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**The Detective's
Undoing**

JILL SHALVIS

Jill Shalvis
The Detective's Undoing

Аннотация

Cade McKnight was a loner... A man who liked his horizons open. Then the private investigator met Delia Scanlon. The sexy spitfire drove Cade to distraction and aroused his protective male instincts. He was supposed to uncover the truth about Delia's heritage—not sleep with his alluring client. Yet he was powerless against the woman who made him break his golden rule about never needing anyone and never letting anyone need him. She unleashed his tightly controlled emotions and made him feel alive again. And although he wanted her in his bed, he had no intentions of becoming Delia's willing groom. But how long could he ignore the longings of his heart?

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The Heirs to the Triple M:

Three foster sisters vow to make their inherited ranch a home.

**There was a dangerous edge
to Cade McKnight, one that
Delia didn't understand.**

For all his casual smiles and laughter, there remained a part of him that was always prepared for anything. Maybe it was the bright day, or the isolation, but she thought she saw a surprising depth to him now, and it made her take a good, long look at him.

He looked back just as steadily, without a hint of discomfort.

Hurt, she realized, startled. He was hiding a wealth of hurt just beneath his rough surface, and this unexpected side to the man she'd thought of only as a pain in her own rear end was unsettling.

She looked away first.

The Detective's Undoing

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To Megan, warrior princess

JILL SHALVIS

When pressed for an answer on why she writes romance, Jill Shalvis just smiles and says she didn't realize there was anything else. She's written over a dozen novels so far and doesn't plan on stopping. She lives in California, in a house filled with young children, too many animals and her hero/husband. Jill loves to hear from readers, and can be reached at P.O. Box 3945, Truckee, CA 96160.

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Prologue

At six years old, Delia Scanlon knew everything she needed to about control.

Having it was the only way to survive.

As she hung upside down from a low branch on the tree outside the group home where she lived, her long blond hair swept the grass. Next to her hung her two foster sisters, Zoe and Maddie.

Actually, Maddie wasn't hanging; the quiet, sweet little girl was too timid for that. She sat, gripping the branch for all she was worth, very carefully watching the ground beneath her.

Zoe, who was not quiet or sweet, hung by one leg, calmly inspecting the torn knees of her jeans. Upside down, she popped a huge bubble and casually said, "I've got three lollipops under my pillow."

Delia's mouth watered and she went all warm and fuzzy inside. She knew Zoe would share—that's how it was between them. Maddie and Zoe were more than her foster sisters; they were her life.

It wasn't easy being in the group home with too many kids and too few caretakers, but they were fed and clothed and safe. And they had each other. It was enough for Delia, who just wanted to be with Zoe and Maddie. They were family, no matter what everyone told them.

“When I marry a prince,” she announced, “he’ll take us away on his white horse. We’ll live in a beautiful castle where we can eat all the macaroni and cheese we want.”

“Will you have horses?” Zoe asked, snapping her gum.

“Lots. You’ll come?”

Zoe smiled dreamily. “Yeah.”

“Maddie?”

“I go anywhere you go.”

Delia, with her natural maternal instinct, liked the thought of taking care of her sisters for the rest of her life. “The three of us together.”

Maddie nodded solemnly.

Zoe flipped down from the tree and tossed back her hair. “I get to be in charge of the horses.”

“Sure.” Delia thought horses were dirty and smelled funny, but she wanted Zoe with her, so she’d promise her anything. “What do you want, Maddie?”

“To be a family,” Maddie said softly, her eyes shining with the dream.

“Always,” Delia vowed, as if she had the power to make it so. “Always.”

Content with that, they sat on the grass in the hot Los Angeles sun, holding hands and thinking about their happily-ever-after.

A thousand miles away on a rugged isolated Idaho ranch, Constance Freeman was searching for her stolen granddaughter. Well not stolen exactly—the law didn’t consider it stealing when

the baby's own father, who had custody rights, had done the taking. But Constance didn't fool herself; her son had no business with a baby, and her heart ached just thinking about what that poor child might have gone through in the past six long years.

Her vengeful son hadn't so much as written, and Constance yearned to know the fate of her own flesh and blood.

She stared down at a map of the United States, her brow furrowed as she wondered for the thousandth time where they'd gone.

There was the Triple M ranch, her pride and joy, to run but, in Constance's mind it had taken a backseat to finding her granddaughter. Everything would take a backseat, until she had the child where she belonged.

On Triple Mountain.

Chapter 1

Twenty years later

He was stuck.

Stuck, while the powerful wanderlust within him tore him apart, driving him crazy with the need to roam far and free.

It wasn't a physical sort of stuck. He couldn't imagine anything as simple as that keeping him in one place.

No, it was a promise that held him, his own promises, no less.

The woman he'd made the promise to, Constance Freeman, was dead. But to Cade McKnight, a vow of any kind was as good as gold. He'd never broken one before, and he didn't intend to start now.

But with all his heart and soul he wanted to be free of the promise.

It was past midnight, but he'd been unable to sleep. A long hard ride in the saddle hadn't helped.

It took only a second to let himself in the huge ranch-style house that would serve as the main lodge when there were guests at the Triple M. There were no guests yet, but four people—three of them his friends and one a complete baffling mystery—owned and operated the place, and lived here.

They were sleeping now. Grateful for the silence and the time to think and yearn, Cade stood just inside the front door.

A sound drifted from the sleeping house, from the kitchen.

Not a normal sound, but a choked nearly silent whisper.

Tense, Cade moved lithely through the large living room, coming to a stop just outside the double swinging doors to the kitchen.

No light was on.

The Triple M Guest Ranch was a fairly secure place, located in the vast wilds of western Idaho hundreds of miles from the nearest big city. But Cade, who was not a country boy but rather a certified city rat, never took chances.

Especially when he had friends sleeping upstairs. He cared about those three friends, Zoe, Maddie and Ty—and that one baffling mystery, too—far more than he wanted to.

Which reminded him of how much he wished he was clutching a one-way ticket out of here. He was chomping at the bit to get moving once more.

The sound came again.

Cade shoved his way through the double wooden doors and turned on the overhead light all in one movement.

Blinking in the sudden light was that one mystery—the cool calm Delia Scanlon.

She was stunningly, shockingly beautiful. Alabaster skin. Long thick luxurious pale blond hair that fell in waves past her shoulders. Full sensuous lips guaranteed to drive a man wild.

She stood in front of the opened refrigerator, bathed in the white light of the refrigerator bulb, her lush curves not entirely concealed by her surprisingly plain terry-cloth bathrobe.

Her eyes, the color of a brilliant mountain sky, seared through him.

They were tear-ravaged.

He swore, hating the way his heart twisted from just looking at her. He hated having his heart do anything, but to have it feel, and feel so passionately, suitably terrified him so that he stood rock still and offered no comfort. “What are you doing?”

“Me? Oh, just dancing with the moon.” Turning away, she wiped at the tears he had pretended not to see and she had pretended not to have shed.

The hunch of her usually ramrod-straight shoulders tore at him and, furious with himself, he turned his back on her. “Dammit, next time flip the light on or something. I thought you were—”

“What? A burglar out in the middle of nowhere? Get a grip, McKnight.” Her voice, with its low grainy sexy tone of a 1930s movie siren, sounded full of temper.

That was good, he told himself. Temper was far preferable to tears.

“Go away,” she said.

She still hadn’t looked at him, but then again, he wasn’t looking at her, either. He couldn’t.

If he did, he’d feel that strange inexplicable absolutely unacceptable tug. He didn’t want to believe it was attraction, didn’t want to believe it was anything, so he ignored it.

So did she.

It suited them both. Delia was no more country than he was, raised as she'd been in the Los Angeles child-welfare system. He knew this, not because they talked much—by tacit agreement they avoided each other—but because he was the private investigator who'd promised Constance Freeman he'd find her long-lost granddaughter, heir to the Triple M.

It should have been an easy open-and-shut case. But of course, given his luck of the past few years, it hadn't been. He'd found an heir all right, three of them. Delia, Maddie and Zoe, all foster sisters, dumped into the system at approximately the same time and age.

It was his job to narrow the choices down to the correct woman, a feat that had so far escaped him.

"Stop staring at me," Delia said.

He glanced over his shoulder to find her still glaring into the refrigerator. "I'm not even looking at you."

"You are so."

He smiled then, because they were both obviously tired, cranky and...well, he didn't want to think about what else they were. Because whatever it was, they were it together and he didn't want anything to do with it.

"Why don't you just leave?" She was again looking into the refrigerator, scowling hard, as if she could find the answers to world peace and hunger, but it was her voice that reached him. She sounded confused and hurt, and he had an insane urge to soothe her.

"You know I can't," he said, wishing yet again that he could.

She pushed at a jar of mayonnaise and peered behind it, searching. "You've proven Zoe isn't the heir."

"Which still leaves you and Maddie."

She pulled out an apple and examined it, then rejected it. "Not me. You know it's not me."

"I know no such thing."

"My father was a cop." Her fingers turned white with their death grip on a bottle of soda. "An undercover cop who never knew of my existence, remember? You yourself found this out just last week when you tracked down my so-called birth mother and found out that she was dead."

Because he sensed the fragile hold she had on her emotions, he stayed where he was and said quietly, "Yes, I remember." He also remembered how she'd looked when he'd told her, the shattered emotions that had swum in her expressive eyes when she'd realized her mother was gone forever, the mother who'd left her in a foster home.

She didn't look shattered now, but with the tears wiped away, she looked strong. Fiercely independent. And despite himself, admiration filled him for her ability to roll with the punches life had thrown her.

He, more than anyone, knew exactly how painful those punches could be.

"And Constance's no-good jerk of a son was a drifter," she continued. "Not a cop. So really, I couldn't be her

granddaughter.”

“I don’t think your mother was real good at truths, Delia,” he said gently.

That had her snapping her gaze back to his, but when she spoke, it was not with the heat of temper, but with the slow precision that only pain and sorrow could bring. “I’d like to be able to deny that.”

It was a surprising admission from a woman who’d been very careful to keep herself hidden from him. He understood perfectly, as the attempt was mutual. “I’m on the case until I have answers.”

She muttered something, but he missed it. When he raised a brow in question, she sighed with exasperation.

“I said thank you for finding my half brother.”

Given how she’d ground out each word, especially the “thank you” part, Cade knew how difficult the words had been. For some reason, this lightened his mood, made him want to grin. “I’m sorry...what was that?” He ignored her growl of frustration and cupped a hand to his ear, giving her an innocent smile.

“Thank you,” she said again through her teeth. Then she swallowed, hard, and all traces of resentment vanished. Her voice and expression softened. “I didn’t even know Jacob existed and I owe you for that. I’m going next week to Los Angeles to meet him for the first time and...”

“And...?”

“And I’m grateful, okay?”

She looked close to tears again, which he couldn't take. Cocking his head, he ran his gaze over the body that could make a grown man beg and gave a wicked smile designed to claw at her temper. "How grateful?" he asked.

For a second she gaped at him before her composure returned. It was fascinating to watch.

She was fascinating to watch.

Without a word, she sauntered past him, chin high, walking regally from the kitchen into the recesses of the dark house.

Which left him alone.

That was nothing new. He was always alone.

Learning to ride. Oh, the joy of it. Not.

The day stretched out before Delia, glorious and cloud-free. Good thing, too, because though it was only October, they'd been battered by a series of storms, and she was already a little tired of the bone-numbing cold.

She was also tired of worrying.

There was so much, she didn't know where to start. She worried about Maddie and Zoe and how hard they had to work. She worried about her newly found little brother, living far away in Los Angeles with a distant aunt, because no one had known to contact her. She worried about this big bad wilderness she was living in, when all she knew were shopping malls and Thai takeout. She worried about—

"Hey."

Him. She worried about him.

Silently cursing her sisters' good humor—which had included this so-called riding lesson, courtesy of one Cade McKnight—she shifted in her saddle and looked into Cade's mischievous eyes. As always, her heart skipped a beat, which annoyed her since her heart never skipped a beat over something as simple as a male.

"You're not paying attention," he said. "You're letting that horse have her way."

"I am not." But good old Betsy betrayed her, bending her long neck down to graze. Delia turned away from Cade's laughing gaze, trying to no avail to pull on Betsy's reins.

The horse continued to graze peacefully.

"Try harder. With authority."

Delia did...and broke a nail. She gritted her teeth and pulled harder.

Chewing complacently, Betsy twisted her neck and gazed balefully at Delia, but when she finished her mouthful, she didn't go for more. Instead, she shifted, as if considering taking off for a nice long run.

Delia's eyes widened slightly, her only concession to alarm. "Stop," she demanded of the suddenly restless Betsy, the gentlest horse on the Triple M.

Cade reached over and stroked Betsy's nose. "Shh, baby, it's okay."

"I know I'm okay." Delia said. "Talk to the horse!"

"I was." Cade grinned when Delia made a sound of frustration.

“But you’re looking pretty okay, too. Baby.”

She rolled her eyes and looked away. Anywhere but at Cade.

They were still on Triple M property, but far enough from the house and barns that the vast land before her felt like another world. The hills were dotted with early frost, and the Salmon River raged more loudly than her thoughts. There wasn’t a freeway, let alone a car, in sight. No smog, no sirens, nothing. And to make it worse, she was sitting on a horse. A horse, for God’s sake.

She missed her city.

Cade’s lips curved as he tipped his head, studying her. A lock of wavy dark hair fell into his eyes, eyes that always seemed to see right through her icy calm to the Delia she didn’t want exposed.

“You’re thinking of your message,” he said.

“Humph.”

“The judge finally reviewed your request for custody of Jacob. You have a hearing set for next month.”

Her greatest hope and terror all mixed into one. Oh, she definitely wanted Jacob, but what made her think Jacob wanted her?

Cade was watching her closely now, and she returned his stare with one of her own. He was tall and built like an athlete, with powerful muscles born more from physical labor than any gym. With the sun behind him, every one of those muscles was outlined beneath his dark T-shirt, along with the ones in his long legs, which were encompassed in faded snug denim. And every

one of those muscles was tense as he sat in the saddle looking at her. “This is good news, remember?”

“Of course.”

He bent closer, peering into her face. “Then where’s the smile?”

Baring her teeth, she gave the smile her best shot.

His big body shifted back, but he still watched her with that probing gaze.

As if he knew.

She assured herself that her secret fear was safe. No one must know that she was afraid and ashamed that she might be found lacking, not good enough to gain custody of her half brother.

But as she looked into Cade’s melting brown eyes, eyes that were filled with questions, she swallowed hard.

She could trust him.

The thought came from nowhere and was quickly squelched.

With one click of his tongue, Cade moved his horse right next to hers. “Why were you crying last night?” he asked bluntly.

She closed her eyes, blocking out the pretty but too-cool autumn sun, the breeze and his too-curious gaze.

“Was it Jacob?”

She didn’t—couldn’t—answer.

“You don’t have to go meet him alone,” Cade said as if she’d responded. “Your sisters—”

“It’s too expensive.” And none of them had a spare cent to their name. “And then there’s the upcoming opening. Plus, we’ll

have guests soon.”

“You need support for this.”

“I can handle it.” She could handle anything.

“So strong.” He gave her a look that said he saw right through her. “You can do it all, right?”

“Yes.”

He shook his head. “No one is that strong.”

“I am.”

He stared at her until she felt that odd fluttering in her stomach. It annoyed her since she could see nothing in his gaze but his irritation at the worry he didn’t want to feel for her.

It was ironic that once upon a time she’d wished for a prince to solve all her problems, but life had taught her the hard way that she needed to be self-reliant—at all times. She would handle this, by herself.

And besides, Cade was no prince.

“Delia—”

“Look, I don’t know why you won’t just drop it.” She felt more desperate than ever, but her voice was sure and calm. Her voice was always sure and calm, thanks to years of practice.

“I can’t,” he said with real regret.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t shake the feeling that...that you need me.”

She managed to laugh at that and toss her head. “I don’t need anyone, Cade, especially you.”

“Yeah. I can see that.” Not a man to hide his feelings for

anyone, his voice was tight. She'd stirred his male pride.

In a way, Delia admired him for showing her that. With Cade, she never had to guess what he was thinking, not when his face expressed every emotion, even when he obviously didn't want to feel that emotion.

What would it be like not to worry what people thought? To just be? Delia didn't have a clue. She'd been playing at being strong and independent for so long she no longer knew how to do anything else.

"It's not a bad thing, needing someone," he said after a long moment, and because she'd often wondered about that very thing, she closed her eyes.

She thought she felt a light caress in her hair, but when she opened her eyes again, he held his reins in one hand, the other lay on his thigh.

It must have been the wind, she decided.

Cade was a man seemingly at rest. Yet power and restless energy emanated from him in waves. There was a dangerous edge to Cade McKnight, one she didn't understand. For all his casual smiles and laughter, there remained a part of him always prepared for anything. Maybe it was the bright day or the isolation, but she thought she saw a surprising depth to that edge now, and it made her take a good long look at him.

He looked back just as steadily, without a hint of discomfort.

Hurt, she realized, startled. He was hiding a wealth of hurt, just beneath his rough surface, and this unexpected side to

the man she'd thought of only as a pain-in-her-own-rear was unsettling.

She looked away first.

The day around them was gloriously white, green, blue—a whole array of colors so brilliant that her eyes welled with stinging tears. It almost hurt to breathe, the air was so cold and crisp and pure.

So different from Los Angeles where she'd worked all her life in busy upscale beauty salons. Yes, she most definitely missed everything about it, especially the weather. Right now, she couldn't remember what fifty degrees felt like, much less seventy.

And God help her, it was only October.

But her sisters were here, she reminded herself. They loved it and she loved them. It would also be the perfect place to raise the brother she'd never known existed—if she could ever get Jacob here from Los Angeles.

That, unfortunately, depended on Cade's help. And he didn't even know it yet.

"We going to ride?" Cade asked lightly.

"Yes." She drew a deep breath and urged Betsy to walk. The stark wild land before her was the most incredible she'd ever seen, she'd give it that much. When they'd first arrived, the Triple M had been nothing more than two run-down barns and a house ready to collapse.

Over the past few months she and her sisters, along with Ty

Jackson, their neighbor and now Zoe's fiancé, had worked their fingers to the bone and their bank accounts to the limit. Due to inexperience and lack of funds, they'd been forced to give up the idea of ranching. Instead, they'd opened a guest ranch.

It was harder than anything she'd ever done, and if she was in an admitting sort of mood, she'd have to say it was also the most rewarding thing she'd ever done.

Now, looking over the land they'd worked so hard on, Delia felt a fierce surge of pride for what they'd accomplished.

It was all thanks to Constance Freeman, a woman she hadn't gotten the chance to meet, but who could have been her paternal grandmother. Family.

In a shocking move, Cade came close and cupped her jaw in his leather-gloved hand, gently but firmly bringing up her chin so that she was forced to look at him. "You're a million miles away and you don't want to talk about it, right?"

"Right."

To soothe her, or maybe to combat the glare she knew she'd shot him, his thumb slid over the skin of her cheek once, then again. Her skin rippled in reaction to the touch that should have been impersonal, but wasn't.

Not even close.

With his hand on her, his eyes hot and intense, it became difficult to think, much less speak. His big body sat in the saddle as if he were born to it, his long, loose limbs at rest, but as the master of control, Delia wasn't fooled.

The darkly handsome man was battle-ready.

For her.

For some reason, that shot a pure undeniable thrill through her. Control, she reminded herself. She had it. Or she had, until Scott Felton, Jacob's caseworker, had informed her of the possible trouble she was in for, since the courts were happy with Jacob's current custody situation. Jacob's father had originally had custody, but then he'd died and custody had gone to Delia's mother. When she'd died as well, years later, with no will, Jacob had had to move again. He'd nearly gone into the welfare system when they'd finally located a distantly related aunt. No judge wanted to uproot the boy yet again, especially for someone Jacob didn't even know.

But Delia wanted her brother safe and sound, and with her. She thought she might know how he felt, for she'd been five years old when she'd been left in a group home. Those first years had been spent dreaming of a family taking her and making her theirs.

It hadn't happened.

Most people didn't want a little kid, they wanted a baby.

Back then, Delia had decided she didn't care. She had Zoe and Maddie, and they were more than enough.

All their lives, they'd had nothing but each other. They'd survived. Zoe had done it by being unruly and defensive, and tough when she had to be. Maddie had done it by being quiet and reserved. Accepting.

Delia had survived by masking her emotions so thoroughly that no one could see what she was feeling or thinking. She donned this protective mask every day, just as she did her makeup and clothes. It was a part of her. She needed no one, and no one needed her.

But now she had a brother—eight-year-old Jacob. He was alone, too, or had been. That gave them a kinship she couldn't ignore. Yet it went deeper than that, far deeper.

For the first time in Delia's life, she faced the truth...she needed to be needed by someone. Yes, she had her sisters, and yes, they loved one another with all their hearts.

But they were independent.

Jacob was too young for that. He was just a child, and needing was part of his life.

Yet whenever she called him, which had been daily, he'd been distant, reserved. She understood.

Still, protective feelings welled up. So did frustration and, yes, a good amount of bitterness and humiliation, for her mother hadn't left a will. She'd left no information about her other child—Delia.

She'd meant that little to her own mother.

As a result, she was last in line for Jacob now. And because of his sizable inheritance from his deceased father, the court was doubly leery of Delia's request. It didn't help that she didn't have a penny to her name. She worked sixty hours a week trying to make a success of their guest ranch, but the fact remained—she

was a poor nobody.

It was natural to think of Constance's inheritance, the one Delia hadn't cared about until now. If she was owner of the Triple M...well, that would be different, right? She'd have collateral, a real job. Importance.

The court would have to consider her seriously then. As much as she hadn't wanted to believe it, money did make the world go around.

The wind blew, making her shiver. Reminding her that she was all too mortal. Reminding her that she was nearly twenty-six years old and still wishing for her prince to save her. He'd sure come in handy now, because no one could laugh at her if she was married to royalty. He'd be mature and kind. He'd love her above all else.

He would not be big and broody and tough and rugged.

He would not be rowdy and mischievous.

He would not be anything like Cade McKnight.

"I'm done riding," she said.

"You mean you're done with me."

"Nothing personal," she muttered.

Which had him letting out a grim laugh. "Like hell." But he turned his horse away without another word, almost as if he was just as eager as she to be alone.

They made it halfway back to the ranch in silence. She watched the landscape, and Cade watched her. She felt his gaze on her hair, her face. Her body.

She was used to men staring at her. Men had always stared at her since she'd hit maturity—it was a fact of life. She was five foot eight, willowy yet curvy, and blond. And yes, she supposed, beautiful.

To her, it was a curse.

But Cade's gaze was different, she had to admit. It made her feel funny, rubbery in her limbs, liquidy in parts of her anatomy she didn't usually pay attention to. And if a portion of her, a deep private portion, tingled with a strange anticipation, she could ignore it.

She was not attracted to him.

"I'm your friend, Delia," Cade said into their awkward silence. "Or I could be."

It was just a word—friends. There was no reason for her heart to tip on its side.

No reason at all.

"We're not. You usually ignore me, and if you don't, we can hardly stand in the same room without shooting sparks off each other."

The expression on his face made her toes curl.

"You going to deny it?" she pressed.

He let out a short almost baffled laugh as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Hell, no. Maybe I used to be able to ignore you. But then I found you crying in the kitchen. It's the funniest damn thing, but now I can't get that out of my mind. And yeah, we shoot sparks off each other, enough to light up the city of Boise

with electricity for a year, and it only seems to get worse.”

She nodded, satisfied.

Then he shattered that satisfaction. “But lust tends to do that.”

“Who said anything about...”

“Lust?” His crooked grin was appealing enough to coax one out of a saint. “Because you do realize that’s what those sparks are, right?”

“Dream on, McKnight.” She pulled back on the reins and was grateful when her horse actually stopped. “This isn’t about lust or even friendship.”

Cade stopped his horse, as well, again with no visible sign or word. “What, then?”

“Ego.”

“Ego?” He looked shocked.

“Foolish male pride. Whatever you want to call it.”

He stared at her for a second, then threw back his head and laughed. The rich sound echoed around them while she gritted her teeth.

Eventually his amusement died and he sighed as he wiped away a tear of mirth. “I’m not certain what kind of jerks you were used to in L.A. But out here in the real world—” he snagged her reins and pulled her horse in close “—we do things different.”

With one hand in front of her holding the leather, his other behind her bracing himself on the seat of her saddle, he leaned close. So close she could see that his eyes weren’t just dark brown as she’d thought, but layered with golden specks that danced with

the sunlight. So close she could smell the one-hundred-percent male scent of him.

So close she could do nothing but catch her breath and stare, feeling completely surrounded.

Held.

Good Lord, he just might be right about the lust part. “A man is a man,” she managed, proud of her steady voice.

“Wrong,” he whispered. “And any time you want me to show you how different some men can be...” His voice had gone husky. His gaze dipped to her mouth, made her tummy flutter again. “You just tell me.”

“Never going to happen.” Her voice wasn’t so steady now.

He noticed and, damn him, his lips quirked. “Never say never.”

She thought it would be safe to say it in this case, but she wisely kept her mouth shut.

And they rode the rest of the way back to the Triple M in complete silence.

Chapter 2

The Triple M Guest Ranch was to be open from Thursday to Sunday every week. Originally they hadn't planned to accept guests during the autumn and winter months at all, but financial problems had forced them to give it a try.

The reservations had started to trickle in, giving the sisters tentative hope of success.

The rumor was, autumn in Idaho was heaven on earth. At least that's what their brochure claimed. And for those who enjoyed the unique—and drastic—weather, it was true.

Delia didn't get it.

The spiders were huge, the air so cold it hurt to breathe and the water so soft she couldn't do a thing with her hair.

But she absolutely loved being with her sisters, loved watching them get a kick out of life for a change, and there was no denying that they loved this existence.

She'd learn to love it, too, she decided. For them. So she carried bug spray, wore lots of warm layers and kept her hair pulled back so she couldn't see it.

Now she walked through the large ranch house, which they'd worked so hard on to clean up. What a job that had been. Everything had been in a sorry state of repair when they'd first arrived last summer. With little more than the clothes on their backs, they'd been sorely challenged to make a go of it, but no

one was better at surviving than Zoe, Maddie and Delia.

Delia's boots clicked on the clean but scarred wood floors. Around her, the house creaked in the wind, a happy sort of sound. She stopped at the hall telephone, thinking she'd like to call Jacob, but it was too late. Besides, one more strained phone call between them and she might break. She had to remain strong. It gave her hope.

She moved to the sliding glass door in the living room, which led to the wraparound deck. They had one week until their grand opening, and aside from the sound of the wind in the eaves, the house was quiet and peaceful.

Normally Delia loved whatever time she could grab for herself, but now she had too much time to think.

It didn't help that Cade was still on the ranch, driving her to distraction with his light teasing and hot eyes. He was nothing but a thorn in her side, but granted, he was the sexiest thorn she'd ever had. Thank God he wasn't a man to stay in one place long enough for a post office to find him. He'd be off soon, she was sure of it. That was how he was made, with a powerful wanderlust she would never understand.

He scared her, she forced herself to admit, resting her forehead against the glass and staring out into the deep dark night. He definitely scared her. After all, Delia needed no one and had made sure no one needed her. As a result, she'd bent people to her will with little to no effort. Teachers, friends. Men.

But not Cade McKnight.

He was truly his own man, one who refused to bow to any authority except his own.

It was frightening to realize she could never control a man like that. But no matter. Despite what he'd said about no longer being able to ignore her, she could still ignore him.

Needing air, regardless of how cold it was, she stepped out into the night, onto the deck that Ty had recently rebuilt. She heard bubbles, which she knew came from the newly installed hot tub, and she followed the sound in search of her sisters, seeking what only they had been able to give her.

Acceptance.

She found Zoe and Ty blissfully immersed in the steaming water, entwined. They were kissing—a deep passionate kiss that made Delia sigh theatrically even as something deep within her yearned. “Don’t you guys ever do anything other than connect your mouths?”

Ty lifted his wet head and shot her a wicked grin. “Uh-huh.”

Zoe smacked him lightly on his chest and smiled up at her sister. “Come on in, Dee. It feels terrific on sore muscles.”

Ty’s grin faded. “You hurt something?”

His concern was touching...and embarrassing, considering it was her bottom that hurt the most from the unaccustomed riding. Zoe and Ty did most of the physical work on the ranch, working the horses and their small herd of cattle. Maddie ran the kitchen, providing all meals. Delia’s job was managing the reservations and the front desk, which included checking people in and out

and keeping up the house.

It wasn't very physical—anyone could have done it. Which was the root of most of her guilt, because she didn't feel she was pulling her weight. She didn't belong and she knew that; she just couldn't admit it to her sisters.

Ty straightened, standing in the tub, a frown marring his brow as water dripped off his well-built frame. He was one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen. "What did you hurt?" he asked.

Zoe snickered and Delia sent her a dirty look. "Nothing," she muttered.

Some of his fierceness drained, but none of his curiosity, and finally Zoe took pity on her clueless husband-to-be. "She hurt her rear end yesterday during her riding lesson." She shoved back her wet auburn hair. "She's got first-timer's butt."

"It was my second lesson," Delia corrected with icy dignity.

Ty bit his lip, but his eyes danced with humor. "Maybe Cade ought to take it easier on you next time."

Ty and Zoe laughed then, revoltingly disgusting in their happiness.

"Speaking of Cade, why is he still here, anyway?"

Ty lifted a brow at Delia's question, glancing at Zoe before answering. "You know he's working."

"You mean eating us out of house and home."

"Well, technically, that's Maddie's fault," Ty countered. "She's too good a cook."

"But we don't even know anything about him—his

background, where he came from...anything.”

Something flickered in Ty’s eyes. Knowledge of Cade, Delia realized, and whatever it was, it wasn’t pleasant.

She’d known from the first time she’d looked into Cade’s dark gaze that he’d suffered in his past. But to know the details of that suffering would be to know him far more intimately than she ever intended, especially when she didn’t intend to know him at all.

“Cade’s past isn’t important to Constance’s case or our friendship with him,” Ty said carefully. “He’s trustworthy and honest, and as far as I’m concerned, that’s all that matters.”

“He’s a friend,” Zoe agreed softly, reaching for Ty’s hand and smiling at him with love in her eyes. “Without him we wouldn’t be here.”

“I know.” Delia sighed, then kicked off her boots, pulled off her socks and crossed to the edge of the tub. Pulling up a chair, she sank into it, set her bare chilled feet into the water and moaned with pleasure.

Moving close, Zoe put her hand on Delia’s leg. “What’s the matter?”

Delia shifted away. “Nothing.”

“Delia.”

She sighed, rubbed her temples. Everything, she wanted to say. I can’t control this place. I can’t control what happens to Jacob. I can’t control these strange feelings I’m having for Cade. “I don’t know what’s wrong.” It was a half-truth. Which was as good as a lie, something she’d never told to either Zoe or Maddie.

Still standing, Ty divided a look between them. "Is this the kind of talk where men aren't invited?"

It seemed like forever that there'd been no one but Zoe and Maddie in Delia's life. But now there was Ty, too, and though Delia didn't trust men on principle, Zoe, the tough fiercely independent sister, loved him with all her heart. That made him okay in Delia's book. "You can stay."

"Good," he said with a grateful shiver, sinking back into the water. "Not just because I was starting to freeze, which I was, but because as your brother, I have to hear all the gossip or I'm completely ineffective when I tease you."

Delia narrowed her eyes. "Brother?"

"Well, yeah." He gently tugged on a lock of her hair. "Which means I get to annoy you often, you know. I also get to inspect all future boyfriends and grill them until their eyes cross. And beating up anyone who hurts you is just a given."

The strangest thing happened. Delia's heart constricted, making her chest far too tight to breathe. A warmth filled her. To cover that, and all the confusing emotions that went with it, she punched him. "I can take care of myself."

"Not with a punch like that you can't."

Zoe smiled at the banter, but still watched Delia carefully. "What's really going on, Dee? Why did you ask about Cade?"

"I just think he can solve this case from his office in Boise." Or maybe from the other side of the country.

"He's not...bothering you in any way, is he?" This from Ty,

who Delia knew cared deeply about Cade. After all, without Cade, Ty would never have met Zoe. Or any of them for that matter.

“No, he’s not bothering me,” Delia said slowly. Not much other than occupying my every single thought. “But as my big brother, would you really beat him up for me if he was?”

“You better believe it, baby.”

Zoe laughed, running her hand over her fiancé’s straining biceps as he comically flexed for them. “Isn’t Cade bigger than you?”

“It’s not about brawn,” Ty assured her, giving up the pose and laughing when Zoe rolled her eyes. “It’s all in how you use it.”

Zoe shook her head. “Men.”

Ty kissed her laughing mouth, which made Zoe melt and Delia...well, she melted, too, but she couldn’t get sidetracked. Once upon a time it had mattered greatly to Zoe who inherited the Triple M. Delia knew Zoe had wanted to be the heir with all her heart. Unfortunately it wasn’t meant to be, and Zoe seemed to have come to terms with it.

Which didn’t make this any easier.

Zoe pulled back from Ty. “Come on, Delia, tell me what’s up.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Well, we’re pretty good at complicated,” Zoe told her dryly. “Our whole life has been complicated.”

Yes, but how to explain that her need to be the heir was greater than either of her sisters’? That she hated to need anything at all,

but to need this, this huge thing, was nearly killing her.

"It's the investigation," Zoe guessed. "Cade's investigation for Constance."

"No."

"It's Jacob, then. Oh, honey, I wish I could make this all work out, right now."

"Me, too." This was so hard. With all her heart, she wanted happiness for Zoe and Maddie. But she also wanted Jacob. How to hurt one sibling over another?

She couldn't.

She'd have to do this on her own, have to prove her worth to the judge. She wouldn't ask her sisters for help unless it became absolutely necessary. "It's nothing," she said quietly as the weight of her lies buried her. "I'm just...tired."

"Of course you are, with all this worrying over Jacob. You talked to him today?"

"Yesterday." If one could call it that, for Jacob didn't do much other than respond to her with monosyllabic answers.

Yes, he liked school.

No, he didn't have too much homework.

Yes, he liked sports.

No, he didn't know where the Triple M was.

And given his tone, he didn't care, but there was always the slightest quiver in his voice, the smallest hesitation, and she clung to that, having to believe it did matter to him, that he was just uncertain and afraid.

Time, she reminded herself. He needed time.

"I know you want to go to Los Angeles alone," Zoe said. "But I wish you'd let us come with you."

Delia knew they would drop everything. They'd cancel guests, they'd spend money they didn't have. They'd do anything for her, anything at all, including hurting their future.

Delia was many things, but she refused to be that selfish. "I'll be fine."

Zoe nodded reluctantly, clearly not believing, but unwilling to push further. "Promise if you change your mind, you'll tell us. We'd be there, Delia, in a heartbeat."

"I know."

With one lithe motion, Zoe was out of the water. "I haven't seen you this upset in a long time," she said dripping water everywhere. "It scares me."

"This is upset?" Ty looked from one woman to the other. "She hasn't even raised her voice."

"Delia never raises her voice." Zoe bent to take Delia's hand, looking deeply into her eyes. "Jacob is yours, honey. The court will see that."

Delia closed her eyes.

"And as for Cade..."

Delia's eyes flew open again. That name, she thought darkly. Just that name altered her pulse.

"He belongs here, too."

Ty got out of the tub and wrapped his fiancée in a towel. "Let's

go inside,” he decided. “I’ll get everyone a hot drink and we’ll discuss how much Delia will pay me to kick Cade out on his tough rear end.”

“We’re not kicking anyone out.” Zoe was still watching Delia. “Honey, you know we can’t. He’s a part of this family now, and when you think about it, whatever is bothering you, you’ll realize we can’t hurt his feelings.”

“Feelings?” Worry and stress hardened Delia’s voice. “If he didn’t have to be here, he’d be long gone, having easily forgotten all about us.”

The sound of someone male clearing his throat came from behind her. “Well, that’s flattering.” The voice was hauntingly familiar.

Delia groaned, wished for the night to be even darker so that she could vanish. She turned and saw Cade standing there, leaning his big body against the doorjamb, his arms casually crossed over his chest. “You must not think too highly of me,” he said quietly, his unsmiling eyes on hers, “if you think I could easily forget anything about you.”

It was embarrassing. Ridiculous. Silly even. But she could think of nothing to say, couldn’t even find her legendary cool, so she did the only thing she could.

She grabbed her shoes, squared her shoulders and walked right past him, as well as Zoe and Ty, into the night.

And for once, she was grateful for the icy air because it cooled her heated cheeks.

But not her dreams.

Oh, she definitely has a bee in her bonnet, Cade thought as he came upon Delia on her hands and knees in the dining room the next day, scrubbing a stubborn stain on the hardwood floor.

Her hair was loose and shining, and her backside... He took an extra-long moment to admire the way it shimmied and shook as she worked. Her long legs were tense with strain, and for an insane moment he wished they were tense and strained...around him.

He had no idea what was running through her head, but he could safely bet his last dollar it wasn't anything close to his own lusty thoughts. "A penny for your thoughts," he ventured.

She stiffened, making him smile. God, she was so easy to rile. "Hell," he said, grinning at her uptight pretty little spine. "I'll give you everything I have for them." Opening his wallet, he pulled out a bill. "How about five bucks?"

She sat back on her heels, wearing her queen-to-peasant expression that never failed to stir his blood.

Off-limits, McKnight, he reminded himself. Way off limits. Still, egged on by some perverse need to see her ruffled out of her cool calm, he waved the money. "What do you say?"

Her lips, wide and oh-so-kissable, tightened. She looked away, but not before he caught a flash of...vulnerability? When he frowned and looked again, it was gone. Which was good. Delia wasn't vulnerable, no more than he was, well, able to settle down. "Hey, if anyone's upset about last night, it should be me. It was

my reputation you were slandering.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I certainly didn’t mean for you to hear.”

But not sorry she hurt his feelings, he noted, torn between the sting of that and humor at her fierce pride.

She was so in control.

He wondered what it would take to have the city girl lose the reins on that tightly held control. He couldn’t help the possibilities that tumbled through his head, starting with a hot deep wet kiss. Yeah, that would do it nicely. He could picture it—her long blond hair falling around him, brushing his bare belly, his thighs. Her lush lips would curve gently, her eyes molten as she softened with desire.

But Delia wasn’t soft at all. She was staring at him, her frosty-blue eyes narrowed, her body taut as a bow.

He should walk away.

And yet he couldn’t. He’d known the three of them, Zoe, Maddie and Delia, for far too long to do that now. In spite of himself and his past, he’d grown to care for them, felt responsible for them coming so far from their home city of Los Angeles to the wilds of Idaho.

But it was more than that, and though he wasn’t willing to name it, Delia seemed to be at the bottom of it. He hardly knew her, he understood that. She had a knack for hiding her true self, for being incredibly stingy with emotions. He understood that, too. Though he hated it, it made him all the more curious, and there was nothing worse than a curious investigator.

In spite of needing to be far away from here and from this woman who drew him as no other had in too long, he worried about her. “You seem uptight today.”

“I thought I was always uptight.”

“Well, there’s uptight and then there’s uptight.”

“I’m fine.”

But she wasn’t, for whatever reason, and he knew it. He’d known it the other night when he’d found her in the dark in the kitchen, with tears in her huge blue eyes.

He had other cases to be obsessing over, had a whole other life, in fact, and yet the Triple M haunted him.

Delia haunted him.

She was staring down at her cleaning supplies as if they held the greatest interest.

Cade knew his instincts were razor sharp. They’d saved his life more times than he could count, and they were screaming now. “Ownership of this place would be incredible,” he said carefully, seemingly out of the blue, but he’d had a hunch.

She flinched before she could control it, confirming his guess.

Bingo. “You know I’m doing my damndest to get proof of that ownership,” he said softly. “Whether it turns out to be you or Maddie.”

“I know.”

He tried a different tack. “Your father—tell me about him.”

“I have an idea.” She’d risen and now grabbed her broom and started sweeping. “Let’s talk about you, instead,” she said.

“Me? Why?”

“Because you’re one big mystery.”

“My past isn’t relevant to this case.”

“And therefore doesn’t need to be discussed?”

“Exactly. Now tell me about your father.”

“You’re a hard man, Cade McKnight.”

“From you, Delia, I take that as a compliment.” He was surprised when she smiled. “Your father?” he repeated patiently.

“You mean, could he have been Ethan Freeman?” She’d given up trying to get information out of him, whether because it wasn’t important to her, or because she knew he wasn’t about to indulge her curiosity, he had no clue.

“We’ve already discussed this,” she said, leaning on her broom. “All I ever knew was what my mother told me when I was five, just before she took me to the foster home.”

And had left her there, without a word. What kind of mother, Cade wondered, would just dump her child like that? He came from a large loving family of six. His mother would no more give up a child than her own right arm. And even when Cade had walked away from that family, his heart destroyed, she’d never turned her back on him, instead, had badgered and badgered until he’d come back to the fold.

Delia set aside the broom and lifted one of the three windows. Immediately a cool breeze hit them. Delia’s sweater plastered itself to her lush form. Cade tried not to look, he really did, but she was so beautiful.

And remote.

“She said he was an undercover cop on assignment,” Delia continued in that low husky voice, the one that screamed sex.

Or maybe it was just his own mind that screamed sex. “Undercover cop,” he repeated, shaking his head to clear it.

“Top-secret assignment. I don’t think she even told him I existed.”

Cade had taken on some heartbreaking cases before, not to mention his own unspeakable heartbreak. He prided himself on his ability to harden himself, separate himself from any pain, his own or his clients.

But he didn’t seem to be able to do that with Delia, and it disturbed him that he felt her anguish as his own. In fact, it multiplied his own. “We know Ethan Freeman disappeared about that time.”

“Just as we know it’s unlikely he became a cop,” she countered. “So unless you’ve missed something or made a mistake...”

It was possible. God knew, he’d certainly made plenty of mistakes in his life. His biggest had cost the lives of the two people he’d cared about most.

Delia stared sightlessly out the window, showing more emotion in just her weary stance than Cade had ever seen her show.

“The three of you are sharing the ranch no matter who inherits,” he said.

“Yes, we knew we would do that before we even got here.”

“Then why does it matter which of the three of you actually owns the Triple M?”

It took her a second longer than usual, but her eyes shuttered and she drew herself up. “You couldn’t possibly understand, not with your life-style.”

Since she knew nothing about his life-style or why he led it, that shouldn’t have hurt.

“And, anyway, it matters,” she whispered.

Cade knew how close she and her sisters were, knew that they had clung together out of a need for more than mere survival during their childhood years. They’d been mother, father, sibling and best friend to one another. They’d been one another’s sole support. Out of that had grown a deep abiding love that was stronger than in most blood-related families.

Despite himself, despite how many years it had been, something deep and frozen in Cade cracked. Thawed. He’d had a family once.

A wife and a beautiful son.

But Lisa and Tommy were dead, had been for eight long years now.

As a result, he lived for his cases, as wide and diversified as he could get them and as scattered across the globe as possible. It helped bury his pain, the all-consuming pain that was too great to think about. Actually, it was far easier not to think at all, instead, taking on case after case, working himself half to death, pushing

himself to the very limit and then beyond, so he could fall into bed at night so exhausted he couldn't even dream. Traveling was a way of life for him, the only way, because if he stayed in one spot too long he lost himself.

It was that simple.

He'd been on this case too long, and the wanderlust part of him was raging to run far and never look back at this place, which was beginning to feel too much like a home.

Damn. Not that. Not ever again did he want a home, a warm safe place that could only, in the end, hurt him. Soon enough he'd solve this case and be on his way, he promised himself. And until then, he'd be an idiot to encourage any more ties than absolutely necessary.

But Delia blew out a harsh breath. "I need to be heir to get Jacob."

Don't ask. Just back off, McKnight. "Jacob is your brother," he said, instead. "I'm betting the court rules in your favor."

"The court is going to snub its nose at me." Her voice was clear enough, but her hands shook when she again reached for the broom.

And despite all his talk about no ties and distance, he moved closer. "What are you talking about? Of course they won't."

"I'm financially insolvent, I'm a thousand miles away from Jacob's home, and I'm single. I'm not exactly parenting material."

He thought that was pretty much crap and said so.

Her lips tightened, but it was as if the veil of control lifted for

that one second, and he suddenly saw the truth.

She didn't believe herself worthy.

Distance. Lord, he sorely needed it, but there was none coming, not when she was standing there pretending to be so strong and fierce when inside she was incredibly vulnerable, so much so that he ached to hold her. "Delia...you'll get him."

She just shrugged.

He was leaving Idaho soon. Wanted to be leaving. Couldn't wait to be leaving.

So why, then, did his heart contract just from looking at her struggling with pride, rigid with the effort to be strong for everyone?

Who was strong for her?

"You're leaving for Los Angeles in a few days," he said slowly. "To meet Jacob."

"Yes."

"I have a case there. I could come with you, try to help—"

"No," she said quickly. "I'll do this alone."

He watched her gather her supplies, watched her move away from him, and with everything he had, he wanted to let it go. Wanted to let her go.

"Hell," he muttered, knowing he couldn't let her go alone. Knowing also that it was far more than mere friendly concern.

Chapter 3

Delia got on the plane, found her window seat, then buckled in and straightened her skirt to avoid wrinkles.

First impressions were everything, and she intended to make a good one on Scott Felton, Jacob's social worker. He'd known Jacob for six years, ever since Jacob's father had died. He was close to Jacob, perhaps closer than anyone at this point, and his approval or nonapproval could make or break her case.

"Excuse me, dear." An elderly woman stood in the aisle, wearing eye-popping chartreuse sweats, high-top tennis shoes and a ski cap.

Delia willed her to keep moving—not that she had anything against old women, but this one looked like a talker and it was a long flight.

"Sadie," the woman informed Delia, as if she'd asked for her name. "Sadie Walkins. Howdy." Her arms were completely loaded and she proceeded to stuff the overhead bin with two large shopping bags. Then she plopped into the middle seat, directly next to Delia, and smiled.

"Whew, those things are darned heavy. It's no wonder they wanted me to check them. I refused, though, because I like to keep my stuff with me, don't you? Though I have to say, I don't think they're too happy with me about now." Pushing at the glasses slipping down her nose, the woman shifted around,

bumping Delia's arms and legs until at last she was apparently comfortable. "Oh, aren't you lovely?" she said to Delia, staring at her.

"Thank you," Delia murmured. She didn't have to glance in a mirror or notice the looks she'd been getting from the male passengers to know she looked good. The woman who'd taken her ticket had complimented her on her outfit, and Delia knew she'd have been shocked to know it was handmade. Nearly every stitch of clothing Delia owned had been made with her own hands. It was a throwback to the years she and her sisters had gone without enough money for anything as frivolous as clothes, but somewhere along the line she'd learned to love the freedom of designing and sewing her own stuff, anyway.

Yet it wasn't the woman next to her she wanted to impress, but the man who was standing in the way of her future with Jacob.

Maybe she should have worn a suit. A power suit, her great little red one...

God, she hated this all-encompassing fear of not being good enough, because that was exactly what this silly obsessing about her clothes came down to—her inadequacy and the certainty that Scott would see it.

"I'm going to visit my grandkids," Sadie offered next. "Though why anyone would want to live in Los Angeles is beyond me."

Delia loved Los Angeles, so she didn't respond and just stared out the window. Jacob lived there. He was a city boy, too, how would he feel about the Triple M?

Idaho and its distinct majestic landscape stared back at her, silent.

“It’s so...dirty,” Sadie said. “Filth.”

All Delia had ever known was the hustling, bustling, teeming, crowded, glorious Los Angeles. She hadn’t been back since they’d left early last summer, and she wondered if it was as wonderful as she remembered. The people, the sights, the smells...yeah, it would be the same.

But was she?

Sighing, she leaned back and closed her eyes.

“Excuse me,” came a deep male voice. “Can I get you anything?”

What? They hadn’t even taken off yet, and it wasn’t as if she sat in first class—

Wait. She knew that voice.

Opening her eyes she looked over Sadie’s head and into the grinning gaze of Cade McKnight. “You,” she said.

He winked. “Me.”

He stood there as if he didn’t have a care in the world, looking annoyingly good, smiling easily and effortlessly, altering her pulse. He wore khaki pants and a soft-looking white shirt unbuttoned at the collar. His dark hair fell to that collar in reckless waves that Delia imagined a less-disciplined woman would have a hard time keeping her fingers off.

Good thing she was especially disciplined. Still, from deep inside her came a strong tingling, which she ruthlessly told herself

must be hunger because she'd skipped breakfast again. It had nothing, absolutely nothing, do to with the tall rangy wanderlust-driven man standing there. "Go home, Cade."

"Ah, but you assume I'm here for you."

That actually made her blush, because of course, he was right. She had a feeling Cade was always right. "You're flying to Los Angeles for your business?"

"Yes."

So what, then, was that undeniable intensity beneath his casual charm? An intensity aimed at her. "Go home, Cade. Wherever that may be."

"You know I can't."

"Of course you can. You just turn around and—"

"Is this your fiancé?" the older woman asked Delia, watching with delight as the too-big Cade tried to squeeze himself against the seat to let others by, his broad shoulders hunched, one long leg bent at an awkward position. He apologized to each and every person forced to pass him, but he didn't budge.

"Oh, how sweet and polite he is," Sadie said. "And so handsome. What a catch, my dear."

Some catch. The man might be a full-time private investigator, but he suffered from the strongest sense of restlessness she'd ever seen. He globe-hopped from case to case and loved it, which Delia, to whom roots and home meant everything, couldn't imagine. Zoe said he was gorgeous enough for a woman to forget such inconveniences, but gorgeous didn't count for much

in Delia's book. "He's not my—"

"Men are so much handsomer now than in my day," Sadie announced, adjusting her ski cap.

From overhead came the drone of the stewardess's voice, reminding them this was a full plane. Everyone was asked to please take their seats.

With an obedience that made Delia narrow her eyes—she had a feeling he never followed the rules unless they suited him—Cade slipped into the still-empty aisle seat, and smiled with innocent charm at Sadie.

"Hello," she said, smiling back. "I'm going to visit my grandkids in Los Angeles. It's a terrible town, but what is one to do?"

"Families. Can't do much with them, can you?" he asked gently, and she beamed.

"I've told my kids to move, but do they listen to me? No."

"That's a shame." Cade shook his head. "You look like a sensible woman to me—they should listen. Now that woman next to you, she's not so sensible."

"But you're going to marry her, anyway, and take care of her." Sadie sighed dramatically. "That's so romantic."

Delia gritted her teeth at the two of them so casually discussing her, then leaned forward to glare at Cade. "He's not my—"

"When's the wedding?"

"Soon as we can manage." Cade lowered his voice to a

conspiratorial whisper. "We're in a hurry, our love just can't be contained. We can't wait to—"

"What are you doing here?" Delia asked through a tightly clenched jaw. "And how fast can you go back to where you came from?"

Cade shot her a mock frown. "What kind of way is that to greet your fiancé?"

Delia gave up with a groan and closed her eyes.

She heard whispering, then felt shifting, and when she opened her eyes again, Cade was in the seat right next to her, his arm and thigh brushing hers. She could feel the heat of him through their clothes, and the strength he carefully held in check.

And when her gaze lifted to meet his, all traces of amusement had been replaced by a passion she found harder to deal with than his teasing. "Cade—"

"Your light was on all night and you left at the crack of dawn," he said quietly. "You didn't sleep, you didn't eat. You can't travel like this."

"I can get by on very little sleep, and believe me, my figure could do without a meal now and then. And coming from the consummate traveler, this conversation is very strange."

"Everyone needs sleep, your body is amazing just the way it is and needs its fuel, and as a consummate traveler, I know what you're doing. You're nervous, you're uptight and you need a friend."

"Is that what you are? A friend?"

"I already told you that."

"People tell me a lot of things."

"That they don't mean?" He shook his head, never taking his gaze off hers. "Not me."

Of course she didn't believe him; it would be ridiculous to do so. But she was breathless, and she told herself it was the pressure, since the plane had started its taxi down the runway.

It had absolutely nothing to do with his thinking her body was amazing. "You should have gone home, Cade."

"Home?" The word rolled off his tongue as if it was foreign to him.

Which just proved her point. He could never really understand her and all that she held dear. "Home. Your office in Boise. Unless you have another home, which of course, since you never say a word about yourself or your private life, I wouldn't know."

"And that disturbs you."

"I'm curious about you," she admitted. "I don't even know if you're married."

"I'm not," he said with sudden grimness. "And I don't talk about me. Ever."

So much for their friendship. "Fine. Then go. Go far away."

"Just go? Where? Anywhere, as long as it's far from you?"

"Well...yes."

He sighed. "You're a tough nut, Delia, I'll give you that. But I'm tougher."

"What does that mean?" But she knew, and let out a groan.

“You’re sticking.”

“Like glue.”

“I don’t need you.”

“So you’ve said.”

“I don’t want you.”

His full lips curved, and his expression lightened with genuine humor. “Now, now. Let’s not lie, not among friends.”

“We’re not friends. And I’m not lying!”

“Uh-huh.”

She closed her eyes and leaned back, deciding the only way to deal with this was to ignore him.

“Dream of me,” he whispered.

And damn him, she did.

The sunny warm weather in Southern California was so different from the cold autumn she’d just left, Delia couldn’t believe it. How could she have forgotten, even for a moment, how delicious the weather was at all times in Los Angeles?

She rented a car from the airport, still trying to ignore Cade, which was becoming increasingly difficult, especially since each long assessing glance he gave her seemed to affect her accumulatively, so that she was aware of little else. It got so she didn’t have to be looking at him; she could feel his every move.

Jacob, she reminded herself. Concentrate on Jacob. There had to be a way to ensure custody, which she wanted so very much. It wasn’t just that she couldn’t imagine letting him live anywhere else when his family was in Idaho, but also that she already loved

him and had from the moment she knew he existed.

“It’ll work out,” Cade said into the silence, his voice gentle and subdued, all joking gone. “Getting Jacob.”

Startled, she glanced at him. He was driving—he’d insisted, claiming that it would leave her mind free to race around if she wanted—and was concentrating on the road in front of him. He had the window down, his hair whipping wild in the breeze. With his sleeves shoved up to his elbows, revealing strong tanned forearms and big sure hands, he seemed relaxed. Confident. And just a tad cocky.

“How do you do that?” she asked.

“Do what?” he said innocently.

“Am I such an open book that you can read my mind?”

He risked a quick glance at her. “On the contrary, actually.” He gave a smile that might have been a killer, if she wasn’t immune to such things. “But I do have an edge.”

“An edge?”

“Yeah. I understand you.”

“That’s interesting, considering we’re polar opposites.”

“Opposites attract,” he said so grimly she realized for the first time that he resented their strange chemistry even more than she did.

Because that gave her too much to think about, she made a disagreeing sound, turned away to look out the passenger window and tried to think about other things.

Soon she’d meet her brother for the first time. Her stomach

danced with jittery butterflies. What would he be like?

What would great-aunt Edna be like? It hadn't been until after their mother's death just months ago that Jacob had even met Edna. She was Delia's mother's second aunt by marriage and until last year had lived in France—which was why twenty years ago, when Delia's mother had left her in the foster home, there hadn't been anyone available to help.

Jacob must be terrified; she'd certainly been all those years back. But in spite of everything, Delia considered herself lucky. She had found Zoe and Maddie, and they'd turned out to be her heart and soul.

Jacob had no one but Edna, and no matter how sweet and kind and wonderful she might be, it wasn't the same as close family.

Delia didn't fool herself. Getting close to Jacob—given the terse restrained phone conversations they'd had—wasn't going to be easy. But she knew what it was like to hide behind a cool facade; she'd find a way to Jacob's heart. She'd never abandon him.

But as she gave Cade the directions she'd been given, they went from the relative slums surrounding the airport to the elegant mansions of San Marino, and any confidence she'd managed to muster faded.

Jacob was living like a king.

How could she compare?

That was simple enough—she couldn't. With a sinking feeling, she stared at the house they'd pulled up in front of.

Three stories of brick and windows shaped into the most charming Tudor-style home she'd ever seen. The circular drive was surrounded with meticulous gardens, and a BMW sat in the drive, beneath a colorful flag waving the words Welcome, Friends.

She felt every bit the misplaced unwanted city girl. She couldn't do this, couldn't compete, and all her buried feelings of worthlessness worked to the surface.

At the touch on her arm, she looked into Cade's unsmiling face. Yet she had no trouble detecting the warmth and compassion that made her want to crawl into a hole.

Where was her own inner strength?

"Delia."

Instead of hugging her, as she knew he would have Zoe or Maddie, he reached over and gave her a gentle shake. "Don't you give up. You're better than that."

"In case you missed it, that little flag over there is worth more than I am."

"I'm not talking about your checkbook," he said, his disappointment in her clear. "I'm talking heart. Soul. Now get out and go show them what you're made of."

Delia stared at him as panic raced through her veins like wildfire.

"Go," he repeated firmly. "I'll wait right here."

What had she expected—him to hold her hand? She didn't need that, or him. She could do this. Drawing upon years of

experience, she took a deep supposedly calming breath and got out of the car.

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