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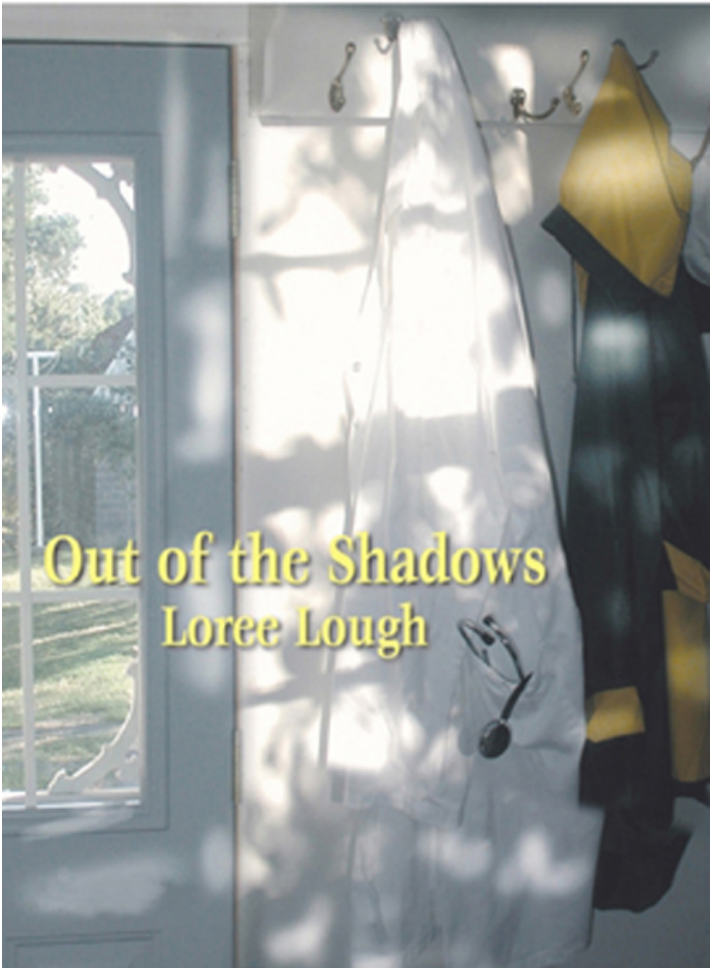

Loree Lough
Out of the Shadows

Аннотация

SCIENCE VERSUS…FAITH?Dr. Wade Cameron was a man of science– it came with the territory. He knew there was nothing between him and Patrice McKenzie short of chemistry. Never mind that the petite auburn-haired beauty had a smile that would put the sun's glow to shame, and a heart big enough to match.But as a man of science he also knew that family history counted…and his clan's sordid past left too much to chance. The twice-voted "Bachelor of the Year" was determined to continue his no-commitment policy…until Patrice began making this nonbeliever think that maybe he'd taken a wrong turn. Maybe there was something permanent in God's plan for him?

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Without warning, Wade gathered her up in his warm, protective embrace.

"What am I gonna do with you?" he sighed into her hair. "You're as bighearted and pigheaded as they come. And while that's a tempting combination, I can't be—"

"So who asked you to be my protector? I told you, I can take —"

"—care of yourself," he finished for her. "I never meant to insult you. It's just that, for some reason, you worry me."

Patrice couldn't help admitting that she was touched by his concern. "There's no need for that. I'm fine."

"Something is happening here," he whispered, lifting her chin. "And I don't know whether to run from it or straight at it."

Patrice trembled in his arms. If he isn't the guy for me, Lord, she prayed, speak now or forever hold Your peace….

LOREE LOUGH

A full-time writer for nearly fifteen years, Loree Lough has produced more than two thousand articles, dozens of short stories and novels for the young (and young at heart), and all have been published here and abroad. Author of thirty-seven award-winning romances, Loree also writes as Cara McCormack and Aleesha Carter.

A comedic teacher and conference speaker, Loree loves sharing in classrooms what she's learned the hard way. The mother of two grown daughters, she lives in Maryland with her husband and a fourteen-year-old cat named Mouser (who, until this year—when she caught and killed her first mouse—had no idea what a rodent was).

Out of the Shadows
Loree Lough

www.millsandboon.co.uk

…yea, in the shadow of Thy wings
will I make my refuge….
—Psalms 57:1

Out of the Shadows is dedicated to all the "real"
Patrices out there who dedicatedly devote
themselves to children in hospitals
all over the globe; my hat's off to you all!

Dear Reader,

Tragedy…

Sooner or later, each of us has a head-on collision with it. If we're strong when it hits, we pick up the pieces and move on. If

not, we throw up our hands and demand "Why, Lord?"

But Christians are taught "Don't ask why. Just have faith." Easier said than done! Because suffering tests more than our mettle, it burrows into the foundation of our faith, making us question God's promise: "Let all those who put their trust in Thee rejoice; let them ever shout for joy, because Thou defendest them." (Psalms 5:11)

There's a line in an old song that goes something like "into each life a little rain must fall." As Wade and Patrice discovered, the Creator defended them from the rain when He said, "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a token of a covenant between Me and thee." (Genesis 9:13) Alone, each was blinded by life's briny storms, but when He brought them together, their eyes were opened to the rainbow that led them out of the shadows…to the soft, warm light of enduring love.

May you bask in that same tender radiance, all the rest of your life!

All my best,

P.S. If you enjoyed Out of the Shadows, please drop me a note c/o Steeple Hill Books, 300 East 42nd Street, New York, New York 10017. I love hearing from my readers and try to answer

every letter personally!

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Prologue

Fifteen years ago, Halloween Night

If not for that lousy D on his last report card, he'd have a car to protect him from the biting late-October wind. His mother's stern lecture echoed in his head: "If you're not responsible enough to get decent grades in school, Wade Michael Cameron, you're not responsible enough to maneuver two tons of steel on the road!"

Angry—at his mom for making the stupid "C Average Required to Get a Driver's License" rule, at Mr. Woodley for giving him the low grade in Biology, at himself for not turning in the report that would've earned him that C—Wade dug his hands deeper into the pockets of his windbreaker.

Scowling, he hunched his shoulders and walked faster. Why hadn't he grabbed a heavier jacket when his mom suggested it? Well, another block and he'd be home. And hopefully when he got there, there'd be leftover lasagna in the fridge…

Ear-piercing sirens and the red-and-white strobes of fire trucks and ambulances shattered his train of thought. Sounded to Wade as though the commotion was coming from the cemetery.

His get-home-quick pace stalled as the turmoil near the railroad tracks mounted. He ran for a closer look.

The blades of a helicopter whipped dry leaves and grit round and round him, making Wade feel like he'd been trapped in a minitornado. Forearm shielding his eyes, he ducked behind the

trunk of a massive oak.

To the adventure-hungry sixteen-year-old, it looked like a movie set, what with the headlights of a dozen cop cars crisscrossing against the revolving strobes of emergency vehicles. Dark-uniformed policemen bolted up and down the polished railroad tracks, hollering and yelling, some aiming flashlights into the woods, others marching through the underbrush looking for…

Looking for what? Wade wondered, suddenly forgetting how cold he'd been a moment ago.

"Found a boot over here," one cop shouted above the whirlybird's rotors.

"Got me a flannel sleeve," bellowed another.

A boot? A shirt sleeve? Wade's pulse pounded in his ears.

"Hey! Get a gurney over here, stat!" shouted a female paramedic. "The engineer is in full cardiac arrest!"

All activity now concentrated on the front of the freight train. Men and women who'd been searching on and around the tracks moved in. Soon, Wade couldn't see a thing past broad-shouldered cops, EMTs and fire-fighters.

Surely these guys didn't think the pumpkin-headed dummy Wade and his pals made had been real…. He leaned left and right, wishing for a better look. He soon discovered it wasn't the boys' Halloween dummy on the stretcher, but a real-life human being. The man's face, contorted with pain, was white as the fleecy blanket covering him.

He and the guys had made the dummy, then thrown it onto the tracks to see how far the train would drag it. Evidently, the engineer had mistaken it for a real person, and radioed for help to find the "man" who was missing after he hit him.

Wade found it difficult to swallow past the hard, dry knot in his throat. His breath came in short, harsh gasps and he knuckled his eyes. Wade and his pals Luke, Travis, Buddy and Adam had done some pretty outrageous things in the past, but nothing so terrible as this!

A flurry of activity captured his attention as several men lifted the gurney and ran, full steam ahead, toward the waiting helicopter. Seconds later, the machine shot straight up into the black sky.

"Lord," he whispered, "let that guy be okay…."

Not much chance God would listen to someone like him—especially considering…. Still, Wade repeated his prayer, just in case.

"The engineer told me he saw a guy on the tracks," he heard a cop say to a firefighter. "Said he braked for all he was worth, but couldn't stop in time."

Wade squeezed his eyes shut, admitting the obvious. What the engineer had mistaken for a homeless man was nothing but an assemblage of items Buddy had ordered the guys to bring to the cemetery—an old shirt, tattered trousers, beaten-up boots—stuffed with week-old newspapers and topped by a jack-o'-lantern head, and a ragtag fedora.

Swallowing, he stepped out from behind the shrubs and walked up to the nearest emergency vehicle. Assuming his best curious-kid expression, he said, "Hey, mister, what's goin' on?"

The paramedic looked up from his gear and frowned. "What're you doin' out this time of night, son?"

Wade shrugged. "I live right over there. So what happened?"

The paramedic went back to stuffing equipment into the side of his ambulance. "Engineer had himself one doozy of a heart attack."

Heart attack.

Wade's heart thudded wildly. Slapping a palm over his eyes, he groaned.

"Aw, don't get your britches in a knot over it," the paramedic said. "Stuff like that happens hundreds of times a day." He shrugged. "Hard as we try to save 'em, there's nothing we can do about it sometimes."

Maybe so, Wade thought as guilt swirled in his gut. But sometimes, they did save people. "Y'think he'll be okay?"

"Hard to say." He slammed the compartment door. "Doesn't look too good, though."

Wade swallowed. "So where will they take him?"

The paramedic slid behind the steering wheel. "University Hospital." He fired up the truck, then met Wade's eyes. "Now go home and get to bed. That's what I'm gonna do."

Nodding, Wade dug his hands deep into his jacket pockets. "Yessir."

And the instant the man was out of sight, Wade stuck out his thumb, intent on hitching a ride into Baltimore with the first driver headed for the city.

Wade waved his thanks to the truck driver who'd dropped him off at the hospital, and shoved through the emergency room doors.

The silence was almost eerie, and the reception area was illuminated only by the dim, flickering fluorescent lights above the nurses' station. In the waiting area, a man flapped the pages of his raggedy newspaper, and directly across from him, a young girl sat on the edge of her chair, hands clasped tightly on her knees and eyes glued to the doors that read No Admittance: Staff Only.

Wade walked up to the nurses' station. A nurse met his eyes. "Can I help you?"

"I, uh, I'm here to see how that guy is doing…the one they just brought in on the helicopter?"

She raised one eyebrow. "You a relative of Mr. Delaney?"

Wade gulped. So the engineer had a name: Mr. Delaney. "N-no, I'm a—"

"Friend of the family?"

Hardly, Wade thought, but he nodded, anyway.

"Wait over there," the nurse said, using her chin as a pointer. "Lemme see what I can find out."

Wade slumped into a chair, two down from the young girl. He leaned forward, scrubbed both hands over his face and shook

his head.

"Who are you waiting for?" the girl asked.

From between his fingers, Wade looked over at her. She appeared to be ten or twelve years old, wearing a faded pink sweat suit and fuzzy bunny slippers. "Just some guy." Elbows on knees, he laced his fingers together. "You?"

"My little brother, Timmy." Her big eyes fixed on the No Admittance doors. "He's been in there forever."

Wade sat back, propped an ankle on a knee. "What's wrong with him?"

She sighed, kicked one foot until the bunny ears flopped. "He was born with this weird heart condition. We have to bring him in here two or three times a month, usually in the middle of the night." Another sigh. "I'll bet he's slept here a couple hundred times."

"That stinks." Wade didn't think he'd ever seen a sadder face. He wished he had enough change in his pocket to buy her a soda, maybe a package of chips or a candy bar. "You always wait out here alone when your folks bring him in?"

She nodded. "It doesn't usually take this long, though." She glanced at the big double doors again. "Something's wrong."

He noticed that one of her bunnies had just one eye, the other was missing an ear. "What makes you say that?"

Tears welled in her big, dark eyes, and her lower lip trembled. "Usually, somebody comes to tell me something by now." She glanced at the clock on the wall. "I've been here nearly three

hours and—"

Wade leaped to his feet. "I'll be right back."

He knocked on the nurses' station desk. "Um, excuse me… I hate to bother you, but that little girl over there," he said, gesturing with his thumb over his shoulder, "has been waiting three hours to hear about her brother. Do you have any idea what's going on back there?"

The lady he'd talked to earlier leaned to the right and peered around him. "Poor li'l thing," she said, clucking her tongue.

"She's getting to be a regular fixture around this place," the woman said. She looked at Wade. "Let me see what I can find out." Then, "Say, Marsha, why don't you see if you can scare up an o.j. or something for these kids." She winked at Wade and hurried into the ER.

Marsha rooted around in a small refrigerator. "Here y'go," she said, handing him two tiny cartons of chocolate milk. "Need straws?"

Wade accepted the milk. "I don't," he said, glancing toward the waiting room, "but she might like one."

"You're a nice boy," Marsha said when he took it from her.

Nice. Yeah, right, he thought, remembering what had happened to the engineer. But "Thanks" is what he said.

Sitting beside the girl, Wade peeled back the spout of one carton and slid a straw into its opening. "You want me to see if I can get 'em to cough up some doughnuts or something?"

She sent him a hint of a smile. "No, I'm not hungry." After

taking a tiny sip, she looked straight into his eyes and said, "You're very nice. Thank you."

Wade nearly choked on his chocolate milk. All his life, he'd been hearing what a loser he was, and twice in as many minutes, two people had told him the exact opposite. What a joke, he thought, because if they knew him…if they'd seen him earlier tonight, at the cemetery, they wouldn't think he was so nice!

"What's your name?" the girl asked.

"Wade," he said, nervously opening and closing the milk carton. "Yours?"

"Patrice McKenzie." She tilted her head slightly. "Do you live near the hospital?"

He shook his head. "Ellicott City. How 'bout you?"

"I live in Freeland, on a farm."

"A farm? With cows and pigs and horses and stuff?" He grinned. "No kiddin'."

That made her laugh—just a little—but it made Wade feel good to have brightened her mood, even slightly.

The ER doors swooshed open, interrupting his thoughts. "Patrice?" a woman wailed. "Patrice, baby, where are you?"

The girl jumped up so fast, she nearly spilled her chocolate milk down the front of her pink sweatshirt. "Right here, Mom."

Wade figured the man and woman who bundled her into a group hug must be her parents. From the looks of them, the news about her brother wasn't good. Then Patrice started to cry. The misery seemed to start deep in the core of her, ebbing out one

dry, hacking sob at a time and racking her tiny body.

As Patrice's family trudged out of the ER arm in arm, Wade realized little Timmy must have died. He hung his head. Maybe he should've tried to scare up something sweet for her to eat, even though she'd said she hadn't wanted anything. Because the way things looked, no telling how long it might be before—

"Hey, kid."

Wade got to his feet. "Yeah?"

"Sorry, but we lost Mr. Delaney, 'bout fifteen minutes ago."

Wade pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

The nurse he'd spoken to earlier put a hand on Wade's shoulder. "The cops are on their way now, to tell the family. You might want to get over first chance you get, see if there's anything you can do for 'em…since you're a friend of the family and all."

Friend. Shame burned hot in Wade's gut. Funny, he thought, that until the nurse said "friend," he hadn't understood what the word hypocrite meant.

"How'd you get here?"

"Walked," he fibbed, knowing if he said "hitch-hiked," he'd probably be in for a safety sermon. The nurse seemed like a nice enough woman, but Wade was in no mood for a lecture, no matter how well intended.

"So, how you gettin' home?"

Wade shrugged. "Same way, I guess."

"I could call you a cab…."

Shaking his head, Wade got to his feet. “Nah. I’ll walk. It’s not far.” You’re gettin’ awful good at fibbin’, he told himself. Better watch it.

Truth was, there were thirty miles between here and his house, but he’d walk every step of it. It’d do him good, having all that time to think.

The nurse frowned. “This isn’t the best neighborhood, so you keep your eyes peeled, y’hear?”

Wade fought the impulse to exhale a sarcastic snicker. Nothing was going to happen to him; bad things only happened to good people.

“Okay, then, if you’re sure….”

He nodded, and the nurse headed back into the ER, leaving Wade alone in the waiting room.

Alone, and feeling more lost than he’d ever felt in his life.

Chapter One

Present day, Halloween Eve

As he stepped off the elevator, Wade glanced at his watch, then ran a hand nervously through his hair. He'd never honed the ability to keep an emotional distance from his patients; especially when the patient was a kid.

Knowing it would be the toughest visit of his rounds, he'd saved this patient for last. Just outside her hospital room, he took a moment to get his head on straight. Then, one hand on the door handle, he froze as a whisper-soft voice from inside the room said, "And may God bless Emily and speed her recovery."

Wade grimaced. Fat lot of good your prayers are gonna do, he silently scolded this patient's mother, 'cause if the Big Guy exists, He ain't listening.

Only yesterday, Wade had spent nearly eleven hours in the OR with little Emily Kirkpatrick. He couldn't help but wonder what kind of God would stand idly by as a six-year-old endured such intense and constant pain. Now, shaking his head, he forced a bright smile and shoved his way into the child's room.

"Dr. Cameron," Emily's mom said, hands still clasped in prayer, "how good to see you."

Humbled by the gratitude on the mother's weary face, Wade felt himself blush. "How goes it, Mrs. Kirkpatrick?" He grabbed Emily's chart from the plastic slot attached to her door, tucking

it under his arm as he met the woman's eyes. "Get any sleep last night?"

"Oh, I managed to catch a few winks. How about you? You're the one who spent eleven hours in the operating room."

Long ago, he'd accepted that now and then, he'd run across someone who seemed to have turned nurturing into an art form. Mrs. Kirkpatrick was one of those people. "Slept like a baby," he answered.

Laughing, Emily's mom grabbed her purse. "If you don't mind, I'll run down the hall and grab a quick cup of coffee while you're examining Emily."

"Take your time," Wade said, dragging a chair closer to Emily's bed.

Emily opened sleepy eyes. "Hi, Doc."

He perched on the edge of the chair. "Hi, yourself, kiddo. How y'doin'?"

Emily managed a wan smile. "Hurts," she said, pointing to her chest.

"Sorry to hear that, sweetie." Gently, Wade laid her chart beside her on the mattress. "You're due for a little medicine soon, so by suppertime, you'll be feeling much better."

She gave a weak nod.

"So how'd you sleep?" Gently, he touched a finger to the end of her upturned nose. "Did those busybody nurses keep you awake, taking your temperature and stuff?"

Her smile broadened a bit. "Yeah, but it's okay. Mommy says

they're just trying to help me get better."

He took her tiny hand in his. "What's this?" Wade asked, grinning.

"A ladybug, crawling on a daisy," she said. "This nice man came in and painted it on me." Her blue eyes darted around, then settled on something across the room. "Miss Patrice brought him here."

Wade followed Emily's gaze to where "Miss Patrice" stood, entertaining Emily's roommate. If the young woman had seen him enter, she gave no sign of it; her attention was fixed on her one-child audience.

Which was fine by Wade; volunteers had good intentions, what with their puppets and face paints and musical instruments, but in his opinion, their main contribution was to wear out his patients and generally get in the way.

"And if Nurse Joan tells me you don't eat your supper again tonight," Miss Patrice made her monkey puppet say, "I'm going to tell my best friend."

The child snickered. "Yeah?" the girl demanded, grinning. "Who's your best friend?"

"Why, Santa Claus, of course!" Miss Patrice manipulated the sticks controlling the puppet, making it tousle the child's hair. Wade would have bet the kid's peals of laughter could be heard all the way to the bank of elevators down the hall. He couldn't help but notice that her merriment had crept to Emily's side of the room, too.

"If Santa finds out you're not taking proper care of yourself," said the puppet's gravelly voice, "there's gonna be T-R-O-U-B-L-E." She made the monkey wiggle a hairy finger under the girl's nose. "And you know what that spells!"

"Trouble!" Emily answered, grinning from ear to ear. For the moment, at least, she appeared to have forgotten her pain.

Patrice whirled around, eyes wide and smiling, and, puppet balanced on her forearm, stepped up to Emily's bed. "And just who do you think you are, li'l missy, the Spelling Bee Queen?"

"No, silly," she giggled, "I'm Emily Kirkpatrick."

"Pleased t'meetcha, Emily Kirkpatrick!" The monkey tickled her chin. "My name is Mortimer Mohammad Mastriani McMonkey."

"That's a long name!"

Mort did a little jig on the edge of Emily's bed, then tapped a paw to his chin. "Yes, it is a bit of a mouthful, isn't it. Tell you what…you can call me Mort." The monkey's hands rested on its hips. "Now tell me, cutie, how're you doin'?"

"I had a op'ration yesterday." She gave Wade an adoring look. "Dr. Cameron fixed the hole in my heart."

The puppeteer met Wade's eyes. For a moment, no one spoke…not even Mort McMonkey.

"Yes, so I heard," Miss Patrice said at last.

The puppeteer had the most expressive face Wade had ever seen. The short, reddish-brown curls topping her pretty head reminded him of the elves on those cookie packages. He

wondered why she allowed it to cover one eye; it seemed to him those big brown eyes were so warm, they could thaw an igloo.

She looked vaguely familiar, and he was about to admit it when she moved Mort aside enough to expose her name badge. Patrice McKenzie, it said.

"Will you be having supper with us tonight, Emily?" Mort asked.

Wade was too stunned to hear Emily's response. He'd met a Patrice or two since that night, but how many Patrice McKenzies could there be? Can't be that Patrice, he told himself.

Could it?

She blinked, confused, he presumed, by his scrutiny.

It had been fifteen years since he'd shared a bleak ER waiting room with a teary, terrified girl, but he'd recognize those big brown eyes anywhere. If the young woman on the other side of Emily's bed wasn't the same Patrice, he'd eat his stethoscope.

Mort started hip-hopping again. "Well, well, well," the monkey said, "it looks to me like your Dr. Cameron is a real live hero, Emily Kirkpatrick!"

The girl's mother stepped into the room just then. "Yes, yes he is," she said, standing beside him.

Hero? The very idea was laughable! Wade wanted to warn them all that, in the first place, though Emily's condition was much better than it had been at this time yesterday, she was far from out of the woods. And in the second place…

The train fiasco that had sent him to the ER all those years ago

flashed through his memory. Heart pounding, Wade checked his watch. “So, are you ready to show me your incision, Em?”

She nodded. “Okay, I guess.”

Because of her heart condition, Emily wasn’t as big as other girls her age. The operation made her seem even smaller, frail, vulnerable. Wade finger-combed golden locks from her forehead. “Say goodbye to Mort,” he said gently, “’cause we need to close the curtain.”

She shook the monkey’s tiny, hairy hand. “G’bye, Mort. See you later?”

“You betcha!” The puppet waved at Emily, at the child in the next bed, at Mrs. Kirkpatrick, then at Wade. “See yas later, ’gators!”

As Patrice started for the door, Wade grabbed her elbow. “Mind hanging around a minute? I have something to ask you.”

Her dark brows rose slightly, as if to say, What could you possibly want to ask me?

“Okay,” Mort answered in Patrice’s stead, “but it’s gonna cost ya, Doc.”

For a reason he couldn’t explain, Wade abandoned his all-business demeanor. “Name your price, monkey face.”

The kids and Mrs. Kirkpatrick laughed as Mort slapped both fuzzy hands over his mouth. “Monkey face? Well, I never!” He shook a furry finger at the doctor. “It was gonna be just a cup of coffee, but after that remark, you’ll hafta throw in a slice of pie, too!”

Small price to pay, Wade thought, for a private session with Mortimer Mohammad Mastriani McMonkey…and his handler.

"I'll be in my office," Patrice said.

For the second time in as many minutes, she'd used her own voice. Like everything else about her, it was adorable.

But wait—had she said her office? "Since when do hospital volunteers have offices?"

Patrice laughed, the sound reminding him of the small copper bells that used to hang on his mom's back porch.

"Technically I'm not a volunteer," she explained, walking backward toward the hall, "But I am the person who makes sure there are volunteers for the children. I'm the pediatric social worker who heads up Child Services." She opened the door. "You know where the Zoo Lobby is?"

Wade didn't like admitting that he hadn't a clue. "Ellicott General is like a small city, and I've spent most of my time in the 'heart' of town, if you'll pardon the pun."

Mort came to life again. "I get it, Doc," the monkey said. "Cardiologist…heart…. Ha-ha-ha." Mort patted Wade's shoulder. "First-floor elevators to the giant stuffed animal cages, left down the hall, office on the right." Clapping, the monkey added, "The sign above the door says Child Services. Got it?"

Wade was about to echo "Got it," when Patrice winked and ducked into the hall.

"She spreads such joy wherever she goes," Mrs. Kirkpatrick said as Wade pulled the curtain around her daughter's bed. "And

isn't she just the cutest thing?"

"Yeah, cute," he muttered halfheartedly, opening Emily's file. He'd never been a big advocate of non-family members meandering in and out of the hospital, overstaying their welcome, leaving behind their germs. And Patrice McKenzie had built a career of inviting them to do just that.

He wondered how much joy she'd feel like spreading if he gave her his two cents worth on the subject.

He pictured the long-lashed, dark eyes, heard her lilting voice in his memory, and found himself fighting an urge to rush through Emily's examination so he could make his way past the Zoo Lobby to the Child Services office…

…and the lovely lady who'd breathed life into Mortimer Mohammad Mastriani McMonkey.

She caught sight of her reflection in the silver frame that held a photo of her father, taken before the fiery car crash. Instinctively, she fluffed her hair, effectively hiding the scar. The hideous, horrible welt coiled from just below her right earlobe to the corner of her eye, like a rope that tied her, permanently, to the accident that had paralyzed her father.

Patrice sat back and squeezed her eyes shut. It wasn't until her knuckles began to ache that she realized how tightly she'd been gripping the chair's wooden armrests. It had taken several sessions with her pastor to realize why she refused to get rid of the picture…and the scar. Flexing her fingers, she sighed. "Someday," Pete Phillips had counseled, "you'll give them both

to God. Until then—"

Footsteps, just outside her office door, cut short the memory. Grabbing a pen, she hunched over the papers piled high on her desk and feigned hard work.

"Knock, knock…."

She recognized the charming baritone: Dr. Wade Cameron.

Patrice looked up and smiled. "Hi," she said, standing. "Come on in."

He placed a partitioned cardboard tray on one of the chrome-and-blue upholstered chairs in front of her desk, then sat in the other. "All they had was cherry," he said, handing her a plastic-wrapped slice of pie. "Hope that's okay."

A nervous giggle popped from her lips. "Oh. Wow. I, um, I was only kidding," she said, as he put a disposable cup on the corner of her desk. "About the pie, I mean."

He held up one hand. "We had a deal." Grinning, he glanced at the puppet, leaning on the silver picture frame. "Well, the monkey and I had a deal, anyway."

She liked his smile. Liked his eyes, too. There was something familiar about him. No big surprise; thousands of medical professionals made up the Ellicott staff. She'd probably passed him in the halls, or shared an elevator, or stood in the cafeteria line with—

"Your directions were great," he said. "I found your office just like that." He snapped his fingers, then glanced around the room. "Kinda dim in here. You want me to hit the lights?"

She lifted her chin. “No. Thank you. Fluorescent light…” Pausing, Patrice folded both hands on the file folders stacked on the blotter. “It’s…it’s hard on my eyes.” Not quite a lie, but not exactly the truth, either. She found the incandescent glow of the sixty-watt light-bulb in her desk lamp more than adequate to work by, and it prevented people from seeing her scar.

“Well,” Wade said, pointing at the mess on her desk, “I can see you’re busy, so I’ll get right to the point.” He leaned forward, balancing both elbows on his knees. “I think we’ve met before.”

She put her hands in her lap. “Really?”

He nodded. “Fifteen years ago, in the ER at University Hospital.”

Patrice swallowed. Hard. Because fifteen years ago today, her brother had died. She felt her mouth drop open. “So that’s why you look so familiar. You’re the nice boy who bought me chocolate milk.”

One shoulder lifted in a slight shrug. “I didn’t buy it—the nurse at the reception desk gave it to me.”

“I stand corrected. You’re the nice boy who brought me chocolate milk.”

Wade stared at his clenched fists.

Patrice peeled the lid off her cup of coffee. When the puff of steam evaporated, she realized it wasn’t coffee, after all, but hot chocolate. Smiling, she said, “So you’re still a nice boy, I see.”

Even in the dim light, she could see him flush, reminding her of an innocent boy.

"So how're your folks?" he asked. "I remember seeing them, too, that night."

She swallowed again. "They're…" Shaking her head, she cleared her throat. Since it wasn't likely she'd be seeing him again, except maybe in passing, Patrice saw no point in telling him all the gory details. "We never quite got around to talking about why you were in the ER that night."

His gaze darting from her face to Mort to his own clasped hands, Wade frowned. "I was checking on the condition of a—" his frown deepened "—a friend."

"How'd he make out?"

He looked up. "Huh?"

"Your, uh, friend. How is he?"

"He, um, he died that night."

Patrice leaned forward. "Oh, Dr. Cameron—"

"Hey, we're old pals, so call me Wade, okay?"

"Sorry to hear about your friend," she said. "Guess that was a pretty dismal night for both of us, wasn't it."

Something was happening behind those sparkling, hazel eyes. Something that made Patrice wish she had the ability to read minds.

Wade got to his feet. "Anyway," he said, neatly sidestepping the question, "you're busy, so…"

Patrice stood, too. Somewhere deep in her heart, she'd hoped that maybe the handsome Dr. Cameron's interest in her was inspired by more than mere curiosity. She checked to make sure

her scar was still hidden. Thankfully, it was. But maybe he'd seen it in Emily's hospital room, where the lights were much brighter than in her office. "Thanks for the hot chocolate," she said. "And the pie."

He waved her thanks away. "Well…"

Well, what? she wanted to demand. He'd gotten the information he'd wanted. If he had more to say…or ask…why didn't he just come out with it?

Wade clapped one hand to the back of his neck. "I, um, I was wondering if, uh, maybe you'd, um, like to have dinner with me sometime." He pocketed both hands and stood there, a half grin on his face, waiting for her answer.

"Um, well, sure," she began, "I, uh, I guess so."

Wade began to laugh. It started slow and quiet, and escalated to a pleasant rumble. Soon, Patrice was laughing with him.

"Maybe we oughta join Toastmasters," he joked.

"Oh, sure. Like anybody would hire the Um-Uh-Er-Uh Duo to give a speech!"

His smile and laughter dulled. "I'd rather hear you stutter and stammer than listen to…just about anything."

In the seconds that followed, Patrice stood in silence, unsure what to make of his probing, penetrating gaze.

"So what do you say?"

About their mutual stuttering? she wondered. Or his dinner invitation? Suddenly aware that she was clasping and unclasping her hands, Patrice stuffed her fingertips into the back pockets of

her jean skirt. "I—"

"What's your preference? Italian? French? Asian?"

Her cheeks were hot, and she hugged herself, hoping the low lighting had kept him from seeing her blush. "I'm not fussy," she said, shrugging. "Food's food."

"How do you feel about tacos, enchiladas, chimichangas, quesadillas?"

"Long as lima beans aren't part of the recipe, I'll eat just about anything."

His eyes lit up. "Great, 'cause I know this terrific little Mexican place and—"

"Tonight?"

He shrugged. "Well, sure." The sparkle dimmed as he exhaled. "Aw, man…I should've known you'd already have a date."

Another nervous giggle popped from her. "Now, really, how could you have known a thing like—"

He interrupted with "You're gorgeous, for starters!"

When he slapped the back of his neck again, Patrice realized Wade probably regretted the compliment.

Well, she didn't; it was nice to hear, even if she didn't believe a word of it.

"I'm not busy tonight," Patrice blurted.

The glint returned to his eyes and he said, "How about scribbling your address and phone number for me on one of those business cards, there." He pointed at the plastic holder on her desk.

After grabbing a card and a pen, she printed the information he'd requested. Their fingers touched when he took the card from her extended hand, sending a tremor of warm tingles up her arm and straight to her heart. He was everything she'd ever dreamed about—tall and handsome, with muscles in all the right places and a dimple beside his generous mouth.

Uh-oh, she thought, it was happening already.

Every time she allowed herself to fall boots over bonnet for some good-looking hunk, all she ended up with was another heartache. Well, not this time! she decided, straightening her back.

Wade tucked the card into the side pocket of his white lab coat. "I'll pick you up at six, okay?"

Patrice nodded. He sounded slightly uncertain, which only added to his charm.

"Dress casual," he said, "'cause this isn't a fancy place."

Another nod. Most guys wouldn't have thought to share a thing like that, meaning that in addition to everything else, Wade was considerate. "Casual," she echoed. "Thanks."

Grinning, Wade snapped off a smart salute and headed for the elevators, whistling an off-key rendition of West Side Story's "Tonight."

Not knowing what to make of any of it, Patrice flopped onto the seat of her chair, leaned her elbows on the desk and pressed both palms to her face. "Not this time, Lord," she prayed aloud, "'cause I don't think I can survive another heartbreak."

Wade frowned at a black-framed photo hanging on his office wall, taken when he was voted Baltimore's Bachelor of the Year by The City Magazine readers last year. On its left, another picture, snapped when he won a similar award at the Heart Association Ball two years ago; on the right, a certificate naming him this year's Most Loveable Doctor.

His participation in the contests and events helped to raise money for one worthy cause or another—the only reason Wade agreed to accept the invites. When the awards arrived, Wade gave them the attention he thought they deserved…by stuffing each into the trash can. If his secretary, Tara, hadn't fished them out to mat and frame as Christmas gifts, they'd be buried deep in a Maryland landfill by now.

He pushed back from his desk, swiveled the chair around so that it faced the windows and propped his shoes on the credenza. Here, where other doctors kept pictures of their wives, their children and grandchildren, were more reminders of Wade's bachelor-for-life status.

Wade stared past his certificates and awards, across the sea of cars in the parking lot below his window. Was it his imagination, or were there colorful baby seats and booster chairs in nearly half of them?

What would it be like, he wondered, hearing the words his best friend had so recently heard: "Honey, we're going to have a baby!"? He'd never seen Adam that happy, and he'd known him nearly twenty years. Well, that wasn't entirely true; the guy

had practically done handstands on the day he married Kasey. If Adam Thorne, of all people, could make his life over, find lasting love and a life mate and the whole ball of wax, might there be hope for Wade, too?

He let out a bitter snicker. Not likely, Cameron, since you seem incapable of getting past a second date. Not that he didn't want a lasting relationship….

"And what do you want?" he whispered to himself.

Moments passed, but no answer came. Not surprising. He'd failed to puzzle this one out, though he'd tried, dozens of times before.

Dropping both feet to the floor, Wade stood and grabbed the miniblind's wand. After several angry twists, he effectively shut out the parking lot…and every child-toting vehicle.

His office door creaked open, and Tara said, "See you Monday, Wade."

"You bet," he answered. "Say hi to Matt and the kids for me."

"Sure thing." She started out the door, then poked her head back in. "Do me a favor?"

"If I can."

"Get some sleep this weekend, will ya? You're beginning to worry me."

"Careful, or I'll move in so you can mother me full time."

"Yeah, yeah," Tara said, waving away the comment. "Just what a guy like you wants—an infant and a toddler and mountains of diapers to come home to every night."

He was about to say better than my one-room apartment, when he replayed what she'd said: A guy like him?

"If you're gonna stay much longer, you might want to turn on a light in here. Eyestrain, y'know."

He forced a grin. "Old wives' tale," he said, grabbing his sports jacket. "Besides, I'm right behind you."

They walked side by side to the elevator. "Hot date?" Tara asked, pressing the down button.

He pictured Patrice, with her mop of auburn curls, doe eyes, sweet smile…. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

The car whooshed them to the garage level. "Well, don't burn yourself." She patted his hand. "'Cause those babies are miracle workers."

He resisted the impulse to pocket both hands. "You have one of those baby-carrying gizmos?"

"An infant seat, you mean?"

Nodding, he said, "Yeah. Infant seat. You have one in your car?"

"As a matter of fact, I have two of them. One for each of the kids. What kind of mother would I be if I—" She stopped talking mid-sentence and narrowed one eye. "Why?"

Wade pretended he hadn't heard the suspicion in her voice. Truth was, he had no earthly idea why he'd asked the question. "Just wondering, is all."

"Boy-oh-boy," she said, giggling, "I'd give anything to meet the woman who has Dr. Nevermarry thinkin' about baby seats!"

She hopped out of the elevator.

And she was still giggling when the doors hissed shut.

Patrice stood in front of the foyer mirror and adjusted the earrings dangling from her lobes. “You sure you’ll be okay for a couple of hours?”

“Sure I’m sure.” Gus fiddled with the controls of his wheelchair. “I’m okay while you’re at work all day, aren’t I?”

Hands on her hips, she faced him. “Yes, Dad, but Molly is here with you while I’m at work.”

“Yeah, well, I’d go hoarse trying to convince you I don’t need her.”

“Save the tough-guy routine for somebody who’ll fall for it,” she teased. “Molly, for instance.” She winked. “I know you like having her around.”

He shrugged. “She’s okay.”

“Okay? Who else would let you beat them at board games the way she does!”

Gus grinned. “You make a good point.” He sniffed the air. “You smell pretty.”

“It’s the perfume you gave me last Christmas.” She leaned closer. “He said casual. I didn’t go overboard, did I?”

Gus inspected her outfit: black flats, blue jeans, a pale pink turtleneck. “So who’s ‘he’ and where’s ‘he’ taking you?”

She went back to fussing with her hair. “To a Mexican restaurant, somewhere here in Ellicott City.”

“And where’d you meet him?”

"His name is Wade Cameron, and I met him at the hospital." She paused, wishing she didn't have to say it. "He's a cardiologist."

"Oh-h-h, no-o-o," Gus groaned. "Not another doctor!" He shook his head. "Every time you get involved with one of those pompous know-it-alls, you get your teeth kicked in. When are you gonna learn, Treecie?"

Patrice couldn't very well argue with him. But she didn't have to agree with him, either. "It's a meal, Dad." Besides, she added silently, it's going to be different this time. This time I'm not going to fall crazy in love on the first date. "So please, when he gets here, be nice?"

Gus raised both eyebrows and feigned innocence. "I'm always nice."

"True." Bending, she kissed his cheek. "So be extra nice, then, for me, okay?"

"Well, I'll—" The doorbell rang, interrupting his promise.

Patrice took a deep breath, then opened the door. Earlier, Wade had looked incredible in his lab coat and stethoscope. He looked even better now in khaki trousers and a fisherman's knit sweater.

"Hey," he said, smiling. "How goes it?"

"It goes pretty well. Come in. I'd like you to meet my father." Patrice watched carefully, studying his reaction to the man in the wheelchair. If she'd learned this trick years ago, she might have spared herself a heartache…or two. "Dad, this is—"

"Wade Cameron," he broke in, grasping Gus's hand. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. McKenzie."

"Good to meet you, too," Gus said. "Treecie, here, tells me you're a cardiologist."

He shrugged as if to say "no big deal," then glanced around. "Nice place."

"Awright, enough with the pleasantries," Gus said. "Get on out of here, you two."

Wade chuckled and Patrice smiled. "Honestly, Dad, if I didn't know better, I'd say you had a hot date planned for tonight."

"Matter of fact, I do have a hot date—with the television set."

"Well," Wade said, "are you ready, Patrice?"

She grabbed her jacket from the hall tree, hung it over her forearm. "I'll have my cell phone on," she said, patting her purse, "in case—"

"I won't need you. There's a boxing match on cable." He winked. "That oughta keep me out of trouble for a couple of hours."

She kissed his other cheek. "All right, but if you get hungry —"

"Are you kidding? You fed me enough supper to last till tomorrow night!" He laughed. "Now get a move on, or I'll miss the first round."

"We won't be long," Wade told Gus.

"Take your time…please." And snickering over his shoulder, he rolled into the family room.

"He's quite a guy," Wade said as she locked up.

She nodded. "Did you have any trouble finding the place?"

"Nah. I was a volunteer firefighter during my senior year in high school." He opened the car door for her. "Got to know the area pretty well."

She slid onto the passenger seat. "So doing good deeds and saving lives has always been in your blood?"

He slammed the door, hard. Routine? she wondered. Or in response to what she'd asked? Something told her it was the latter. But why would the question bother him?

"How long has your dad been in the wheelchair?" he asked, revving the motor.

She sighed. It was his turn, it seemed, to ask hard-to-answer questions. "Long time."

"Accident?"

Nodding, she whispered, "Yes."

"Automobile? Or work related?"

Patrice forced a sigh. "You're off duty, Doc, so just relax, okay?"

He shot a glance her way, and she could see by the puzzlement in his eyes that he didn't understand her reluctance to talk about her father's condition. She didn't mind talking about that, exactly…it was how he got into the chair in the first place that she minded talking about.

"So do you live near the hospital?"

He shook his head. "I live a few minutes from here. Plumtree

Apartments."

"How long?"

"Little over a year."

"Wow. Amazing."

"That I live nearby?"

"Well, that, and the fact that we haven't run into one another in the grocery story, or at the pharmacy."

"So how'd it happen?"

"That we haven't run into one another?" Maybe playing dumb would get him off track.

"Okay, I can take a hint." He looked at her again. "Not your favorite subject, I take it."

She breathed a sigh of relief—

"So what's your mom up to tonight?"

—and the breath caught in her throat. She hadn't prepared for this eventuality.

"Is she a boxing fan, too?"

"Mom hated boxing," Patrice blurted.

"Hated? Past tense?" He shot a stunned look in her direction. "Oh, man. I'm sorry, Patrice. I had no idea…."

She leaned against the headrest and closed her eyes. "Some fun date this is starting out to be, huh?"

Wade reached over and took her hand. "If it was fun I wanted, I wouldn't have asked you out."

That snapped her to attention! "Excuse me?"

"Oh, wow. Oh, man. I, uh, I didn't mean it that way. I only

meant—"

Laughing, she squeezed his hand. "It's okay, Wade. I know what you meant." She paused. "I think—"

"After that crack, I feel I owe you something better than the dinner I'd planned."

"Don't be silly. The Mexican place is just fine." She smacked her lips. "In fact, I've been craving soft tacos all evening."

"Soft tacos? No foolin'?"

She nodded.

"My favorite," they said in unison.

This time, Wade squeezed Patrice's hand. "Say, maybe this night is gonna turn out all right, after all."

Maybe, she thought. And maybe I'd better be real careful with this one.

Because already, she felt the oh-so-familiar tugs at her heartstrings.

Chapter Two

His hand on the small of her back, Wade led her into the restaurant. She seemed so small, so vulnerable beside him. If he had to guess, he would've said Patrice was five feet tall, not a fraction of an inch more.

The instant they stepped into the restaurant, an elderly woman hollered, "Dr. Cameron!" She hurried toward them, arms outstretched. "It's been too long. We've missed you!"

"Nice to see you, too, Mrs. Gomez," he said as she wrapped him in a grandmotherly hug. "How are you?"

She pressed a hand to his cheek. "Fine, thanks to you."

"And where is Mr. Gomez?"

Her eyes twinkled with mischief when she released him. "In the kitchen," she whispered, "telling Juan how to do his job."

"That's a good sign."

Suddenly, she faced Patrice. "And who is your lady friend?"

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to slide an arm around her waist. "Patrice," Wade drawled, pulling her close to his side, "ah'd like you to meet Corrinne Gomez, sweetest li'l gal east of the Rio Grande."

Mrs. Gomez took Patrice's hands in her own, then drew her into an embrace. Wade watched as Patrice returned the woman's warm gesture, seemingly unperturbed by the uninvited physical contact.

"Ah, theese one," Mrs. Gomez said, "theese one, she's a keeper." She grabbed two menus from the hostess stand. "Come with me. I'll find you a nice quiet booth in the back, where you'll have some privacy."

As Patrice slid onto the burgundy leather seat, Mrs. Gomez winked. "I'll send Enrique right over with tortillas and salsa," she said, handing them each a menu. After whipping a book of matches from her apron pocket, she lit the candle in the middle of their table. "Suerte grande!" she said, winking again before hurrying away.

Patrice's gaze followed until Mrs. Gomez disappeared into the kitchen. She rested both arms on the table and leaned closer to Wade. "Lots o' luck?" she translated, grinning as her eyes bore into his.

Wade always brought women to Mi Casa for a first date. If they passed the Gomezes' muster, he made a second attempt. So far, no woman had eaten here more than twice. He felt more than a little guilty, putting Patrice through her paces this way. For one thing, she hadn't been the aggressor, like the others. For another, he genuinely liked her.

He felt the heat of a blush, ran a finger under his collar.

"And what was with that conspiratorial little wink?" she added, winking herself.

He couldn't very well tell her the truth, and for some reason, didn't want to tell the usual first-date fibs. So he grinned, shook his head and said, "That Mrs. Gomez. Quite a card, isn't she."

Wade prepared himself for a sassy retort, and likely would have heard one—if Juan hadn't blustered up to the table just then.

"Dr. Cameron! We were worried you'd fallen off the horse." He laid a beefy hand on Wade's shoulder "It isn't Friday night unless Baltimore's Bachelor of the Year brings a pretty girl here to eat!" His hearty laughter thundered as he gave Wade a playful slap on the back. "Glad to see you're still in the saddle, m'boy!"

Wade squirmed under Patrice's level gaze. Yeah, he thought, still in the saddle.

"Theese," he said to Patrice, "eese one special man."

One well-arched brow rose a bit as Patrice made a feeble attempt to smile. She met Wade's eyes. "I'm beginning to get the picture," she said carefully.

"He has a heart the size of his head, theese one." Juan glanced at Wade. "Shall I tell her thee story?"

Wade held up a hand, traffic cop style. "No. Really. Juan, we'd like a basket of tortillas, if you don't mind, and some—"

Juan shoved his bulk onto the seat beside Patrice. "Four years ago," he continued, slinging an arm over her shoulders, "I was a telephone repairman. I was high on a pole when the ol' ticker gave out. Thank the good Lord for safety harnesses!"

Normally, the Gomezes teased Wade about his exploits. He couldn't remember a time when either of them had mentioned Juan's surgery. "Juan," he began, "Patrice, here has to get back because—"

"Patrice." Juan faced her. "Pretty girl, pretty name," he said,

beaming. Then he aimed his dark-eyed stare at Wade. “Maybe theese time, you peek a winner?”

Wade covered his eyes with one hand. “Juan—”

“You think because you’re a big-shot doctor you can interrupt an old man’s story?” Another round of rumbling laughter filled the booth. He turned to Patrice again. “As I was saying, I had a heart attack up there, hanging from the telephone pole. And it would have killed me, if not for the good doctor, here.” He reached across the table, squeezed Wade’s forearm. “I thank the good Lord for him every day of my life.”

A moment of silence ticked by before she said, “Maybe I’m the one who picked a winner.”

Was she kidding?

Wade came out of hiding in time to see the merry gleam in her eyes. So she’d decided to play along, he realized as his blush intensified.

Juan held a forefinger aloft. “But you haven’t heard the half of it!”

She tilted her head—a bit flirtatiously, Wade thought.

“There’s more?”

He figured Juan was gearing up to tell her about the loan, and he didn’t want that. Didn’t know why, exactly, he just didn’t. Pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, he tried to think of a way to divert Juan’s attention. He saw Enrique just then, having an animated conversation with a diner. “Looks like your boy could use some help,” Wade said, pointing.

Juan didn't so much as glance in his son's direction. "After the operation," he went on, "I couldn't go back to climbing poles, and I wasn't trained to do anything else." His voice softened. "For as long as I could remember, I took care of my own. Not being able to work was—"

"Juan, enough. You're—"

"My condition began to worry the good doctor, here. And months after the surgery, after a checkup, he came to our house. I was making soft tacos, he agreed to join us for supper…and he gave me the idea for Mi Casa, right there at our kitchen table."

Patrice blinked and sighed. If she said "my hero!" like an actress in some B movie, he'd dump the sugar bowl into Juan's lap.

"We had spent all our savings, keeping the bills up to date while I was out of work. One bill we didn't have to pay was Dr. Cameron's. He didn't charge a penny for his services. What do you think of that, Patrice?"

She looked from Wade to Juan and back again. "I honestly don't know what to say."

"Well, what would you say about this. He also gave me the down payment to buy this place."

Wade could only exhale the breath he'd been holding and shake his head, hoping for the best.

A few seconds ticked by before she said, "I guess I'd have to say you're right to call him a hero."

The entire Gomez clan had been calling him that for years.

Patients and their families routinely dubbed him a hero, too. His sister's kids had never said the word, but he could see in their eyes that they thought the world of their Uncle Wade. Despite it all, he hadn't felt the least bit heroic—until Patrice said it.

But, sure as he was sitting here, looking into her gorgeous face, the truth would come along sooner or later, and change her opinion of him. So for as long as this feeling lasted, Wade decided, he may as well go ahead and enjoy it.

She thought it was charming, the way Wade blushed like a schoolboy under Juan's obvious admiration. Horse and saddle references aside, she admired him, too. And so Patrice made a concerted effort to ease his discomfort.

She introduced dozens of topics, from the philosophical to the political. The interchange of opinions and ideas taught them they had a lot more in common than Ellicott General. They voted for the same man in the last election, became enraged at the mere mention of flag burning, loved kids and dogs and apple pie.

"Dessert?" Enrique said, rolling the dessert cart to their table. Patrice smiled as Wade rubbed his palms together.

"I'll take an order of the flan," he said, grinning. "Patrice, what'll you have?"

She couldn't remember her name ever sounding quite so lyrical. "I'm stuffed," she admitted. "Maybe I'll just have a bite of yours?"

His grin made her stomach flip and her heart lurch. He turned to the waiter, held up one finger, then two. "One flan, two

spoons," he said. And when Enrique rolled his cart to the next table, Wade blanketed her left hand with his. "You're awfully quiet all of a sudden. Worried about your dad?"

"Maybe." With thumb and forefinger, she measured a centimeter of air. "Just a little."

He gave her hand a gentle pat. "I'm sure he's fine."

She nodded. "I know. And I know it's silly, worrying about him, because he's really quite capable."

"Well, we'll be through here in no time. Then you can see for yourself."

Another nod. "Thanks, Wade, for understanding."

He gave a shrug, as if it was no big deal that he'd cued in to her fears…and hadn't made her feel ridiculous for them, as other men had.

"So how'd it happen?"

Patrice took a sip of her decaf. "Car wreck."

His hold on her hand tightened slightly.

She'd learned a ton about him tonight; why not even the score a bit?

"It was my fault."

Silence was his response. She wondered if his caring expression was sincere, or something practiced and mastered in med school. "It was raining that night…teeming is more like it. I wanted to go to a party, and talked him into driving me."

Patrice tried to wriggle her hand free of his grasp, but Wade wouldn't allow it. Absently, her right forefinger picked at its

neighboring thumbnail. If she were a betting woman, she'd say his concern was genuine. "He slammed the car into a big brick wall after he picked me up from the party. He's been paralyzed from the waist down ever since."

He nodded, and she could almost read his mind. No wonder you're such a devoted daughter—you blame yourself.

"I'm sure you've heard this before, hundreds of times, no doubt," Wade said, "but accidents happen, Patrice." His hazel eyes darkened and his lips thinned when he added, "Usually, they're nobody's fault."

Usually? The fact that he'd stressed the word made her wonder if Wade blamed himself for an accident in his own past.

"I didn't have to go out that night, but I didn't want to miss Marcy's party." If she didn't shut up, and quick, she was going to cry. Why had she opened this Pandora's box!

"And your dad didn't have to take you." He sandwiched her hand between his own. "If you insist on laying blame, lay half of it on his shoulders. You were a kid, he was a grown-up. He made the final decision, after all."

She shook her head. "Not really. He hadn't been himself at all since the—" Lord, she prayed, please help me deal with this!

"Since the what? C'mon. You've told me this much. What's the point in holding back the rest?"

"Suicide."

His brows dipped low on his forehead. "Sui— What?"

Nodding now, she sighed. "A year after Timmy died—almost

to the day—my mom killed herself. She knew Dad would take it hard, said so in her note." She closed her eyes. Okay to shut up now, Lord? Or is this my penance…telling a total stranger about what happened to my mother and that I'm responsible for my father's paralysis?

"You were a kid," he repeated. "Just a kid, for cryin' out loud. Give yourself a break!"

She was about to say "My dad didn't get a break, why should I?" when Enrique returned, a serving of flan resting on one palm, two spoons wrapped in the other. He placed each on the table.

"More coffee?" he asked.

"Make it decaf, okay?"

"Sure thing. And the lady?"

"Same," Patrice said, her voice still trembling slightly. "Thanks."

Wade seemed in no hurry to eat the dessert. Instead, he changed the mood from confessional to conversational. He talked about the weather, the last movie he'd seen, an article he'd read in the newspaper about certain brands of bottled water that came straight from kitchen taps. She had to admit, he had a real knack for making people feel relaxed, comfortable. At least, he had that talent with her.

Suddenly, Wade picked up one of the spoons and carefully cut off a piece of the custard. Holding it in front of Patrice's face he said, "You first."

Calmer now, she laughed at the suggestion. She'd seen this in

the movies, and now hesitated, afraid she might open too wide, or not wide enough, and the dessert would end up all over her face—or worse, in her lap. "This is silly," she admitted.

Yet she went along with the suggestion. Wade skillfully slid the bite past her teeth, his own lips parting slightly as he watched her accept his offering. "Thwnkym," she said around it.

He'd already popped a sizable chunk into his mouth. "Ywr wrlcm."

Their laughter brought inquisitive stares from nearby diners. They seemed to share one thought: All dressed up like respectable adults, but talking with their mouths full, like a couple of kids.

"I do believe," he said between snickers, "we're making public spectacles of ourselves."

He chose that exact moment to reach out and remove a tiny drop of caramel syrup from her lower lip. The pressure of his thumb lingering there, seemed natural and normal. Their eyes fused on a sizzling current.

She began searching for things to dislike about this man, because having some negative character traits sure would make it easier not to fall for him! But try as she might, so far Patrice couldn't come up with a single thing. In fact, she felt as though she'd known him for years.

"I can't believe how much I talked tonight," he said as they crossed the darkened parking lot to his car. "I don't think I've bumped my gums this much, all at one time, ever in my life." He

slipped an arm around her waist. “I hope you won’t think I’m a total boor for dominating the conversation all evening.”

She remembered her confession. He’d hardly controlled the discussion. Would’ve been a lot better for her if he had!

Teasing and flirting had never been part of Patrice’s personality. Yet with Wade, the two seemed to go hand in hand as naturally as the stars went with the inky sky. “Well, you’re not a complete oaf, anyway,” she said, blinking up at him.

“Keep looking at me that way,” he said, one hand on either side of her face, “and you’re gonna find out real fast what a barbarian I can be.”

Immediately, Patrice tensed, for his left palm was touching her scar. She tried to wriggle free of his embrace, but he held tight.

“No need to pretend it isn’t there, Patrice. I saw it in your office and again in your foyer. I’m a cardiologist, remember? I’ve seen thousands of scars. I’ve made thousands of scars.”

She bit her lower lip, closed her eyes. Please, Lord, she prayed, make him—

He wove his fingers into her hair, combing it back and exposing the scar, then pressed his lips to the gnarled, angry flesh on her cheek, her temple, the corner of her eye. Slowly, he made his way to her forehead, her chin, the tip of her nose.

This wasn’t what she’d meant when, seconds ago, she’d asked for Divine intervention…

…but when Wade’s lips found hers, she realized it was exactly

what she'd been wanting.

The familiar flutter of fear rolled in her gut. Too much too soon had brought her nothing but pain in the past.

Well, a girl can hope, she quickly tacked on.

The pleasant chatter they'd enjoyed during those last minutes in the restaurant continued during the drive home. Wade chose a collection of old country and western tunes to entertain them this time, and now and again, sang a line or two with Willie Nelson or Patsy Kline. Patrice enjoyed every note, even though his singing voice reminded her more of a rusty hinge than any melody she'd ever heard.

When he parked in front of her house, he turned in his seat and placed a big hand on her shoulder. "Since you already know what a clod I am, I guess it won't do any harm to invite myself in for a cup of coffee…."

Her heart fluttered. She could barely make out his features in the darkness, yet somehow she knew those bright hazel eyes were boring into her, hoping for an affirmative answer. As she'd dressed for dinner, she'd determined to be pleasant and polite, nothing more, no matter what he said. But things had taken an odd turn somewhere along the way. There didn't seem to be much point in pretending she wasn't…interested.

"High-test or decaf?" she asked.

His quiet chuckle warmed her, right down to her toes.

"Decaf, if you have it."

As they walked up the flagstone path, he casually draped an

arm across her shoulders. Patrice liked the way it felt, and resisted the urge to lace her fingers with his.

"Let me just check on Dad," she whispered, locking the door. "Meanwhile, make yourself at home in the kitchen. I baked chocolate chip cookies this morning. Do me a favor and have a few."

Wade nodded as she headed for the back of the house. She knocked softly and called, "Dad?"

"Come on in, Treecie."

She opened the door a bit, poked her head through the opening. "So who won the boxing match?"

He chuckled. "I haven't the foggiest idea. Fell asleep before the first round ended."

"Hungry?" she asked, stepping into the room.

"Not in the slightest." He indicated the half-empty plate of cookies on his bedside table. "If you don't stop doin' stuff like that, I'm gonna be big as a house."

She fluffed his pillows, smoothed the line-dried sheet over his blanket. "How about a nice cup of chamomile tea?"

"Thanks, but I'm about ready to turn out the light." He winked. "You get back to your doctor. Just be careful, y'hear?"

The accident hadn't dulled his paternal senses one whit. "Don't worry. Things are going to be different this time."

"Oh, really?" He inclined his head. "How so?"

Truthfully, she didn't know, exactly. "Well, I'm taking my time, for starters."

"Good girl." He gave in to an enormous yawn. "Now give your old man a good-night kiss."

One hand on either side of his whiskered face, she pressed her lips to his forehead.

"Don't stay up too late, now. Tomorrow is Halloween and we have plans to make!"

"How could I forget?" she teased. "There must be a dozen scarecrows and pumpkins on the front porch!"

"Yeah, well, you ain't seen nuttin' yet. I made a tape today while you were at work."

"Did Molly help?"

"I should say so. That woman has the most ear-piercing scream I ever heard. She oughta rent that voice out to the movie stars, for the scary parts of monster movies!"

Laughing, Patrice turned out the lights. "G'night, Dad. I love you."

"Love you, too," he was saying as she closed his door.

"Hope you don't mind," Wade said when she entered the kitchen. "I rooted around in your cupboards until I found the coffee, got a nice head start on the brew."

With the back of his hand, he brushed chocolate chip cookie crumbs from his lips, then took a swallow of milk. "These are great," he said, using a half-eaten cookie as a pointer. "So you're a good cook, I see."

"I'm no gourmet," she said, taking two mugs from the cabinet, "but I can whip up a respectable meat-and-potatoes meal when

the situation calls for it."

He nodded approvingly. "Most professional women I've known seem scared of kitchens."

She wondered what it was about him that brought out this outrageously flirtatious side of her. Grinning, she said, "There's not a gadget in this room that scares me, mister."

Suddenly, the friendly light in his eyes dimmed. "Yeah. You're all kinds of brave, aren't you."

Patrice had no idea what he was talking about, and said so.

He held up his hands in mock surrender. "Far be it for me to tell you how to run your life. Seems to me, though, you'd live a lot longer if you'd stop blaming yourself for something that wasn't your fault."

She could see by the caring expression on his face that he meant well, could hear the concern in his voice, too. Still, the advice irked her. "I've been on my own for a long time, Wade. I can take care of myself."

He took another bite of the cookie. "Well, you won't starve to death, that's for sure."

At least the mischievous grin was back. Patrice hadn't realized how much she enjoyed looking at it until it disappeared. Finally, the pot hissed, signaling that the coffee was ready. "You take yours black, right?"

He turned a kitchen chair around, straddled it and rested his forearms on its back. "Brave as a lion, memory like an elephant. Maybe you should've been a veterinarian."

She chose to ignore the remark, pouring milk into the creamer, instead. Wade took his time drinking the first cup of coffee, then helped himself to a second. For the next twenty minutes, he talked nonstop about guilt and blame and personal responsibility. Finally, lectured out, he stood and put his mug into the sink. "Promise me you'll at least think about what I've said."

She did her best not to reply in a bored monotone. "I'll pray on it."

His eyebrows rose high on his forehead. "Pray on it? What good do you think that'll do? Religion, prayer, guilt—tools used by organized religion to make us feel beholden."

She'd pray, all right, but not about whose fault the accident was. She'd ask God to give her the strength, the wisdom, the words that would turn Wade's heart toward Christ.

He placed both hands on her shoulders. "I'm serious, Patrice. You're a terrific woman. You should be living a full, happy life. How are you gonna do that if you're emotionally exhausted from lugging around guilt that isn't yours?"

Narrowing her eyes, she regarded him with sudden suspicion. I'll live a full, happy life—as long as I keep a safe distance from romance! she thought. If only she could back up the tape, erase this whole episode.

With no warning, he gathered her to him in a warm, protective embrace. Automatically, her arms went around him.

"What am I gonna do with you?" he sighed into her hair. "You're as bighearted and pigheaded as they come," he added,

kissing the top of her head, "and while that's a tempting combination, I have a practice to run. I can't be—"

She broke free of his hold and stood, hands forming fists at her sides. "So who asked you to be my protector? I told you, I can take—"

"—care of yourself," he finished for her. "I know, I know." He opened the door, then clicked it shut again. "I never meant to insult you. I hope you know that. It's just that, for some reason, you worry me."

Patrice couldn't help admitting that she was touched by his concern. "There's no need for that. I'm fine."

Wade grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him, his lips a fraction of an inch from hers. In the dim light of the foyer lamp, his eyes glittered like amber as his gaze flicked from her mouth to her throat to her eyes. She wondered what that thick, dark hair would feel like beneath her fingertips, and held her breath as she waited for his kiss.

He inhaled sharply and stepped back. "Take care of yourself, you hear? Because…"

Because what? she wondered. What did he care if her guilt was deserved or not? During the pause, Patrice thought maybe he'd changed his mind. Maybe he didn't intend to kiss her, after all.

He cupped her chin with one trembling hand, brushed the hair from her face with the other. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are, how much I want to—"

"I had a lovely time."

Wade blinked several times before a low chuckle began bubbling deep in his chest. "That was the general idea," he said. "And for your information, so did I."

"Well, that's a relief," she teased, "because I'd hate to add that to my guilt burden, too."

His soft laughter wafted through her hair as he hugged her. "You're something else, you know that?" He sighed into her ear. "You're in big trouble now, missy."

She looked up at him, into his sparkling hazel eyes, willing him to kiss her.

"Something is happening here," he whispered, lifting her chin, "and I don't know whether to run from it or straight at it."

Patrice trembled as his muscular body pinned her to the wall. She inhaled crisp aftershave and sweet cookie breath. If he isn't the guy for me, Lord, she prayed, speak now or forever hold Your peace.

When his lips touched hers, Patrice gasped. The soul-stirring taste of him sent silent shock waves straight to her heart. Weak-kneed and light-headed, she felt his arms encircle her, providing surefooted and much-needed support. Slowly, his fingers combed through her hair, traced down her shoulders and back, gently caressed her cheeks. His lips skimmed, light as feathers, from her earlobes to her throat to her forehead, before sliding back to her slightly parted, waiting lips.

Between kisses, he stammered and stuttered, and his words

made no sense to her. "It's been…never thought I'd…you're like…Patrice, oh Patrice…."

When he said her name, it was a soft spring breeze, rustling the pines and sending dogwood petals floating gently through the air. Liking the way he'd warmed her lonely heart, she wanted to learn more about this strong-willed man—until her decision to keep a safe distance echoed in her head.

He seemed to sense her sudden mood swing and gradually ended the delicious kiss. "I—I don't know what's gotten into me," he murmured shakily. He kept her close, though, and looked deep into her eyes. "That's a lie. I know exactly what's gotten into me."

A tightrope walker could have balanced on the taut thread that linked their gazes. Wade stood back slightly, his eyes sliding over her features, reminding Patrice where his lips had been mere seconds ago. She waited for him to tell her exactly what had gotten into him.

"I sure could use another cup of coffee," he said instead.

Small talk over the minimountain of chocolate chip cookies was companionable, and when he stood to leave the next time, she wanted to stop him. Wanted to feel his big, protective arms around her again, making her forget the horrible nightmares that disturbed her sleep. Wanted him to prove to her that the guilt and remorse she'd heaped onto her shoulders all these years truly was misplaced.

"Wait," she said.

He'd made a stack of cookies while they talked, and now he was straightening a teetering column. "For what?"

He sounded pleased, even happy, that she'd asked him to stay. "Let me pack a few of these for you to take home."

Grinning, he said, "Do you do this often?" Wade gestured toward the cookie pile.

"Only when I'm upset. Baking…soothes me."

Wade chuckled softly. "From the looks of things, something had you real upset."

She was stuffing a small grocery sack with sweet treats when he bent to kiss her temple—the one with the scar. Her hands froze.

"Beautiful," he rasped.

Her heart raced as she clutched the bag to her.

"Well," Wade said, "guess I'd better get home." He hugged her and a cookie crumbled between them. He kissed the top of her head. "Lock up tight when I'm gone, you hear?"

Nodding against his hard chest, she wondered about the myriad of sensations spiraling through her. What she felt with Wade was nothing like what she'd felt all those other times. If that had been love, what was this?

Chapter Three

Wade never really paid much attention to his home, such as it was, but those few hours at Patrice's house made him see it differently. "Not your stereotypical bachelor pad," his sister had said, the one and only time she'd seen it.

He'd laughed along with Anna—and quickly dismissed her opinion. What did he need with suede sofas, an intricate stereo system, and sophisticated lighting designed to romance a woman? His beat-up foldout bed and mismatched lamps suited him just fine. The only females who'd ever seen them were Anna and his cleaning lady. If anyone had asked him, he would have said that's how it would stay—until he saw the way Patrice lived.

Dozens of times, he'd been invited to women's houses. Except for the blond nurse whose town house resembled the sty of a certain Muppets character, his other lady friends had lived in organized style.

So why did Patrice's place seem so…different?

Like a home.

Wade blew a stream of air through his teeth. Home is more than a place to store your clothes, eat TV dinners, spend the night, he thought dismally. It's where a man goes to be with his kids… and the love of his life.

Things he'd never have.

A year ago this time, he would have been heading out the door

in a tux and shiny black shoes, on his way to one gala or another. Either that, or rushing to pick up some model wannabe for dinner and dancing.

Wade put the soda bottle on the end table, aimed the remote at the TV and hit the on button. He tucked one hand under his head and squinted at the screen, determined to block Patrice's pixie face and sweet voice and cozy home from his thoughts. He scrolled through the channels, but nothing—not even the super-sucker vacuum cleaner on the shopping station or the lion-hyena war on the science station—could take his attention from Patrice.

It was the chocolate chips, he thought, grinning to himself. But when he closed his eyes and licked his lips, cookies were the last thing on his mind.

After that McMonkey display in Emily Kirkpatrick's room, he should've known she'd be animated, funny, sweeter even than those homemade cookies. Even if the shenanigans with the sick kids hadn't told him a thing or two about her personality, the visit to her office should have.

Black-and-white photos of hospitalized kids lined the walls. Numerous illnesses kept them tethered to their beds by plastic tubes, slouching weakly in wheelchairs, leaning on IV poles—yet every child in the pictures had one thing in common: a Patrice-induced smile. On her bookshelves, she'd proudly displayed lumpy animals, flower vases, and candy dishes made of modeling clay—mementos for the young woman they'd lovingly dubbed Monkey Lady.

She'd been caring for her father for more than a decade, but Wade hadn't noticed a trace of distress in her demeanor, hadn't heard a hint of bitterness in her voice. Her dad's cheerful attitude seemed proof that not even he had detected so much as a note of regret or resentment.

Wade started counting Patrice's qualities on his fingers: smart, good sense of humor, a big heart… The spotless house told him she was an "attention to detail" kind of gal, and the tasty cookies she'd baked from scratch said she enjoyed the sweet things of life, too. With all that going for her, who'd expect her to have eyes that would inspire poetry, a figure like the porcelain ballerinas his mom used to collect, and a voice so velvety he couldn't think of a word to describe it.

And then there was that kiss….

He caught himself grinning from ear to ear, like some girl-crazy schoolboy. Wade blocked the TV's flickering light with the crook of his arm, and shook his head. If he wasn't careful, this thing could take a nasty turn; if he didn't watch his step, he'd end up asking her out a second time, a third, even—and he couldn't let that happen. Anyone with eyes could see that she was an innocent, and he didn't have a clue how to behave with a woman like that!

Again he thought of their kiss. She'd felt so small, so vulnerable in his arms, that Wade had found himself wanting to shield her from all life's woes. He'd kissed quite a few women in his time, but he'd never felt that, not once, not even for an instant.

Weird, because he got the sense Patrice had earned the right to say, "I can take care of myself."

If he believed that, why did he want to protect her, anyway?

Because she was one of those people, he told himself, who shouldn't have to struggle, that's why. She deserved to have someone there, right beside her, to lean on at the end of a hard day, to fend off any trials and tribulations that dared force their way into her world.

Wade didn't know if he had what it took to be that someone, and the admission saddened him more than he cared to admit.

After tossing and turning for more than an hour, Patrice gave up trying to sleep and headed downstairs for some herbal tea. With her mug on the end table and a plate of chocolate chip cookies beside her on the sofa cushion, she cuddled under an afghan, scanning the morning paper. Unable to concentrate, she folded it neatly and laid it on the coffee table.

Maybe the plot of a good novel would take her mind off the evening with Wade…and that incredible, indescribable kiss….

Standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that flanked the fireplace, Patrice ran a fingertip along the spines of ancient volumes and settled on the family Bible. Maybe, printed on one of its crisp, gold-trimmed pages, she'd find the answer to the question that had kept her awake: Do You want Wade to be a part of my life, Lord?

As she slid the Good Book from its shelf, a photograph fluttered to the hearth. Even as she bent to pick it up, Patrice

recognized her mother's familiar blue script, identifying the event and the date: Timmy, first day of school.

Nothing could have prepared her for the sudden, overwhelming sadness that brought her to her knees. Sitting back on her heels, Patrice clutched the Bible in one hand, Timmy's picture in the other. And holding her breath, she slowly turned it over, gasping softly at first sight of her little brother's pale yet cherubic cheeks, at his gap-toothed smile, at eyes too big…too filled with pain for a face so young.

She hadn't seen this snapshot in more than a decade, but she remembered the day well. It had begun like every other, with her fervent prayer for Timmy: "Make him well, Lord!" Even before breakfast, he had been sent to his room with a paternal admonishment never to put sugar in the saltshaker again.

Patrice couldn't help but smile at the bittersweet memory of the feisty child who, despite his diminutive size and infirmity, never once complained. Even as a girl, she'd suspected that Timmy knew, somehow, that his life would be short. Why else would he have worked so hard to squeeze so much living into every moment?

Back then, she hadn't understood why the Almighty didn't answer her plea. In truth, she didn't understand it any better now. Timmy had as much right as any boy to climb to the treetops, to chase fly balls in left field, to race two-wheelers with a mob of his pals, right?

The why of Timmy's death would remain a mystery, at least

until she joined him in Heaven. She believed without question that the Lord had taken Timmy to Paradise for reasons of His own, believed just as strongly that she had no right to question those reasons.

Wasn't that the basis of faith?

Her mother's death, however, was another matter entirely…. Anger swirled in her heart, in her mind. Dangerous territory, Patrice reminded herself.

Standing, she tucked the photo back into the Bible and returned to her corner of the couch. Resting her head against the back cushions, she closed her eyes.

"So, how'd it go?"

Patrice lurched and let out a tiny squeal. "Dad," she said, one hand pressed to her chest, "honestly!"

"Sorry," Gus said. "But you'll thank me later."

Grinning, she sat up. "Thank you? For scaring me out of the last ten years of my life?"

"Sure," he said emphatically. "Those are the years you'd spend in an overpriced nursing home, anyway."

Rolling her eyes, Patrice groaned. "Maybe this weekend I'll drive you down to Water Street, so you can audition at the Comedy Club."

He chuckled. "There's something else you have to thank me for—"

She waited for his punch line.

"—that rip-roarin' sense of humor of yours."

"Wow," came her dry reply. "And here I thought being thankful that I got your eyes was enough." She regarded him carefully. "You feeling okay?"

"Never better."

"Then, what're you doing up so late?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"And we could go back and forth like this till dawn…."

"Good point," Gus said. And winking, he added, "Couldn't sleep, that's all. Happens to the best of us, sometimes."

Patrice sipped her tea. "How 'bout I fix you a cup of—"

"No, thanks. I mostly just came in 'cause I thought I'd forgotten to turn out the lights." It was his turn to look suspicious. "You okay?"

The question surprised her. She could only hope it didn't show on her face. "Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well," he said, pointing with his chin, "there you sit, family Bible in hand, Timmy's picture poking out…."

Another sigh. "Well," she answered, forefinger following the contours of the Bible's gilded letters, "maybe I am feeling a bit wistful."

He rolled closer to the couch. "You're a good kid, Treecie. Have I told you that lately?"

Gus said it a dozen times a day. Oh, he substituted a number of words for good—terrific, fantastic, super, wonderful—but the meaning was always the same.

"So, how'd it go?" he repeated.

She flopped back against the couch cushions. “My date with Wade, you mean?”

Gus nodded, grabbed her mug and took a sip of the tea.

“I’d be happy to make you a cup, Dad.”

“Nah. Not thirsty,” he said, returning the mug to its coaster. Then he added, “You gonna keep me in suspense all night, or what?”

She met his dark, teasing gaze. Smiling, Patrice said, “It went well.”

“Where’d he take you?”

“Mi Casa.”

He scratched his chin. “Mi Casa, Mi Casa. Doesn’t sound familiar.” He squinted. “Is it new?”

“Couple of years old.” She sipped the tea. “It’s at the corner of Route 40 and St. Johns Lane.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, nodding. “That new building behind the bank.”

They’d already discussed this, briefly, before Wade arrived. “Enough small talk, Dad. Out with it.”

Palms upturned and brows raised, he feigned innocence. “Out with what?”

“May as well tell me what’s on your mind, save us both a lot of hemming and hawing.”

Gus opened his mouth to respond, then snapped it shut again. For a long, silent moment, he only stared at her, a pensive, faraway expression on his rugged face. “Do you have any idea

how much you remind me of your mom sometimes?"

She'd never understood whether that was a good thing…or a bad thing. Patrice looked down, at the grain of the Bible's leather cover. If she thought for a minute opening it would provide him with comfort and peace, if it would give him the healing he so richly deserved—

"All I can say is, he'd better treat you with kid gloves," Gus said roughly. "You remember what I said when the last bum broke your heart…."

A sad smile lifted one corner of her mouth. "That you'd mow him down with your wheelchair, then back up and roll over him again."

"I would-a, too, if you hadn't begged me not to."

He didn't have it in him to squash an ant, let alone harm another human being. Still, he seemed to enjoy his little threat. Quiet laughter simmered in them, bubbled up and spilled softly out—proof of what they both knew.

For a minute or two, father and daughter sat in companionable silence. Then Gus reached out and patted her hand. "Better get to bed, Treecie. Didn't you say there's some kind of multiward party at Child Services tomorrow?"

She nodded. "Yep. Child Health Week starts this weekend."

"And let's not forget what tomorrow night is…."

Merriment twinkled in his eyes. She got up and crouched beside him. "What're you dressing up as this year?"

"Molly helped me build a box for this baby." He slapped the

armrests. “It’s the spittin’ image of an Indy 500 car!”

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