubted it for a minute.”

## *Chapter Three*

It was past four o'clock when Malcolm finally walked out of the police station. As he hurried down the stone stairs that led to the parking lot, he noted that the lot had thinned out considerably. There was only a smattering of cars left. Business at the police station had to be slacking off, he mused.

Walking toward the black sports car, he became aware of the grating, whining noise. It was a sound he was more than passingly familiar with. Metal on metal, sparking nothing but aggravation as it prophesied a stranded motorist.

Malcolm automatically glanced in the direction the noise was originating from.

He might have known.

It was coming from her van.

His initial impulse was to ignore the sound, and her, and just keep walking. That would have been the sensible thing to do.

Malcolm got as far as the driver's side of his own car before he finally turned around. The grinding noise put his teeth on edge as she tried to turn the ignition on again. He couldn't just drive away and leave her like this. In a vague way, it was tantamount to a fireman ignoring a fire alarm or a policeman ignoring a cry for help.

He'd thought that she would be gone by the time he was finished at the station. Her brother and another policeman had

led Christa in first to look at the men in the line up. It had taken her all of one minute to pick out the man who had car-jacked her van.

It had taken him a little less than three minutes to make the same choice. Malcolm had deliberately taken his time after that, hoping she'd be gone when he walked out of the station.

Obviously, he hadn't taken enough time.

She was going to kill that thing if she didn't stop. By his count, she'd tried to start the van six times since he'd left the building.

"C'mon, c'mon, start," Christa chanted under her breath. The mantra wasn't working. The engine refused to turn over.

She turned the key again just before he reached her. The window on her side was open, and he heard her mumbling something under her breath, but he couldn't make it out. The grinding noise drowned it out.

"You'll flood the engine."

Christa started, her head jerking up at the sound of someone at her elbow. When she saw it was Malcolm, she relaxed, but not before the exasperated sigh escaped her lips.

"Right about now, I'd like to drown the engine."

Malcolm nodded. It had been a long time since a car's problems had baffled him, but he could relate to the helplessness she had to be experiencing.

It was the way he had felt about life when he had found himself alive in the hospital bed. Alive when Gloria and Sally were gone.

Christa threw up her hands in surrender. She'd been trying to

start the van for the past ten minutes. Taking every curve life had to throw at her, Christa prided herself on being levelheaded and calm. Today, however, her nerves were very close to the surface.

She looked at him. "Any suggestions?"

In reply, Malcolm circled the front of her van and placed his hands on the hood. Then, as she watched, mystified, he pushed down on it, hard. She felt the vehicle begin to bounce up and down like a small sailboat caught in a storm at sea.

He wasn't behaving like any mechanic she knew. Christa stuck her head out the window. "What are you doing?"

Malcolm didn't bother answering. Instead, he gave her an order. "Now try it." When she just looked at him, he added, "Turn the key."

Not seeing how what he was doing could make any difference whatsoever, Christa turned the key in the ignition. She was rewarded with the sound of the engine turning over. The van vibrated as the engine coughed to life, shuddering like a wet dog.

Relief coaxed a grin from her. "Is that the auto mechanic's equivalent of a TV repairman hitting the side of a set when it doesn't work?"

The principle would take too much effort to explain to her. "Something like that." He cocked his head, listening to the sound of the engine as it idled. A starter motor wasn't her only problem. The engine sounded as if it was wheezing, and the car was idling rough. Besides that, he detected the light scent of gasoline.

*Not my business*, he thought.

But cars *were* his business. If he let her go now and she wound up stranded somewhere, it would be partially his fault. A great deal had changed in his life, but Malcolm still believed that omission was just as much of a sin as commission.

Trapped by his conscience, he reluctantly asked, "You live far from here?"

The nice thing about the condo she was leasing was that it was so centrally located. "A couple of miles." She nodded toward the street right off the parking lot. "West Plaza Development. Just off Heather."

Heather Drive. That was in the opposite direction from his own apartment. Malcolm sighed. He supposed it wouldn't be too far out of his way. "All right, I'll follow you home."

Now, that was a switch. Though she appreciated it, she didn't see any reason for his abrupt change of heart. "Any particular reason you've suddenly decided to become friendly?"

Malcolm sniffed the air. Nothing. The light scent of gasoline must have just been his imagination.

"I'm not being friendly," he corrected mildly. "I'm being a mechanic. I don't like the sound of your engine. You might not make it home."

"I hate putting you out like this."

That made two of them. He shrugged in reply. "Like you said, you live only a couple of miles down the road. No big deal."

That sounded more like him, Christa thought. Distant. Matter-of-fact. And he was wrong; it *was* a big deal. She was a stranger

and he was offering to help. Again. She felt bound to tell him the absolute truth.

“It’s not exactly two miles. More like five,” she amended.

Two, five—it made no difference. He had already made the offer:

“Five,” he repeated, accepting the correction. Malcolm glanced at his watch. “We’re still not quite into rush hour yet. Shouldn’t take more than ten minutes to reach your house.” The idling sound the van was making was beginning to sound like someone with smoker’s hack. “Unless, of course, the van breaks down,” he added matter-of-factly. “I’m parked two aisles over.” He jerked his thumb toward the LeMans. “Wait for me.”

It was more of an order than anything else.

He was one strange man, she thought. There was something about him that spoke to her. Despite his size and the aura of power he cast, there was something about him that was reaching out to her. She doubted if he was even aware of it.

Tyler would have said she was meddling.

Mentally, Christa crossed her fingers as she backed out of her space. The van seemed to shimmy and shudder more than usual. She had the impression that it was like a prize-winning stallion past its peak, trying to eke out just a little more life before it died.

She kept her fingers crossed all the way home. The van didn’t die, but Christa had the uneasy feeling that it was touch and go all the way. It was reassuring to see the LeMans in her rearview mirror.

The van had over a hundred and fifty thousand miles on it. It had brought her safely over the desert, when she had left with Las Vegas and Jim in her rearview mirror. Actually, she amended silently, only Las Vegas had been in her rearview mirror. Jim, at the time of her departure, had probably been housed somewhere at a casino table, hoping that Lady Luck had decided not to snub him any longer.

Luck had been an elusive, capricious partner during the five years that she and Jim had been married. When she'd had enough of his gambling fever and divorced him, he'd acted relieved. He'd called Christa his Jonah. Without her, he felt confident that his luck would change for the better.

She sincerely doubted it, but she was decent enough to hope that it had. No matter what, the man would always be Robin's father. That meant something.

All during the trip back to Southern California, she'd had the uneasy feeling that she was on borrowed time. Each false start and stop that the van made only increased that feeling. Today's harrowing chase down Bedford's main thoroughfare had undoubtedly wreaked havoc on the failing engine.

Or whatever it was that was wrong with the van, she mused with resignation.

*Just last a little longer. Please.*

Finally, Christa pulled up in the short driveway in front of her condo. Malcolm's car was only a beat behind her. Though there was ample room in the driveway, he parked in the street, directly



in front of her father's vintage Jaguar.

She watched Malcolm smoothly guide his car into the tight space between her father's car and her neighbor's. Admiration curved her lips. She couldn't conceive of doing that. She could no more manage to parallel-park than she could fly on her own power.

Malcolm slammed the car door shut behind him. He nodded at the dark metallic green Jaguar. Her husband must be the sporty type, he decided.

"Nice car. Yours?"

She shook her head. With a bank account barely in the triple digits, she could ill afford maintenance on something like that.

"My father's." She smiled, thinking of the way he pampered the vehicle. "It's his baby now that he's retired."

Malcolm nodded absently, acutely aware that she had turned her electric blue eyes up at him. He didn't quite know what he was doing here. He was going out of his way, and he'd made it a practice never to go out of his way. The less involved he was with people in general, the less there would be to trigger him, to remind him of what he no longer had.

Of what he had allowed, because of a momentary lapse in skill, to slip through his fingers.

Feeling uncomfortable, Malcolm slowly shoved wide, capable hands into his back pockets. He stood looking at her van.

Now would be the time to back out. Before he got in too deep.

"Well, you got here without any mishaps. Maybe your husband

could take a look at the van for you.”

He was already turning to go when he saw the amused smile rising to her lips. It feathered up to her eyes. The sight was appealing, though Malcolm didn't want it to be.

She could just see Jim staring into the interior of the engine. He would have been more lost than her.

“I don't have a husband, at least, not anymore. And when I did have one, he would have been far more prone to look at a deck of cards than a car. Jim wasn't what you'd call handy by any stretch of the imagination.”

What he had been, she thought, was a spinner of dreams. Unattainable, impossible dreams. They'd been magical once. But the magic had long since faded from his dreams and their life together.

Malcolm gave no indication that he had heard her or absorbed the information she offered. But he did approach the van with a resigned expression on his face.

He was here, he thought, so he might as well take a look at it. “Pop the hood for me.”

Obediently, Christa pulled the lever on the dashboard. The hood made a noise as it rose an inch, still tethered to a lock.

Feeling around for the release latch, Malcolm found it and pulled. He moved the hood back and looked in, letting out a long, low whistle. That had to be one of the dirtiest engines he'd seen in a long, long time. And just possibly the worst cared for. He shook his head.

Christa joined him and looked down below the yawning hood. She had absolutely no idea what she was looking at, other than the fact that there was a great deal of metal and rubber snaking into itself that she didn't begin to understand.

She was standing too close to him. The light scent she wore somehow managed to block out the smell of gasoline that was now much more prevalent since she had opened the hood. He wished she would move.

"So, what's the prognosis, Doctor?" Her voice was teasing as she crossed her arms before her. "Can the patient be saved?"

Not without a hell of a lot of work, he thought. Malcolm looked at her, trying to gauge just how knowledgeable she was. "How much do you know about cars?"

That was an easy one. "You put the key in and they go?" she offered with an apologetic shrug that should have irked him but did just the opposite.

He laughed very softly, but she heard him and it warmed her.

"Not this time," he said. The hoses all looked worn. A couple of them were cracked. And he'd been right about that smell of gasoline. She had a leak somewhere. His guess was that one of the seals on the fuel injectors was cracked.

"You're lucky to have gotten home. From the sound of it, I'd say that your starter motor has just about had it and I'm surprised that you're getting anything out of your battery." He indicated the corroded couplings. "The cables are completely corroded with residue. By all rights, there shouldn't even be a connection being

made.”

He wasn’t even going to bother getting into the hoses and the fuel injectors, except to warn her. “I wouldn’t drive it if I were you. There’s a faint smell of gasoline. It’s not safe.”

Christa wrinkled her nose; she believed Malcolm’s assessment. She knew she’d been pushing her luck with the van, but she’d had no choice. A new one, or even a new used one, was out of the question right now.

“Can you fix it?”

He felt as if she had just placed a wounded baby bird in his lap and asked him to breathe life into it.

“Well, it needs a new starter motor, and there’s no telling what else might be wrong with it—”

This was beginning to sound worse and worse. “So it won’t be fixed by tomorrow?”

Did she think he was a miracle worker? He began to say just that, then decided against it. “No, it won’t be fixed by tomorrow.”

Christa sighed, dragging her hand through her hair. “Oh, God.”

She sounded as if he’d just told her the car was terminal. “Is tomorrow important?”

“It might have been.” She dug deep, trying to rally her sinking spirit, but it wasn’t getting any easier. “I have a job interview. Had,” she amended. “I was counting on getting there with this.” She waved a disparaging hand at the van.

“Not unless the place interviewing you is located at the bottom

of a hill.”

Christa nibbled on her lower lip again, thinking. Watching her stirred a distant feeling in Malcolm that he had been certain had completely vanished from his life the day he'd buried Gloria.

He pushed it away.

Christa knew she had no right to impose. But she was desperate. “Could you work on it for me?”

Malcolm had never seen so much hope in a woman's eyes before. Unfounded hope, he thought, but hope nonetheless. It pinned him to the spot and kept him there. It also gave him no choice.

Shrugging, he acquiesced. “Sure. I could have it towed to the shop—”

Towing. Something else to consider. “Is that going to cost?” Before he could answer, she flushed ruefully. “Of course it's going to cost.”

She ran a slender hand over her face. God, but it was hard not to feel as if her back were against the wall. She knew she could always turn to her brothers and father for money, but her pride wouldn't let her.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.