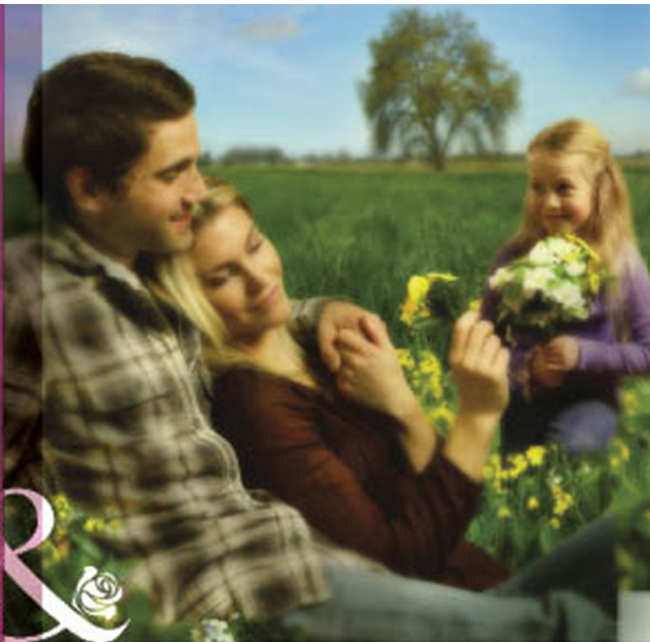


MILLS & BOON



**Vintage** *SUPER*  
*ROMANCE*

# Her Sister's Child

CYNTHIA THOMASON

**Cynthia Thomason**  
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## **“You want to see how he is, don’t you?”**

That was certainly true. Julia hadn’t climbed down the ravine, had the wind knocked out of her and taken an unplanned mud bath just to have Cameron die on her. She went to the back of the ambulance and took the paramedic’s proffered hand. He helped her inside and returned to work, adjusting gauges and checking IV lines.

Cameron lay on the stretcher. She took a few awkward steps toward him in the confined space. He tried lifting his head, but his movements were limited by a restrictive collar. Nevertheless, he smiled. That same devastating smile she remembered shining on her from the podium of a Riverton College classroom, not even diminished now by a background of nasty lacerations.

The medic pointed to Julia. “Professor, meet Miss Julia Sommerville, one-woman mountain rescue team.”

“Actually, we’ve met before.” He stared intently at her before adding, “Moon Pie?”

Dear Reader,

Hopefully once in a lifetime each of us will find a place that feels like home even when it isn’t. The Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina have been the home of my heart since I first visited there thirty-five years ago. That’s why I had to write

about two characters who find love and happiness in the mystical, magical mountains.

Julia and Cameron returned to the small valley town of their childhoods for different reasons— Cameron to reconnect with the folklore of the hills, and Julia to lend support to her family after a heartbreaking suicide left them floundering. Neither Cameron nor Julia intended to stay. Neither expected this particularly splendid autumn would inspire them with so much pain and so much promise. Tragedy brought them back, but the love of a little girl and each other made them stay.

I love to hear from readers. You can visit my Web site at [www.cynthiathomason.com](http://www.cynthiathomason.com), e-mail me at [cynthoma@aol.com](mailto:cynthoma@aol.com) or write to me at P.O. Box 550068, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33355.

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

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cynthia Thomason writes contemporary and historical romances as well as an historical mystery series. She has received the National Readers' Choice Award, nominations for the Romantic Times BOOKreviews Reviewers Choice and the Golden Quill. She and her husband own an auction company in Davie, Florida, where she is a licensed auctioneer. They have one son, an entertainment reporter, and a very lovable Jack Russell terrier. Learn more about Cynthia at [www.cynthiathomason.com](http://www.cynthiathomason.com).

This book is dedicated to my “Buddy”  
of nearly thirty years, who longs, as much as  
I do, for a waterfall to appear around  
the next mountain curve.



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# PROLOGUE

THE SOUND of the front door closing roused Tina from a drowsiness brought on by having drunk too much wine. She glanced at the clock by her bed. 2:18 a.m. Wayne had promised to be home by midnight, but Tina had known he wouldn't be. She reached beside the bed, picked up the bottle she'd set there a few minutes ago and tipped it to her lips. It was the last swallow and it tasted bitter. She dropped the empty to the floor, rolled it under the mattress and heard it clink against the other one she'd hidden there a couple of hours ago so her daughter wouldn't see it.

Wayne's heavy boot connected with the partially opened bedroom door, swinging it wide. He stood a moment, squinting against the soft light of the bedside table. "You still awake?" he asked unnecessarily.

"You promised you'd be home hours ago," she said.

He closed the door, strode awkwardly to the middle of the room. "Don't start, Tina. I'm beat." He slipped his T-shirt over his head, tossed it onto a chair and unzipped his jeans.

"Where have you been?" she asked, knowing she wouldn't believe the answer.

"I told you. I met my brother at the pool hall. We had some wings, played a few games."

"Until two o'clock in the morning?"

"Yeah, until then." He stepped out of the jeans and threw them

on top of the shirt. She caught a whiff of something floral and cloying.

“Daryl sure smells good these days,” Tina said.

Wayne crawled between the sheets. “I’m going to ignore that. There were women at the bar.”

“I want you to tell me where you’ve really been all this time.”

He rolled onto his side. “Turn out the light.”

She sat a little straighter, the effects of the wine making her dizzy and nauseous. But she couldn’t give in now. All evening she’d planned this confrontation. No, she’d planned it for weeks and tonight it was going to happen. She jostled his shoulder. “Wayne, we need to talk.”

He tensed, but didn’t turn toward her. “Fine. You talk. But I’m going to sleep.”

A single tear slid down her cheek. She wiped it away. “I’m miserably unhappy.”

He yawned. “What else is new?”

“No, I mean this is serious. I...”

“Go to sleep, Tina. We’ll talk in the morning.”

She trapped a sob in her throat. “This can’t wait until morning.”

“It’s gonna have to.” He punched his pillow hard. Tina flinched. “Now either go to sleep or leave me alone so I can.”

She waited at least a minute, hoping he would move, say something else, look at her. He didn’t. The clock read 2:22 a.m. when Wayne began snoring.

Tina got up, smoothed her nightgown down her body with damp palms and went into the bathroom. Grabbing the sink for support, she looked at her reflection in the mirror. When had she grown so old? So sad? So worn-out from the task of living each day?

She stumbled in bare feet to the living room and took an envelope from the old oak desk scarred with cigarette burns. She'd sealed the envelope a couple of hours ago. Somewhere in the back of her mind was the faint hope that she wouldn't need the note, that something would happen to change her mind. Foolish hope. That's all it was. She picked up a pen and wrote "To Wayne," and leaned the envelope against a picture of her and her daughter on the fireplace mantel.

She walked into the tiny second bedroom of her run-down cottage and stood by Katie's bed. The child slept peacefully, unaware of the tears flowing down her mama's face. Lately, Tina knew, Katie's dreams had been the only place the little girl found true contentment. Kids sensed when something wasn't right, when their worlds were about to crumble, when a parent could no longer be counted on to fix the problems in their lives. Tina had disappointed Katie too many times.

She leaned over the bed, brushed a few tangles of golden blond hair off Katie's brow and kissed her cheek. "I'm so sorry, baby," she said. "But everything is going to be better now. I promise."

Tina took one last long look at her daughter's face before she left the room. Wayne would do the right thing. At least she could

depend on him to do what he needed to for Katie.

She walked through the house, feeling weightless, free, sure of her course for the first time in years. She went out the rear door and headed toward the lake. At the edge of the water, she stopped and looked back at her house. The roof over the small porch sagged from neglect. The shed still lay in ruins from the last tornado, its sad contents rusting on red clay where only weeds survived. Nothing in Tina's life was ever fixed. It all simply rotted away, little by little, day by day. But she could stop the decay from destroying her daughter. At least she could do that.

She looked up at the Tennessee sky sprinkled with a thousand stars and stepped into the water, still warm from September's Indian summer. She walked straight ahead, enjoying the feel of her gown rippling around her ankles, her calves, her thighs. The worn flannel was as soft as a petal, clinging, protective. When the water reached her breasts, she spread her arms, inviting the earth's most basic element to claim her, opening herself to the calm that awaited.

Water lapped at her chin, her nose. She opened her mouth and let the lake flow in until the stars disappeared.

# CHAPTER ONE

JULIA TURNED OFF her shower and heard the phone ringing. She grabbed a towel. “Oh, great.” With just thirty minutes to dress, hail a cab and travel ten blocks to an off-Broadway theater for a Friday opening matinee, she didn’t have time for conversation. Nevertheless, she raced to her nightstand and picked up the portable.

Caller ID displayed her mother’s name. Julia considered not answering, but she couldn’t do that. It wouldn’t necessarily be bad news. Her mom didn’t have a problem every time she called. Although since Julia’s dad died a year ago, it seemed as if she did.

She draped the towel around her body, sat on the bedspread and punched the Connect button. “Hi, Mama. What’s up? I’m kind of in a hurry...”

There was a moment’s pause, then a trembling sob from Cora.

“Mama, what’s wrong?”

“W...Wayne’s here,” she said.

The stutter alerted Julia that her mother was either nervous or upset. This could be a long call. Tucking the phone into the crook of her neck, she walked to her dresser and took out some underwear. “What’s he doing there?”

“He—he brought K-Katie.”

Oh. Well, that was okay. Julia slipped on her panties and reached for a bra. “That’s wonderful,” she said. “You must be

excited to have Katie for a visit.”

“It’s not a visit,” Cora said, her words coming slowly.

Alarm raised goose bumps on Julia’s arms. “Mama, where’s Tina? Is she there?”

“No.” A quaking sob stopped Cora’s speech.

Julia gripped the phone more tightly and spoke deliberately. “Tell me, Mama. Where’s Tina?”

There was no answer, only a rustling sound. The next voice Julia heard was Wayne’s. “Hey, Julia, it’s me.” Julia had never gotten along with her sister’s live-in boyfriend, a man she considered a Neanderthal.

“What’s going on, Wayne?”

“I don’t know how else to tell you, but Tina’s dead. She killed herself.”

“What?” The towel fell to the floor. Julia sat heavily on the mattress, feeling as though a vicious clamp were squeezing her chest.

“It was pretty awful,” Wayne said. “When she wasn’t in the house yesterday morning, I went outside and saw her body floating in the lake. She still had her nightgown on.”

Pretty awful. How could he summarize this horrendous news with such an idiotic description? Her sister was dead. She meant something to people, maybe not to Wayne but to Julia. And Cora. And certainly Katie. Katie. Julia tried to draw a deep breath but only managed to push out two words. “She drowned?”

“Yeah. She left a note like suicide victims do. The police found

footprints leading to the lake. She must have just walked into the water.” He paused a moment before adding, “I don’t know, Julia. Tina hadn’t been feeling too good lately.”

Julia blinked hard, releasing hot tears onto her cheeks. “Wayne?”

“Yeah?”

“Is Katie there—can she hear you?”

“Well, hell, Julia, she knows. There wasn’t any way to keep it from her. The cops were everywhere. And the ambulance...”

“Where’s Katie now?”

“We’re at your mom’s store. She’s sitting at the snack bar coloring. She’s okay.”

You idiot. “Put Mama on.”

Julia had to strain to understand her mother through the incessant buzzing in her own mind. Nothing made sense. Tina was often emotional, but this...it was unthinkable. “Y-you’ve got to come h-home,” Cora said.

“Of course, Mama.”

“I can’t take any more.”

“I know.”

“We’ve got to raise K-Katie. It’s what Tina wanted. It’s why W-Wayne brought her here.”

“We will, Mama. We’ll take care of her.” Julia had run out of air, out of strength. She clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle a cry.

“When will you get here?”



Julia bit her bottom lip. "I'll leave for the airport as soon as I pack a few things. I'll get the first stand-by seat to Charlotte."

"Hurry, Julia."

"I will, Mama. I'll see you soon."

"W-Wayne's going back to Tennessee, but he doesn't know how long he'll stay in the c-cabin. He's giving me his c-cell phone number."

Big of him. Julia choked back an accusation that Wayne had never been much of a father to Katie. She kept quiet because this time he'd done the right thing. He'd brought Katie to Cora, where she'd be safe and loved. Julia knew that, and, with her last breath, so had Tina.

She put down the phone, pulled her suitcase from the closet shelf and tossed clothes inside. As she was zipping it up, she remembered to grab the prescription her doctor had given her a few months ago. The pills were intended to be a quick, temporary fix. She needed them now more than ever.

A LITTLE AFTER 10:30 p.m. Julia called her mother from the car-rental agency at the Charlotte, North Carolina, airport. When she heard her daughter's voice, Cora broke into tears again. "Where are you, Julia? Are you almost here?"

"Yes, Mama. I'm at the airport. I'll be home in a few hours."

"I'll wait up for you."

Julia knew it wouldn't do any good to advise her mother to go to bed, to remind her that she wouldn't arrive until nearly 2:00 a.m. Cora didn't sleep well under the best of circumstances and

surely her anxiety level was at the breaking point now. "If you want," she said. "Is Wayne still there?"

"Oh, no. He left. He said he'd t-try to send something for Katie's support when he found a decent job."

Gee, thanks, Wayne. "How is Katie?"

Cora sniffled, muffling her answer with the tissue Julia could picture in her hands. "She's hardly said a word, the p-poor thing. But she's sleeping now in Tina's old room."

Julia ached for all of them but especially for eight year-old Katie. Past resentments that no longer seemed to matter had kept the sisters apart, so Julia had seen her niece only on rare occasions when they all gathered at Cora's house. She'd always found the girl quiet and respectful. Julia had attributed her demeanor to a creative, intelligent mind. Like a lot of kids, Katie preferred reading and drawing to playing outside. Only now did Julia think that introspective behavior might have signalled a deep emotional problem. Julia would have to watch her carefully.

"Did you tell her I was coming?" she asked Cora.

"Yes, I told her."

Julia concentrated on how she could help Katie get through this tragedy. In the time she had, she would certainly try, but she wondered how much could really be accomplished in the one month leave of absence she'd arranged from her job at Night Lights Magazine. "I'll see you soon, Mama."

"Drive carefully." Cora sobbed. "You and Katie are all I have now. I couldn't b-bear it if anything happened to you."

Cora had managed to turn a simple motherly word of caution into a dire warning. But it was an easy three-hour drive into the mountains with little traffic. "I'll be careful," she said.

Two hours after she left Charlotte, Julia watched the landscape change from the flat, straight panorama of central North Carolina to the gently rolling swells of the Blue Ridge foothills. The highway was bordered by trees that in the daylight would show the first splendor of autumn, though now, in the middle of the night, the colors were all blended shades of deep charcoal. Fall had always been Julia's favorite time of year. She felt sad now thinking that it might never be again.

An hour later, she turned off the main four-lane highway onto the narrow road that wound through the picturesque small town of Glen Springs. Julia's lights flashed on the wooden placard that announced its name and its population of a rarely fluctuating 3,312 people. The town was quiet, its residents nestled into their flower-decked cottages and charming bed-and-breakfast inns.

She drove down the main street and turned onto Whisper Mountain Road, where Cora's General Store was located directly across from Whisper Mountain Falls, one of the area's most popular tourist destinations. After a two-mile winding climb, she turned into Cora's gravel lot and pulled behind the store to the split log cabin where she'd grown up. Before Julia had even turned off the car, Cora stepped through the screen door onto the wraparound porch and opened her arms.

A FEW HOURS LATER, Cora and Julia sat at the pine table

in the kitchen, each with her hands wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee. Cora seemed remarkably calm, as if the sleep she'd managed to get had renewed her ability to cope. "Should we check on her again?" Cora asked when she'd taken a sip of coffee.

Relieved by her mother's improved emotional state, Julia allowed herself to believe she might not have to stay in Glen Springs for as long as she'd thought. "I looked in on her a few minutes ago," she said. "She's sleeping. That's probably the best medicine for her right now."

"We'll have to see about school, I suppose," Cora said.

"Of course. It's hard to imagine Katie in the same classrooms where Tina and I..." She stopped when the biting pain returned. "Anyway, I'll bet some of our teachers are still there."

Cora sighed. "Prob'ly so. Nothing much changes around here." She looked out the window. "Except the leaves. You can always count on the leaves changing."

Julia glanced outside. The first twinges of gold and red colored the trees. One good cold snap and riotous color would descend in all its autumn glory. As would the tourists. Right now, Julia didn't think she could face an onslaught of customers, but life had to go on. Cora still had to survive on the store's income. And now, thanks to that worthless Wayne, so did Katie.

"We'll give Katie a few days," Julia said, returning to the topic of her niece's schooling. "Let her get used to being here with you. See how she handles Tina's..." Again, she couldn't talk about her

sister. Was Cora actually coping better than she was?

Cora shook her head. "Look at us. Tiptoeing around Tina's name as if just saying it will shatter us."

"I know. We've got to stop that. Katie will need to talk about her mother and we'll have to let her." She sipped her coffee. "Did you get any more information from Wayne?"

"Just that it happened after he came in for the night. He said everything seemed fine when he got home. Tina was in bed. She must have gotten up after he fell asleep. He didn't know anything was wrong until he couldn't find her in the morning and then saw a note telling him to bring Katie to us."

Julia frowned. She'd always doubted anything that came out of Wayne's mouth. "Did he mention any signs that Tina was troubled?"

Cora's shoulders slumped. "You know Tina. She had more highs and lows in her life than these mountains have hills and valleys. I loved her with all my heart, but I couldn't make her happy. I doubt anyone could've. Not even Katie." She reached across the table and patted Julia's hand. "She wasn't my easy girl to raise, Julia. You were. You've always been the strong one, the one I could depend on."

If you only knew. Julia anticipated what her mother was about to say next. Whenever Julia returned home, Cora always strongly suggested that Julia remain on Whisper Mountain for good. But that wasn't why Julia had gone to college and gotten her journalism degree. She'd studied hard and worked long hours

at the store so she could get away from here, from the isolation and the cold and snow.

And to get away from Tina and the bitterness between them that had started one autumn when Julia was a sophomore in college. That resentment had continued to the present day, or at least until the day Tina died. This morning, Julia felt only overwhelming pity for her older sister and, God help her, guilt over the tragic, lonely way her life had ended.

And she hadn't thought much about Cameron Birch for years. The handsome, charismatic assistant professor who'd taught American Literature during her sophomore year in college had eventually faded from her mind. Cameron, the man who'd opened her eyes to the beauty of the written word. The man she'd adored. The man Tina had set her sights on the moment she discovered her sister idolized him.

Cora stood and carried her mug to the coffee machine. "You want a refill?" Cora's voice reminded Julia that her mother hadn't yet begged her to stay.

"No. I'm fine."

Cora filled her own cup. "What were you thinking about just now? You seemed far away."

"It's funny, but I was thinking about Cameron Birch. You remember him?"

"Your college professor?"

Julia nodded.

"Sure. A nice-looking young man. His grandfather lived up

the road at the top of Whisper Mountain. Cameron used to visit as a teenager. They'd come into the store for supplies." She smiled sadly. "Old Josiah's gone now. Died a while back. I'll bet you don't remember your Professor Birch from those days."

That was almost true. Julia had been a little girl when Josiah Birch used to come into Cora's with his grandson. Julia had barely noticed the gangly, grinning boy trailing behind the old man from the top of the mountain.

After those childhood encounters, she never gave Cameron Birch a thought until she walked into that classroom at Riverton College years later and there he stood, all grown up, wearing jeans and a blue denim shirt, his acorn-brown hair slightly mussed and falling over his forehead. He absolutely stole the air from her lungs that day and it was a full term before she took another normal breath.

Cora returned to the table. "It's the oddest thing, you mentioning Cameron. This is the second time his name has come up this week."

Julia stared at her. "Really?"

"This must be old home week on the mountain. Rosalie said that Cameron had inherited Josiah's place and was coming back to stay for a while."

"Where did Rosalie hear that?" Julia asked.

"At the coal supplier's. She overheard the manager talking about an order Cameron had placed for the winter."

Julia faked nonchalance with a shrug of her shoulder. She'd

never admitted that she'd been completely infatuated with Josiah's grandson, or that part of her heart had broken when she learned from a former classmate that the gorgeous Professor Birch had married. "I haven't seen him in years," she said. "The last I heard he was married and teaching at North Carolina State."

Cora nodded. "He wasn't from around here. His family lived in Raleigh." She tapped her finger on the tabletop. "I know what brought him to your mind today," she said.

Julia flinched, sitting back in her chair. "What?"

"Tina had a few dates with him at one time, years ago. It's strange how a tragedy can make the mind conjure up all sorts of details from the past. I'd always hoped those two would get together."

Julia swirled the contents of her coffee mug. "I'm sure that's it. Why else would I think of Cameron?"

A soft shuffling caused both women to shift their attention to the door. Katie stood in the entrance, one hand fisted around the folds of her white nightie, the other curled and rubbing her eye. Tousled blond curls fell over her shoulders like spun silk in the morning sun. She looked like an angel, a sad, heart-weary angel.

Julia went to her and got down on one knee. "Hello, Katie."

The child's voice was barely a whisper. "Hi, Aunt Julia. Grandma said you'd be here today."

Julia gently finger-combed hair from Katie's cheeks. "Of course, sweetheart. We Sommerville women have to stick together, don't we?"



Katie's expression didn't change. She stared at Julia, then dropped her gaze to the floor. "I guess."

"I can't believe how big you've grown," Julia said. "I haven't seen you since Christmas."

Cora got up, opened a cupboard and carried a bowl to the table. "Do you want some breakfast, honey?"

"Okay." Katie sat in a chair, folded her hands in her lap. "Daddy's gone, isn't he?"

Cora opened a cereal box. "For now, yes. He had some things he had to do."

"He has to pick up Mommy's ashes."

Cora dropped the box on the floor. "What?"

"He said she was cre... I don't know the word."

Cora grabbed the handle of the refrigerator to steady herself. Her eyes glittered with fresh torment and something else—fury. "D-damn your f-father," she cried. "I told him I wanted a traditional service to bury my daughter properly here on the mountain. He's taken that away from me."

Julia's momentary hope that Cora had found the strength to face this tragedy for Katie's sake vanished. She looked into her niece's eyes, saw the fear reflected there. She took the girl's arm and led her onto the back porch. "Look at the trees, sweetie. It's beautiful this morning. We'll have breakfast out here."

She went back to get Katie's cereal, poured herself a glass of water and took her prescription bottle from the pocket of her robe. She swallowed the tiny pill and brought a sobbing,

trembling Cora to a chair before facing the fact that a few weeks might not be enough time for any of them to heal.

## CHAPTER TWO

JULIA ENTERED the kitchen on Tuesday morning and headed for the coffee machine. She filled a mug that had been left for her on the counter and smiled at her mother. “Thanks for letting me sleep in.”

Cora glanced at the kitchen clock. “8:45 a.m. is hardly worth thanking me for. Besides I have a good idea how many times you got up during the night.”

Julia took her first sip of fortifying caffeine, walked to the back door and looked onto the porch where Katie sat in an old bent twig chair, her eyes cast down on a book. An empty bowl and glass were on the rustic table beside her. “At least she ate her breakfast,” Julia said. “That’s encouraging, even if she’s still not sleeping well.”

“Nightmares again?” Cora asked.

Julia nodded. “I doubt she remembers them, though. She cries without fully waking up.” She sent her mother a concerned look. “Did you bring up the subject of taking a bath yet this morning?”

“I mentioned it. Katie just shook her head and said she didn’t need a bath yet. She said you’d help her wash when you got up.”

Julia mentally counted the days since Tina’s death—again. “It’s been a week. I understand her reluctance to get into water now, but this can’t go on. Phobias that affect children at Katie’s age can last a lifetime.”

Cora sighed. "I guess you may be right about Katie needing to see a professional."

Relieved that Cora had come around to her way of thinking, Julia sat across from her mother. "I know you were hoping to avoid outside influences at this early stage of her grief. But we have to face the fact that family may not be enough to see Katie through this." She sighed, staring down into her mug. "Especially when one of those family members is me and I've been conspicuously absent for too much of my niece's life."

"Stop blaming yourself for the alienation between you and Tina," Cora said. "Your sister didn't do anything to bridge the gap, either. Anyway, you saw her and Katie on holidays. That's more often than many estranged siblings get together."

Cora's absolution didn't make Julia feel better. Now that it was too late, she wished she'd tried harder to reconcile with Tina and reestablish the relationship they had enjoyed as kids. But first there had been Cameron, then Wayne, then Tina's refusal to share the responsibility for family problems...

Julia shook her head, dispelling the same old destructive thoughts that had kept the sisters apart for years. It was pointless to dwell on regrets. Julia would deal with the past later. Now she had a frightened, grieving little girl on the porch who needed her help. "I'll check with the elementary school today," she said. "They must have a counselor who deals with children's trauma."

"While you're at it, see if you can find someone who can help the older generation."

Julia had suggested many times that Cora seek help for her grief over her husband's death. "You've been dealing better with Dad's passing lately, haven't you?"

"I was. But this...I don't know if I can do it again."

"Yeah. It's a lot, Mama." Julia paused, her mind struggling to focus on Cora's problems, but refusing to abandon Katie's. An idea suddenly occurred to her. "About that bath situation..."

"What?"

"I've got an idea." Remembering the prescription she'd tucked into her jeans pocket, Julia said, "I've got to go into town and I think I'll suggest a shopping trip for Katie that just might make her decide a bath isn't so bad, after all. At least maybe it will be a first step." She returned to the back door and waited for Katie to look up. "Hey, sweetie."

"Hi." Katie sat placidly.

"I've got to go into Pope's Drugstore today. You want to come?"

Katie chewed the inside of her cheek. "I guess."

"Bring your bowl and glass inside. We'll get you dressed and go."

Katie shut the book and reached for her dishes. It was a start.

LINUS POPE, the pharmacist and owner of Pope's Drugstore came around the counter where countless prescriptions had been filled for Glen Springs residents over several decades. He stuck out his hand when Julia approached. "Well, look who's here."

Julia shook his hand. "How are you doing, Mr. Pope?"

His eyes were kind when he said, "I should be asking you that." Julia managed a smile. "You heard?"

He squeezed her hand. "Word travels fast in Glen Springs, both good and bad. Margaret Benson came in the other day and told me." He passed a hand over thinning gray hair. "A terrible thing, Julia. Just terrible. Especially coming on the heels of Gene's passing. You ladies have my deepest sympathies."

"Thanks."

"How's Cora holding up?"

"About as well as you'd imagine."

"I know she's thankful you're home." With considerable effort because of his arthritis, Mr. Pope got down on one knee and pulled a lollipop from the pocket of his smock. "Nice to see you again," he said to Katie. "I was wondering if a pretty little girl would come into the store today and take this treat off my hands."

Katie waited for Julia to give her the thumbs-up before accepting the gift with a quiet "Thank you."

The pharmacist stood, placing his hands on his hips. "Can I help you find anything?"

Julia handed him the prescription she'd brought from New York for her antidepressants. Mr. Pope glanced at the doctor's handwriting. It seemed for a moment as though he might comment on the meds, but he wordlessly folded the paper and slipped it into his pocket.

"You can point us in the direction of bubble bath," Julia said, grateful for his discretion. Mr. Pope had known her

since she'd been born and no doubt wondered why she was taking the medication. Perhaps he assumed she'd just gotten the prescription to help her deal with Tina's death. That was fine. He didn't need to know the truth.

He pointed down a narrow aisle. "All the bath accessories are over there. You girls have a look." He raised a corner of the prescription from his pocket. "I'll have this ready in a few minutes."

Julia put her hand on Katie's shoulder and guided her down the row of shampoos and scented bath oils. When they came to the children's section, she stopped and affected a great interest in the assortment of colorful plastic bottles. "Look at all these choices," she said. "Which one do you like best, Katie?"

The child tentatively pointed to a bottle shaped like a duck. "That one, maybe."

Julia took it from the shelf.

"No, that one."

She replaced the duck, reached for a fairy princess bottle on the top shelf and unscrewed the cap. Holding it down for Katie to smell, she said, "What do you think?"

Katie sniffed. "It smells good."

Julia tested it. "Wow, sure does. I think I'll buy it. Nothing makes me feel better than a good long soak in tons of sweet-smelling bubbles. How about you?"

Katie hunched one slight shoulder. "I never had a bubble bath."

Julia disguised her shock by loading her basket with other items from the shelves. “Then we’ll definitely have to remedy that. We’ll buy some of these kitty-cat soaps, and one of these pink spongy things and this shampoo.”

Julia set the basket on the counter while Mr. Pope filled her order. “We still have a few minutes,” she said to Katie. “Want to have a drink?”

“Okay.”

They went to the soda fountain and Julia helped Katie onto a stool. While she waited for the clerk to take their order, she ran her hand along the smooth Formica surface where, over her lifetime, she’d enjoyed hundreds of vanilla Cokes. Nothing had changed at Pope’s ice cream and drink fountain. The mirror behind the shelf of soda glasses still had a crack in it. The chrome napkin holders still gleamed. Straws dependably popped up when a customer lifted the lid of the heavy glass dispenser.

And almost as predictably, Julia’s past came flooding back. She vividly recalled when she and Tina were kids, three years apart, and they’d sat on these very stools, sharing a drink and laughing about something that had happened at school. Or when they’d left the matinee at the Glen Springs cinema and waited at Pope’s for their father to pick them up. Or years later, when they’d been sitting here during Julia’s sophomore year at Riverton College and the dashing new professor from the English department had stopped at the pharmacy to pick up a few things for his grandfather who lived at the top of Whisper Mountain.



When Cameron Birch had spotted his student at the fountain, he'd come right over to say hello. Although tongue-tied with nervous excitement at seeing the handsome Professor Birch right here in her hometown, Julia had somehow managed to introduce him to Tina without stumbling over both their names. And that night she'd gone to Tina's bedroom and gushed to her sister about how gorgeous his hazel eyes were, how intelligent he was and how she couldn't sleep at night because he'd taken up permanent residence in her mind.

And a week later, the larger-than-life Professor Birch showed up at the cabin behind Cora's General Store to pick Tina up for a date. And everything changed.

"What can I get you?"

Julia looked up at the young man behind the counter. "Two vanilla Cokes," she said, and smiled at her niece, whose eyes were the same beautiful blue as her mother's. She handed Katie a straw. It was too late for her to make amends with her sister, but she prayed it wasn't too late for her and Katie.

AN HOUR LATER, Julia parted the bathroom curtains. Glorious late morning sunshine sparkled on the tile floor and porcelain claw-foot tub. She looked over her shoulder at Katie, who stood silently watching her. "Isn't that better? Sometimes, like on a day like today, I really hate those curtains."

Katie shrugged. "I guess."

Over the last days, Julia had noticed that Katie often responded to direct questions without emotionally committing

herself to the answers. I suppose...I guess...Maybe... These were the responses Katie gave when asked her opinion. It was as if she qualified every answer so she could amend it quickly and simply if circumstances indicated she should. Julia wondered what had made her so unsure of herself. Growing up, Tina had always displayed more than her share of confidence. Apparently that trait hadn't been passed down to her daughter.

Julia turned on the tap and tested the temperature of the water flowing into the tub. She reached behind her back. "Hand me the bubble bath, sweetie."

Katie took the bottle off the vanity and passed it to Julia.

"Unscrew the cap," Julia said.

"No, you do it. I don't think I'm going to take a bath right now."

Julia complied, filling the cap with liquid and pouring the entire amount under the faucet. Frothy bubbles spread over the water. "Look how beautiful," she said. "I think you should add another one." She handed the cap to Katie and was relieved when the child stepped close enough to the tub to pour in the contents.

Julia swished her fingers through the bubbles. "You have to feel this, Katie," she said. "It's like touching air you can see."

Katie reached forward, poked a couple of bubbles and then scooped a small mountain of them into her hand.

Julia stood. "You know, I could be the first person to enjoy this bath, but I rather thought you might like to be."

Katie made a fist, shooting bubbles into the air above the tub.

“I don’t know...”

Interrupting her, Julia said, “But if you go first, I have a really big favor to ask.”

Katie’s eyes widened. “What is it?”

“Well, we just got Grandma’s favorite lady’s magazine in the mail and I want to read it. I realize that we girls like our privacy when we bathe, but since the light in the bathroom is the very best in all the house, I was hoping you’d let me stay in here with you and read. I promise to be very quiet.”

Katie looked from Julia to the rising water. Her eyes showed a bit of sparkle, just enough for Julia to hope the bubbles might be working some magic. “It would be okay if you want to,” she said after careful consideration.

“Great!” Julia pulled a magazine out of the basket Cora kept in the bathroom and sat on the commode lid. “Why don’t you undress, and I’ll just start reading.”

Fifteen minutes later, most of the bubbles were gone and Katie had been scrubbed clean with the exception of her face and hair. “I think I’m done,” she announced.

Julia looked up from the magazine. “Almost.” She picked up the bottle of children’s shampoo from the side of the bathtub and flipped open the lid. “Still have to wash your hair, don’t you? And I haven’t finished this article.” She reached for a plastic cup she’d brought in earlier. “Can I wet your hair with this?”

Katie nodded, but her eyes widened with the first sign of alarm. “It’s going to be all right, sweetie,” Julia said.

Katie closed her eyes tightly and threaded her hands between her knees. Bending her head forward, she said, "Hurry, okay?"

Julia leaned over the tub and poured the first cupful over Katie's head. Water sluiced down her forehead and the sides of her face. Katie trembled but remained silent. Julia slowly emptied the contents of another cup, decided Katie's hair was wet enough and reached for the shampoo.

Katie began to scream. Her face more than a foot above the water, she cried that she couldn't see, couldn't breathe, that she was drowning. Each frantic word was punctuated with shrieks of sheer terror. Her panic ripped through Julia. She dropped the cup, grabbed her niece and lifted her partway from the tub. "It's okay, sweetheart."

Katie reached up, wrapped her arms around Julia and held on. She buried her face in the crook of Julia's neck. With bathwater soaking her skin and clothing and her own tears mingling with her niece's, Julia crooned words of comfort into Katie's ear. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. You're going to be all right. I won't let you go."

Moments later, the cries subsided. Katie sniffled loudly. "Do we have to wash my hair?"

Julia drew a normal breath. "No, we can wait for another time. But when we do, we'll do it another way. If you look up at the ceiling, not at the tub, the water will run down your hair and your back, not into your face. I promise you won't feel so scared."

The child considered the advice for a moment and said, "Aunt Julia?"

“Yes?”

“Why didn’t my mommy look up at the sky when she went in the lake? Didn’t she know that the water wouldn’t have gotten her then?”

Julia hugged Katie close again and said, “Oh, baby, I don’t know why she didn’t look up. I know we both wish she had, though. Maybe it was just too much water all at once, not like the shallow bit in this bathtub.”

Katie arched back, looked at Julia with eyes glistening with tears. Still, a subtle hint of a smile curved her lips. “You’re all wet, Aunt Julia.”

Relief flowed through Julia. She laughed. “I guess I am.” Plucking her damp blouse from her chest, she said, “See? A little water never hurt anybody.”

Katie sat down in the tepid water, pursed her lips in a determined line and stared at the ceiling. “Okay, you can do it now,” she said.

A minute later, Katie had clean hair and Julia couldn’t stop thinking about her sister, who, in her last moment of life, with her child sleeping a few yards away, didn’t look up.

AT CLOSING TIME, six o’clock the next night, what had started out as a picture-perfect autumn day ended with dark thunderheads blanketing the mountains and lightning illuminating the valleys between the tallest hills. Julia and Cora carried rocking chairs in from the store’s front porch and removed hanging baskets from the eaves before the storm could

send them tumbling down the mountain. Fighting a near gale-force wind, Julia turned tables upside down on the porch floor and advised her mother to seek shelter. "I'm almost done," she hollered to Cora. "You and Katie make sure the windows in the store are closed. I'll be right in."

Cora ducked inside just as the first fat drops of rain hit the shingle roof over the veranda. By the time Julia secured the last of the outside decorations, the wind had driven the downpour sideways, pelting the wood slat floor and dampening her clothes. She ran into the store, closed and bolted the door and took the roll of paper towels Cora handed her. Wiping her arms and legs, she said, "This is what we used to call a toad strangler."

"And how," Cora said, her worried gaze fixed on the closest window. "It's nights like this I really miss your father. We'll probably lose power before this one's over." She lifted a lacy curtain panel and peered out at the pitch-black evening sky.

Julia placed her hand on her mother's shoulder. "Come away from the window, Mama. You know it's not safe to be near glass when there's wind and lightning."

Cora started to walk away, but stopped and went back. "My goodness, Julia," she said. "I think I see headlights coming up the mountain. Who would be fool enough to be out on a night like this?"

Julia joined her at the window. "Someone caught on Whisper before they realized the storm was going to be this bad is my guess."

“I’ll wait by the door to see if they pull in to ride it out.” She looked over her shoulder at Julia. “You and Katie go in the back room and get those old lanterns and oil your dad kept there. If this person passes us by, we’ll still have time to make it to the cabin before the worst of it hits.”

Julia took Katie’s hand. As they went into the storeroom, Julia noticed headlights veering into their lot. A few seconds later, the front door opened. A gust of wind sent the chimes above the entrance into a jangling frenzy, which was followed by a rumbling bellow of thunder.

And then the door was closed, reducing the wind to a steady ominous howl. The sound Julia heard next made her heart pound and her hand freeze around the glass chimney of a hurricane lantern. She wasn’t prepared for that strong baritone voice from her past.

“Hi, Mrs. Sommerville,” the man said. “Some night, isn’t it?” Silence stretched for a few seconds until he added, “I bet you don’t remember me.”

Cora gasped. “For heaven’s sake. Cameron Birch?”

He chuckled. “In the dripping flesh, and am I ever glad you’re still open.”

Julia tucked the lantern into the bend of her elbow and pressed it against her chest to keep from dropping it. Making her way to the storeroom entrance, she stood on the threshold. Her curiosity urged her to peek around the door frame, but her feet felt glued to the floor.

“Who’s out there, Aunt Julia?” Katie asked from behind her.

“I’m not sure,” she lied. “Probably someone looking to get out of the storm.” She leaned against the open door and listened.

“We were just talking about you the other day,” Cora said.

“We?”

“My daughter’s here with me.”

Cameron coughed. His voice was raspy when he said, “Tina?”

Julia held her breath, fearful that the mention of her sister might send Cora into tears. But she calmly answered, “No. My younger girl, Julia’s visiting for a while.”

“I remember Julia,” he said. “She was a student of mine when I taught at Riverton. Smart girl. Got excellent grades, as I recall.”

“She has a job in Manhattan now,” Cora said. “She’s a reporter.”

“Good for her.”

Julia heard footsteps and assumed Cameron was choosing supplies. “Is she married?” he asked after a moment.

“No,” Cora said.

Katie tugged on the end of Julia’s blouse. “Why don’t we go out?” she asked.

“We will,” Julia said. “In just a minute. But for now I need you to be very quiet.”

Katie dropped her hand. “Okay.”

Thunder rumbled over the rooftop, and Julia missed the next words spoken. When the sound faded she heard Cameron say, “I had just started up to my grandfather’s place when the storm



hit. I was hoping to buy enough supplies from you to get by until morning.”

“Pick out what you need,” Cora said. “But you might want to wait until the weather clears before you continue up the mountain. This road is slippery in a rainstorm. You can stay in the cabin with us till it’s safe.”

That’s just great. Julia wasn’t really thrilled with the idea of the four of them sitting in the cabin parlor talking about old times, which in retrospect were alternately tragic and embarrassing. But then an even worse picture formed in her mind. Cameron’s wife was probably out in the car. If he accepted Cora’s invitation, it would be the five of them huddled together until the storm passed. How cozy would that be, especially after she’d relived all those old memories the past few days.

Julia released the breath that had been trapped in her chest when Cameron declined. “Thanks anyway, but I can make it to the top. I’ve got four-wheel drive on a Jeep that can plow through anything and I think the rain’s letting up some now.”

Julia heard the rustle of paper and assumed Cora was filling a sack with supplies. She was thankful when the cash register drawer opened and closed, indicating the transaction was finished. “Nice seeing you again, Cameron,” Cora said. “How long you planning to be on Whisper?”

“I’m not sure. A while. My grandfather left the cabin to me when he died. This is the first chance I’ve had to come up here.”

“We’ll be seeing more of you then,” Cora said.

“Definitely.”

Wonderful. Julia winced. She didn’t look forward to running into Cameron and his wife. Although, thinking rationally, she’d been over Cameron for years. So why was she reacting like a love-struck college coed now?

“You be careful now,” Cora called just before the door closed.

Julia stepped aside and let Katie precede her into the store.

“What took you two so long?” Cora asked. “You won’t believe who was just...”

“I heard.”

“I guess the rumors about him coming back to Whisper were true,” Cora said. “Imagine Cameron Birch walking in here after we were discussing him the other day.”

“Yeah, imagine.” The lanterns still in her arms, Julia walked toward the rear of the store and glanced out the back door. “Well, come on. If we’re going to make it to the cabin, we’d better go now.”

Cora checked the lock on the front entrance and started to follow, but the squeal of brakes and the grating of twisting metal stopped her.

“What was that?” Katie asked, clutching Julia’s arm.

Julia dropped the lanterns on a nearby worktable. Her heart raced. She recalled only two times in all the years she’d lived on Whisper Mountain when she’d heard that sound. She looked at Cora’s stricken expression. “Oh, God, Mama,” she said. “He’s gone through the guardrail.”

# CHAPTER THREE

JULIA GRABBED a yellow slicker from the hook by the storeroom, slipped her arms through the sleeves and hurried to the counter under the cash register where her parents had always kept a flashlight. Shoving the light into the waistband of her jeans, she headed for the front door. Cora followed, talking incessantly, her anxiety clear. "I t-told him not to g-go out in this weather. I w-warned him, Julia."

"I know, Mama," Julia said, pulling the vinyl hood and securing the snap at her chin.

"You c-can't go after him!"

"I'll be all right. I'm just going to cross the road and look down in the ravine. Maybe he's fine and I'll see him climbing up toward me."

"But, but what if he's not climbing out? What if you don't see him?"

Julia paused, her hand on the doorknob. "We can't just ignore this and leave him at the bottom of the falls. I need you to stay focused, Mama. Call 9-1-1, tell them what's happened."

Cora nodded and walked toward the phone.

At the door Julia stopped when she heard Katie sobbing behind her. "Don't go out there, Aunt Julia. It's raining and you'll get all wet."

Julia took Katie's arms and held them tight. "I'll be fine, Katie."

Nothing is going to happen to me. I've been down that ravine more times than I can count."

Katie sniffed loudly. "In the dark?"

"Dark, light, all kinds of weather." She kissed the top of Katie's head. "I have to do this, honey. People could be hurt down there and we don't know how long it will take the police to get here. I want you to be a brave girl and wait with Grandma. Will you do that for me?"

Katie pinched her eyes closed and nodded. "You'll hurry though, won't you?"

"You bet I will." She gave Katie what she hoped was a reassuring hug and stepped outside. A strong wind propelled raindrops as heavy as pebbles against her face. Fighting a gust, she shouldered the door into its frame, testing the latch to be certain it took hold.

Julia flicked the switch on the flashlight and aimed it left and right. She had a fleeting, hopeful thought that she might encounter travelers out on this wicked night, someone she could flag down to help her. Instead, all she saw was dense rain in her beam of light. Within seconds, her jeans were plastered to her legs and her tennis shoes were soaked through.

Julia hugged her arms to her chest and started walking up the mountain road, knowing that was the direction Cameron had taken just minutes ago. She aimed her light at the guardrail, a thin strip of galvanized metal that had originally been erected by FDR's Works Progress Administration during the

Great Depression. Over the years, the rail had been inspected often, mended many times, but never replaced. And, ironically, considering what had just happened, always considered by the locals to be “good enough.”

She had progressed about a hundred yards when she spotted the breach, a mere ten-foot gap in the otherwise continuous flow of gray posts and barriers. Just ahead of the hole, her flashlight caught the ominous shimmer of an oily substance on the road, probably an engine leak from a vehicle belonging to a negligent local.

Julia quickened her pace. She reached the edge of the ravine and pointed her flashlight to the bottom. A tight pain squeezed her chest when she realized that the Birches’ car had gone over at the steepest decline. With her meager light, she saw nothing resembling a vehicle but she heard the fury of the waterfall rushing over the rocks, gaining power from the rain and its one hundred-foot drop from the mountain ledge where it tumbled from the Glen River.

The thundering falls ended some forty feet below in a frothy pool of water that drew tourists from all over before it gained momentum again and flowed to the bottom of Whisper Mountain. Julia knew that, right now, the swollen pool would be roiling, struggling to accommodate the downpour that could cause it to overflow its banks. And somewhere near that angry cauldron lay Cameron’s car, perhaps submerged, perhaps not. There was only one way to find out.

Julia tucked the flashlight under her arm, aiming it down to light the path ahead of her, and grabbed hold of the nearest tree. And then, as she'd done many times before, but never in conditions like this and never in the dark, despite what she'd told Katie, she began her descent. She lost her footing again and again, the tread of her sneakers no match for slippery patches of mud and leaves as squishy as wet sponges.

She wished she'd remembered to bring gloves. Tree bark and shale bit into her hands as she reached for anything solid to steady her downward climb. Her heart hammered as the ravine seemed to swallow her up. Strange sounds assailed her—night creatures scurrying to safety, raindrops beating on the underbrush, water rushing everywhere, blending with the frantic buzzing in her own brain. A mixture of rain and sweat ran into her eyes. But she kept going until, perhaps no more than ten minutes after she'd begun her climb down, she reached the bottom and noticed a dim glow near the base of the falls.

She took the flashlight from under her arm, drew a deep breath to fortify her for what she might see and aimed it at the light. With an overwhelming sense of relief, she realized she was staring at Cameron's headlamps, half buried in mud and brush, but proof that his vehicle hadn't plunged into the pool—yet.

"Professor Birch!" Julia hollered his name as she advanced toward the driver's window. "I'm coming to help you!" She flicked rainwater from her eyes and struggled to catch her breath. Good grief, Julia, Cameron Birch won't care if you use his first

name. She continued over the soaked ground, her heart pounding harder with each labored step.

When she reached the Jeep, she relaxed slightly. Somehow Cameron had managed to steer down the embankment without losing complete control and rolling over. She held on to the roof and hit the rain-streaked window. "Cameron, answer me. Are you all right?"

When she didn't get a response, she used the sleeve of her slicker to clear a circle in the mud-streaked glass, wiped her eyes and peered inside. Shining her light into the interior, she saw her former professor unconscious, his safety belt fastened, his head slumped over the wheel. She slammed the window hard with the heel of her hand, and then immediately regretted the action. The SUV slid forward toward the rushing water, maybe only a foot or two, but the motion left the headlamps buried deeper in mud.

Julia yelled louder. "Wake up, Cameron! I've got to get you out of there." She walked around and shone her light in the passenger window. "Mrs. Birch, are you in there?"

The seat was empty. She aimed the beam at the back and saw where boxes had been stacked for transport. There was no one else in the vehicle. Julia returned to the driver's side and tested the door. Miraculously, it opened. Cameron's head slipped off the steering wheel. His arm fell out of the SUV. And the Jeep inched farther down the muddy slope.

Julia grabbed the door and held on, as if by sheer force she could stop the forward motion. "Wake up, Cameron!" she

screamed. She pulled on his arm. "You've got to get out before you go in the water."

Still receiving no response, Julia had the horrifying thought that perhaps she was trying to revive a dead man. "No!" she shouted. "You can't be dead." She pinched his jawline between her thumb and forefinger. "Wake up!"

When a long, low moan rewarded her, Julia renewed her efforts to get Cameron out of the vehicle. She reached over his body, felt for the seat belt release and freed him. Next she twisted him so his back was toward her. "Okay, that's good," she said in an even, level voice, meant to soothe herself as well as the victim. "We can do this, Cameron." She slid her hands under his arms and pulled with all her strength. The next moments were a blur. Cameron groaned. The Jeep rolled forward. Julia fell back onto the ground, and Cameron landed on top of her. Air rushed from her lungs.

Pushing her feet against anything solid she could find, she scooted them both back from the car until they were clear. And then, with Cameron heavy on her chest, she raised her head and watched in numb shock as, with a huge sucking sound, the SUV plunged engine-first into the churning pool. Seconds later, only the faint red glow of taillights and the weak gleam of a chrome bumper were visible above the water.

Shaking off the horrifying realization of what nearly had happened, Julia tried to scramble out from beneath Cameron's limp body. But he was like lead pressing on her breastbone, and



she succeeded only in sinking farther into the mud. She turned his head to the side, felt his faint breath warm on her cheek. “Cameron, wake up. Please. You’re okay. We’re both going to get out of this, but you have to help me.”

She concentrated on the details of the first-aid course she’d taken years before and tried not to panic. “Keep the victim still and quiet,” she said. “Keep him warm. Elevate his legs. Check for broken bones.” A ripple of inappropriate laughter bubbled up from her chest. “Yeah, right.” One arm was pinned to her side and her fanny felt as if it were mired in freshly mixed cement.

Her strength waning, Julia gave up struggling. She was stuck underneath Cameron until help came. Wiggling around only pushed them both farther into the depression she’d created when they landed on the wet ground. Minutes seemed to stretch into hours as she lay there. To keep her mind occupied, she talked to the unconscious man on top of her. “I’ll bet you wish you’d taken Mama’s offer to stay with us,” she said. “I didn’t think it was such a good idea at the time, but now I sure wish you had.” A minute passed before she spoke again. “When are the rescuers going to get here?” She almost jumped out of her skin when she heard a response.

“Hey, Jules, you okay down there?”

Recognizing the voice of the class clown of her Glen Springs High graduating class who went on to join the Vickers County firefighters, Julia laughed almost hysterically. “Is that you, Bobby?”

“Yep, it’s me, MoonPie.”

She never thought she’d be so glad to hear the nickname Bobby had given her in grade school. “Well, hurry up and get down here!” she hollered.

“That’s the plan. Just hold on. We’re on our way.”

Seconds later, Bobby Cutter and two other rescue workers rappelled down the slope in a fraction of the time it had taken her to cover the same distance. Bobby and one fireman rushed to her side, while the other waited for a fiberglass backboard to follow them on ropes into the gully.

Bobby leaned over her, flashing a brilliant light in her face. “So how’d you manage to get yourself in this situation, MoonPie?” he asked.

She couldn’t see his expression and that was just as well. If she’d detected a smart-ass smile on his face, she’d have found enough strength to slug him—once she got out from under Cameron. She frowned up at him. “Just get us out of here, Bobby.”

“Will do.” He ran his hand down her arm while his buddy examined Cameron. “Do you think anything’s broken, Julia?”

“No. I’m fine, but I’ll be even better once I know that this guy on top of me is okay.”

Bobby switched to rescue mode. He helped the third member of his team position the board next to Cameron, then asked if the victim could be safely lifted. The rescuers’ voices blended together in a flurry of well-rehearsed commands and evaluations.

And Julia lay back, waiting patiently, relieved to be turning the task of rescuing Cameron Birch over to the experts, at last.

THE TRIP up from the ravine proved much easier than the one going down. Of course, it helped that Julia was tied securely to a two-hundred-pound fireman who attached them both to a pulley controlled by a team at the top. With his arms around her, she let the pulley do all the work, and if it hadn't been for her concern over Cameron, she might even have enjoyed the ride.

The rain had finally stopped, and Cora and Katie stood at the edge of the road when the fireman set Julia on the pavement. She tried to take in all the details of the scene at once. A half dozen emergency vehicles, red lights flashing, lined the road. Barricades placed a hundred yards in either direction from the breach in the guardrail kept traffic from hampering the efforts of the rescue team. A news helicopter circled overhead, its bright light illuminating the ravine where efforts to bring Cameron to the top were still ongoing.

Julia assured waiting EMTs that she was fine, and traded her slicker for a blanket Cora had brought from the cabin. The storm had left behind a brisk, clean breeze, signaling the first cold snap of the autumn season, and Julia shivered in her woolen cocoon.

"Will he be all right?" Cora asked her.

"I hope so, Mama, but I don't know. He was still unconscious when the rescuers got there." She recalled the skill and confidence with which the three men went about their job. "I'm sure the guys are doing all they can," she said.

She looked down at Katie, who was huddled in a worn parka at least two sizes too small for her. New winter coat jumped to the top of the mental shopping list Julia had been preparing for her niece over the past several days. “And how are you, sweetie?”

“Okay. I was worried about you, though.”

“I know, but I told you I’d be all right.” Julia tucked a strand of wispy hair inside the hood of Katie’s jacket. “I’m a mountain girl, remember?”

Katie nestled close to Julia’s side. When Julia put her arm around her, she said, “I guess I’m one now, too.”

Julia smiled at her. “You know, I guess you are. And you’re going to make a fine mountain girl. I can tell.”

When a stark light shone in her face, Julia blinked and squinted. “What’s going on?”

A woman approached her, walking in front of a man with a large camera balanced on his shoulder. “Cut the light, Benny,” she said. She stuck her hand out to Julia. “I’m Margo Wright from Channel Seven News. From the details I’ve gotten from onlookers, I figure you’re the hero of the hour.”

Julia minimized the comment with a shrug. “Hardly.”

The reporter moved her fist in a circular motion, indicating the camera should start rolling. “Don’t be modest, Miss...” She flipped a pad open and took a pencil from her pocket. “Would you spell your name, please?”

Julia did. Though the last thing she wanted to do was be interviewed when she didn’t even know Cameron’s condition, she

understood what it was like to be on the reporting side of the camera—not an easy job with an uncooperative subject.

“I understand the victim is a professor from North Carolina State University,” Margo said.

“That’s right.”

“What was he doing on Whisper Mountain?”

“You’ll have to ask him that,” Julia said.

“Okay, but you can tell me what happened down there.”

Julia kept the facts simple and brief. “His car rolled over the edge and I pulled him out before it submerged in the river.”

Katie gasped. “Did you really do that, Aunt Julia?”

She hadn’t allowed herself to piece together those frightening moments until now, though she was quite certain the entire panic-filled episode would stay in her mind forever. “I guess I did.”

“Tell me what you were thinking as...”

Julia no longer heard the reporter’s voice. The rescue guys had just appeared, the tops of their protective headgear the first signs that they were finally coming out of the gully. One man on each side leveled the board while Bobby guided it up. Julia broke away from the reporter and rushed to meet them.

With efficient calm, the rescuers relayed information to a team of paramedics who’d come from a waiting ambulance. Cameron was transferred to a wheeled stretcher and taken to the emergency vehicle. Julia grabbed Bobby’s arm as he followed the medics. “Will he be all right?”

“I think so. He’s kind of busted up, but he was starting to come

around about halfway up the mountain.” Bobby patted her arm. “You done good, MoonPie. And by the way, it’s nice seeing you again, even if the circumstances that brought you home aren’t the best.”

“Thanks, Bobby. And you done good, too.”

Bobby walked off toward a woman who offered him a cup of coffee, and Julia suddenly felt as if her legs would no longer hold her. She didn’t want to talk to the reporter again. And she hoped she wouldn’t be questioned by the police right now. Searching out Cora and Katie in the crowd, she said, “Let’s go home. Tomorrow will be plenty of time to sort all this out.”

A paramedic stepped from the back of the ambulance. “Hey! Which one of you is MoonPie?”

Julia grimaced but slowly raised her hand. “I guess that would be me.”

The medic waved her over. “Can you come here? The patient says he won’t go to the hospital until he talks to you.”

Julia hesitated, but Cora urged her forward. “Go on. Cameron probably wants to thank you.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“You want to see how he is, don’t you?”

That was certainly true. Julia hadn’t climbed down the ravine, had the wind knocked out of her and taken an unplanned mud bath just to have Cameron die on her. She went to the back of the ambulance and took the paramedic’s proffered hand. He helped her inside and went back to work, adjusting gauges and checking

IV lines.

Cameron lay on the stretcher. She took a few awkward steps toward him in the confined space. He tried lifting his head to see her, but his movements were limited by a restrictive collar. Nevertheless he smiled. That same devastating smile she remembered shining upon her from the podium of a Riverton College classroom, not even diminished now by a background of nasty lacerations.

The medic pointed to her. "Professor, meet Julia, Glen Springs' one-woman mountain rescue team."

"Actually, we've met before," Cameron said. He stared intently at her and added, "MoonPie?"

She exhaled and shook her head. "It's a long and very uninspiring story."

"I think I'd like to hear it."

"Someday, maybe." She sat on a bench built into the side of the ambulance and leaned toward him. "How are you feeling?"

"Alive. Thanks to you."

"Don't mention it. All in a day's work."

"I'll bet." He slowly reached out his left hand and stroked her cheek with his fingers. "You've got a little smudge there."

For the first time she was aware of how she must look. She glanced down at her mud-caked jeans. Her hands were splotched with ravine debris and she doubted she'd ever get her fingernails clean again. She lay her hand where his had just touched and felt a flush of heat. If her face looked even half as bad as the rest of

her, well, she didn't want to think about it.

"So, are you all right?" he asked. "You weren't hurt?"

"No. It takes a lot more than a freaky autumn sprinkle to take me down."

He smiled again. "Not even a half-crazed driver plunging off a mountain?"

She laughed, relieved he seemed okay. "Nope, not even that. But don't feel so bad. I saw an oil slick just before where you breached the rail. I don't think the accident was all your fault."

The paramedic lifted Cameron's right arm and placed it on his abdomen. Julia flinched when she saw the bone threatening to poke through the skin covering his wrist.

Cameron winced in pain.

"Sorry, Professor," the medic said, setting a splint under his forearm and wrapping gauze around it. "I've got to stabilize the injury before we take off."

Cameron watched his practiced motions. "Do you think it's broken?"

"I'm not the doctor, but I think it's safe to say this arm is going to be out of commission for a while. It looks like you've got a compound fracture and my guess is you're going to need surgery and external fixators to patch it up."

Cameron frowned. "That doesn't sound good."

The medic taped gauze to Cameron's wrist. "Could be better, I'll admit. Do you remember how you damaged your wrist this badly?"



Cameron snickered. “The last thing I recall is feeling like a pinball inside my Jeep, complete with some pretty weird sound effects.”

Finished with his temporary immobilization job, the medic called to the driver in front of the ambulance. “I’ve got him ready to roll, Rick.”

Julia got up from the bench. “Well, I guess that’s my cue to leave. Good luck, Cameron.”

“Wait, Julia...” Cameron stared at her as if he were unexpectedly at a loss for words. “I haven’t really thanked you,” he finally said.

“Sure you did. We’re square.”

The medic looked at her. “Actually I was going to suggest that you come to the hospital, too. You need to be checked out.”

She shrugged off his concern. “That’s not necessary. I’m fine, really.”

“It’s a precaution,” he said. “There’s another ambulance waiting to take you, but since you two know each other, I guess it would be okay if you rode with the professor here. He doesn’t have any family in the area and would probably appreciate the company.”

Cameron stared up at her.

She looked at him but spoke to the paramedic. “He has a wife. I’m sure if you call her...”

“No, I don’t,” Cameron said.

“You don’t?”

“Divorced.” He raised his eyebrows in a placating way. “I’m all alone here, Julia. It would be nice if my rescuer agreed to hold my hand.”

Suddenly feeling light-headed, Julia sat back on the bench. Maybe she was experiencing repercussions from the night’s trauma, after all. Or maybe she’d just heard news that she hadn’t had time to process yet. “I’m not really the hand-holding type,” she said.

He gave her an earnest look. “Okay, no hand-holding. But I’d appreciate it if you’d come along. At least until they know what they’re going to do with me. I’ve been gone so long from the mountain, I don’t know anybody else to call.”

Before she could decline again, Bobby Cutter appeared at the back of the ambulance. “Everybody okay in here?”

Cameron answered for all of them. “I’m trying to get Julia to come to the hospital with me. She needs to be examined, too.”

Bobby shook his finger at her. “You’re going, MoonPie. No arguments. I don’t want you doing something stupid and girly like staying here and fainting on me.”

Outnumbered, she sat against the ambulance wall and fastened the seat belt. “Fine. I’ll go. But ask my mother to come to the hospital to pick me up in an hour or so. And tell her to bring some clean clothes.”

Bobby slapped the door of the vehicle before closing it. “Will do. My job here is done.”

Cameron raised his good arm. “Just one more thing.”

Bobby paused. "Yeah?"

"How'd she get the name MoonPie?"

Bobby laughed. "You can blame me for that. Julia loved those damn cakes. Had 'em in her lunch box every day so I just started calling her that. I think Cora must have bought them by the caseful. And then, one day, she just decided to stop eating them." He stared at Julia. "Why was that, Julia?"

She rolled her eyes. "For heaven's sake, Bobby, that's ancient history. Nobody cares anymore."

"I care," Cameron said.

Bobby gave her a what'd-I-tell-you look. "Anyway, I guess Julia didn't want to hurt Cora's feelings by telling her not to put any more pies in her lunch, so she started secretly swapping them for things like carrots and grapes and celery. But by then the name 'MoonPie' had stuck."

Julia shook her head. "Exciting story, isn't it?"

Bobby chuckled. "Julia's the only person I've ever known who'd give up a MoonPie for a bag of carrot sticks. The first woman on Earth content to trade down."

"Not anymore, Bobby," Julia said. "I learned my lesson."

Bobby laughed again and shut the ambulance door.

When Julia glanced at Cameron, she noticed his expression had changed, become more reflective than amused. "What?" she said.

"You've just given me my first Blue Ridge Mountain story," he said. "A Girl Called MoonPie." The ambulance lurched forward.

Cameron sucked in a deep breath and looked at his arm. “Too bad I can’t hold a pen to write it down.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

ONCE SHE'D LET the hospital staff coat her hands with antiseptic ointment and cover them with gauze, Julia was able to convince the emergency room nurse that she'd suffered no more ill effects from her trek into the ravine than minor cuts and bruises. The minute the doctor signed her release papers, Julia hurried to the admitting area, sounding as though she were walking on squeegees instead of shoes and leaving an embarrassing trail of mud flecks. She was going to make some maintenance people very unhappy tonight.

The receptionist at the admitting desk was the same middle-aged woman who'd assigned Julia to an examination room earlier. When she looked up from paperwork and saw her again, she wrinkled her nose. "Oh. They didn't give you a hospital gown?"

"They tried, but I've got clean clothes coming..." she glanced at her wristwatch, which was still smeared with mud, and wiped the face "...any minute now." She started to lean on the counter but thought better of leaving a residue for this woman to contend with. "Can you tell me where Cameron Birch is, please?"

The woman pointed to a set of double doors. "In there. Exam room eight if he's not down for tests. I'll have to buzz you in." Julia squished her way along the row of curtained-off areas until she found Cameron's and peeked around the drape.

He roused, slowly lifting his eyelids. “Hey. Come in.”

She moved to the side of his bed and stood looking down at him. Trying not to reveal her shock, she glossed over the dark purple bruise that had formed on his forehead and the scratches on his face and arms. Plus, he had a cumbersome half cast secured to his wrist. “So, when are they springing you?” she said.

“Not until tomorrow, maybe early afternoon.”

“And what have they poked and prodded tonight?”

“I’ve had an EKG, a chest X-ray, a CAT scan. All I’ve heard about is my wrist X-rays, and the paramedic was right. The orthopedic surgeon thinks about two hours of surgery in the morning ought to do the trick. And then I’ll have a network of miniature antennae sticking out of my arm for six weeks.”

“Well, look at the bright side. You might not have to invest in a satellite dish to keep up with Grey’s Anatomy.”

He smiled. “And there’s one more silver lining to this cloud. My handwriting’s never been any good, and now I have an excuse.”

His offhand comment took her back ten years. She remembered her surprise at discovering this minor flaw in the otherwise seemingly perfect professor. His comments on her assignments had been practically illegible, and when each paper was returned, she’d spend several minutes trying to decipher his scratch marks.

“...for the bandages on your hands?”

His voice returned her to the present. “Sorry. What did you

say?”

“Your hands? Why are they bandaged?”

“A couple of giant-sized splinters mostly, from some inhospitable oak trees in the ravine.” When she saw the concern on his face, she added, “Nothing I haven’t experienced many times in the past.”

He released a long breath and shook his head. “Geez, Julia, when I think about what you did, what almost happened down there...”

She held up her hand. “Don’t go in that gully again, Cameron. It’s over, happy ending and all.”

“But there has to be a way I can thank you.”

She smiled. “You did. Ten years ago. You gave me an A.”

“You earned an A.” He pushed himself up with his good elbow, the movement obviously causing him pain. He tried to be cavalier about it with a forced grin. “I might have cracked ribs, too. But, anyway, about showing my appreciation, I may have to thank you twice since I have to ask one more favor.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll need a ride to my grandfather’s place when they let me go.”

His request dumbfounded her in light of his injuries. “You’re not thinking of staying alone on top of the mountain while you heal, are you?”

He shrugged his shoulder, then winced. “Sure. I’ll manage.” He must have sensed the doubt in her eyes, because he added,

"I want some time on that mountain, Julia. I've planned it for months. I've taken a sabbatical from the university." He drew his lips into a determined line, pulling in a deep breath. "I think Whisper Mountain will heal me, broken bones and all."

She wondered what he meant by "and all," and decided that maybe it was Cameron's spirit that needed mending. She stood. "Okay, I'll pick you up tomorrow afternoon." She jotted a phone number on a pad by his bed. "Just call the store when you're ready."

JULIA COULDN'T STOP thinking about Cameron. Restless and impatient, she strode to the automatic doors of the waiting room, stepped into the cool night air, came back, then sat in three different chairs while staring at CNN on the television. Mostly she wondered what could have gone wrong in Cameron's life that made him admit to needing this time on the mountain.

She thought about her own life, as well, and the months before she'd finally seen a doctor. She'd never been able to identify one isolated problem that had eventually sent her to him for help. She'd only known that something hadn't been right in her life, and she wasn't successfully dealing with it. A major part of her downward slide had been the breakup of a five-year relationship. She'd believed that Kevin had been the one. She'd pinned her hopes on him. Her future, her friendships and her weekends. They'd been inseparable for at least three years, one rarely seen without the other, two like-minded souls content to imagine a lifetime together.



Until suddenly she was the only one imagining.

When she'd lightheartedly brought up the subject of making their relationship permanent and legal, he'd found nothing funny about it. Nor anything remotely serious.

Julia looked up at the clock in the waiting room. 10:15 p.m. Had her mother forgotten about her? It was too late now to bring Katie out. Julia walked to the wall of windows and stared at the near empty parking lot. And her thoughts returned once more to Cameron.

Had he been the one to initiate divorce proceedings with his wife? Had she disappointed him, or had it been the other way around? Had the breakup been amiable? Julia supposed some could be, between two rational people who decided that ending a relationship would result in improved lives for both.

She recalled the day she'd gotten the prescription for antidepressants. Kevin wasn't the only reason she'd seen a doctor. There had been problems at work, frantic calls from her mother, no calls from her sister. And nearly everyone Julia knew in Manhattan was on some kind of antistress medication. Pills were the big city quick fix that many people relied on.

Headlights veered from the main road and traveled up the drive to the hospital entrance, saving Julia from a potential bout with her conscience. She watched the approaching car closely, hoping to identify it as her mother's dependable old Ford. "Thank goodness," she said, when Cora pulled up to the drop-off area, and she went outside to meet her.

Cora got out, handed over a bundle of clothes, stared at Julia's hands and gasped. "Oh, my heavens, Julia."

"It's nothing, Mama. The hospital staff overreacted. I can remove these bandages in the morning." Too tired to control her impatience, she asked, "Where have you been?" She looked down at her soiled garments. "I feel like I've been wearing this stuff for weeks."

Cora frowned and Julia felt bad. She didn't mean to take her foul mood out on her mother. She considered going inside to a restroom to change clothes but decided she wouldn't bother now. "Did you lose power at the cabin?"

"No, but I had to make arrangements for Katie," Cora explained. "The time just got away from me, and I didn't want to make her come along this late."

Julia put the clothes in the backseat and did the best she could to dust dried particles of mud from her jeans. "I'll just wear these home now." Once in the car, Julia asked her mother "So what did you do with Katie?"

"I put her to bed and called Rosalie. She was happy to watch her while I came for you."

Julia made a mental note to thank the neighbor who also helped out at the store during the busy season.

"Unfortunately, Rosie had to pick up her supper dishes first," Cora said. "She was running late because the TV kept showing bits about the accident."

Julia settled into the seat and closed her eyes. All at once her

bones felt as if they were melting into little puddles around her. She rested her head back and said, "Oh."

"You were on television. That lady reporter talked about what happened and they showed you." Cora pulled out of the hospital parking lot. "I wish they'd let you go in and comb your hair first."

"Yeah, that would have been nice," Julia said absently, knowing a comb wouldn't have helped much.

"So how is Cameron?" Cora asked.

Julia looked over at her mother. "Pretty banged up. He's having surgery on his wrist tomorrow morning. Tonight, he mostly had tests."

Cora nodded with understanding. "They do that these days. Make sure the ticker's working right, your blood pressure's normal, all that stuff, before you go under the knife. I suppose it's good they take such care."

Through Julia's haze of exhaustion, Cora's voice seemed to drone on in another dimension. "I suppose," she said.

"I guess he's going back to Raleigh now that he's had the accident."

"Actually, no. He's asked me to pick him up tomorrow and take him to his grandfather's place."

Cora looked at Julia and quickly returned her attention to the road. "He's staying up there?"

"That's what he said."

"Pure foolishness."

"I kind of thought so."

“What time will you get him?”

“In the afternoon. He’s going to call the store when they release him.”

“I’m glad it’s not the morning,” Cora said. “I told Katie you were taking her to the elementary school to see about getting her enrolled.”

Suddenly alert, Julia sat up straight. “You did?”

“Yes. She needs normalcy in her life, a schedule.”

Julia couldn’t argue. “How did she react?”

“She said she didn’t need to go to school. I hope you can find a way to change her mind, Julia. Your idea with the bubble bath seemed to work well the other day.”

Julia sighed. “I’ll think of something, Mama.”

AT NINE O’CLOCK Thursday morning, while she waited for Katie to get dressed, Julia called the Vickers County Medical Center to get an update on Cameron’s condition. The operator switched her to the second floor station where a nurse reported that Cameron was currently in surgery. She suggested that Julia call back in an hour or so.

Julia tried to put her concern for Cameron out of her mind as she and Katie drove down Whisper Mountain and headed for Glen Springs Elementary. Katie hadn’t spoken a word, so Julia attempted to break the ice. “I’m excited to see the school,” she said. “I was very happy there as a student.”

Katie stared out the window.

“Did you enjoy school in Tennessee?” she asked.

“It was okay.”

“Were your teachers nice?”

“I guess.”

Julia drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. “You know, one thing about living behind the store is that you don’t get the opportunity to meet other kids. We’re kind of isolated on the mountain. I suppose that’s why I always looked forward to school.”

Katie knotted her hands together.

“I’ll bet you miss your friends in Tennessee.”

Katie turned her head, stared out the side window. “I have you and Grandma.”

Julia gripped the wheel tighter. Oh, baby. But I’m not always going to be here.

The principal of Glen Springs Elementary was a staid though seemingly competent individual who said he’d spoken to Cora and he understood the circumstances that made Katie’s enrollment unique. While Katie waited in the outer office, he assured Julia that the staff would do everything in their power to make her niece’s assimilation stress-free. Then he instructed his secretary to send Katie into his office.

Her eyes downcast and her hands fisted at her sides, Katie walked stiffly to the wooden chair on the other side of the principal’s desk.

Mr. Dickson interlaced his fingers on top of his desk, smiled and said, “So, you’re Katie.”

She didn't respond. Julia wasn't surprised. It was a rhetorical question.

"We're very happy to welcome you as a Glen Springs Chipmunk," he said.

Katie stared at her hands. Her feet, a clear six inches above the floor, began to swing.

"You can start tomorrow." The principal waited for a reaction, predictably received none, and prompted, "How does that sound, young lady?"

Katie turned to Julia. "I don't need to go to school," she insisted.

"I was hoping that perhaps you'd want to, honey," Julia said.

"I don't. I want to stay with you and Grandma."

Julia smiled. "We're okay for a lot of things, but we can't help you learn everything you need to know. You have to have a real teacher for that."

Mr. Dickson added his sensible argument. "And the government requires that you attend school. You wouldn't want your aunt and grandmother to get in trouble for keeping you out, would you?"

Katie stared up at him, her eyes crinkling in determination. "I can homeschool. Lots of kids do."

Julia couldn't help admiring Katie's quick wits. Unfortunately homeschooling wasn't possible for her niece. Once Julia returned to Manhattan, Cora wouldn't have time to oversee lessons with her responsibilities at the store. "There are always options,

Katie,” she said. “But I think we should try this one first.”

When Katie started to protest, she said, “And tomorrow will be just right. It’s Friday. You can attend one day and have the whole weekend to tell us about your class and the kids you met. What do you think of that idea?”

Katie didn’t appear to think much of it at all, so Julia tossed in one more selling point. “And after school, we can stay late, visit the library and take out some books.”

Baby steps, Julia. One inch at a time and eventually a foot is gained.

“We could do that, I guess,” Katie said.

Julia stood, extending her hand to Mr. Dickson. “We’ll be back tomorrow. In the meantime, if you would consult the school’s guidance counselor about Katie as we discussed, I’d be grateful.”

“Certainly. We’ll see you ladies in the morning.”

When they left the school five minutes later, Katie took Julia’s hand. “What are we going to do now?” she asked.

Julia paused, considering the answer. “Excellent question. I’m thinking we should go to the mall, have a snack at the food court and buy you some new clothes, maybe some especially sparkly things.” She smiled down at Katie. “Just in case Friday goes well, we have to be prepared for Monday.”

And then I’ll pick up Cameron at the hospital and see if he’s come up with a better option for his situation, she thought. Before starting her car, Julia called the hospital on her cell phone. The

second floor nurse assured her that Cameron had come through the surgery just fine and was resting in the recovery room.

WITH SEVERAL shopping bags in the backseat of her rented Toyota and ice cream still sticky on their fingers, Julia and Katie headed up Whisper Mountain. Julia pulled into the gravel lot of Cora's General Store and parked next to the cube van belonging to Sunny Vale Bakery. "Have you ever met Oscar?" she asked Katie.

"No."

"Then you're in for a treat, maybe literally, although you'll have to save it for after dinner now."

The store was crowded for a weekday afternoon. Cora had a line at the cash register, and Rosalie was helping customers pick out native-made jewelry from the glass showcase. A couple sat at one of the booths in the snack bar chowing down on Cora's famous hot dogs, "the best on Whisper Mountain," according to the sign on the store's front porch. Of course, nowhere could the customers read that Cora's hot dogs were the only ones offered, since the store was the only stop between the town of Glen Springs and the top of the mountain.

A middle-aged man with thick salt-and-pepper hair looked up from a display shelf where he was stocking prepackaged goodies labeled with the Sunny Vale trademark, a bright sun rising over a meadow. "Hey, Julia," he called. "Good to see you."

"Same here, Oscar." She walked over, gave him a quick hug and stepped back so he could see Katie. "I'd like you to meet



my niece.”

The man smiled at Katie. “I heard there was another golden-haired Sommerville lady here,” he said, his old-country accent as charming as always. Oscar Sobriato was proud of his Italian heritage. He rubbed his thumb over his chin and gave serious consideration to the items he’d arranged so far. “I wonder what this little one would like, hmm? Do you suppose she wants a MoonPie?”

Julia laughed. Oscar had been on this route for only five years, but legends were passed down forever on Whisper Mountain. “I know her to be a cookie fanatic,” she said.

“Pick out what you like,” Oscar said, waving Katie closer to the goodies. While Katie studied her choices, Oscar took Julia’s arm and led her down the aisle. Placing his thick, soft hands on the sides of her face, he said, “I’m so sorry, Julia. I remember when you were here for your papa’s funeral. Such a short time ago, and now Cora can’t even bury her daughter in the family tradition.”

“Thanks, Oscar. Folks have stopped by all week. That has helped.”

He folded his arms. “How are they doing—your mama and the little one?”

“Okay, I guess. Katie is so quiet. That really worries me. And Mama...” She tried to give the impression that she wasn’t overly concerned about Cora. “Well, Mama is Mama. She’s sad but trying to cope.”

Oscar glanced over at the cash register. "She's got a strong constitution, that one."

Julia's eyes widened. My mama?

Oscar thumped his chest. "And a heart as big as this mountain. She loves with it and grieves with it, and always takes care of those around her."

Julia followed his gaze, tried to see her mother as Oscar did. She supposed she could agree with the heart part of his description, but the rest of it was up for debate. When she looked back at Oscar, she realized his attention hadn't wavered from Cora.

"But she looks tired," he said. "And too thin." He patted his own round belly. "She needs to eat more. Pasta, some hearty Italian sausage. And a few napoleons wouldn't hurt, either." He shook a finger at Julia. "You see to it, okay?"

"Okay." As she walked back to Katie, Julia watched her mother with the customers. She smiled as she always had, but the gesture was void of any real feeling. She engaged in small talk, but her voice sounded flat, toneless. All the Sommerville women had blond hair, but Cora's lacked any sign of a healthy luster. Her blunt cut hung straight to her shoulders and was streaked with coarse gray strands that made her pale face appear washed-out, older than her fifty-eight years. An idea occurred to Julia. There had been an aisle at Pope's Drugstore for Katie. And there was one for Cora, too.

Julia settled Katie at a booth with a coloring book and crayons.

When the last customer paid his bill, she went to the register. “Has Cameron called, Mama?”

“No, not yet. But someone was here from the towing company. He said they were going to try to bring Cameron’s car up from the ravine later on today. But he figured it was a total loss.”

Julia sighed. “I thought it would be.” She looked at her watch. “It’s almost one o’clock. I think I’ll just drive over to the hospital and see if he’s ready to go.”

“Okay.”

Julia waved at Katie and smiled at Oscar, who was taking his sweet time stacking muffins and cupcakes on the shelves. Had he always given Cora’s General Store such special attention? Julia was suddenly quite certain that Oscar found more to like at Cora’s than just the invigorating ride up the mountain.

HAVING FOUND OUT Cameron’s location from the receptionist, Julia took the elevator to the second floor and headed toward his room. Her pulse increased with each step down the quiet hallway. Though she hadn’t fantasized about Cameron for years, just hearing his voice in the store last night had awakened familiar emotions. And imagining him at the bottom of the ravine had propelled her to risk her own well-being in an effort to save him.

She stopped outside Cameron’s door when she heard a voice with a clear take-charge attitude. “You simply can’t handle your immediate medical needs by yourself, Mr. Birch,” a woman said.

“Those fixator insertion points must be cleaned and dressed daily until your doctor says otherwise.”

“That’s nonsense,” Cameron argued. “I’ve had a wrist operation, not open-heart surgery.”

“But it’s your right wrist, and you’re right-handed. You can’t manage your care with your left hand.” The woman sighed. “And need I remind you that you also have a concussion and two cracked ribs. Even simple movements in the next few days will cause you pain.”

Cameron groaned. “Isn’t there a form I can sign that allows me to accept responsibility for myself? I promise you, Miss Winston, I won’t hold the hospital liable for anything that happens to me once I walk out this door.” His declaration was followed by a whistled intake of breath. Julia’s own breath hitched in sympathy with his obvious stab of pain.

“Your doctor won’t release you until we’ve established home care, which, unfortunately is proving quite difficult considering your remote locale. None of our regular attendants will commit to traveling that mountain road. It’s known to be quite dangerous in iffy weather conditions.” She paused. “I guess I don’t have to remind you of that.”

Julia stepped into the room just as Cameron tossed his head back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling. “This stalemate is ridiculous,” he said. “I can take care of myself. I don’t need anyone to make that drive every day just to...”

He turned his head, spotted Julia and pushed himself upright.

Just as they had so many years ago, his greengold eyes seemed to penetrate her to the core. Breaking eye contact, she caught her first glimpse of Cam's "antennae," the system of fixators sticking out of his wrist, as well as the thick gauze and sling supporting a contraption that looked more like a throwback to medieval times than an example of modern medicine. When Cameron fell back against the mattress, Julia realized he wasn't going to pull off any sort of macho display.

"Thank goodness, Julia," he said. "Will you tell this well-meaning hospital administrator that you are taking me home, and that you will see that I am appropriately tucked in and medicated?"

Miss Winston seemed relieved. "Are you a health-care professional?" she asked Julia.

Cameron darted a quick warning glance at Julia and followed it with a blatant lie. "Of course she is..."

"No, I'm not," Julia admitted before he could say anything more. "But I did agree to take Mr. Birch home today. I'm staying on Whisper Mountain myself for a while, so it's no problem. I'm not concerned about making the drive."

Cameron arched his brows. "There, you see? I'm all set. No worries."

"I'm sorry, but you still need medical care. I'm waiting for one more home-care person to report back to me. If she doesn't agree to make the trip daily, then you'll have to come into the hospital every day or make arrangements for more accessible

accommodations.”

Cameron shook his head. “I can’t do that.”

Miss Winston picked up a cell phone, which had been sitting on her clipboard. “Then we wait.”

He blew out a long, frustrated breath. “There has to be something we can do.”

Julia inched to the doorway. “I’ll come back later when all the details have been worked out.”

He nodded. “You might as well.”

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