MILLS & BOON

Vintage SUPER ROMANCE

The Doctor's Daughter

JUDITH BOWEN

Judith Bowen
The Doctor's Daughter

Аннотация

MEN OF GLORYA cowboy town in a cowboy country. This is a place a woman could love. These are men a woman could love! Virginia Lake left town more than a decade ago–after a memorable night with a man her parents forbade her to see. Lucas Yellowfly, they said, was a troublemaker. Off-limits. Half-Native American and from the wrong side of town, he wasn't good enough for Dr. and Mrs. Lake. But now…everything's changed. Now Lucas is a successful lawyer in Glory. Practically a pillar of society.And now Virginia's back, a single mother with a five-year-old son. She's looking for a job–and Lucas finds he needs someone with exactly her qualifications. Because he's always been half in love with the doctor's daughter.He's finally got the chance to convince her that this man from Glory will make a good husband…and a good father. Her reasons for marrying him might have more to do with need than with love, but things can change. Who knows that better than Lucas Yellowfly.

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"I want to thank you, Lucas, for all the help you've been to me and my son."

Virginia's voice was low and urgent. "It was a huge thing for me to come back to Glory. I only hope I've made the right decision."

"Hey, Virginia." Lucas held her gaze and felt something start to hum and burn inside his chest. She had this effect on him; she'd always had this effect on him.

"You've been terrific. And...and I really appreciate it. Especially since things aren't always the way I'd like them to be with Mother and Father."

Lucas had noticed that she always referred to her parents rather formally It seemed odd, since everyone in town knew how much Doc and Doris Lake had doted on their only daughter.

Lucas wanted to reach out and touch her. Suddenly he did. He leaned forward and placed both his hands on her shoulders.

“Listen, Virginia, I’m happy to be a good friend to you. But that’s not all I want to be. When we’re at work, I’m a hundred percent professional. But when we’re not...I intend to court you. Seriously.”

There was a moment of strained silence. Then “S-seriously?” Her voice was faint.

“Damn seriously.”

“Oh, Lucas...then kiss me. Please.”

Dear Reader,

There’s a wrong side to every town.

Sometimes it’s the east end, if the prevailing wind is from the west. Sometimes it’s across the tracks, where the cinders and smoke once flew and the freight whistles meant sleepless nights for the nearby residents. Sometimes it’s on the far bank of the river or creek, with a graveled path leading toward it, away from the brighter lights.

Rarely it was a hilltop. Generally that’s where “Society” lived, with a good view of those less fortunate folk below.

Lucas Yellowfly is poor, half-Native American and from the wrong side of town. But he’s got big plans for himself.

Maverick daughter of the local surgeon, Virginia Lake is definitely from the right side of town. But she returns in disgrace, a young son in tow and no husband in sight.

Now, twelve years after they both left Glory, they’ve got a second chance. This time, will love prevail, no matter what the neighbors think?

I hope you enjoy Lucas and Virginia's story. How could two wrongs come out so right?

Sincerely,

Judith Bowen

P.S. I'd love to hear from you! Write to me at P.O. Box 2333, Point Roberts, WA 98281-2333

The Doctor's Daughter
Judith Bowen

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To my good friend, Kathy Garner

CHAPTER ONE

IT NEVER CEASED to amaze Lucas Yellowfly how, in this life, you couldn't discount coincidence. Sure, good luck was good management, but sometimes you had to wonder.

Look at today's mail, for instance. How likely was it he'd get an invitation to a baby christening, a letter from his sister, who never wrote when there was a phone in town, and a job application from a woman he'd once loved? Twelve long years since he'd seen her. No woman had ever measured up quite that way since.

Pete Horsfall, his law partner, mostly retired but still in the office a day or two a week, had tossed the application on Lucas's desk after lunch. Lucas had just picked up his personal mail at home and read the invitation to the christening of Joe and Honor Gallant's baby boy. His sister's letter he'd tucked in his pocket unopened after examining the postmark. Somewhere on

Vancouver Island in British Columbia. He wanted to think about it on his short walk back to the office.

So Theresa had ended up on the coast again. With her daughter, presumably. Lucas's sister had had her share of problems. He was always ready to help her, no questions asked, especially since Tammy's birth eight years ago. He just wanted a few minutes to think about what Theresa might be up to this time before he opened the envelope and found out.

And then, as soon as he sat down at his desk, there was that application for the legal assistant's position from Virginia Lake staring him in the face, on top of the handful of six or seven applications Horsfall had already opened and read. Lucas wondered if Virginia was on his partner's short list. If she wasn't, he pondered briefly how he'd get around the old man and get her hired.

Because that was what he intended. He didn't care what her qualifications were. He'd train her himself if he had to—he wanted to see Virginia again. He wanted her back in Glory.

When had he seen her last?

Graduation night. Her graduation. He'd come back to Glory with one thing on his mind—to show the town that had never had time for the Indian kid from the south side of the tracks just how wrong they were. He'd had a freshly inked bachelor of arts degree in one pocket and a letter accepting him to one of the country's top law schools in the other. He'd planned to ask the doctor's daughter to the dance—the one girl in town who'd been

considered completely beyond his reach. All she could do was turn him down, right?

But she hadn't turned him down. She'd said yes, and Lucas wasn't sure his life had ever been the same again.

He'd had his eye on her all through high school, although she was several years behind him. She'd been wild. Crazy and wild, and it seemed there wasn't anything she and that boyfriend of hers, Johnny Gagnon, wouldn't get up to. She was the bane of Doc Lake's life. His only daughter. His and that stiff society dame. As if there was any society in the town of Glory!

But Doris Lake did her best to pretend there was. Only, it was extremely difficult with a flame-haired daredevil of a daughter who drag-raced her daddy's Oldsmobile on the abandoned airfield five miles out of town and thumbed her nose at every convention in the book.

Maybe that was why she'd accepted his invitation to the senior prom. Because he was hands-off. A half-breed. A no-good with a drunk for a father and a brittle, worried, worn-out mother who somehow kept the family together by cleaning houses in the fancy district up on Buffalo Hill. Doc Lake's wasn't one of them. Lucas didn't think he could have borne the shame at eighteen, no matter how proud he was of his mother now, at thirty-five. The old man was dead finally, of a rotten liver and a broken heart, a salmon-eating Fraser River Sto:lo dead in prairie Blackfoot country, home of the buffalo-eaters. And a few years ago, Lucas had bought his mother a retirement apartment in south Calgary,

which she shared with her older and only surviving sister. Family was a part of his life Lucas rarely talked about. The truth was, nobody asked.

Or maybe Virginia Lake had accepted his invitation becaue her boyfriedn was in jail.

Johnny Gagnon had a string of petty charges against him by the time he quit school at sixteen. Joyriding, public mischief, shoplifting. He had a laughing, darkly handsome face and a devil-may-care attitude to match Virginia's. Even when he went to work as a grease monkey for the local mechanic, Walter Friesen, he hung around the high school, revving up his old Thunderbird in the parking lot, waiting for Virginia to finish class. When Virginia was out of town, Lucas would see him driving up and down Main Street with any number of other female companions. Or steaming up the car windows with some girl at the Starlight Drive-in.

The day of Virginia's graduation, Johnny was in jail for grand larceny. Car theft. He wasn't a young offender anymore and the Glory Plain Dealer didn't call it joyriding in their "This Week in Court" column. He got six months, was out in three, but by then Lucas had taken his girl to the senior prom and earned Gagnon's enduring enmity.

Not that Lucas Yellowfly gave a damn. Where was Johnny Gagnon now? Ha. Lucas hadn't thought of him in years. Probably in a maximum-security pen somewhere. Dorchester or Kingston. Well out of society's hair, anyway, he presumed. Lucas had

grown up and dedicated his life to the law. He'd put the violence of his own youth behind him. The bar fights, the rodeo brawls, the lies dreamed up to protect his no-good father and tired mother from the town's scorn—all of it behind him. He believed in the law now. In the power of justice.

And his profession had been very, very good to him. He had an excellent income, a knockout wardrobe, savings in the bank, a stockbroker on retainer, holidays in the south every January, a BMW—he'd achieved all the trappings of success. And, best of all, he'd come back to Glory to do it. He'd shoved his success in the town's face and they'd had to take it. Now he could accompany any single woman in Glory to any dinner party, anytime. He was in demand. Fathers brightened when they saw him arrive with their daughter on his arm. Where were the scowls of the old days?

Lucas enjoyed every minute of it. Revenge, they said, was sweet. Indeed, it was.

He frowned slightly as he examined the facts on Virginia's resumé. Thirty, diploma in office management and legal research, past experience... He ran his eye quickly down the list and frowned again. It seemed she'd had an awful lot of short-term jobs in a lot of different towns. He glanced at her cover letter.

Then his eye stopped. His heart stopped. She had a child. A boy, five years old.

Lucas pushed back his chair and put his feet up on the desk, hands behind his head. He stared out the window.

Single. With a child. Coming back to Glory. What had happened in Virginia Lake's life?

Lucas told himself he'd do everything right. He'd let Pete handle it; otherwise, she might remember that prom date and the night they'd spent together and maybe change her mind. When he saw her, in person, it would be different. There'd be no embarrassment on either side. She'd know he cared. The way he always had. She'd know he'd never do anything to hurt her. She'd know she'd come to the right place. If he could help her, he would.

Yes, he'd let Pete take care of things. Lucas couldn't afford to blow it. He'd been waiting for Virginia for a very long time.

CHAPTER TWO

Six years earlier

VIRGINIA PAUSED at the spring-loaded door to the Bragg Creek Grocery with an odd feeling that something was wrong.

What could be wrong?

It was a glorious morning, the trees were in full leaf and the wild roses were in bud. She'd just heard good news about a summer job at the Banff Springs Hotel and now she had a place to live, too, at the Prescotts' summer cabin just down the road. She didn't have to go home to Glory, didn't have to deal with her parents, after all. She could take care of herself.

Virginia frowned. Maybe the feeling had something to do with the shiny late-model Jeep that stood outside the store with its engine running. In winter, yes, people sometimes left their

cars and pickups running, but on a beautiful May morning? She pushed open the door and stepped into the gloom of the old store.

"Well, well."

"Johnny!"

"Will you lookee who's here?"

Virginia was tongue-tied. She hadn't seen Johnny Gagnon since the summer her father had packed her off to Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, four thousand miles away.

"Haven't seen you in a while, babe. Man, what a sight for sore eyes!"

She'd have recognized him anywhere. Handsome as ever, maybe even more so now that he was a man, fully grown. He wore a mustache, which suited him, and his hair was fashionably long. His teeth flashed white in his swarthy face when he grinned at her, and, as always, she found it hard not to grin back.

Johnny Bandito.

But what was he doing here?

Then she noticed his right hand stuffed awkwardly in his jacket pocket and, slung over his shoulder, a stained and worn canvas cash bag that was stenciled faintly with "Bragg Creek Grocery." He was sweating profusely and his dark eyes were all over her and all over the store at the same time. Where was Mr. Gibbon? Where were the other customers? The old guys who gathered every morning in the country store to shoot the breeze with the proprietor?

Virginia heard a muffled thump from behind the high wooden counter. That was when she noticed the wall phone was off the hook and the connection had been ripped out.

Her eyes shot to Johnny's. "What are you doing here?"

"C'mon, babe," he shot back, winking at her. "Lighten up, eh? Just a little grubstake, that's all." He pulled his hand out of his pocket, leaving a bulky-looking object behind. A gun. He had a gun in his pocket.

He grabbed her arm. "Come with me, sweetheart. I could use a good-looking hostage." He grinned again, but this time Virginia felt no inclination to smile back. Her insides were frozen. He was robbing this store. She'd walked into the middle of a robbery.

"Where's Mr. Gibbon?" she demanded, wrenching her arm away from the man who'd been her first lover and, once, her closest friend.

"Aw, he's fine. Tied him up with a little of his own stock. Panty hose." Johnny nodded in the direction of the counter. "Little trick I learned in the pen. You know I'd never hurt anybody, Ginny," he said irritably.

Virginia stepped closer, trying to peer behind the counter. "My God!" She turned to rush to the aid of the three people on the floor-one of whom was Mr. Gibbon—gagged and bound together by the feet. But Johnny grabbed her arm again.

This time it hurt. This time she knew he meant it. He was going to take her with him, just as he'd said.

"Look, they're fine. I tied 'em up so I could put a few miles

between me and this dump before they called the cops. And I ripped out the wires just to give 'em a little more challenge, eh?" He winked at her, then reached out and scooped up half-a-dozen beef jerky and pepperoni packages from the display on the counter. "Come on, Ginny. Let's get out of here."

He stuffed the jerky and pepperoni in the cash bag and gripped her arm. Virginia cursed herself for not doing something when he'd let her go. Why hadn't she run out of there screaming? She ought to be able to raise the alarm herself even now—run, get help at the nearest occupied cabin. Where was that at this time of year? Not many Calgary people spent more than weekends at their Bragg Creek cabins this early in the season.

It was too late. He had her arm in a viselike grip and he wasn't letting go. Maybe she should play along. Maybe she could talk him out of this, talk him into giving himself up. Convince him that this kind of stupid crime was no way to have a life.

Johnny doused the lights with his free hand, twisted the doorknob lock and flipped the plastic sign hanging on the window beside the door to Closed. The lock wasn't secure, but it would halt most people, though they might wonder why Mr. Gibbon hadn't opened up yet.

Then, holding her tightly, he turned and yelled back into the silent store, "Remember, old man. I got a gun and a hostage—just stay where you are and don't do nothin' and nobody'll get hurt!"

He slammed the door shut, then frog-marched her to the

driver's side of the running Jeep. "Get in, Ginny, and don't try nothin' funny. We got a lot of catching up to do."

Virginia clambered across the driver's bucket seat and the gearshift into the passenger seat. By the time she was reaching for her seat belt—a matter of habit—Johnny had thrown the Jeep into gear and popped the clutch. He left the small parking lot in a spray of gravel and grinned at her as she jammed her seat belt lever home. "Just like the old days, eh? You and me? Bonnie and Clyde—"

"This is nuts, Johnny. You'll never get away with this."

His eyes narrowed. "Who says, babe?"

"Me. You can't do this." She made a wild gesture at him, at the vehicle, at the blur of trees lining the roadside. "Whose Jeep is this, anyway?"

"Friend of a friend, you might say. Just borrowed it." He winked at her again. She noticed then that there was no key in the ignition. He'd hot-wired it. That was why he'd left it running.

Johnny tossed her the cash bag with one hand as he pulled out to pass a gleaming stainless-steel dairy tanker. "Dig in there and throw me a chunk of that pepperoni, will you?"

Obediently Virginia rummaged in the bag. There wasn't much cash. Probably just Mr. Gibbon's float for the day. Or maybe his receipts over the weekend. She was disgusted. Imagine robbing a store for a couple hundred bucks or less. Then she caught herself—stealing was stealing, no matter what the amount. She'd just finished her second year of law school and she knew where this

kind of thing led.

She'd have had more respect for her former lover if he'd planned and carried out something big. This nickel-and-dime stuff, this hot-wiring and stealing cars—all it did was add up to a ruined life and a string of jail terms. Not that robbing a bank and going to jail for twenty years in a federal penitentiary wouldn't ruin a person's life. But at least it took some brains. She tossed Johnny a bag of pepperoni strips, which he caught with his free hand.

"Thanks, babe. So—" he tore the bag open with his teeth "—what've you been up to since the last time I saw you? Four, five years ago now?"

"More than that." She paused. She didn't feel like filling Johnny in on her life over the past six years. This was no social picnic or school reunion. She was in the middle of a crime that was still taking place. He had called her his hostage. Armed robbery. She hadn't guessed wrong; he'd told Mr. Gibbon and the others that he had a gun. Car theft. Now kidnapping. Did he mean it? Or was he going to drop her off somewhere, maybe in the next town or on one of these back roads, and ask her not to go to the police?

She wasn't sure where they were headed, except that they were traveling west. The Rockies loomed, snowcapped and gleaming in the sunshine, in the near distance. Bragg Creek was in the wooded foothills twenty miles west of Calgary. To the southeast was the Stoney Reserve and, south of that, ranch country.

Longview, Priddis, Black Diamond, Turner Valley, Millarville, Glory. If they stopped in one of those towns, she could jump out. Then what? She supposed she'd have to turn Johnny in and even testify against him when the time came. She didn't want to be involved. She wished she hadn't decided to walk to the store for a cellophane-wrapped Danish for breakfast this morning. She wished she'd settled for the dry cereal her first check of the Prescotts' cupboards had yielded.

What luck. And Mr. Gibbon's stock of bakery goods would likely have been a week old, anyway.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked finally.

Johnny swallowed the mouthful of pepperoni he'd been chewing and turned to her. "Place I know. Nice little cabin up here off the Powderface Trail. Give us a chance to visit. Nobody to disturb us, if you know what I mean." He laughed and bit off another chunk of the pepperoni.

Virginia relaxed slightly. He couldn't intend her any harm if he'd told her where they were going. He must plan to let her go soon, maybe after this "visit." Oddly, even with the gun she knew he had, she wasn't particularly worried. She wished he'd just let her go now. She had nothing to talk about with him. They had nothing in common anymore, probably hadn't since high school. She'd gone to her prom with that half-Indian guy she'd always secretly admired, Lucas Yellowfly. Johnny had been in jail. It had been the last in a string of disappointments with Johnny Gagnon, and in a way she was relieved when her father, furious

that she'd dated Yellowfly, had packed her up and sent her to university in New Brunswick.

She'd stayed with her aunt Sadie and attended Mount Allison for four years, long enough to get her bachelor of arts, and then she'd applied for law school in Edmonton and Calgary. Edmonton had accepted her. She'd wanted to come back to Alberta. Maybe not to Glory with her parents, but she'd missed the mountains and the wide-open spaces. She'd missed home.

But she hadn't missed Johnny Gagnon, although she hadn't forgotten him, either. You never forgot the first man you'd been with. You never forgot someone who'd been a good friend, someone who'd grown up with you and who'd once shared all the secrets of your teenage heart.

"What've you been doing, Johnny?" she ventured. Might as well play the game. For now, at least.

"You mean besides robbing dumpy little highway grocery stores?" He grinned at her and ripped open a bag of peanuts that had been lying on the dash. "Oh, this and that." He stuffed a few peanuts in his mouth. "Got married."

"Really!" Virginia was genuinely pleased. "Anybody I know?"

"Nope. Babe from Clearwater. In B.C. On the Yellowhead." Johnny frowned, chewed a mouthful of peanuts and swallowed again. "Hey—you hungry?" He offered her the open bag. She shook her head.

"So, got any kids?"

"Nah. Marriage went belly-up a few years back. She couldn't

handle the life-style, know what I mean?"

That didn't surprise her. What woman could?

"Worked a few jobs here and there, tried to stay straight. Sawmills, oil rigs, drove truck for a while. Harper's Transport out of Olds." He glanced at her. "Nothing that amounted to much. Spent a little time in the clink—I already mentioned that, huh?" Virginia had the distinct impression he'd spent more than a little time in jail, and maybe that had been the part of the life-style his wife couldn't handle. "What about you?"

"Oh, this and that. I was down East for a few years. I'm going to law school up in Edmonton now, second year—"

"No kidding! So you can put guys like me behind bars, eh?"

"I guess so." She smiled. It was hard to stay mad at Johnny. She remembered that about him. He could always make her laugh, even during the worst times. Firmly she reminded herself that this was different. This was serious. Mr. Gibbon had no doubt freed himself and called the Mounties. Any minute now they'd hear a police siren and they'd be pulled over and Johnny'd be arrested and that would be the end of it.

Suddenly Johnny slowed the Jeep and they lurched off the road, which had been gravel for the past several miles, onto a rutted lane that wasn't much more than a grassy track. The vehicle heaved and bounced, engine growling.

Virginia held tight to the armrest. She didn't like this. She didn't like it one bit. At least the road they'd been on was public; there'd been a chance of flagging down another car, if she'd had

the opportunity. But what could she do out here in some shack in the bush? Somehow, though, she didn't think Johnny was a walker. Too lazy. The cabin he'd mentioned couldn't be too far and she figured it had to be on some sort of road.

She was wrong.

They came to a stop in the middle of a clearing with a faint turnaround. There were tiny spring flowers and grasses growing in the tracks, indicating it hadn't been used for a while.

"What are we stopping for?" she asked, on the off chance this wasn't what she thought it was—their destination.

"We're here, babe. This is old-fashioned cabin country. You take the cash bag and I'll grab that duffel in the back. I'm banking on my buddy keeping the joint stocked. Otherwise it's pepperoni and peanuts or, if the lady prefers, peanuts and pepperoni." He laughed, as though it was a tremendous joke.

Reluctantly Virginia took the canvas bag. She didn't know what else to do. She was stuck out here now. She had to put her faith in Johnny's good nature. Surely he'd drive her back to civilization, or at least to the road, once they'd talked.

She shivered, realizing no one knew where she was. No one even knew she was in Bragg Creek, except Mary Prescott, and Mary was in France right now. Virginia had planned to call her parents and tell them about her summer job and the place she'd found to stay, but she hadn't gotten around to it yet.

No one would miss her. Not until she didn't show up at the Banff Springs Hotel next Monday for her new job. It was a

horrible feeling.

She walked beside Johnny through the clearing and over a small grassy knoll, through sparse groupings of birch and poplar and mountain ash. A few conifers, spruce and pine, were interspersed with the deciduous trees. It was a lovely time of year. Somewhere in the distance she could hear the sound of water flowing. Snowmelt? Elbow Falls was somewhere up here. Were they near it?

The cabin was surprisingly comfortable, despite its remote location. It consisted of two rooms, a tiny bedroom with a sagging double bed and a larger main room combining small kitchen, dining nook and living room. A large iron woodstove stood in the center of the main room. Seasoned firewood was split and piled to the eaves outside the weathered wooden door. The walls were log and the roof was rusted tin. The place had a certain charm.

"You've been here before?" she asked Johnny as he threw the duffel bag onto the old-fashioned sofa draped in a granny-square afghan on one side of the living room. She wrinkled her nose at the musty smell in the air. Mice, definitely.

"Couple times. Buddy of mine owns it. Fishing cabin." Johnny yanked open a window a few inches, then went to the cupboards. He whistled with satisfaction. "Man, ain't we lucky? Everything a guy could want," he said, holding up some soup mixes and other dehydrated-food packages in one hand and a large bottle of rye whiskey in the other. "Good thing we had a mild winter or this

woulda froze—and that woulda been a darn shame."

Whiskey. Virginia had a sinking feeling in the pit of her belly. Johnny had always been a boozer. She'd forgotten that about him. In fact, it struck her that perhaps he'd already been drinking. The Jeep, she recalled, had smelled faintly of old booze, along with cigarette smoke and damp canvas. Maybe to get his nerve up for the robbery. Suddenly this no longer felt like a lark—not that it ever really had. She wanted to go home.

"When are you taking me back, Johnny?" she asked nonchalantly, trying a smile. She had the feeling it wouldn't be a good idea to get into an argument with him out here. Not until she knew exactly where she stood.

"Oh, hell, Ginny," he said sharply, unscrewing the cap on the whiskey and splashing several inches into a water glass. "What's your rush? It's party time. Hell, I haven't seen you in six years and now you can't spend a couple hours with an old buddy? What's the matter? The doctor's daughter too good for old Johnny Gagnon now?" He held up the glass in a mock toast and smiled, but his smile didn't quite match the look in his eyes. Virginia felt a tiny shiver run over her flesh.

"I guess you're right," she said lightly. "Well, I'll start a fire." Why not play Girl Guide? Maybe Johnny wasn't welcome in this cabin, and someone would come to investigate the smoke. It was as likely as not that the "buddy" who owned the place was like the buddy who'd lent him the Jeep—a flgment of Johnny's wishful thinking.

Virginia found some old newspapers on a rickety table in the bedroom, yellowed and dated the previous fall. Did that mean the owner hadn't been back since?

She crumpled up a few sheets and poked them into the stove. Johnny slouched on the sagging sofa, whiskey in his hand, watching her every move. She opened the door to get some firewood.

"Don't go anywhere, eh, babe?" he called out. There was no mistaking the warning in his voice, and Virginia shivered again. She looked out the door into the deep, quiet afternoon woods. She had no idea where she was. What were the chances of her running out of here, away from Johnny? Not great. She'd play for a little more time; maybe he'd get drunk and fall asleep.

"I'm just getting some wood for the fire," she said. She stepped off the stoop and ambled casually toward a large stump that had obviously been used for splitting wood. Dry chips lay all about the ground. Virginia bent to pick up a handful—starter for the fire. As she did so, she glanced toward the cabin. Johnny was watching her through the small window. So much for making a run for it.

Why did he want her? Surely not as a real hostage. That was crazy, just something he'd made up on the spur of the moment. Virginia carried in the chips, along with a few sticks of the firewood. She'd go along with him and stay as determinedly cheerful as possible. Any chance she had to run, she'd take it.

The fire caught immediately, and soon a welcome warmth

penetrated the cabin, warming the chill, dank air and even driving off the mousy smell she'd noticed when she'd first walked in.

"Soup and crackers?" she asked Johnny, checking out the cupboard contents herself. "I didn't have any breakfast or lunch."

"That's more like it, babe. Make yourself useful. Sure, put on some soup. Throw in some of that beef jerky." Johnny grinned and raised his half-empty glass to her. He'd already refilled it once. "Let's party!"

Virginia didn't reply to that. She filled a pot of water from the outdoor hand pump, letting the rusty water seep into the ground until it ran clear. A squirrel scolded her from a nearby jack pine. In other circumstances, this could be quite pleasant.

The soup was good and filling, especially simmered with a handful of the jerky. Something new, she thought, almost smiling —cream of jerky soup. The crackers were stale, but she felt better after she'd eaten. Johnny was drinking too much and mumbling to himself. She ignored him. All she could hope was that he'd pass out.

When she'd cleaned up the dishes and pot she'd used for the soup, Virginia pawed through a stack of magazines and newspapers she'd discovered in a corner of the bedroom. She found an old Reader's Digest magazine and curled up on the rickety armchair to read and pass the time. He was definitely incapable of driving anywhere now. Johnny had progressed from mumbling to singing to himself on the sofa, a third—or was it a

fourth?—tumbler of whiskey in his hand.

Oddly, she didn't feel threatened. She knew her captor too well. He was the same old Johnny. Impulsive, headstrong, a joker... He was too badly organized to carry off anything complicated or serious. Virginia had no doubt he'd be back in jail within days. And not for the last time either.

A sudden groan and then snoring from the direction of the sofa alerted Virginia to the fact that she'd finally had some luck. He'd fallen asleep. Or passed out. Now she could sneak out and find her way back to the main road—there was still an hour or two of daylight—hitch a ride to town and put as many miles between herself and her captor as possible. If she could avoid it, she wouldn't go to the cops. Let them catch him themselves; it wasn't as though anyone had been hurt in the robbery, including her.

Virginia got to her feet and walked quietly to the door, one eye on the snoring Johnny Gagnon. He'd knocked over his glass when he'd fallen asleep and the pungent fumes of twelve-year-old whiskey filled the room.

The key! It was missing. Virginia clenched her jaw in surprise and shock. Damn him. He wasn't as disorganized as she'd assumed. There'd only been an old-fashioned latch on the outside when they'd arrived, but she'd noticed an ancient skeleton key stuck in the rusted lock from the inside when she'd gone out to get the firewood earlier. That skeleton key was gone. She glanced toward Johnny, her lips compressed in annoyance. No doubt the

missing key was in his pocket.

Then she realized he hadn't taken the gun out of his jacket pocket and his jacket was hanging over the back of the sofa. She tiptoed toward it Shuddering, she touched the icy-cold steel of the gun. She withdrew it, then panicked. It was a lot heavier than she'd thought it would be. What was she going to do with it? She didn't know; she just didn't want a weapon like that available to a man as drunk as Johnny. She looked around the small cabin. There weren't many hiding places. In the end she put it in the crisper of the old icebox, which hadn't been used for months. Johnny wasn't the type to rummage around for vegetables, anyway.

After that she searched through the cupboard and found a couple of packages of noodles and mix, which she decided to make for an evening meal. The discovery that Johnny had locked her in was a shock. She was stuck until tomorrow now. It would be dark soon, and even if she got out, she didn't think she'd be able to find her way to the road at night It wasn't as though the Powderface Trail got a lot of traffic even in the daytime.

Johnny woke up for supper, cheerful but still very drunk. He ate two huge platefuls of the concoction she'd made, complimenting her on her cooking. Then he dug the key out of his jeans pocket with a sly grin at her and swaggered onto the stoop outside, where she could hear him relieving himself. When he came in, she went out with the same object in mind, finding some privacy behind a bush to one side of the cabin. There was

no outhouse that she could see, but there was probably one a few yards . down a nearby trail. She wasn't about to hunt for it, though. Johnny was waiting for her on the stoop when she returned.

"Thought I'd let you sneak off on me, eh?" he said with a snort of laughter. "Not a chance, babe."

"When are you taking me home?" she demanded. None of this struck her as being the slightest bit humorous.

"Whoa, don't get your shorts in a knot, babe. I'll drop you off tomorrow somewhere. Canmore, Calgary, wherever you wanna go. No sweat." He followed her back into the cabin and locked the door again.

"Why are you locking up?" she asked. She didn't like the idea of a locked door with a fire in the stove. Or Johnny. He was drunk. What if he upset an oil lamp or something?

"Keep out the bad guys," he joked, winking at her. "You can't be too careful these days. There's a lotta riffraff out there runnin' around." He gave her a significant look and dropped the key back in his pocket. Virginia went into the bedroom to return the magazine and surreptitiously tried the small window there. It was either nailed or painted shut. There was no way she could get out without breaking the glass. Well, if she had to, she would. Maybe when he passed out again.

Half an hour later it was too dark to read. Luckily her captor had shown no interest in lighting the lamps that were lined up on the kitchen counter. Johnny fell asleep sprawled out on the

sofa, with only an inch or two left in the whiskey bottle. Virginia hoped that was the only booze the cupboards would yield.

She tried the bedroom window again. It wouldn't budge. Then she went back into the main room and tried the window he'd opened earlier. It was stuck, too. She looked for some kind of tool in the kitchen drawer, but didn't come up with anything more lethal than a dull knife, which she took into the bedroom. She began chipping at the paint that covered the window frame.

"Whatcha doin', babe?"

Damn. Virginia put down the knife and cleared her throat. "Nothing," she called back. She froze for a few moments, then heard snoring again.

She was trapped here. But did she really want to get out now and try to make her way through the dark forest? She could get seriously lost. For tonight, anyway, things seemed pretty hopeless.

She might as well go to bed. She picked up an afghan that lay on the end of the bed and carried it into the main room. Johnny was stretched out on the sofa. She unfolded the afghan and draped it lightly over his snoring form. With any luck he wouldn't wake up until morning.

Then, just in case, she jammed the kitchen knife between the door frame and the door itself of the bedroom as a temporary lock and studied the sagging double bed. When had the sheets last been changed? Did she want know? For extra security, she lodged a rickety chan under the latch, then took off her jeans

and sneakers, leaving her socks, shirt and underwear on, and climbed between the fairly clean-looking quilt and blanket that covered the bed. She could only hope that morning would come soon. And that Johnny would be sober enough to drive her to the nearest town.

It was so quiet. Except for the soughing of the wind in the trees and Johnny snoring in the living room, there wasn't a sound. And it was getting so dark. There wasn't even a moon.

Despite her certainty that, exhausted or not, she wouldn't sleep, she did, only to awaken suddenly in a horrible fright, the room pitch-dark, and with the stinking, whiskey-laden breath of her captor in her face. He obviously had broken into the room somehow and fallen across the bed. He was trying to kiss her.

"Johnny!" She wrenched her face away. "Stay away from me!"

"Whassamatter? Doc's daughter too good for me now? Eh?" He persisted, rubbing his whiskery face over hers. She wanted to gag when his damp mustache swept across her mouth.

"Get off me!"

"Shut up, you stuck-up bitch," he growled, grabbing her hair. "Kiss me. The way you used to." Real fear stabbed Virginia's heart. This wasn't the Johnny Gagnon she knew. She realized at the same time that he'd taken off his clothes. He was stark naked on top of her on the bed, only the tattered quilt between them.

He plunged his tongue into her mouth and she gagged. He swore and grabbed the quilt off her and tore at her panties. Virginia fought him, scratching his shoulders and pulling his

hair. She was filled with complete panic and the strength of ten women.

Johnny swore in French several times and slapped her, then fumbled with himself, his other arm holding her down on the bed. She realized he was trying to rape her. She screamed. He laughed. “Go ahead. Nobody’s gonna hear you, babe.” She screamed again and twisted, desperately trying to free herself. “Come on, honey, settle down. You used to like this, remember?”

He thrust and thrust again. Nothing happened. Obviously he was too drunk to maintain an erection. Then he slumped suddenly, weighing her down so heavily she could barely breathe. Omigod.

He’d passed out again. On top of her. Stark naked on top of her. Virginia wanted to scream again, this time with hysterical laughter. But she was afraid she’d wake him. The impulse turned to painful whimpers as she heard his breathing slow, and the wet, sloppy, ragged sound of his snoring again. His breath overpowered her and made her retch. She tried to wriggle out from under him, with no success. She told herself to calm down, to save up her strength for one huge effort once he was deeply, fully unconscious.

Gradually, over the course of the next hour or so—she had no idea how long she lay there, terrified—she wriggled herself ever so slightly away from him. Inch by tiny inch she moved, so that less of his weight pressed her into the lumpy mattress springs.

But it was no use. There was no escape. Johnny woke up. He

raped her twice before morning. The second time, the birds were singing mightily in the trees outside and it was nearly the gray of first light. Battered and feeling sick beyond words, Virginia pushed the unprotesting Johnny off her and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She no longer cared if he tried to stop her. There was nothing more he could do to her, except kill her.

She stood, shaking, and looked down at the man she'd once loved with all her innocent teenage heart. She hated him now. She hadn't known hate could flood the heart as hotly and thickly as love.

She groped in the dark for her jeans. She couldn't find her panties. She felt around for her shoes. She realized she'd put her hand on another pair of jeans, Johnny's, in the darkness. She thrust her hand in his pocket. The key. Then she groped around until she found her shoes.

"Where you goin', babe?" Johnny groaned sleepily, and she froze. She couldn't believe it. He acted as though they'd just shared a night of consensual sex. As though this was just the morning after, one among many morning afters.

"I'm just going out to pee," she said, willing her voice to steadiness.

Johnny moaned something indistinguishable and buried his face in the mildewed pillow.

She slipped into her jeans, shuddering. She had a few dollars in her pocket, for the Danish she'd planned to buy the morning before. She hadn't brought a purse. Then she walked to the door

of the cabin, opened it, closed it quietly behind her and turned the key in the lock from the outside. Squeezing her eyes shut, she threw the key as far into the long grass as she could.

She made her way to the Jeep and, in the rapidly lightening forest, managed to hot-wire the vehicle with shaky fingers. Some of Johnny Gagnon's early lessons had been well learned, she thought ironically. The engine roared as she put it in gear and retraced the path they'd taken the previous day. If Johnny pounded on the cabin door, she didn't hear it. She didn't hear anything. All her thoughts were on getting away and blocking the entire incident out of her mind.

That afternoon, after she'd showered and scrubbed herself until she was raw, she phoned the police. A constable picked her up at the Prescott cabin and she gave a statement at the area headquarters. She knew Johnny was as good as in jail. She didn't mention the rape, and when they asked her if she'd been hurt, she said no, she was fine. A month later, she was subpoenaed to testify against Johnny Gagnon in court and he was sentenced to nine years for armed robbery, grand larceny, assault and kidnapping, to be served in a federal penitentiary.

Three weeks after that, Virginia knew her dreams of a law degree were over. She needed to make a living, starting right now. She was pregnant; she was going to have Johnny Gagnon's child.

CHAPTER THREE

"Y-YOU MEAN I HAVE the job?" Virginia sat a little

straighter in the hard oak chair facing Pete Horsfall's desk.

The old man spread his hands wide, an indulgent smile on his good-natured face. "I don't see why not. Everything's in order here—" he rearranged a few papers on his desk, then leaned back, still smiling "—and if I can't do a good turn for the doc's daughter, I'd like to know why not."

"I don't want the job because I'm Jethro Lake's daughter," Virginia said firmly. But she knew that wasn't the real reason Horsfall was hiring her. It was because she was qualified, maybe even overqualified, for the job.

"No, no—you're not getting the job because you're a Glory girl, my dear. Heavens, no! It's because you know the work and I'm convinced you'll do a fine job for us. Have you seen Lucas yet?"

"No." The thought of working with Lucas Yellowfly made her a little nervous. She hadn't seen him in years, not since that crazy night they'd spent together after her graduation. Talking, laughing, kissing, looking at the stars. Not that anything serious had happened—but it had made Jethro mad enough that he'd shipped her off to New Brunswick on practically the next train. "You said he wasn't in the office?"

"No. He's stepped out for the afternoon to go to a christening celebration. You remember Joe Gallant?" the older man queried from beneath grizzled brows. "Farms out toward Vulcan way."

She nodded. She had a faint recollection of the Gallant family. Joe and his sister had been a few years ahead of her in school.

“Well, Joe’s finally married. Last year, to a real nice girl from Calgary. Honor Templeman. A lawyer! Oil- and gas-business law. Maybe Doc and your ma told you, eh?” When Virginia shook her head, he added, “Honor may do some title work for us a few days a week when her baby’s a little older.”

“I look forward to meeting her.” Virginia smiled. “Well, I’d better go. I left Robert with Mom for the afternoon.” She stood up and extended her hand. Pete Horsfall shook it warmly.

“I’m looking forward to meeting the little gaffer. P’rhaps Doc and I can take him fishing one of these days.”

“Robert would like that,” Virginia responded, smiling. She thought of her small, serious, bespectacled son. Fishing on the Horsethief River with a couple of old men would be a fine experience for him. That kind of thing was exactly why she’d made up her mind to come back to Glory. It was time to settle down, to stay in one place long enough for Robert to make friends. He’d start school in September, kindergarten, and it was time she quit running and made some long-term plans in her own life.

Maybe she’d stop having nightmares about Johnny Gagnon and whether he’d ever find her or find out about Robert. Johnny Gagnon was in jail, after all, where he belonged.

Virginia hesitated when she reached the sidewalk outside the law office. It was the middle of the week, and many Glory merchants clung to the old-fashioned custom of half days on Wednesday. The streets were quiet. Virginia breathed deeply.

She swore she could smell the ripening fields of grain and alfalfa outside of town blowing along Main Street. She could smell the pungent blossoms of the town's caragana hedges, for sure. Caraganas, lilacs and peonies. Rhubarb and crabapple trees. The harshest northern winter didn't kill the stubborn roots of those prairie faithfuls.

She glanced at her watch. Robert had been with her mother for about two hours now. Doris could probably handle another hour or so with this grandchild she'd seen for only a few days a year. They'd visited her parents every Christmas since Robert was born. She heard a distant church bell and remembered what Horsfall had said about a christening. Why didn't she wander over to the church? Maybe she'd see Lucas. She'd feel a lot better getting that first meeting over with. Now that she had the job, the worst of her worries was behind her. Next would be finding a place to stay and getting settled. Her parents had offered—grudgingly, she thought—to let her and Robert stay with them in the big brick house at the top of Buffalo Hill. Her pride did not allow her to accept.

She'd stood on her own two feet for quite a few years now. She'd given up law school and completed an office-management course before Robert was born. She'd worked and supported them both ever since, and was determined to continue as she'd begun. She'd never asked for favors and wasn't about to start now.

People—including her parents—could take her and Robert as they found them or not at all. She had never pretended to be a

widow or divorced, and no one had had the nerve, so far, to ask any questions. Perhaps in Glory someone would. Small towns were small towns. No one knew that better than she did.

Still, their hometown would be the last place Johnny would ever think to look for her. If, indeed, he wanted to look for her.

Virginia approached St. Augustine's, conscious that although several people on the street had noticed her, no one had tried to talk to her. She wasn't sure anyone would recognize her after all these years. She still had the red hair she'd been famous for, but she'd grown up. Slender now, not scrawny. Red hair neatly tucked up, not flying wild. Crisp skirt and jacket, not scruffy jeans and a T-shirt. Of such were most people's memories made, or so she believed.

The christening was over and the large crowd had moved next door to the church hall, where the women's league always served tea and cakes after funerals and weddings and, obviously, christenings. Virginia stepped up to the door, smiling at several people she knew. She couldn't tell whether they remembered her, but they smiled back.

The hall was noisy with talk and laughter. The big multipaned windows on each side spilled bright sunlight into the room. Virginia saw the postmistress, Myrna Schultz, who was a town fixture, and said hello, then walked farther into the room, confident that within very short order the entire population would know about her, Robert and her new job.

Holding center stage were a much-older-than-she-

remembered Joe Gallant with a slim, brown-haired woman who must be his wife, a teacup and saucer in her hand. Honor Gallant chatted animatedly with an older woman Virginia didn't recognize. Several ladies stooped over the baby, who was decked out in white lace and satin and gazing quietly up at the world from a fancy bassinet. A gray-haired man leaning heavily on a cane stood proudly beside the bassinet, a rather spectral-looking man in a bowler hat at his elbow, solicitously holding a tray with two cups and saucers and a small plate of cakes.

Virginia fought a sudden ache. How differently she'd welcomed Robert into the world. She'd taken a bus to Regina a week before her due date and stayed with a friend, whom she'd sworn to silence, so that her baby would be born in Saskatchewan and wouldn't even be traceable in Alberta records. Now she realized she'd probably gone somewhat overboard in her desperate fear that the man who'd raped her might find out about Robert and make life more difficult than it already was.

Suddenly she spotted Lucas Yellowfly and caught her breath. He was even handsomer than she'd remembered, and he'd been handsome as a teenager, when all the other boys had been just gangly and awkward. His shoulders were broad, the man fulfilling the rangy promise of the boy, and he looked terrific in a suit she'd have sworn was handmade, it fit him so beautifully. His hair was still black as coal, and he was tall—he'd been tall at eighteen.

He smiled as he bent slightly toward a dark-haired woman

Virginia vaguely recognized. No, she couldn't put a name to the face. Lucas's smile was warm. Was this the lady in his life? Although she hadn't thought of that possibility, Virginia felt some relief. Of course Lucas Yellowfly would have a woman in his life, whether he was married or not. He was too attractive not to be in some kind of relationship.

That would make working with him a little easier. Not that she herself was particularly attracted to him, not anymore. What she'd felt for him all those years ago had been nothing more than a teenage crush. She'd been involved with Johnny Gagnon. Lucas had just been a lucky, last-minute date for her prom and a chance —again—to thumb her nose at the town.

Lucas saw her then, and Virginia knew that the seeds of the attraction that had once existed hadn't gone away. How awkward, when they'd be working together. His eyes caught hers and she felt almost as if he'd reached across the crowded room and touched her, put his warm, strong hands on her shoulders, run the side of his thumb along her cheekbone... kissed her softly. She took a swift breath. What foolishness!

She forced herself to smile and walked into the room. Lucas moved toward her, his eyes never leaving her face. The woman he'd been speaking with accompanied him. Virginia swallowed hard.

"Virginia!" He took her hand in both of his and smiled in return. His eyes were tender and gentle and welcoming. She felt a prickle of emotion, which she pushed back firmly. She took

a deep breath. She finally felt secure, wanted, as though she'd made the right decision in coming back to Glory. That was a great part of Lucas Yellowfly's charm, as she remembered it. He gave the impression that the person he was speaking to was the only person in the world. It had a great effect on women.

"Hello, Lucas."

He kept hold of her hand and turned to the woman beside him. "Donna, this is Virginia Lake, the woman I've been telling you about. I believe she's coming to work for Pete and me in the firm. Is that correct, Virginia? Virginia, this is Donna Beaton, an old friend. She runs a gift shop in town."

Virginia, Virgina... It was as though he couldn't stop himself from saying her name.

An old friend. "How do you do, Donna?" Virginia said formally, and shook the other woman's hand. "Yes—" she glanced at Lucas "—I'll be starting in the office the first week of school, I believe."

"Welcome to Glory," Donna said. "I hope you'll enjoy living here. Well, Lucas, I think I'll head back to the store now." She smiled apologetically at Virginia. "I catch up on my bookkeeping on Wednesdays."

"Virginia," Lucas repeated, gazing deeply into her eyes. He took her arm, and nodded as the other woman moved away with a small wave, then leaned toward her. "Listen, do you want to get out of here?"

"Sure," Virginia said, quickly looking around. "Maybe I'd

better say hello to the parents of the baby first?"

"Do you know Joe and his wife?"

She shrugged. "Not really."

"Well, then, why don't we leave? You can meet them another time."

Lucas adroitly maneuvered her out of the crowded hall, smiling and saying a few words to people as they left. Then they were back in the bright sunshine, standing on the painted wooden steps that led up to the hall.

"You bring a car?"

"No," Virginia replied, very conscious of Lucas's hand still on her elbow. "I walked over from your office. I left my son with Mother."

"I'm looking forward to meeting him," Lucas said. "What's his name?"

"Robert."

"Starting grade one?"

"Kindergarten. He's just five."

The unspoken question hung between them: Who is his father? Virginia bit her lip.

"I walked, too," Lucas said easily as they reached the sidewalk. He let go of her elbow, for which she was grateful, and adjusted his stride to hers, hands in his pockets. "So, what are your plans, Virginia? I suppose you'll be staying with your folks for a while?"

"A few days. I'm going to look for a place to rent while I'm here—"

"While you're here?" he interrupted, one eyebrow raised.

"Sorry." She felt herself flush slightly. "That didn't sound right, did it? I'm planning to stay. When I find a place to rent, I'll go back to Stettler and pack up our stuff."

"Stettler. That's where you've been living?"

"Yes." She could be as clever at not giving out information as he could be at soliciting it. She wanted to smile.

"It can be tough renting in Glory. Most people own, and there's not much in the way of apartments in a small place like this."

"I'm hoping Mother and Dad will know of something."

By this time they were at the far side of the square. Virginia noticed a delicatessen-café—Molly McClung's—that hadn't been there when she'd lived in town. Lucas gestured toward it. "Coffee?"

She hesitated, but only for a second. Lucas was not only going to be her boss now, one of them, but he was well connected here. He was also her friend, or he had been, years and years ago. She needed a friend in Glory.

"They've got great carrot cake," he teased, one hand on the door, the other reaching for her elbow again.

"Sounds good."

The interior was dim and cool and bursting with good scents. Homemade soup, fresh-baked goods, spices, peppermint tea, fresh-squeezed orange juice....

They sat in a booth next to the window. A plump woman came

from behind the counter to take their orders, then Lucas turned back to Virginia with a devilish grin. She waited, trying hard not to smile herself.

"You aren't going to believe this, Virginia Lake, but I think I've got just the answer for you."

She toyed with her spoon. "What do you mean?"

"An apartment. I'm moving out of my place and as far as I know, Mrs. Vandenbroek hasn't rented it yet."

"You're moving out?" She added cream to her coffee, which had just arrived, and stirred it.

"Yes. You remember my sister, Theresa?"

"No." Virginia shook her head and took a sip of the coffee. It was delicious. Her eyes met Lucas's over her cup.

"Well, she's a few years older than I am." Lucas pulled his coffee toward him. "Anyway, she's got an eight-year-old daughter, Tammy—she's in grade three this year. Theresa's shipping her out to live with me for a couple of months, so I've bought a house. It's bigger and closer to the school."

"Bought a house?"

"It was high time. I'd been thinking about it for a while."

Virginia frowned. "Why is she sending her daughter to you?"

Lucas sipped his coffee, then set down his mug. "Theresa's in a patch of trouble. She's had problems with substance abuse in the past, liquor mostly, and she swears she's going clean this time. She's checked into a sweat lodge or some damn thing on Vancouver Island. Something she thinks is going to do the trick

for her. Get in touch with her Indian spiritual side, all that stuff."

"You don't sound like you believe her," Virginia said flatly, still frowning.

"Hey, I've heard a lot of big dry-out plans from Theresa over the years. She's been through detox, through different twelve-step programs, you name it. I'll keep an open mind on the sweat lodge." He shrugged. "Who knows? It could work for her this time."

"What about Tammy's father?" Virginia didn't know why she asked that question. The whole thing was none of her business.

Lucas paused and their eyes held for a second too long. "He's not in the picture. Theresa's never told me anything about him."

The statement seemed to hover there. The waitress brought their carrot cake just then, and Virginia was glad of the interruption and determined to change the subject.

"I'll have a look at the apartment. Thanks. Is it close to town?"

"Alder Street. Not far from the office."

Virginia thrust a fork into her cake. It was very good. She tried to ignore the statement about Tammy's father, but she couldn't. Lucas—everyone, the whole town—must be wondering about her son. Who was Robert's father? Well, she did know that, although sometimes she wished she didn't.

"The apartment's not big. Two bedrooms, one fairly small, which I used for a den, a kitchen, one bathroom, a small living room. It's on the top floor of Mrs. Vandenbroek's house. There's a separate entrance. She's okay. Decent-landlady, not too nosy."

"Furnished?"

"Yeah. I had some of my own stuff, so she put a few things in the basement. She could rent it completely furnished, I'm sure."

Virginia didn't miss the curiosity in Lucas's dark gaze. He must wonder why she'd want a furnished place, like some oilfield worker moving in with a pair of jeans, two T-shirts and a case of beer for the fridge. The truth was, she hadn't accumulated much in the past few years. She'd moved too many times to want to burden herself with furniture. Apart from Robert's toys and their clothes, there wasn't much to bring down from Stettler. She could easily get it all in her car.

"Shall I tell Mrs. Vandenbroek to hold the place for you?"

Virginia met Lucas's gaze. "Yes. I...uh, I really appreciate this, Lucas. It makes things a bit easier." She barely recognized her own voice, low, hesitant, even slightly wobbly.

"Hey." Lucas covered her hand with his briefly and signaled for the check. "What are friends for?" he asked easily. "Do you want to go over and see it now?"

"No, I'd better get back to see how Robert's getting on with Mother. Thanks, Lucas."

Almost as though conscious that things were moving a little too fast—although in which direction Virginia couldn't have said—Lucas nodded. "I'm going back to the office for a couple of hours. Anything I can do for you?" He held the door open for her as they left the café.

"Not at all. You've been very helpful. Very kind."

He smiled. “I, uh, I guess I’ll see you later.”

Virginia nodded. “Thanks again.”

“I’ll call your folks and leave my landlady’s number with them. You can see the place whenever. You don’t have to wait until I move out.”

“Okay.” She watched him cross the street, then turned and began to walk slowly toward where she’d parked her car.

She was glad he’d left it at that. That he hadn’t made her any offers she’d have had to refuse. Friends. They were thinking along the same lines, at least

CHAPTER FOUR

LUCAS REALIZED he’d been counting the days until Virginia came to town. It was now precisely twenty-two days since he’d spotted her application and eight days since he’d seen her at the christening.

He peered into the fogged-up mirror and drew the razor carefully over his chin. It was Thursday, but he wasn’t going into the office today. He was moving.

He’d better come clean with her right off the bat. No sense letting her go on thinking he’d forgotten everything that had happened twelve years ago. Maybe it meant nothing to her—just another date—but it had meant plenty to him. He’d never forgotten her, not in all that time. His thoughts of taking up where he left off when he’d looked over that application sure hadn’t changed since last week.

She was beautiful now. Of course, she’d always been beautiful

to him, even the first time he'd seen her when she was scrawny and maybe eleven or twelve. She'd been up a big sycamore, determined not to let any of the neighborhood boys into her tree house, and was pelting down anything she could lay her hands on—twigs, stuff from the treehouse, one of the other girls' sneakers. He'd just happened by with his buddy Adam Garrick. They were too old and too cool to get involved—must have been sixteen, at least—but he'd never forgotten it. Spit, vinegar, sass. She'd been on fire with righteous indignation and he'd thought if she was a little older, he'd like to get to know her.

Well, she's a little older now. He whistled under his breath as he dabbed at the traces of shaving cream on his face and swiped the mist from the mirror with his towel.

He glanced out the small bathroom window, which he'd propped wide-open. Another gorgeous day. He was moving his stuff over to the new house this morning, and Virginia and her son were moving into this place on the weekend. Tammy was arriving on the weekend, too, on Sunday. He'd drive to Calgary and pick her up at the airport.

Lucas was still whistling as he finished dressing. Jeans, an old T-shirt, sneakers. Much as he enjoyed playing the lawyer-about-town, he liked getting into his old gear at home. He was looking forward to furnishing the new house on Second Avenue and settling in with his niece. He'd always gotten along well with Theresa's daughter, and this way afforded a chance to try out being a parent. Plus help his sister.

Not that he wasn't ready to make the big leap himself. Marriage. Kids. A mortgage. He already had the mortgage and now he had a woman in mind, as well. And she came complete with a kid already, which was just fine by him.

Robert. Kind of an odd little duff, with his glasses and his serious face and big brown eyes. Somehow Lucas had pictured a miniature version of Virginia, only male, but Robert was dark, not fair. He'd met the boy the day after he'd seen Virginia at the christening; the two had been downtown when he'd gone to the hotel to meet a client for lunch. That was Glory—business lunch was over a burger and a mug of beer at the Glory Hotel, not a steak and a glass of cabernet at the Palliser. Which was just fine with him. Lucas's clients tended to be more of the break-and-enter variety than the insurance-fraud type. Which was fine, too.

He might have set up practice in Glory initially to rub the town's nose in his success, but he had to admit he'd grown fond of the place; now he couldn't imagine leaving. That was why buying the old Murphy house hadn't hurt quite as much as he'd thought it would. A house, after all, was a big commitment.

Two stories, white-painted, wide wooden veranda with gingerbread trim, picket fence, lilac hedge, the works. It was in an older neighborhood, close to the center of town. Lucas liked everything about it, from its hardwood floors and stone fireplace to the sunny kitchen and the big yard out back with the raspberry bushes and the Norway maples. Next on his list, after he moved his stuff over this morning, was to buy more furniture and get

it delivered.

Maybe Virginia and her boy could help him pick some out

Lucas pulled the door shut behind him and clattered down the outdoor stairs.

Virginia and Robert were coming up the sidewalk.

"Hello!" she said, shading her eyes against the morning sunlight. "We just wanted to get a key from Mrs. Vandenbroek so I can show Robert the apartment. Are you leaving?"

"Just to grab some breakfast at the Chickadee." Lucas had most of his morning meals at the Chickadee Café, a low-end, no-nonsense place tucked in behind the Glory Hotel.

He peered in his landlady's kitchen window. Everything was spotless and shining and silent inside. "I believe she said something about going over to her sister's to pick peas this morning. Hey, come on up. I can show you the place."

"If it's not too much trouble."

Lucas regarded her for a few seconds. She looked gorgeous in khaki shorts and a plain, long-sleeved white shirt and sandals. Robert wore green shorts and an Edmonton Oilers T-shirt—in the middle of Calgary Flames country. He'd have to set the boy straight. "It's no trouble at all."

They followed him up the stairs.

The door opened into the kitchen. There was another door, a fire escape, off the main bedroom. Lucas stood back as Virginia and her son walked into the apartment.

"See, Robert? Here's where we'll be having our meals. Does

the table stay?" She turned, her sea-blue eyes echoing the query.

"Table and chairs stay. Bed stays. Stuff in the den goes. Sofa and chair stay. End tables and lamps go."

"Coffee table?"

"It stays."

Lucas leaned against the doorjamb, watching them. It felt weird to have Virginia in his apartment. It felt even weirder to think she'd be sleeping in what he'd thought of as his bed for well over a year. And she'd be sitting down at his table with her son.

"You mean this is mine? I get a room all to myself?" Robert said, looking up at his mother in wonder.

She smiled quickly, glanced at Lucas, then back at her son. "Yes, Robert. All yours." She ruffled his hair in a gentle gesture and Lucas felt his heart go thump-thump.

"Do I get my own bed' and everything?"

"Yes, honey. We'll have to buy you some furniture, won't we? For your very own room. A desk, maybe, and a—"

"And bunk beds?" Robert grabbed his mother's hand. "Oh, boy! Bunk beds, so I can have a friend sleep over with me?"

Virginia paused, but just for a second. "Sure. Bunk beds."

Lucas cleared his throat. "I'm, uh, I'll be doing some shopping myself when I get my stuff moved over. After lunch. Maybe you and Robert would like to come along." This was as good a time as any to jump in and show her that he had every intention of being a friend and more if she'd allow it.

"Here in town?"

“There’s always Riddley’s. Or we could go to Lethbridge or drive into Calgary. Make a day of it.” Man, he was full of good ideas.

“Can we, Mom? Can we get bunk beds today? Yippee!”

Robert suddenly bolted into the bathroom and slammed the door. They heard his excited voice, slightly muffled. “I’m going to try out our new toilet!”

Lucas and Virginia smiled at each other. Lucas waited. He’d thrown out the invitation. The next move was Virginia’s.

“Well, it’s very kind of you to offer, Lucas. We’ve got our car, though—”

“I’ve got the pickup. Come with me. We’ll take Robert over to the Grizzly Drive-in. You remember it?”

Virginia laughed. “Is that still around?”

“Yep. And Mrs. Perkins is still running it, too.

Then we’ll go shopping for bunk beds.”

Virginia laughed again, then shrugged. “Okay.

Sounds fine.”

They heard the toilet flush, then the faucet, and Robert came out, wiping his damp hands on his shorts. “I like this place, Mom. It’s cool.”

“Good. Now let’s get on our way. Mr. Yellowfly has lots of things to do this morning.”

Lucas groaned. “Oh, please, Virginia. Lucds. Listen, Robert...”

The boy looked up at him, a tiny smile hovering on his too-

serious face.

"Promise to call me Lucas, okay? Don't forget.

Never Mr. Yellowfly—never."

"Okay...Lucas." The boy grinned up at his mother. "He said to, Mom!" he protested when she murmured something about manners. Lucas hadn't seen him smile like that yet. It suited the boy.

He stepped aside as they came back into the kitchen. "When do you want to go? Like I said, I was thinking of this afternoon. But if tomorrow's better for you..."

"This afternoon will be fine."

"I'll pick you up at your parents'?"

"Great."

"Let's make it before lunch so we can buy Robert a Grizzly burger. I should be finished moving this stuff by then." Lucas gestured to the stacks of boxes already neatly packed and piled on the kitchen floor. "Half-past eleven, say?"

Virginia smiled and nodded. As he left them on the sidewalk to make his way to the Chickadee Café for his usual two-over-easy and stack of hots, Lucas could hear Robert asking what a Grizzly burger was and Virginia trying to explain.

ROBERT'S EYES WERE HUGE when they drove up to the Grizzly Drive-in. The take-out diner, built in the shape of a bear's head, was a landmark in Glory, and Virginia had many memories of late-night swoops to the drive-in with Johnny or some of her friends for burgers and malts.

Lucas obligingly growled—a Glory tradition, albeit one usually practiced by children—and Mrs. Perkins growled back.

"Say, that you, Virginia?" she exclaimed, bending low from the counter inserted into the snarling bear's mouth to peer into Lucas's pickup. "Well, I'll be danged! Good to see you, dear. What'll ya have?"

It was said that Mrs. Perkins never forgot a face.

Lucas ordered a burger and fries for Robert, an order of onion rings for her and got himself a rootbeer float. They parked on the side of the potholed parking lot and ate their meal with the windows of the pickup wide-open.

"What do you think, Robert?" Lucas asked, smiling at Virginia over her son's head.

"Cool!" He had his carton of french fries on his bare knees and was squeezing the hamburger a little harder than necessary so that mayo and ketchup dripped.

"Yuck!" Virginia wiped at her son's knees with a napkin.

"Here." Lucas handed her some packages of moist wipes from the food bag, which she used to finish cleaning up Robert. She hated to be too hard on the boy; it wasn't often that she'd seen him enjoy himself like this.

The onion rings were as good as she remembered. The hell with cholesterol, she decided, licking her fingers.

She sneaked a glance at Lucas as he sat, slouched back in his seat, one arm crooked out the window, the other holding his drink. He caught her glance and grinned. She smiled, suddenly

brimming with good feeling. Simple. Uncomplicated. She'd found so few opportunities to relax in the past few years, certainly not with someone like Lucas, someone she'd known since she was practically a kid. She wondered who else from her school days was still living in Glory. Maybe she'd look up a few old friends soon.

Lucas seemed very relaxed, too. She was grateful for that. Obviously a lot of the stuff she'd thought about working with him was strictly in her own head. She'd have to make sure it stayed there.

They'd decided to drive to Lethbridge to check out Cooper's Department Store. Calgary would have been a better bet for selection, but a big-city mall was the last place Virginia felt like visiting on a sunny late-August afternoon.

They were driving down the highway that led to Lethbridge, deep in the St. Mary River valley, when Robert suddenly spoke up from his position on the bench seat between Lucas and her. He'd been quiet for the last five miles or so.

"Are you my dad?" He looked at Lucas wistfully. Virginia wanted the earth to open up and swallow her. She'd never heard anything like that from her son before.

"Me?" Lucas's startled eyes met hers over the boy's dark head. "Your dad?"

There was no mistaking the alarm in his voice. Virginia had to say something.

"Robert—"

“No, it’s okay,” Lucas said, and smiled at the boy. Robert continued to gaze seriously at him. “No, I’m not your dad, pal. What made you think so?”

“You’re a friend of my mom’s. And you know her from a long time ago, so I just thought you might be my dad, that’s all,” Robert said evenly. He sighed and glanced up at her. She knew her face must be beet red.

“We’ll talk about this later, honey,” she said softly, about ready to die of embarrassment. Oh, Robert, why did you have to bring this up now? All she’d told her son about his father—and until now she’d seen little interest in the subject—was that he lived far, far away. Maybe Robert thought Glory qualified.

As though he knew intuitively that his question had unsettled the grown-ups, Robert went on, to Virginia’s dismay, “It’s just that I know I have a dad,” he said solemnly, looking up at Lucas again. “Everybody has a dad, right?” Lucas nodded and smiled encouragingly at the boy. “It’s just that I don’t know who he is.”

Robert folded his hands in his lap and looked straight ahead. Virginia met Lucas’s gaze again. He winked. “It’s okay, you know,” he said quietly. “I can handle tough questions. I’m a lawyer, remember?”

His remark, making light of Robert’s query, made her feel a bit better. Next thing she knew, Lucas pointed out one of the hydraulic pumpers that dotted the landscape and was explaining to Robert how it brought oil out of the ground.

Later at the department store, while Robert tried out some of

the BarcaLoungers, Virginia tried to explain. “Look, I’m really, really sorry—” she began.

“Hey!” Lucas put one hand on her shoulder in a casual gesture and squeezed gently. “It’s no big deal. I can understand where the kid’s coming from. He’s just curious, that’s all.”

She looked into his dark eyes, waited a moment or two, then blurted out, “You wonder what the hell’s going on, don’t you?”

“Not really.” Lucas shrugged. “It’s none of my business, and to tell you the truth, who really cares? Except Robert, that is. It’s your business.”

“I’m not married. I’ve never been married. Robert was... well, he was an accident, I suppose you could say.” She stared defiantly at Lucas, daring him to comment. He said nothing. “I’m a single mother. I’ve always been a single mother.”

“I understand,” he said. “You don’t need to give me any explanations. These things happen.” He shrugged again. “Let’s go see the bunk beds, shall we?”

He steered her in the direction of the bedroom furniture, and Robert hopped off the BarcaLounger and followed them. “Oh boy! Bunk beds.”

Virginia bought a maple model with drawers under the lower unit and headboards that had space for a row of books. Two mattresses and a child-size wooden ladder completed the purchase. Lucas sought her advice on some leather upholstered furniture, then ordered a sofa and chair in dark green, to be delivered on Saturday. She wasn’t crazy about them and he said

neither was he, but they'd do for his den. He also took Robert's advice and bought a white-lacquered single bed frame, mattress and matching dresser the boy thought suitable for a girl.

Lucas murmured to Virginia that it was a little fussier than he remembered his niece being, but ordered it, anyway. Virginia was warmed from the inside out that Lucas took Robert's opinion seriously. Robert had had very few men in his short life. Virginia had been so focused on work and on her son that she hadn't had time to develop relationships with men. Not that, after her horrific experience with Johnny Gagnon, she'd had any desire to.

The department-store employees loaded Robert's bunk-bed frame and mattresses into the back of Lucas's pickup. Their delivery van would bring the leather sofa and chair, as well as Tammy's new furniture on Saturday. Virginia settled on the passenger side for the return trip, wondering what questions her son would come up with on the way back.

Robert was quiet, paying attention to the landmarks Lucas pointed out, responding in his usual sober manner. Sometimes Virginia wasn't sure what to think about her small, serious son. She hoped this move to Glory meant he'd finally be able to make some real friends. He spent far too much time with his video games and watching television, in her opinion. Kindergarten would be a big change in his life. They'd moved so often that it had been hard for Robert to establish the kinds of relationships that meant birthday-party invitations and afternoon play sessions with friends. When she'd worked in Red Deer, she'd placed him

in a licensed day care, but Robert had become so withdrawn and miserable that she'd taken him out and gone back to relying on baby-sitters, as she'd done when he was a baby.

That was something else she'd have to think about—after-school care. Her experience working with lawyers had shown her that the hours could be erratic. She'd have to find someone reliable to pick Robert up from school and stay with him until she got home from work. Maybe Lucas could give her some leads.

She bit her lower lip and glanced sideways. She'd already presumed on her former acquaintance with Lucas far too much. Besides, what would he know about child care or baby-sitters? His niece, Tammy, was arriving Sunday and he'd find out soon enough how much was involved in looking after children.

Lucas dropped her and Robert off at her parents' house at the top of the hill, insisting that he'd get a friend to help him unload the bunk beds at his old apartment. After that, he said, he'd have his hands full getting settled into his new place. He seemed about to add something else—had he been going to ask her to help? —but apparently thought better of it. She was amazed to realize she felt let down that he didn't ask. It would've been fun helping him arrange his furniture, and a way to pay him back a little for the outing they'd had today.

Robert wanted to in the hammock that hung between two huge linden trees at the back of the Lake property, so Virginia went in through the kitchen door. She heard murmurs from the sitting room when she entered the house. Her mother must have

company.

She'd paused to open the refrigerator door to inspect the contents for a cold drink when she heard the raised voice of her aunt Lily beyond the swinging doors of the kitchen.

"But, Doris, you have to insist she tell you who the boy's father is. I know Virginia's headstrong—she's always been a handful—and I realize what you and Jethro have had to put up with over the years, but don't you see? People are already asking. What am I supposed to tell them? That no one knows?"

She heard her mother's soft, fretful reply and suddenly Virginia lost her thirst. She shut the refrigerator door quietly and went up the back stairs to the room she and Robert were sharing.

Busybodies. All of them. Especially Aunt Lily. What if Robert had overheard that remark? Virginia felt her face flush. They made her so mad. What business was it of theirs? What was it about small towns that made everyone so dam nosy? It'd been like that when she was a girl here, and apparently nothing had changed.

Had she expected it would have changed?

No. Lucas had said, "Who really cares, except Robert?" Maybe Lucas believed that. But Glory was the same as it had always been. She was sure unmarried pregnant girls were still said to have gone to the city to take a hairdressing course, or gone to stay with a distant aunt to go to school.

Some things never changed. But she had. And the town of Glory would realize that soon enough.

CHAPTER FIVE

LUCAS STEPPED OVER a cardboard box and nodded to one of Gus McCready's employees, who was just clearing up the last of the paint, brushes, rollers and drop cloths, ready to leave after a week spent painting the place. Another employee had already carried ladders to the van.

The house looked terrific. Lucas took a deep breath, noting the pungent fumes of the last coat of cream semigloss that had been applied to the woodwork. The walls were a soft sage green throughout, with a deep mustard for his study on the main floor, room that had once served as a bedroom for the Murphy family. The kitchen walls had been painted a soft butterscotch color with the kitchen cupboards, doors and framework all done in the same cream color as the woodwork in the rest of the house. The Portuguese tile countertop and black-and-white-checkered vinyl floor were new and shining.

Lucas had always been drawn to color. He wasn't sure if it was his native ancestry or just a personal preference, but color always made him feel good, and he wanted to feel good in this big Second Avenue house he'd bought. This was home now.

Lucas made his way up the broad staircase. He'd had the hardwood floors refinished on both levels, and the deep walnut tones gleamed in the latemorning sunlight. Upstairs, the four bedrooms were all painted in an off-white, except for his, which was a restful but rich café au lait, again with the cream woodwork. A small Oriental carpet added a touch of luxury.

He was glad he'd bought the bedroom furniture at an auction when he'd first moved to Glory and kept it in storage while he lived at Mrs. Vandenbroek's. Now, polished and sturdy, the old-Ontario armoire and dresser and chest of drawers fit into the room perfectly. The matching double bed was going into one of the bedrooms, which he planned to use as a guest room. Antique or not, Lucas had no intention of squeezing his six-foot-three frame into an old-fashioned double bed. A king-size model was coming this afternoon, along with the other furniture he'd ordered from Cooper's.

Lucas strode into the en suite bathroom, which one of McCready's crews had converted from a small bedroom or sewing room. Now the room was ready, complete with modern fixtures and ceramic tiles. Lucas felt something he'd never really felt before as he looked over his new home. Pride. Pride of ownership.

The house was too big for one person, no question. It had been the Murphy-family home for three generations. A lot of kids had grown up here, slid down the banisters, played in the attic, swung from the trees in the backyard.

Tammy would be here for a while, until Theresa was ready to take her back again. Who knew when that might be? Maybe he'd hire a housekeeper who could do the cooking and cleaning for him and his niece. And maybe one day he'd fill this house with his own children. It was a house that ached for family life. Lucas had enjoyed bachelorhood, but from time to time he felt that he

should make a change. Get married. Settle down.

Somehow, Virginia Lake's coming home to Glory had put the idea right back in his head.

That reminded him—he glanced at his watch—he'd promised her he'd put Robert's bunk beds together after lunch. There wasn't much to do, just fasten a few screws and do some assembly work on the ladder and headboards. He was happy to offer and even happier when she accepted. Her father could have done it or she could easily have done it herself if she'd borrowed a few of her dad's tools, but he had the feeling Virginia didn't get on too well with her folks. She seemed awfully anxious to move into his old apartment and get settled in with her son.

Lucas could see a person not getting on all that well with Doc Lake. He had to be close to retirement age, in his midsixties, but was still head of surgery at the Glory Memorial Hospital. He was tall, lean and iron-haired, and was said to have an uncompromising personality. Definitely he had a certain unassailable position in this town, as a senior doctor often did, regardless of his temper. Lucas had to admit his memories weren't the best. Doc Lake had done all he could to blacken Lucas's name around Glory when word had spread that he and Virginia had spent the night together after her graduation. It didn't matter that his own daughter had told him nothing had happened or that Lucas had gone to his office and told him the same thing.

And even if something beyond a little moonwatching and

stargazing and kissing had gone on, so what? It wasn't as though the doctor's daughter was the town virgin. Everyone knew how she'd carried on with Johnny Gagnon, and it wasn't as though Lucas was from a part of town any worse than the Gagnon clan's. Frankly it had irked the hell out of Lucas at the time, the doc's attitude, considering Lucas had been well on his way to making something of himself.

Maybe some things were too hard to change—like a person's skin color and the preconceived ideas of a small-town elite.

Well, those days were past, Lucas thought, whistling as he climbed into his pickup for the short ride over to Virginia's new apartment. Now the town fathers were more than happy to have him date their daughters. Lucas didn't harbor any grudges. He was too confident in his own abilities. But he had to admit he did enjoy their shocked expressions when he showed up in his BMW—ten years old but in perfect shape—with a big smile on his face and flowers for their womenfolk.

Virginia was at the apartment cleaning windows. She answered the door to his light knock—it seemed odd to be knocking at what still felt like his own door—dressed in shorts and a stained T-shirt, her hair tied back in a kerchief, her nose smudged with grime, her freckles vivid against her pale skin. She looked like a fairy-tale cleaning lady. Cinderella. He glanced down. Canvas sneakers. No glass slippers for this Cinderella—yet.

"Hey, didn't think I'd catch you here," he said, taking off his

own sneakers at the kitchen door. He could smell fresh floor wax. "I'll have Robert's bed fixed in a jiffy."

"I thought I'd give the place a final going-over before we moved the rest of the stuff in," she said almost apologetically. "Robert's over at Mother's." She smiled, a delightful expression that made him want to bend forward and kiss the end of her nose. "He wanted to help, but I thought I'd rather do this myself. Take half the time. Besides, I think it's good that he's getting to know my parents better."

"I've got a couple tools with me," Lucas said, walking toward the bedroom where he'd unloaded the bunk beds, still encased in their packing plastic. "A screwdriver and wrench." He patted his back pockets. "If I need anything else, there's a toolbox down in the truck. Don't let me interrupt whatever you're doing."

"Okay," Virginia said a little uncertainly, still holding her cleaning cloth. "I'll make us some tea in a bit. Do you drink tea?"

"Sure." Lucas started stripping the heavy plastic from the furniture. Sometimes he had a hard time seeing the assertive, act-now-ask-later girl he'd known in this rather tentative woman. Yet there was something appealing about her vulnerability, something that upped the ante on the protective, tender feelings he already had toward her. And he was certain he glimpsed the determination that lay under that quiet manner. Somehow he didn't think Virginia Lake gave any more quarter now than she had then.

Assembling the bunk beds, he watched her from the corner

of his eye. She had a serious look on her face as she attacked every glass surface with her cloth. She polished the windows in the living room, then went to work on the kitchen window, a little out of his line of sight. Which was just as well. It was a hot August day, but watching Virginia Lake in her cutoffs and skimpy T-shirt made the day a little hotter.

They worked quietly for a while and Lucas was just tightening the last screw on the headboard when Virginia came into the room with a tray containing two mugs and some store-bought cookies.

"You take milk or sugar?" she asked.

"Just plain." He tossed down his wrench and she offered him a mug.

"Thanks. Listen, why don't you help me lift this bed on top of the other one before we have our tea and then we'll have more room and an idea of what this is going to look like," Lucas said. He took the tray from her and set it down behind the door, where it was out of the way.

"Great." Virginia seemed pleased. She grabbed the footboard while he went around to the headboard.

"Now," Lucas began, "you just steady that end while I lift. I'll help you with your end when I get this post onto the other one."

In two or three minutes the job was done, and Virginia's face broke into a delighted grin. She looked about sixteen.

"Wait until Robert sees this," she said. "He's going to be thrilled! I think it should go against this wall, don't you?" She

indicated the north wall. “I don’t want him falling out the window.”

“Good spot for it,” Lucas agreed. “We’ll move it after our tea.” He picked up the tray and sank onto the floor beside the bed, legs crossed. They still had the mattresses to unpack and hoist onto the frame. As Virginia knelt on the floor opposite him, Lucas handed her a mug. “Robert’s never had his own room before?”

Virginia frowned. She took a sip of the hot drink. “I hadn’t really thought it was important to him, but everywhere we’ve lived, we’ve either shared a room or sometimes he’s had a sitter who stayed with us. When he was a baby we had a live-in sitter for a while.”

“Sounds like he’s looking forward to having friends over, that kind of stuff,” Lucas said casually. He took a swallow of his own tea. Virginia’s past life was of enormous interest to him, but he didn’t want to push her. He didn’t want to appear to be fishing for information. And none of it mattered, anyway. Not really. Curiosity aside, the only thing that mattered was that she was here in Glory.

“Cookie?” Virginia extended the plate to him and he took one.

“Thanks.”

For a few minutes they sat in silence, but it was a companionable silence. Lucas wondered what she was thinking about—beyond where to position the furniture and what kind of curtains to hang, if she intended to replace the rather grim vinyl blinds Mrs. Vandenbroek had installed. His own mind wandered

a little, to a difficult property case he was working on, and to whether or not he'd written Tammy's flight number in his day book—

"I want to thank you so very, very much, Lucas, for all the help you've been to me and my son since we arrived here." Virginia's voice interrupting his thoughts was low and urgent. She held her empty mug in one hand, and her eyes were troubled. "It was a huge thing for me to come back to Glory—I guess you know that. I only hope I've made the right decision. I'm determined to stay, no matter what happens—"

"Hey, Virginia." Lucas held her gaze and felt something start to hum and burn inside his chest. She had this effect on him; she'd always had this effect on him.

"What could happen?" he asked quietly. Maybe it was time he told her he had no intention of being just a friend.

"I mean it. You've been terrific. And...and I really appreciate it. It's meant a lot to us, especially since things aren't always the way I'd like them to be with Mother and Father." She paused and bit her lower lip.

Lucas had noticed that she always referred to her parents rather formally. It seemed odd, since everyone in town had always known how much Doc and Doris Lake had doted on their only child.

Lucas wanted to reach out and touch her. Suddenly he did. He leaned forward and placed both his hands on her shoulders and began to massage. She looked surprised momentarily, then

relaxed into the pressure of his hands, as though her shoulders or her neck were tense and tight. Lucas continued to massage softly. “Listen, Virginia, I’m happy to be a good friend to you. But that’s not all I want to be.”

Their eyes, only ten or twelve inches apart, held. “Do you realize that?” he asked. “It’s way too early to kiss you, but that’s what I’d like to do.” His voice sounded hoarse even to his own ears. “I’ve been crazy about you ever since we were kids and I only had the one chance to show it. Your graduation. And we both know what happened then.”

He grimaced, expecting an answering smile, but she stared at him steadily, her eyes huge.

“You’re working for Pete Horsfall,” he went on quietly, “not me. I mean, you’re working with me, not for me. Do you understand? I’m giving you due notice of the way I feel about you. I owe you that. When we’re at work, I’m a hundred percent professional. You can count on that. But when we’re not at work —” he studied her eyes, noticed that her lips trembled ever so slightly “—I intend to court you. Seriously. Very, very seriously.”

He stopped massaging her shoulders and drew her a little closer. “Consider yourself warned, Virginia Lake. Unless you tell me that it’s right out of the question for you. That there’s no chance at all for me. For us.”

There was a moment or two of strained silence. Then, “S-seriously?” Her voice was very faint.

“Damn seriously.”

“Oh, Lucas...then kiss me. Please.”

He didn’t need a second invitation. He pulled her into his arms. Her trembling stopped and she met his kiss with her own, warm and soft and tentative. He shivered. It was way, way too early for this. What the hell was he doing? She was vulnerable, she was new in town, and she was hurting in some way he couldn’t begin to imagine.

Still, he’d made his intentions clear. Which was what he’d planned all along. Virginia moaned and he brought her even closer.

Well. He’d asked. And it didn’t look as though the doctor’s daughter was completely against the idea.

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