

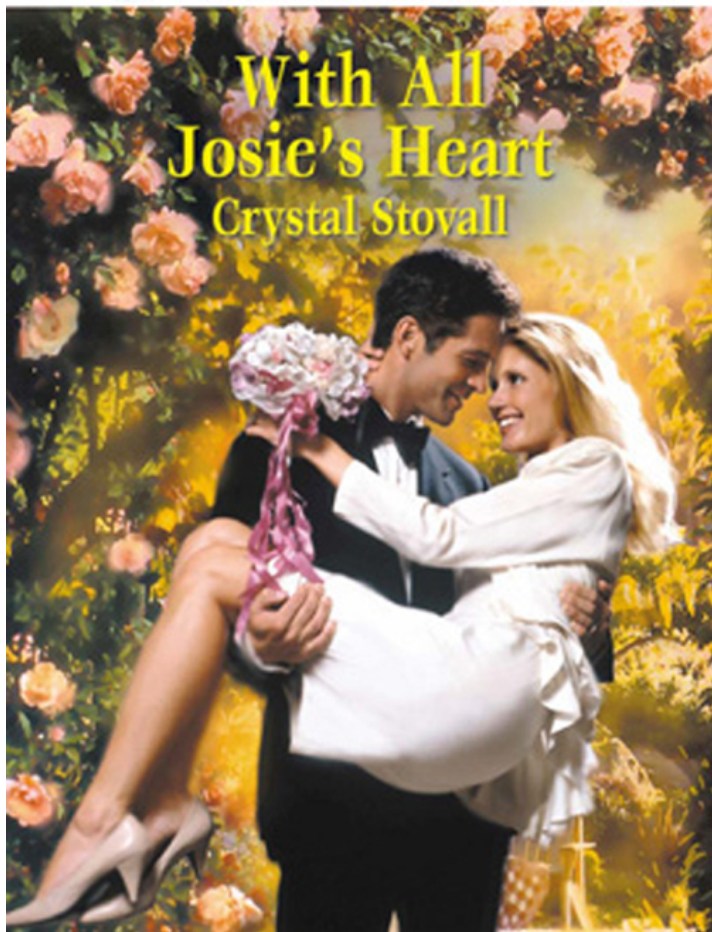


Love Inspired®

January 2001
87133-3

Heartwarming Inspirational Romance

**With All
Josie's Heart**
Crystal Stovall



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Аннотация

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART ISSoul-weary Josie Marshall returned home after seven years to recover and reflect. But what she found was Michael Rawlins on her doorstep, asking for her hand in marriage. A long time ago, Josie had pledged to marry Michael...then left him when life took her down a different path. Now he needed her help to gain custody of his cousin's little girl. But seeing Michael again stirred emotions Josie thought long dead. Josie didn't know if her time with Michael was meant to be, but she knew she had to give him everything in her heart, not only for her salvation...but his as well!

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He needed Josie's help. But he couldn't let her get close.

She had left him once, and she'd do it again.

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know what Sharla's father is thinking. He says he's gotten his act together, and now that Sharla is motherless she should live with him."

"So, he's really serious about suing for custody?" Josie asked. "What does your attorney say?"

"That my chances are fifty-fifty at best."

"If I can help... You know I would."

"I appreciate your offer. Actually there is something you could do." Taking a deep breath, Michael said a quick prayer before putting his heart in Josie's hand.

"You can marry me."

CRYSTAL STOVALL

dreamed of writing inspirational romances from the moment she discovered Grace Livingston Hill's novels as a teenager. These books changed her life in a profound way, starting her on a quest to blend faith and romance in her personal life, as well as launching her writing career. She's a graduate of Oral Roberts University and a recipient of the Romance Writers of America's Golden Heart Award.

Crystal lives in Tulsa with her husband, Jim, who is president of the Emmy Award-winning Narrative Television Network. Though she's lived in Oklahoma for nearly twenty years, she's still an Easterner at heart. Her frequent visits to her upstate New York hometown—especially a certain boulder on the edge of Cayuga Lake—provide her with the inspiration and perspective which she finds essential to her writing.

With All Josie's Heart

Crystal Stovall



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Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck, write them
on the tablet of your heart.

—Proverbs 3:3

In memory of my mother, Jozell Smith,
whose love lives on in my heart and
whose smile won't be forgotten.

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Chapter One

This was the last place she expected to be.

Josie Marshall took a deep breath, then knocked on Michael's front door. Just past five o'clock, the late-afternoon sun cast a long shadow across the wide porch. Potted geraniums and begonias lined the wooden rail, emitting a sweet fragrance that might have calmed her nerves on another day.

For the last seven years, Josie had successfully avoided Michael Rawlins, and she'd had no intention of seeing her parents' next door neighbor on this trip home either. Yet, here she was, holding the basket of hot food her mother had prepared, waiting for Michael to open the door.

All attempts to convince her mother Josie was too tired, that she needed a long shower and a good night's sleep before she faced anyone, had fallen on unsympathetic ears. An exhausting international flight fraught with delays and cramped seating was no excuse in Sarah Marshall's mind. Sarah, relying on the persistent gaze Josie clearly remembered from childhood, had asked her daughter to please take Michael the food. The poor man had just been released from the hospital, and Sarah would have delivered the meal herself except she'd promised to drive Gran to her four o'clock doctor's appointment and she was already late. If Josie would do this one thing for her, her mother had sworn, she would be so grateful.

Realizing it was useless to argue, Josie had given in. However, she'd procrastinated another hour before making the short trek next door.

She rang Michael's doorbell a second time and prayed there would be no answer. Quickly, she counted to ten. If Michael didn't open the door by the time she reached twenty, she was leaving.

Eighteen, nineteen, twenty... Thank you, God, she whispered.

Taking a deep breath, she turned away from the door and hurried down the wooden steps. Halfway across the lawn she heard his voice. She would have known the deep, warm timbre anywhere.

"Josie? Josie Marshall?"

For a split second, Josie considered ignoring Michael, pretending she hadn't heard him call her name. But why should she? And what was the fuss anyway?

The thought of seeing Michael had her acting like a silly teenager. What was the harm in spending a few minutes with an old boyfriend she hadn't seen in years? She would hand him the food, make sure he was okay, chitchat for a few minutes and then leave. She would do as much for anyone else. In fact, as director of an international children's charity, she did much more than this on a daily basis for countless strangers.

Josie took a deep breath. The truth was, not only did she need a hot bath and good night's sleep before seeing Michael, she needed a haircut, a new dress and a ten-pound weight loss.

But it was too late for any of those luxuries. Making certain her brightest smile was in place, she faced him.

Michael stood on the front porch, his tall, lean body holding the screen door open. He looked the same, and yet he had changed. The longer, rebellious hair style had been replaced with a short, layered cut that emphasized his friendly brown eyes and high cheekbones. Instead of the blue jeans and T-shirt she remembered him always wearing, he looked surprisingly comfortable in casual slacks, a cotton shirt and burgundy loafers.

"Hello, Michael," she slowly answered. "If this is a bad time..." She hoped he would accept her offer to end this encounter before it started.

"Not at all. Come on in." He waved her toward the house as if he'd been expecting her.

His insistence surprised her, as did his curious gaze. She was tempted to ask what he thought. Had the last seven years been as flattering to her as they had been to him?

Uneasy with entering Michael's house, she remained in the yard. With her feet on solid ground, it would be easier to keep a safe distance between him and old memories.

"I've got your dinner." In case he hadn't noticed the picnic basket, she raised it a few inches. "In fact, there's probably enough food in here to last a family of five an entire week."

Michael shook his head. "It's a crime, isn't it? More food than I can possibly eat has been delivered this afternoon, while somewhere in the world there are families who'll go hungry

tonight. I imagine with your work, the unfairness must really get to you, doesn't it?"

Josie merely nodded at Michael's casual remark. He couldn't know the half of how she felt on that particular matter, and she saw no reason for sharing those private thoughts with him now. Her feelings were strictly between her and God.

Too weary for a serious conversation, she deliberately answered with a lighthearted quip. "If you want to do battle with my mother, then go ahead. I dare you to send this picnic basket back."

Michael smiled. "No way I'm messing with Sarah Marshall. At least not until I'm fully recovered."

Only then did Josie notice the tired lines framing Michael's eyes and the stiff carriage of his upper body. While there were no visible bandages or scars, her mother had said he was badly bruised and very sore.

"Where would you like me to put this?" Josie asked, suddenly aware of his physical discomfort. She rushed up the steps, and as she neared him, he tried to take the basket. But before he could, she glided past him and through the open door.

Though it'd been a long time since she'd been in the Rawlins's home, it still possessed the same welcoming air she'd remembered from her teenage years when Michael's parents had owned the house. The floral prints and lemony walls Mrs. Rawlins had loved had been replaced with subtle earth tones and plaid fabrics. Even the carpeting had been pulled up to expose

beautiful hardwood floors. The Western art, tailored furniture and Persian rugs hinted at a man she no longer knew.

Making her way to the kitchen, she deposited the picnic basket on the trestle table and started unloading it.

"I can do that," Michael insisted. He reached for the casserole dish, and for a second his hands covered hers.

Josie flinched, his touch the same combination of gentleness and strength she'd remembered. Before too many old memories slipped to the surface, she turned abruptly and broke the unsettling contact.

"I wouldn't be Sarah Marshall's daughter if I didn't finish the job properly," she announced, as if his being so close had no effect on her.

Michael jokingly raised his hands shoulder high with palms facing outward. "Hey, like I said before, I'm not messing with your mother."

Josie flashed her too bright smile. "Good. Then sit down and let me do my work." As she placed the casserole dish in the oven to warm, she described the meal. "For starters, there's your favorite, cheese-stuffed meat loaf and roasted potatoes."

When she hesitated, Michael didn't notice. A long time ago meat loaf had been his favorite. Maybe it wasn't anymore.

Oh, God, she turned a silent prayer upward. Please, help me get out of here before I say something I'll regret.

"I'll put the coleslaw in the fridge with the applesauce. And there's a loaf of wheat bread and—ta-da—cherry pie for

dessert.”

Michael shook his head. “When your mother does something, she does it right.”

“Yeah,” Josie said. Despite all her grumblings, she had a pretty special mom. Sarah Marshall would do just about anything for her only daughter.

Michael glanced nervously at the food then back to Josie. “I can’t eat all this myself. You will stay for dinner, won’t you?”

The request was simple enough, but the unreadable emotion in Michael’s eyes bothered her. Despite the years and distance between them, she knew him too well not to know when he was trying too hard. If he was as uncomfortable with her presence as she was in his, then why did he ask her to stay?

“That’s so nice of you to offer, but I’m exhausted and you must be, too. Maybe we could get together later in the week?” Josie said, aware that once she walked out the door tonight their paths would not cross for the rest of her six-week hiatus. She would make certain of that.

“Really, I insist,” Michael said. “You know how busy you are when you’re home. Your mother will be dragging you to family reunions and church dinners until you’ll need a vacation to recuperate from your hiatus.”

“Not this time,” Josie promised. “It’s going to be a quiet six weeks spent with my parents.” She’d already warned her mother she wanted peace and quiet. Though she hadn’t told her why it was so important.

“Please stay,” Michael said. “At least for a few more minutes.” The same unreadable look she’d noticed before flashed across his eyes. Could he really want her to stay? Against her better judgment, she gave in to her curiosity.

“For a little while.” She’d never been able to refuse Michael in the past, and even after all this time apart, she still couldn’t say no.

Josie suggested they go ahead and eat. While she filled two plates, Michael poured iced tea and set place mats on the dining room table.

“The kitchen’s fine,” Josie called out. She didn’t want him to go to too much trouble. She didn’t want to be treated like a date. She was an old friend, the girl next door, and she wanted to keep it like that.

“You’re right. The kitchen is more comfortable. I’m not sure why I even kept this old dining room set. I never use it.” Still, Michael continued to set the oak trestle table that had belonged to his grandparents. Stepping back, he inspected his handiwork, and with a look that suggested something was missing, he opened the hutch door.

“Nonsense, it’s beautiful,” Josie said. “Besides, someday, when you’re an old married man, you’ll sit around that big table with your children and grandchildren and think life couldn’t get any better.”

The second Josie met Michael’s gaze, she wished she could have taken back the words. Was she crazy bringing up the subject

of marriage? The sooner this meal was over, the better.

“Always the optimist,” Michael said. “I’m glad that hasn’t changed.” Michael held out a chair for her, but before seating himself, he clumsily searched through the bottom hutch drawer.

Josie waited quietly, thinking there’d been a time when she would have responded to his comment with honesty. But today she was content to let him think her optimism had remained intact.

Just as she started to ask what he was looking for, he produced two tapered candles and wrought iron holders she recognized as having once belonged to his mother.

In patient silence, Josie watched Michael strike the match and light the ocean-blue candles. Even though the sun hadn’t set, the flames flickered in the early evening light. Instantly, she recalled how their love had burned out, but unlike a candle it wasn’t something that could ever be rekindled with the strike of a match.

Josie sighed with relief. She shouldn’t have avoided Michael for so many years. Because it wasn’t until she’d faced him tonight that she could really be certain of her heart. She no longer loved him. In this moment, all she felt for him was the lingering fondness anyone would feel for their first love.

“Shall we pray?” Michael asked.

Reaching across the table, Josie held his hand and closed her eyes.

“Dear Father,” Michael prayed. “Thank you for this food and that we could be together to enjoy it. Please, protect Sharla, who

I already consider as my daughter, and let her feel how much her grandmother and I love her. And grant Josie the restful hiatus she seeks.” Then a little more loudly, he added, as if it were an afterthought, “May Your will be done during these next few weeks.”

“Amen,” Josie said. “I always like a man who knows how to say a short prayer.”

Michael grinned; and for a moment it was just like old times. Except for the silence that followed. Josie struggled to think of something to say, otherwise it would be a long meal.

“Mom told me about your accident the day before yesterday. She said Sharla wasn’t hurt.” And Sarah Marshall had told her a lot of other things through the years, as well. Thanks to her mother’s newsy e-mails and telephone calls, Josie knew the high points in Michael’s life. She knew who he had dated, when he’d bought the house from his retired parents and when Sharla had come to live with him.

“Thank God, Sharla’s fine,” Michael said with much relief. “She’s been staying at her grandmother’s this summer, and we were lounging in the front yard when she chased a neighborhood cat into the street.”

“That must have been a horrible moment.” Josie had chills just thinking about the child and the speeding car.

“I can’t tell you how terrified I was. I didn’t think I could reach her in time.” But he didn’t have to explain his horror, because the fear still clung to his face. “Sharla never saw the car.”

“You were lucky your injuries weren’t more serious.” Josie closed her eyes for an instant, knowing how close Michael had come to tragedy.

“The driver had slammed on his brakes, so by the time he hit me, he wasn’t going very fast.”

“But fast enough.”

Michael shook his head as if his cuts and bruises were nothing. He was obviously uncomfortable being the focus of attention.

“Thank God, it’s summer and school’s out. How long before you’ll be back on your feet?” Even though he wouldn’t have to teach until the end of the summer, he most likely had a busy agenda planned for his vacation months. Michael considered teaching a year-round job, whether he was teaching his third-grade class or Sunday school.

Michael nodded. “The doc said I should take it easy for a couple of days. My injuries are more inconvenient than anything.” Michael gracefully rose from the table, as if to prove his point. Pulling his wallet from his back pocket, he showed her the photograph on top.

“Sharla’s first-grade picture,” he said.

Michael’s eyes burned bright with love and fatherly pride. The moment stole Josie’s breath.

“She’s your cousin Denise’s daughter?” Josie said, even though she knew the answer. When Sarah had written about Denise Rubee’s tragic death, Josie hadn’t been surprised to learn Michael had wanted to raise the orphaned child.

He nodded.

“She’s beautiful,” Josie said.

“And a spitfire, too.”

Michael continued to stare at the smiling photo. With her long black hair, dark-blue eyes and lightly tanned skin, the young girl physically resembled Michael.

“I was sorry to hear about Denise’s death last fall. The fact that she was so young makes it even harder to accept,” Josie said. The words were inadequate, but then there were no words to heal the pain death left behind. She’d witnessed too many tragedies with her work to think a few words could possibly give real peace and comfort.

When Michael shrugged his shoulders and his eyes misted over, Josie wanted to hug him, but instead she clasped her hands under the table. Michael opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but then changed his mind.

Josie reached for the wallet, flipping through the photographs. There were two more of Sharla, both taken recently, as well as a family shot with his parents, sisters, nieces and nephews. At one time, she’d considered herself part of this great bunch.

“How are your parents doing?” she asked. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen them.”

“They enjoy Florida, and they especially love being near their grandchildren.” She thought she detected a wistfulness in Michael’s voice. He’d always adored his older sisters.

“Have you ever thought of moving closer to them? I’m sure

you could get a teaching job anywhere.” And any school would be lucky to have him. No one was better with children than Michael.

He shook his head. “You know me. Tulsa’s my home. I can’t see myself living anywhere else.”

“Of course,” Josie said, avoiding his gaze. She knew that. His refusal to leave Tulsa was one of the reasons they’d broken up.

“And your sisters?” Josie said, once again filling the awkward tension. “They’re doing fine?”

“Couldn’t be better. They love living in Florida.”

Josie popped the last bite of potato into her mouth, then took her plate to the sink. She’d stayed too long already. There was nothing left between her and Michael except old memories, and she didn’t want to stir them up too much for fear she would release the old anger and bitterness as well. She would wash the dishes and leave.

Without asking if she wanted any, Michael cut the cherry pie.

“None for me,” Josie said. “I’m trying to cut back.”

“Really? You look great to me.”

“Thank you,” she said, surprised by how good his approval made her feel. Yet a little leary, too. It was almost as if he were being too nice. She shook the feelings off quickly, but noticed he still served her pie.

Stubbornly, Josie continued to wash the dishes. As she gazed out the window, a small structure, under construction in the backyard, caught her attention.

“Is that what I think it is?” she asked.

Michael came up behind her. His breath was warm on the back of her neck as he spoke. "Yeah. It's a playhouse for Sharla."

"Oh," Josie exclaimed. Grabbing a hand towel to wipe her hands, she left the dish suds and uneaten cherry pie behind. Michael followed her into the backyard.

The June sun hit the horizon as they crossed the thick Bermuda grass. Orange-red fingers blazed across the sky, heralding the end of the day. Evening songbirds welcomed the rise of the moon as darkness approached.

"You're really building her a playhouse," Josie said with wonderment.

At the moment, it was little more than a few studs and nails. Close by lay a pile of bricks for the winding walkway, wood shingles for the roof and fancy trim pieces to complete the gingerbread look. She closed her eyes and knew exactly how the finished playhouse would look. Or at least, she saw the playhouse she'd always wanted as a child.

As Michael watched Josie, he pressed his hand against his side to ease the pain. It was silly, but he hadn't wanted her to know how much he hurt. This wasn't the reunion he'd always envisioned. In those daydreams, he was strong and healthy and ready to prove he was doing just fine without her. And he was. He'd gotten over Josie a long time ago. The trouble was he needed her help, and from the moment she'd unexpectedly appeared on his doorstep, he'd been trying to find a way all evening to broach the subject.

Perhaps the direct approach was best.

But before he could say anything more, Josie began inspecting the trim pieces and the tiny stained-glass windows he'd located at an antique store last week. She picked up the delicate multicolored glass and let the last rays of light filter through, coating her face in muted blues and pinks.

When the breeze pushed her light brown hair off of her face, Michael silently gasped at the tender beauty of her profile. Her creamy skin and pale red lips looked so lovely, and he was reminded of what might have been. And that made him edgy. Knowing it might be wiser to walk away before he said something he'd regret, he stepped up onto the plywood platform and took the window from her hands.

"I didn't realize how much you love her until I saw this," she said. As Josie met his gaze, he would have sworn she knew how it felt to love a child as her own. But then she loved a thousand children. She had put her love for children before her love for him. And now he was going to ask her to do it again.

"Yeah, she's like my own. I remember the day Denise asked me to be Sharla's godfather. Though I took the responsibility seriously, I had no idea of the commitment I was truly making. Denise and Eddie had already broken up, and so I was Denise's birthing coach. I was there when Sharla was born. I held her in my arms when she was only minutes old. I heard her first cries and saw her first smiles."

Josie nodded. She knew this. Her mother had written about

Sharla's birth in detail and how Michael had stayed with Denise those first few weeks, helping her with night feedings and diaper changes. And then he'd started keeping Sharla on weekends and making sure she had her required shots and clothes for school.

"Little by little, I became her father. I didn't even see it happening. It was the most natural thing in the world."

"I can see she makes you happy."

Michael smiled. "That doesn't even begin to describe my feelings. She's the reason I get up in the morning. She's the reason I look forward to the future."

And now it was the future that worried him.

"When Denise asked me if I would become Sharla's legal guardian, I was scared by the responsibility, but deep down I knew God had placed me in this child's life for a reason. She needed me. She needed the stability and love I could give her. I think deep down Denise somehow knew she would never beat her drug addiction. You know, she died of an overdose?" Michael's voice cracked, and he paused to regain control.

Watching Denise succumb to her illegal drug addiction had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done. He'd tried to help her, but his best efforts combined with the help of family and friends hadn't been enough. "Loving Sharla is the easiest thing I've ever done."

"I'm glad everything is working out for you."

Josie's eyes were sincere and that touched him. "Sharla couldn't be in better hands."

“It’s not that simple.” Michael turned away from her. He had to ask her now, before he lost his nerve. For Sharla’s sake, he couldn’t blow this.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“I’ve got to go to court later in the summer. I may not get custody of Sharla.”

“What?” Josie shouted. “I can’t believe this. If it was Denise’s last wish for you to raise her daughter, and she had sole custody...”

Michael appreciated Josie’s indignation. It made him believe she would help him.

“As it turned out, she didn’t have sole custody. But because Eddie Lewis had never shown a smidgen of interest in Sharla, Denise hadn’t thought it necessary to ask the court to grant her sole custody.”

“And now he wants to raise her?” Josie filled in the missing pieces. “But why?”

Michael wasn’t prepared to tell Josie everything. This was his fight. While he needed her help, he couldn’t let her get too close in the process. She’d left him once, and she’d do it again.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know what that man is thinking. He says he’s gotten his act together, and now that Sharla is motherless she should live with him. He’s recently remarried and has stepchildren near Sharla’s age.”

“So he’s really serious about this?” Josie said. Michael nodded. “What does your attorney say?”

“That my chances are fifty-fifty at best. The judge hearing the case is known for siding with the biological parent.”

“Wow.” Josie swallowed so hard Michael saw her Adam’s apple bob.

“If I can help...in any way...you know I would. Perhaps I could testify at the court hearing on your behalf?”

“I appreciate your offer to help. And actually there is something you could do.” Michael said the words quickly before he lost his nerve.

“What? Tell me?” Josie gently touched his elbow, the simple gesture giving him the courage he needed.

Taking a deep breath, Michael said a quick prayer before putting his heart in Josie’s hand. “You can marry me.”

Chapter Two

With a thousand stars blinking in the summer sky, the only light Michael cared about smoldered in Josie's eyes.

For what seemed like an eternity, she remained frozen in place, too stunned to move. When she met his gaze, he felt the full force of her indignation. Perspiration spread across Michael's forehead and neck, and he felt as if he were melting into the black shadows cast by the outdoor lights.

"Let me make sure I heard you correctly." She took a deep breath, then pointed her index finger at him. "You just asked me to marry you."

Michael nodded his head. "I know it sounds crazy—"

"Crazy?" Josie grabbed the top of her head with both hands as she grimaced. "Crazy doesn't even begin to describe what this is. You...me...getting married? Well, it's...it's insane. That's what it is...insane." Josie clinched both fists. With each word she said, her voice became higher and louder and more agitated, while her face turned one shade of red after another.

"Okay, if you could just settle down, and let me explain—" Dear God, Michael prayed, let her see my heart. I know if she would just listen she would understand and help me. Michael reached out to take her hand, but she flinched to avoid his touch.

"Tell me this," she said, taking one more step backward. "Do you love me?"

Though he didn't speak immediately, he boldly met her gaze. "It's not that simple."

"Well, it ought to be," she whispered. Obviously unwilling to consider his request, she turned to walk away. This time when Michael reached for her, he caught her arm and brought her to a halt. If he had to beg, he would.

"If after you've heard everything, and you still want to say no, then so be it. But at least give me a chance to explain."

The seconds ticked by, seeming like hours to Michael. Doubt began to rise in his heart, followed quickly by humiliation. He'd been foolish to put his future in Josie Marshall's hands. He should have learned his lesson the first time.

Finally, Josie nodded.

He saw the reluctance, but he didn't care. She was giving him a chance, and he couldn't blow it.

"This is the only way I know to protect Sharla," he began.

It was the desperation in Michael's eyes that finally convinced Josie to listen.

"I'm fighting Sharla's newly married biological father. And I'm a single man. You know what that means. The decision could come down to those facts alone. I just can't sit by and do nothing."

"You would marry a woman you don't love for Sharla's sake?" Josie asked. Were they really having this discussion?

"Yes," he said firmly.

Josie sighed. "There has to be some other way. You've got a good attorney. You're the only father Sharla has ever known.

Surely that has to count.”

“It does, but I need more than maybes. I need to do everything I can to keep Sharla.”

“Why?” For some reason it seemed important to know the depth of his conviction.

“Because I believe, without a doubt, I’m the best person to raise her. God brought her into my life, and I don’t think He brought us together just to take her away now.”

Josie glanced down at the ground, kicking the grass with her toe before looking back up. “Sharla is a lucky girl.”

Still, Josie wasn’t even close to being convinced she was the answer to his problems. Shaking her head ever so slightly, she feared Michael wouldn’t let her say no and walk away. He was prepared to wear her down until she gave in.

“There must be another way. I’m sure there are lots of women who would jump at the chance to marry you.” Michael cocked his head in disbelief, but Josie continued. “What about Marianne Blade or Julie Sparks? They’re both crazy about you.”

Josie saw the confused look flash across Michael’s eyes. He knew there was something odd about what she’d just said, but in this intense moment he couldn’t put his finger on it. But she knew. Though she’d always pretended she didn’t care what Michael was doing, she’d paid attention to every bit of news her mother had passed along.

“You don’t get it,” Michael said. “You’re the only woman I can believably marry on such short notice.”

“Because we were once engaged,” Josie finished his sentence.

“This marriage has to be convincing.” Michael took her hands into his, as if he believed he’d already won her over. “We’ve got to be so real your parents, our friends, the court’s caseworker, don’t suspect a thing. I know we can do this, Josie.” Michael paused for a minute. “Please. Help me. Help Sharla.”

The word no perched on the tip of her tongue, and she had been ready to spit it out until he’d said:

Please, help Sharla.

Sharla. A little girl she didn’t know, but a little girl who needed her help just as Angelina once had.

For a second, she imagined Angelina’s sweet, round face. Mentally she ran her fingertips across the child’s smooth tanned cheeks, then through her long dark hair. She heard her innocent laughter ring out across the night sky, and she shivered.

“Please,” Michael said again in a voice so low, so quiet, she barely heard him. Yet, he spoke with such intensity and determination his voice could have traveled around the world and back and she would have still heard him.

Josie once again looked her former fiancé in the eyes. There had been a time when she would have done anything for him. But this?

Again Angelina’s face flashed through her memory. She couldn’t say yes, but neither could she say no.

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