



SPIRIT
OF THE
HEART

Barbara Cary

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For Craig,
Mary, Shirlene, Frank Jan, Elysa,
Catherine, Mark, and Tom K.
— you all know why



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Prologue



Can it be? How is it possible? Has she come back to me? ... for me?

How long has it been since I touched her hand, her face? I remember her skin—so soft, like a child's. And her hair. I know that tumble of gold across her shoulders. See how it falls against her cheek, caressing it as I once did.

She's young. Far too young—a girl. But my love was just a girl when I brought her to this wilderness... when I left her alone to face the darkness.

It can't be her. She's been long at rest while I've wandered alone and lonely.

Who are you, beautiful child?

She turned! She felt my call! She follows my voice!

I'm here, my love! Follow the sound of my whisperings! Yes, up the stairs, to the landing. I'm here! And you've come back to me! You've come home!

Chapter One



“This is hideous.”

Lindsay picked up the cotton candy pink formal by its one satin shoulder ruffle and wrinkled her nose.

“Not your color?” Vida Emerson smirked.

“Grams, it’s nobody’s color. Well,” Lindsay added with a sigh, “it might look good on the Easter Bunny.”

Vida laughed. “Eleanor wants to make sure Sarah’s wedding is like something out of a fairy tale.”

“No doubt.” Lindsay tossed the offensive gown onto the back of a chair and dusted her hands. “But I think it’ll look like the big top blew up instead.” She thought a moment. “Maybe Lottie James could improve it a little.”

Vida grinned and shook her head. “Lottie’s not speaking to Eleanor these days. Eleanor went to a bridal shop in Seattle instead of asking her to outfit the party. If you take it to Lottie you might

end up with something worse.”

“I can’t believe it.” Disheartened, Lindsay dropped her arms to her sides. “Eleanor managed to find the tackiest gown in the Northwest. She still doesn’t like me much, does she?”

“Oh, Lin!”

Scowling at her grandmother’s mild rebuke, Lindsay dropped onto the double bed with a groan. “It’s hopeless. What’s worse, I’m going to be the only one parading around in that monstrosity.”

Vida chuckled and lifted a lapel of the dark brown blazer Lindsay had discarded on the bedpost. “Speaking of hopeless...”

Lindsay snatched the blazer away from her grandmother’s appraising fingers, but couldn’t suppress a wry smile. “These are my work clothes. I had some last minute business to clear off my desk before catching the plane, so Sam drove me to the airport from City Hall. The election is only a few months away, you know.”

“So you’ve reminded me several times,” Vida drawled as she glanced sideways at the briefcase in the corner. “Couldn’t you have left *that* back in Illinois?”

Lindsay walked to the vanity chair and laid the brown blazer across the back of it with deliberate care. “Habit. I carry it almost everywhere.” She turned and smiled. “But I promise I won’t open it in your presence.”

“Then I’ll have to keep my eye on you.”

“Ten days is a long time, Grams,” Lindsay teased, though she knew her grandmother was more than a little serious.

“Not long enough, Sweetie.” Vida ambled over to her, pulled her into a hug, and planted a kiss on her cheek. “You haven’t been out here for more than a few days at a time since you were in college. I mean to enjoy every minute I’m with you.”

Vida stepped back and held her granddaughter slightly away. “First we have to get you into some comfortable clothing. This skirt is absolutely grim!”

Lindsay laughed, stepped out of the embrace, and looked her grandmother up and down. “Not everyone in the world runs around looking like the Red Baron. Pardon me,” she corrected, dipping her head in mock courtesy, “the Red Baroness!”

“I always wear jeans and riding boots when I fly.” Vida grinned as she drew herself up and tugged at the waist of her cropped black leather jacket. “Call it superstition, but it’s what I wore the first time I took the Redbird up solo. Haven’t had one bad mishap yet.”

Her grandmother actually looked terrific in her ‘flying habit,’ Lindsay admitted to herself. The black jeans and white silk blouse hugged a lithe figure. Aviator’s goggles that hung from Vida’s neck added just the right touch of panache. Had it not been for a cap of silver curls around an

astonishingly smooth face, one might have guessed Vida Emerson to be several decades younger than her seventy years.

“You look as you should, Grams. As I always think of you.”

“Remember the first time you were my co-pilot, Lin?” Vida’s features softened.

“Sure do,” Lindsay answered, warming to the subject. “I was barely eight.” She chuckled at the memory. “I didn’t think Mom was in her right mind letting me go up with you.”

Vida shook her head. “She wasn’t sure either.”

“She seemed pretty confident,” Lindsay remembered.

“Katherine was scared witless,” Vida told her. “I hadn’t been flying long, just six months. And *without* the praise and approval of most family members,” she added. “But I have to hand it to Katherine. The way she waved at us when we took to the skies made me feel confident because I knew she was entrusting me with the most precious person in her life.”

Lindsay recalled crawling into the four-passenger plane, fitting her tiny backside into the cushioned seat, and waving to her mother, who stood on the apron of the runway. Katherine Jackson had seemed calm and confident as she lifted her arm and gave pilot and passenger a thumbs-up salute. Only much later, as an adult, did Lindsay appreciate her mother’s show of bravado.

“After that first time, I couldn’t even imagine traveling any other way with you,” Lindsay remembered fondly. “As I recall, your flying was better than your driving.”

Vida crimped her mouth. “You can dress yourself in an ugly power suit, Lin, but at heart you’re still a smart-mouthed kid.”

“At heart, you still love it,” Lindsay quipped, hefting one of her suitcases onto the bed and unfastening the safety straps.

“Too bad your flight arrived so late,” Vida replied with another laugh. “I would have taken the scenic route over Kitsap County and the Olympic Peninsula. Maybe one of these afternoons we can go up again. Or better yet,” Vida mused, “Kent can take you and Sarah down to Seattle.”

Lindsay’s hands froze over her suitcase. “Kent? He flies?”

Vida nodded. “He’s a pilot.” She studied Lindsay’s face. “Didn’t you know that?”

“No... no, I didn’t know that.”

“I thought you did,” Vida commented. “After all, you spent so much time together last summer.”

“It was only four days,” Lindsay cut in, wanting to forestall any conversation about last summer.

“Four entire days,” Vida reminded her with a frown. “I just took it for granted you knew.”

“You shouldn’t take anything for granted, Grams,” she said casually. Lindsay shook her head as she yanked open the suitcase and started lifting

pieces of clothing from it. She went to the closet and rummaged for hangers. “He must be pretty good if you let him take the ‘Bird.’”

“Oh, he is,” Vida replied. “Now that he’s marrying Sarah, he’s almost family. I trust him as much as I like him.” She paused. “Any reason I shouldn’t, Lin?”

Lindsay slipped a pair of white linen slacks over a hanger, unable to look into her grandmother’s face. “No reason, Grams. Kent’s a decent guy. You can trust him with the ‘Bird.’” She swallowed. “And with Sarah.”

“Good!” Vida announced, slapping her thighs. “Now, I’ll leave you alone to get ready for supper. It’s almost six, and I told Eleanor to be here by seven.”

Taken aback at the announcement, Lindsay pivoted. “Eleanor?”

“Didn’t I tell you?” Vida nodded, a wrinkle creasing her forehead. “Everyone’s coming over for dinner tonight. That’s why I cooked up the little chickens... Oh, Lin, I’m sorry. I guess in all the excitement I forgot to mention it.”

Lindsay waved her hand but couldn’t quite muster an understanding smile. “I’m just not sure I’m up to seeing everyone tonight, Grams. It was a long flight.”

“I know,” Vida commiserated. “I tried to tell that to Eleanor, but Sarah insisted. She’s so eager to see you.” Vida leaned forward, worry touching

her jade-green eyes. “Frankly, Lin, the sooner the better. I think Sarah’s getting a little nervous about the wedding. She could use your steadying hand. Eleanor’s been planning everything from the get-go in her usual style, but she’s making such a big deal out of it I think Sarah’s overwhelmed. The wedding dress has been altered three times in the past two months because of the weight Sarah’s lost. Nerves, probably.”

“Nerves?” Lindsay repeated with disbelief. “Sarah? Why? She doesn’t have to wear that ruffled pink clown suit!”

Vida laughed, and the sound of it helped ease Lindsay’s tension. “Grams, Sarah’s the most calm, complacent person I know. She’s always let Eleanor run things and just gone along for the ride.”

Vida shrugged. “This is different, Lin. Marriage is a big step. If you take all of that pressure and add it to Eleanor’s plans for a stage-managed social-event-of-the Island, I can see where the most complacent person might become a bit fidgety.”

“I suppose.” Lindsay looked up. “So Eleanor, Ted and Sarah are coming tonight?”

“Ted can’t,” Vida said. “Thursdays are busy at the inn, with weekend guest registration and all.”

“Oh, yes, I remember,” Lindsay muttered.

“Sometimes I worry about Ted,” Vida went on. “He puts his whole heart and soul into the business, just like his father did. I still say it was the stress and worry over that place that killed your grandpa.”

Lindsay nodded, feeling lonesome for her grandfather even though he'd passed away years ago.

"But we'll have some male company to keep things interesting. Kent's coming."

Lindsay's stomach pitched. She tried not to look distressed.

"Lindsay," Vida said carefully, "you'd tell me if there were something I should know about Kent, wouldn't you?"

Lindsay blinked and forced a smile. "Grams, there's nothing you should know about Kent that I haven't already told you. He's a decent guy," she repeated. "Sarah's a lucky woman."

Vida narrowed her gaze, then seemed to let go of any lingering reservations she had about her granddaughter's odd reaction. "Well, get yourself ready," she urged as she turned and headed for the door. "And try to remember, Lin, this is a casual family dinner, not a City Hall power lunch."

Lindsay grinned. "I'll dress appropriately, Grams."

Vida skewed her face. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Lindsay giggled as she shooed her grandmother from the room. But once the door closed, Lindsay dropped her head back and peered at the white ceiling as if looking for inspiration.

Sarah, Aunt Eleanor and Kenton Stuart all in one room.

Damn! It was going to be worse than the Chicago City Council the week before elections.



Lindsay heard the crunch of tires on gravel outside her window just as she jammed the last pin into a loose knot of hair at the crown of her head. She checked the alarm clock on the nightstand, wondering if she had misjudged the time.

Six-forty-five.

Eleanor was predictably early. Lindsay sighed. She had often wondered if her aunt was simply impatient with time frames, or liked to catch people unprepared and a little shaken. Lindsay had long since stopped trying to figure out Eleanor Emerson. Instead, she did a quick pivot in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the door, and smoothed the skirt of her cotton knit dress.

“Oh, the belt!” She lunged for the dresser, tearing open the top drawer.

The narrow raspberry-colored sash lay right on top. Lindsay whipped it out, folded it in half and pulled it around her narrow waist. She slipped the two dangling ends through the looped end, tied a double knot, and nodded at her reflection. The sash contrasted nicely with the medium periwinkle color of the dress itself. It matched the trim around the short sleeves and square cut neckline. The effect was summery and casual. Grams would

be pleased.

Glad she had already freshened her make-up and put on her gold loop earrings, Lindsay slipped her feet into a pair of tan sandals, securing the heel straps while she hopped awkwardly across the carpet.

“Calm down, Lin,” she muttered before grabbing the doorknob with a trembling hand. “You have to get this over with. The first time will be the worst. Just grit your teeth and do it.”

She drew a breath, let the advice sink in, and opened the door. Once in the upstairs hallway, she heard a babble of female voices. Steeling herself a second time, she started down the stairway.

Halfway down the stairs Lindsay caught sight of her cousin. Sarah stood in the archway that connected the foyer and the parlor. Dressed in a pale yellow cotton blouse and gathered skirt that floated around her knees on currents of air, Sarah looked as beautiful as ever, but somehow more delicate. Volumes of ash-blond hair almost overwhelmed the soft angles of her face, draping like a protective cloak over her narrow shoulders. Lindsay squinted, wondering if Sarah only appeared smaller because of the perspective.

Lindsay took another step forward. Sarah turned and smiled gloriously as she held out her arms. “Oh, Lin! I’ve missed you!”

Lindsay ran down the last few steps and into Sarah’s welcoming embrace. But her greeting

caught in her throat as Lindsay swallowed a gasp of astonishment. Sarah *was* smaller. Her shoulder blades poked sharply through the billowing material of the yellow blouse. Lindsay pressed closer, an instinctive, protective gesture, and felt each one of Sarah's narrow ribs.

Sarah pushed away first, but didn't let go of Lindsay's arms. "You haven't changed, Lin. I swear you haven't!"

Lindsay peered down into her cousin's face, wanting to say the same, but unable to lie outright. Though still hauntingly lovely, Sarah was a fragile reflection of her former self. Her cheeks, usually tinted with a delicate blossom pink, were vaguely sallow and noticeably hollow. Her eyes were the same sparkling clear blue, but rimmed with a faint purple that made them appear sunken and weary. The soft, supple contours of her face had shriveled. Tiny dry lines etched the once dewy skin at the corners of her mouth. She looked like a faded summer flower barely clinging to its glory before the winter frosts.

"Sarah... you...." Lindsay stammered, wishing something witty and intelligent would pop into her brain.

It didn't.

Sarah grinned up at her and gave her a gentle shake. "Yes, we're early," she teased. "I just couldn't wait to see you again. It's been so long." Her lush bottom lip trembled a moment. "But

everything will be all right now that you're here."

Lindsay shook her head at the odd comment.

Sarah only grinned wider and lifted her chin. "Right, Mother?" she called across the room.

The sharp staccato click of heels on the hardwood floor signaled an approach. Eleanor Emerson was snippy even when she walked. Stepping away from Sarah's hold, Lindsay glanced into the parlor.

Eleanor marched toward them, a tiny smile on her perfect coral lips. Lindsay had to admit her aunt still looked ten years younger than her chronological age of fifty in her pale blue tailored silk suit and ivory silk blouse. There was only a trace of gray in Eleanor's blonde french twist and hardly a wrinkle in her satiny skin.

Chafing under Eleanor's appraising glare, Lindsay self-consciously adjusted the raspberry-colored belt. She felt a stab of embarrassment that she let her aunt's silent critique rattle her.

Eleanor stopped just short of the two younger women, leaned forward and pressed her cheek to Lindsay's face.

"Yes," Eleanor finally agreed with her daughter. "Sarah couldn't get out here fast enough. I do hope we didn't rush you, Lin."

Lindsay smiled tightly. "I had plenty of time to get settled in, thanks. Coming here is like coming home anyway. How are you, Eleanor?"

Lindsay didn't bother calling her *aunt*. She

didn't feel any affection or kinship for the woman, and didn't care to pretend. Eleanor raised a brow, her usual demur reaction to any perceived *faux pas*, but didn't comment.

"Sarah does expect a long visit with you," Eleanor said without much enthusiasm. "But the two of you must remember the wedding is only eight days from now, and there's so much to be done."

Sarah tittered. "Oh, Mother, you have everything planned, choreographed, and set in stone. All I have to do is show up!"

Eleanor pursed her mouth together in a pretty moue of feigned displeasure. "Now, Sarah dear, you give me too much credit."

"She doesn't give you nearly enough," Vida said, stepping into the conversation and motioning toward the sofa and settee in the parlor. "I daresay no one could have done a more efficient job of managing all of it on such short notice."

Lindsay, who followed Sarah to a settee and slid onto the cushion next to her, focused on her cousin's pinched features.

"Sarah did give me only two months," Eleanor complained sweetly, smiling at her daughter as she alighted onto a straight-backed chair. "But I can understand the hurry. Love just doesn't want to wait for such mundane things as catering schedules and such. Fortunately, the wedding and reception will be in our private quarters at the inn.

We only had to rearrange a few guest reservations for family and friends who'll be staying with us. It wasn't all that difficult. Our clientele was more understanding about it than Ted was about losing a weekend of income."

In spite of her disclaimer, Eleanor still made it sound like hard work and inconvenience, in the process making Lindsay's Uncle Ted sound like an obstructionist.

"Kent was particularly insistent about the timing," Eleanor gushed on. "I do believe the young man is more than ready to settle down."

The sound of Kent's name sent a jolt through Lindsay. She lifted her head sharply.

A bit too sharply, she realized when her grandmother cast her a questioning glance.

Lindsay sank into the cushion of the settee. "Where is Kent?" she asked as if it were just a polite question. "Grams said he'd be coming, too."

Sarah waved her hand. "He had some business in Seattle and took the ferry down this morning. He'll be along."

The apathy in her cousin's voice startled Lindsay, but no more so than the glimpse of the gold filigree ring Sarah wore on the third finger of her left hand. She'd never really seen the ring. Her only knowledge of it was a detailed description, but she recognized it nevertheless.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Eleanor commented. "A Stuart family heirloom. Kent tells us it belonged

to his maternal great-grandmother. I think it a most appropriate engagement ring, considering Sarah's expertise in the field of antiques."

Blinking away her surprise, Lindsay nodded. "Yes, very appropriate. It's... it's beautiful, Sarah. How lucky you are."

Gazing down at the ring, Sarah nodded with a weary sigh, then reanimated in the wink of an eye and brought her attention back to Lindsay. "There's so much to talk about!" she bubbled.

Lindsay wet her lips with the tip of her tongue and forced a smile.

Before she could say anything, Eleanor leaned forward on her chair. "How is Katherine these days?"

Lindsay's tension eased. "Mom's fine. She's busy at a conference in New York. Quantum Electronics is going public, and since she's Mr. Grayson's executive assistant, he left her with all the details. She'll be flying out next Thursday."

"How exciting," Eleanor replied as if she were making forced small talk with a stranger. "Your mother's done quite well for herself, considering—" Eleanor cut herself off and lowered her eyes. "Considering her life didn't have the smoothest of beginnings."

Lindsay bit her tongue. She despised the snide insinuation behind Eleanor's "tactful" reference to Katherine Jackson's younger years, but wasn't about to let her aunt drag a retort out of her.

Not in front of witnesses, anyway.

“Katherine’s done amazing things with her life, all things considered,” Vida interjected. “Of course, as her mother, I am a little biased.”

Lindsay laughed at her grandmother’s diplomacy. Sarah giggled.

“Biased with reason, Vida.” Eleanor smiled. “One might say Katherine took lemons and made lemonade.” She paused and folded her hands in her lap. “Of course, she had a great deal of help along the way, what with her husband’s family right there in Chicago, and your willingness to take Lindsay every summer.”

Lindsay gripped the arm of the settee and clamped her jaw.

“Reid and I took Lindsay every summer for selfish reasons,” Vida replied. “We’d have had her out more often if it had been possible.”

“Of course.” Eleanor spread her hands. “I know how much you and Reid looked forward to Lindsay’s visits.”

Lindsay heard a wisp of brittleness in her aunt’s comment; heard a note of disdain. She wanted to lash out, but instead gripped the arm of the settee harder.

Sarah’s bright laughter startled her.

“Well, *I* looked forward to Lindsay’s visits, too!” Sarah said, grasping Lindsay’s hand with her own. “But never as much as I looked forward to this one. There’s so much to talk about, Lin!”

she repeated with a sigh.

Sarah's delicate fingers felt cold as they curled against Lindsay's palm. Lindsay stifled a shudder, but didn't quite hide a frown of concern.

Sarah drew away, and settled into the soft cushions. "What about you, Lin? Are you still as enamored with politics as you were last year?"

Lindsay nodded with genuine enthusiasm. "It's something new every day, I'll say that much. Chicago politics isn't what it used to be. It's usually worse!"

Eleanor crossed her legs and leaned back into her chair. "What of this alderman of yours—Sam Beggs, is it?"

"Briggs," Lindsay corrected. "Sam Briggs. He's not *my* alderman. I work for him, but I don't live in his ward."

Eleanor smiled coyly. "That's not what I meant, Lin."

Lindsay sighed. "I know what you meant, Eleanor. For the record, Sam Briggs is happily divorced and remarried to his ward. We're friends. Just friends."

Eleanor's smile degenerated into a smirk. "That's not what we hear, right, Vida?"

Lindsay glared at her grandmother. "You haven't been reading the gossip sheets, have you, Grams?"

Vida shook her head. "I wouldn't buy one of those rags if I needed kindling. But your mother

does send Chicago news articles in which your name is mentioned.” She lowered her eyes a moment, then looked up through her lashes. “There has been a blurb or two about you and Sam attending social functions together.”

Lindsay skewed one brow and chuckled. “Oh, Grams, those gossip notes are as reliable as earthquake predictions!”

Sarah giggled again.

“We may not be worldly-wise out here in Washington State, Lin,” Eleanor said, her icy gaze stifling Sarah’s giggles, “but we do know that gossip is usually built around a grain of truth.”

Lindsay shook her head and sighed. “The only grain of truth is that I like and respect Sam. Most everyone in his ward and in the City Council does. He could probably run for God in Cook County and win. But he’s my friend,” she repeated. “That’s all. In fact, my days in his employ may be numbered if he’s elected to the Illinois House this fall.”

“I told you, Mother,” Sarah said, beaming. “I knew there wasn’t any truth to those rumors.” She turned to Lindsay. “I have to say, those articles set both Mother and Kent back on their heels for a good while.”

“Sarah!” Eleanor gasped.

Lindsay’s mouth dropped open. She wasn’t sure whether to be more surprised at her aunt’s rare pique with Sarah, or at Sarah’s blithe observation.

“Well,” Sarah pursed her lips in a show of

uncharacteristic defiance, “maybe not you as much as Kent, Mother.”

Eleanor cleared her throat. “Sarah, I think you may have made some inaccurate assumptions....”

“Believe what you will, Mother,” Sarah cut in. “I know otherwise.”

Unsettled by the strange battle of wills between mother and daughter, and uncertain why Sarah had even brought Kent’s name into the mix, Lindsay slid forward on the cushion. “Then let me put your minds at rest,” she said with just the right touch of irony in her voice. “I won’t soon be a Springfield legislator’s wife.”

Eleanor refolded her hands in her lap and took a deep breath. “Then you’ll go back to teaching, dear?”

“It’s always been my first love. As a matter of fact, dealing with politicians on a daily basis is twice as frustrating as facing a roomful of fifteen-year-olds on hormone overload.”

Sarah and Vida laughed. Eleanor nodded slowly as if she understood.

“The trick is finding a good position with the promise of tenure,” Lindsay continued, finally feeling as if she had some control of the situation. “There isn’t much need for high school history teachers these days. Most openings are for those who concentrated in math and the sciences. If I move too far outside Chicago and the suburbs, I won’t be able to support myself on the salaries

being offered by the smaller school districts.”

Eleanor shook her head. “You should have gotten an MBA instead of a master’s in teaching.”

Lindsay’s humor dissipated altogether. “I’d have been miserable trying to make my way in the business world.”

Vida interrupted. “Good heavens! It’s been so long since I’ve entertained I’ve forgotten to play hostess. Can I get anyone a drink?”

Lindsay pushed herself off the settee. “Let me, Grams.”

Vida grinned, and dropped back into her chair.

Lindsay walked to a small, teakwood serving cart and lifted one of the two bottles from an ice bucket. “Eleanor?”

“Chardonnay, please.”

“Grams?”

“White Zinfandel, Lin.”

Lindsay felt a little more at ease. “Me, too, I think. Sarah?”

“Nothing, Lin.”

Lindsay glanced around. “Not even a small glass? You love Zinfandel.”

Sarah lifted one shoulder. “Haven’t had the taste for it lately.”

“All right,” Lindsay replied, and turned back to the cart to pour the wine as Vida picked up the conversation.

Lindsay barely heard the chatter. She concentrated on the wine, read the labels and smiled as

she recognized the names of local wineries. She had just returned the Zinfandel bottle to the cooler and reached for the Chardonnay when the hair on the back of her arms stood up.

Shivering to dispel the odd sensation, she uncorked the wine and poured Eleanor's glass. Not until she set the bottle back did Lindsay realize there was no sound in the room except the soft crunch of ice.

She tensed, braced her hand on the cart and cocked her head. Even before she turned, Lindsay sensed the new presence. She caught the faint scent of musk and cedar. Lindsay pivoted slowly, her heart contracting so painfully she could hardly breathe.

Kent Stuart. He appeared little changed since last summer. Perhaps there was a sprinkling more of early gray in the waves of his thick, dark brown hair. He still wore it a bit too long in the back, letting it drag against the collar of his midnight blue shirt. His skin wasn't quite as burnished. The arch of his thick brows stood out in darker relief over wide eyes the color of French roast coffee. Those eyes scowled as they peered down at Sarah, and the expression lent the blunted lines of his nose and chin a slightly harder edge. He set his mouth in a straight line, obscuring the sensual fullness of his lower lip.

Lindsay thought he appeared a shade taller than she remembered. He held himself rigid, legs

apart and planted, arms away from his sides. He had curled his long, powerful fingers halfway inside his palms. At the moment, with his sleeves rolled up past his elbows, he looked more like the carpenter he was by avocation than the architect he was by profession. He looked ready to spring, and more than a little threatening.

“Kent, hello,” Sarah greeted without moving from the cushion.

Kent stared down at her a moment longer before he moved toward the settee. When Sarah offered him her cheek, he bent over and brushed the crest of it with a chaste kiss, then pulled a hand’s breadth away from her.

“I told you I’d be back in time,” he growled. “Why didn’t you wait?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, don’t be such a grump,” Sarah scolded.

Stunned by the waspish tone in Sarah’s voice, Lindsay held her breath to keep from uttering a protest.

“I was eager to get over here and see Lindsay again,” Sarah went on. “Now, loosen your tie and go over to say a proper hello to her.”

Lindsay mused that the knot in his abstract patterned tie had already gone slack giving Kent an air of reluctant stylishness. She didn’t dwell on it long, however, as he straightened and did a quick scan of the room until he found her in the corner by the serving cart.

Lindsay wasn't sure how long they stood apart and appraised each other. She stayed rooted, not so much because she wanted to, but because some inner caution told her navigating across the room might be an embarrassing endeavor.

She tried to swallow and failed. She tried to force a smile of recognition. That failed, too.

Kent's brow puckered. He seemed no less bewildered than she. His hand slid down the length of his tie, then dropped to his side.

In all the hours of agonizing over this moment, Lindsay hadn't given any thought about what to do once she found herself looking into his bottomless dark eyes again. What was she to say? What was she to do? Shake hands? Give him a kiss?

No, not a kiss. Definitely not a kiss.

"Hi, Lindsay. It's good to see you again."

His voice jolted her out of the moment of panic. Deep and rough around the edges like the rest of him, the sound of it struck a chord of intimate recognition. It warmed her inside, caressed her heart. Lindsay found herself smiling a tentative reply in spite of the horrible awkwardness knotting her tongue.

"Hi, Kent," she managed to croak out. "It's been a while."

A while. Nine months that seemed like nine years.

"You're just in time," Lindsay said, forcing the remnants of air from her lungs and the niggling

regrets from her mind. “I’m pouring wine. Zinfandel or Chardonnay?”

His expression went blank for a moment.

“Chardonnay,” Sarah spoke up. “Always Chardonnay. Right, Kent?”

Kent glanced down at Sarah, then let his gaze drift back to Lindsay. “Yes, Chardonnay.”

Lindsay dipped her head and spun around to the cart, unreasonably embarrassed. Her hands trembled as she pulled the bottle from the ice bucket.

Always Chardonnay. Of course, Chardonnay. How little she really knew about him. But then, they had spent only four days together.

Steadying the bottle with two hands as she poured, Lindsay still managed to slop a little over the lip of the narrow wineglass. Intent on holding together the remnants of her shattered poise, she didn’t realize he had come up behind her until she breathed in his clean, masculine scent and felt his warm hand rest lightly, briefly on her shoulder.

Her sense of caution now as muddled as her wit, she turned and peered up into his dark eyes.

“Thanks, Lin,” he said, his voice an emotionless whisper as he picked up his glass.

One part of her wanted to know his thoughts; another part recoiled from knowing. She could see he had trouble shifting his gaze from her to the glass of wine she offered. Though he said nothing more, his eyes snapped a dozen questions before he turned away and sauntered across the room.

Lindsay felt herself warm in the wake of his intense scrutiny. She turned back to the wine. Good heavens, the last time she had blushed so furiously was when Sam Briggs had come into her classroom that sun-dappled autumn morning and appraised her with forthright curiosity.

Sam's probing stare had merely embarrassed her. But Kent's silent intensity singed her heart and sent her pulse fluttering. His touch made her tremble with both excitement and apprehension; she had longed to feel it, yet she had feared it. Now her entire body reacted to the whirl of emotions he'd set into motion by walking into the room and resting his hand on her shoulder.

She had to get a grip on herself, otherwise she'd never get through the next ten days. Lindsay steeled herself, calming her shaking hands. She picked up the glasses, turned and handed Eleanor and her grandmother their wine before returning for her own glass. She turned back to the group just in time to see Kent lower himself next to Sarah on the settee.

Sarah's forehead wrinkled. Kent immediately tilted his head in question.

"Lin was sitting there before you came in," Sarah informed him.

He started to get up. "I'm sorry."

"No, that's all right. I'd prefer to stand just now anyway," Lindsay hurried to say.

Sarah's frown deepened, and Kent rose further

out of the cushion.

“Really,” Lindsay emphasized, lifting a stopping hand. “I sat for four hours in a DC-10, and another forty minutes in the Redbird. I need to stretch.”

Kent studied her a moment longer, then lowered himself back into the cushion. Sarah lifted her chin, as if not quite satisfied with the excuse.

Lindsay cradled the narrow cup of the wine-glass in her palm. She wished a cold north wind would come through and blow away the simmering tension in the small parlor. She tried again for a smile, and this time succeeded.

“I haven’t had a chance to congratulate you, Kent,” she said, hoping her voice sounded bright and sincere. “I’d like to offer a toast to both you and Sarah. Congratulations, with my best wishes for all the years ahead.”

Lindsay lifted her glass in a salute. Kent peered solemnly at her a moment before returning the gesture. Sarah only stared down into her hands.

“To both of you,” Lindsay repeated, and put the glass to her lips.

“Nicely said, Lin. But do you mean it?”

Lindsay almost choked on her meager sip. “Sarah?” she rasped out almost at the same moment Kent did.

Sarah looked back and forth between them several times, her expression one of grand bemusement. “Well, you two were almost inseparable last summer. One might have thought...”

“Oh, Sarah, what nonsense!” Eleanor broke in. “You truly must be a nervous bride to be babbling on about such things!”

For the first time in her life, Lindsay felt grateful to her Aunt Eleanor. Knowing the color had drained from her face and feeling dizzy for it, Lindsay turned once more to the cart, hoping the movement would help her reestablish her precarious sense of balance.

That’s when she met her grandmother’s nonsense, rock-steady gaze. Lindsay flinched, lifted her glass, and took a long swallow from it.

“Why don’t you all go to the dining room and get yourself seated,” Vida commented as she rose from her chair while keeping an eye on Lindsay. “I’m sure the little chickens are done, and they should be eaten while there’s still steam rolling off them.”

For some reason, Lindsay felt overwhelming compassion for those little roasted chickens.

Chapter Two



Vida's "little chickens" were Cornish game hens, stuffed with sage dressing and basted with butter.

Kent was certain it had tasted good. But he hardly remembered lifting the food to his mouth, much less enjoying the savory flavors. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to keep much of it down, considering the pitch and roll inside his stomach. But somehow he did, all the while casting furtive glances across the table, hoping Lindsay wouldn't look up and catch him staring at her.

He didn't know what he expected to find. She seemed little different from the last time he had seen her in August. Her gaze focused just as intently as she listened, her comments were every bit as concise and intelligent. Nothing had marred the energetic prettiness of her face. Her soft, well-defined mouth still tilted upward at both corners even when she wasn't smiling, and her skin still had its healthy radiance.

He wondered if her face still felt as warm and

smooth to the touch. His palms tingled with the memory of cupping her narrow chin and flared cheekbones.

Lindsay appeared oblivious to him as she downed her entire hen along with generous helpings of mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberry-orange sauce and corn nibblets. She seemed to savor every mouthful of Vida's home cooking while Eleanor monopolized the conversation, droning on about the wedding shower planned for Monday evening.

Kent set his fork down, took his wineglass and drank off a hearty measure of the Chardonnay left in it. His gaze locked with Eleanor's over the rim of the glass, and he suffered a moment of her disdain. In reply, he gulped the remaining wine, lifted a brow, and returned the glass to the table.

Eleanor continued to talk, never missing a beat. Not that anyone noticed. Didn't the woman know none of them were really listening anyway?

Lindsay stood and walked across the room. Kent saw the movement in his peripheral vision and trained his gaze on her as she went to the teak cart and poured herself another glass of wine. She seemed more relaxed as she nodded in reply to something Eleanor said. Earlier, her movements were quick and precise, too choreographed and self-conscious. Lindsay never used to be self-conscious.

He lowered his gaze to his plate. Well, she had a right to be nervous. God knew he had been—

was still. He pinched the stem of his goblet between thumb and forefinger. Maybe another splash of wine wasn't such a bad idea.

"Good heavens, Lindsay," Eleanor exclaimed, "you ate like a lumberjack!"

Kent looked up to see Lindsay grin—a satisfied, mellow sort of expression that loosened one corner of his mouth and made it twitch with amusement. Her smile was warm, sweet and sincere.

But he knew the way she glowed incandescently when she laughed—the way her eyes twinkled, changing color from soft hazel to golden-green; how she tossed her head back, letting thick strands of tawny hair sweep away from her face and bounce playfully against her narrow shoulders. She looked her most alluring in those moments, guileless—yet, irresistible.

And he hadn't resisted her. Not for one second.

"I'm not used to 'real' food," she replied to Eleanor's blunt rebuke. "Cooking for one isn't much of a challenge, and most of the time I don't get home before the ten o'clock news anyway. I'm a 'bag-in-the-microwave' person. This dinner was a treat." She laid her hand on her grandmother's shoulder and squeezed. "Thanks, Grams."

Vida smiled around a mouthful of cranberry sauce.

Eleanor sniffed and delicately speared another piece of hen. "Sarah's a wonderful cook, isn't she, Kent?"

The question didn't quite sink in until Lindsay glanced his way. Their gazes locked for only a second, but in that moment a current sparked between them. He forced his attention to Eleanor.

"Cook? Sarah?" he got out raggedly. "Yes, she is. She's a good cook."

Inadvertently, he glanced down at Sarah's nearly untouched plate of food. He hadn't meant to call attention to the fact that Sarah had dawdled over her dinner. It had become a habit of late—checking to see if her appetite had returned, concerned when it hadn't. Sarah didn't eat enough these days to keep a flea alive.

Sarah set her fork back on to the table with a force that made the tines sing. Kent stiffened and looked back to his wineglass, feeling anger replace concern.

He gritted his teeth but said nothing. Not with Eleanor in the room. He didn't feel like defending himself against both mother and daughter.

"I guess cooking is one skill I've never had the time to develop to any great degree," he heard Lindsay say.

He glanced up in time to see her slip back onto her chair and cast a questioning look at Vida.

"You've been too busy with other things," Sarah consoled, now as sweet as honey. "Getting an education, starting a career." She laughed. "*Two* careers, for that matter. Besides, you never had much patience with the indoors. I remember

you were always so athletic. Tennis was your best game, wasn't it, Lin?"

Kent felt his body go rigid. Lindsay refused to meet his stare, though he knew from the slight lift of her head that Sarah's careless chatter had struck a raw nerve.

"Yes, tennis," Lindsay agreed. "I don't play that much anymore, I'm afraid."

What games do you play, Ms. Jackson? Hide and seek, maybe? Kent thought irritably. He took a deep breath.

Sarah set her elbows on the table and pressed a steeple with her fingers. "You're a good horse-woman, too, come to think of it."

Lindsay smiled.

Sarah rested her arms on the table, her expression suddenly infused with excitement. "This is perfect, Lin! You and Kent and I can go riding sometime!"

The suggestion left him thunderstruck. Kent stared at Sarah in open-mouthed surprise.

Sarah glanced at him, then went on as if oblivious to his bemusement. "I haven't felt up to it lately," she admitted, probably for his benefit. "I'm truly fond of my gelding, Jacob's Dream, but I've been too preoccupied to even consider riding him. And he does need exercise."

Lindsay narrowed her eyes. "Jacob's Dream? Is that the Biblical reference to Jacob and the ladder to heaven?"

Sarah giggled, hiding her mouth behind her hand like a schoolgirl. “Oh, no, Lin. Not *that* Jacob!”

Lindsay started to ask another question, but Eleanor lifted her napkin from her lap with a discreet flurry.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t press her, Sarah,” Eleanor suggested. “I’m sure Lindsay has other plans.”

“For ten days?” Sarah challenged her mother with a glance. Then she turned to Lindsay. “Do you?”

“I... no, not really, but...” Lindsay stammered.

“Sarah, there are so many last minute details for the wedding,” Eleanor began to point out.

“You don’t need me around for that, Mother,” Sarah broke in with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Eleanor sat up straight. “You haven’t ridden the bridle paths all year, and some of them have been rerouted.”

“Kent’s been out on the stallion quite a lot this spring,” Sarah countered with a grin. “He’ll know where to take us.”

Kent flexed his jaw. Sarah had pressed him into a corner and she obviously knew it.

“Maybe you should consider asking Kent,” Lindsay recommended. “It isn’t polite to talk for someone when he’s sitting right across the table and can speak for himself.” Lindsay addressed Sarah, but was looking into his eyes.

Kent felt his jaw slacken as the tension eased from his body. Lindsay had sensed his resentment.

“Well, you like riding the stallion,” Sarah rushed to say, forestalling whatever argument she assumed he might make to the contrary.

Kent forgot the quiet kindness of Lindsay’s gaze and swiveled in his chair to meet Sarah’s insistence. “Sarah, I...”

“And you like being with Lindsay, don’t you?”

It was a statement, but the words had the undeniable ring of a taunt to them. Perplexed and shaken, he searched Sarah’s placid face.

Sarah leaned forward. “Well, you do, don’t you, Kent?”

Was she baiting him? How could she? Sarah didn’t know about last August.

Did she?

Kent blinked and turned back to Lindsay. Her hazel eyes reflected the same cloudy confusion that fogged his wit, only she had the presence of mind to find some sort of reasonable response to it.

Lindsay wet her lips and her gaze fixed on Sarah. “I’d love to ride with you. I’m sure I can remember the landmarks.”

“See, Kent, Lindsay’s agreed.”

Something about Sarah’s dogged persistence shook him from his paralysis. Inside he felt torn between reaching over to throttle her and leaving the room before giving in to the impulse.

“I haven’t.” His voice came out a low rumble,

hinting at the simmering emotions he barely kept in control.

Sarah smiled generously in spite of it. "Then do make it formal, Kent. Or perhaps I should hand the request to you in writing."

Her snideness cut at his pride, though after enduring it for the past few weeks, he should have been used to it. "*Some* courtesy would be in order, Sarah."

Lindsay reached across the table and laid her hand on Sarah's wrist. "It's all right. I can figure out the paths."

"Nonsense. Kent will go with us."

Kent glared at her, then turned to Lindsay, hoping he'd sound as apologetic as he felt. "This has nothing to do with you, Lin."

Lindsay opened her mouth, but Eleanor spoke first.

"This bickering is ridiculous," she warned in a cold, contemptuous voice. "Please, Kent, be civil."

"Eleanor, in all fairness to Kent...." Lindsay sputtered out.

"In all fairness," Eleanor cut her off, "I think you should stay out of this disagreement."

Lindsay's eyes widened. "Kent has a point. No one asked him."

He'd had enough.

"I'll go," Kent told her. He paused, and riveted his eyes on Sarah. "I'll go," he repeated for her

benefit alone.

Sarah drew a deep, indulgent breath. “Thank you, Kent.”

He glared at her a moment longer, then sighed and slumped back into his chair. Defeat was hell. But with Sarah, winning could be worse.

He heard the rustle of a chair shifting on the carpet. “I think I’ll serve dessert now,” Vida announced.



“I want the recipe for that dessert!” Eleanor gushed as Vida escorted her to the front door.

“Rosemary brought it over especially for Lindsay’s visit. I’m not sure exactly what’s in it,” Vida chuckled, “but I think she uses a pinch of magic to put it all together.”

Eleanor wrinkled her nose. Lindsay and Sarah both laughed.

Vida squinted her clear green eyes. “I mean it. Rosemary only makes it when there’s a full moon!”

“When did this all start?” Lindsay asked, playing along, if for no other reason than it seemed to make Eleanor uncomfortable.

Vida lifted a shoulder. “Could have been going on for years. I didn’t say anything because my motto is each to her own beliefs. So,” she added, poking Lindsay in the ribs, “you never know

about the strawberries and cream.”

Lindsay and Sarah laughed again. When Lindsay glanced up she saw that even Kent was smiling.

He looked so wonderful when he smiled, dashing and carefree.

As he had been last summer.

He must have seen the memory in her eyes. He turned his gaze away from her and took a step toward Sarah.

Sarah, however, went rigid. “I’m going to ride back with Mother.”

“But Sarah...” he started to say.

She frowned and shook her head. “I’m too tired to go bouncing around in that off-road thing of yours. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He flexed his jaw. “Fine.”

Sarah pivoted away from him and slipped into Lindsay’s arms. “And I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Feeling guilty that Sarah seemed more eager about meeting with her than with Kent, Lindsay nodded. “Sure. I’ll come by sometime early afternoon.”

Sarah backed away and smiled radiantly. “Yes, that’ll be wonderful. I can show you all around the cottage.”

“Cottage?” Lindsay echoed. “What cottage?”

Sarah’s grin became impish. “The old LeCoeur place. I bought it. Kent’s renovating it for me.”

“The LeCoeur Cottage?” Lindsay went stone

cold. "Sarah, that's where you almost... where you had your accident. The place is more than a hundred years old."

Sarah nodded with glee. "More like a hundred and twenty. But you won't recognize it, Lin, it's so beautiful now! I'll tell you all about it tomorrow!"

Too stunned to reply, Lindsay nodded. Sarah squeezed her arm one last time, went over and gave Vida a hug, then breezed out the door. Eleanor waved a final good-bye and trailed after her daughter.

Dazed, Lindsay watched after them for a moment, her fingers pressed to her lips. Behind her, she heard Vida murmur something, but didn't quite catch the drift of it. Once the car doors slammed and the engine hummed to life, she filled her lungs with the crisp night air and took a step back from the open door.

"Careful."

She heard the warning as she felt Kent's wide palm press into the small of her back. Both chilled and warmed by his touch, Lindsay spun away from him and stumbled backward. His hand moved momentarily to her shoulder to steady her.

A nervous titter escaped her throat as she regained her balance. "Oh, sorry! I must have been off in the ozone. Did I step on you?"

"No damage." He paused. "Not this time."

Lindsay knew her bottom lip trembled, but was helpless to stop it. She reached out, let her hand

hover just inches from his shoulder, but then retracted the gesture and crossed her arms instead.

“Where’s Grams?”

“She went back to finish up in the kitchen,” Kent replied.

Lindsay frowned. “Now? I told her I’d help her in the morning.”

The left side of his mouth lifted. “She meant to leave us alone.”

Lindsay winced. “Was it that obvious?”

His mouth flattened. “You aren’t very good at hiding the truth.”

“My mother’s doing,” she tried to joke. “She took my bike away for three months when I was nine because I lied to her. Taught me a good lesson.”

“Maybe she taught you too well.”

Lindsay’s gaze met his. “The comments Sarah made earlier.... I mean you didn’t tell her anything about us?”

He shook his head. “No. Did you?”

“No,” she said, her voice quivering. “How did Sarah pick up on it? She’s never been all that intuitive. I can see Grams. Or even Eleanor. But Sarah? I did feel awkward, and I suppose I showed it.”

“Actually, you did pretty well, Lin,” Kent broke in softly. “You, at least, seemed prepared. When I walked through the front door, I had no idea what I was going to do or say.”

“Neither did I.” Lindsay rubbed her arms at the

prickling that had started there.

“You look great.” He smiled.

“I do?” The prickle became a surge of heat racing through her body.

“Yes, you do,” he chuckled. It was the first hint of his old humor she had seen all evening. His gaze slid over her features. “Your hair’s darker. Last summer there was more gold in it.”

She touched a tendril at her cheek that had come loose from its moorings. “I haven’t been out in the sun much this year.”

“You mentioned at dinner you hadn’t played tennis in a while.”

Lindsay lowered her eyes to the floor. Should she tell him she hadn’t picked up a racquet since that last game with him?

“I haven’t either.”

She lifted her head at the admission. His gaze was serious. Too serious. She couldn’t read the emotion. Neither did she dare ask about it.

“I should leave,” he offered.

The words galvanized her. Only a few hours ago she worried about being in the same room with him. Now, she felt reluctant to let him go.

“Of course,” she heard herself say.

His eyes searched her face again. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

He cocked one dark brow. “When Sarah drags you out to the cottage.”

“Oh. Yes, the cottage,” she muttered.

“I’m supervising some of the final work,” he told her. “I’ve also been living there the past two weeks.”

For some reason, that bit of news surprised her. “You haven’t been staying at the inn?”

Kent shook his head. “Now that the cottage is almost renovated, it’s more comfortable.” He paused, as if reassessing his words. “There’s more room for me to spread out.” He chuckled, but it seemed more of a groan. “You know, I have to enjoy the last of my bachelor days.”

“Last August you told me you were ready, willing and able to give those bachelor days up for good. In fact, you sounded almost desperate to do it.” Lindsay didn’t share his amusement.

He opened his mouth. As if thinking twice, he turned his head and stared into the night. “I *am* getting what I wanted, aren’t I?”

“Are you?” Lindsay heard the strain in his voice.

Kent jerked back around to face her and seemed ready to answer. Instead, he pulled away, fisting his hands, then letting them relax.

“Sure,” he finally replied in clipped tones. “Just what I want. A wife. A real home.”

Lindsay frowned.

“We’re all on edge.” Kent breathed deeply. “Eleanor’s got us going around in circles. Sometimes I wonder how Sarah’s put up with her

all these years without losing it.”

“She did a couple times tonight,” Lindsay observed dryly.

He blew out a breath of air. “Yeah, she’s stressed. She’s dropped some weight in the past few weeks, too.”

“She hardly ate anything tonight,” Lindsay recalled.

“That’s not surprising. She was excited about seeing you again. You’re like a sister to her. Sarah doesn’t have many friends, and there’s no one else she feels close to.” Kent braced his hand against the doorjamb. “The only thing she really decided about this wedding was that you were to be her maid-of-honor.”

Lindsay knew she should leave well enough alone. She knew she should smile, accept the compliment and say good-night. Something goaded her to ignore the intuitions, and she let herself be lost in the seductive allure of his dark gaze.

“What did you think about that, Kent?”

He pushed away from the doorjamb, and peered down at her. “I think it was her decision,” he answered a shade too curtly.

Lindsay flinched. Kent’s eyes softened.

“I’d better leave.”

“I think you already said that.” She straightened her shoulders.

“I did,” he agreed, and then fixed her with a heartrending gaze. “Bye, Lin.”

“Bye, Kent,” she whispered, forcing the words past a bubble of emotion in her throat.

He started to turn, then stopped. “Lin?”

Lindsay shut her eyes. “Go, Kent,” she muttered. “Sure.”

She heard him turn and start down the flagstone walkway. A few seconds later she heard a metal door shut with more force than was necessary.

A car engine sprang to life and he put it in gear. Tires spun as he pressed the accelerator, sending out a rain of gravel. Only then did she force her eyes open to watch as the red taillights disappeared into the light fog.

Feeling as heavy as the humid air, Lindsay closed the front door and leaned her forehead against the polished wood.

“Rough night, huh?”

Lindsay swiveled at the sound of her grandmother’s gentle question, giving up the support of the wooden door.

Vida ambled into the foyer and tilted her head. “I brewed some decaf coffee and cut up some brownies.”

She let the invitation dangle. Lindsay didn’t have the wherewithal to do anything except stare back at her.

Vida lowered her chin and looked up through her lashes. “So, Lin, is there something you want to tell me?”

Lindsay sighed and rubbed a dull ache in the

middle of her forehead. “Not really, Grams.”

Vida smiled, and held out her hand. “Come tell me anyway.”

Chapter Three



Lindsay pushed chocolate crumbs around the plate with the tip of her forefinger, thinking the rich brown-black was almost the exact color of Kent's hair.

"It just happened, Grams," she said, her gaze fixed on the plate, on the particles. "I know that sounds trite, and it's no excuse."

She hated the pleading in her voice and sat up straighter. She wasn't a victim and she didn't want to act like one.

"He was staying at the Alderwood Inn," she began. "We stopped off there after our tennis game so he could pick up his wallet and change before we grabbed a bite to eat. While he was in the bathroom washing up, we carried on this half-shouted conversation. I told him I thought he moved agilely considering his height, and he mentioned he had played soccer in high school and college. I started kidding him that soccer was a wimp sport, and then asked if he had ever

played a real game, like football. He puffed up and claimed soccer was no wimp sport and he had the scars to prove it, and he'd show me every one if I didn't believe it."

Vida sucked on her bottom lip. Lindsay thought she detected the hint of a grin and scowled.

"So he showed you his scars?" Vida prodded.

"And a lot more, Grams."

She dropped her head into her hands. "I don't know what I was thinking! No, I *wasn't* thinking, that's just the point!" She lifted her head. "I had known him a sum total of four days! Four *short* days! Then suddenly there we were, falling into each other's arms."

Lindsay pulled her stiff fingers through the fringe of hair on her forehead, then gripped it hard. "I didn't even consider protection. I guess somewhere in the back of my mind I figured it was a safe time. But I wasn't certain. It didn't even hit me that I had taken a stupid risk until the next day when I was 35,000 feet somewhere over Nebraska. The first thing I did when I got back to Chicago was call my doctor and make an appointment to get a prescription for birth control pills."

Vida put her chin in the cup of her right hand. "Then you were planning some sort of future with him. You must have believed it was more than lust."

“At the time I did,” Lindsay answered. “I’d never felt that way about anyone else. Everything clicked between us. We laughed at the same things. We had both put off personal relationships so we could accomplish other goals.”

She stared off at some nonexistent point. “Something drew me to him, Grams. Something made me want to hold on to his hand and keep holding it forever. I felt....” She searched for a word. “I felt ‘right’ with him,” she decided, then pulled herself out of the sweet, nostalgic haze. “Even though I knew it was outrageously reckless to let myself go like that!”

Vida threw up her hands. “God forbid you should be reckless, even a little bit!”

Lindsay frowned at the gentle mocking. “I’m not a reckless person. This was a brand new sensation, and I let myself get carried away with it because it felt so good.”

Vida settled back into her chair. “What happened?”

“Reality. One night about six weeks later I got home and found a message from Kent on my answering machine. He said he had called me because it was *his* birthday, and he wanted to treat himself to the sound of my voice.”

“Sounds romantic to me.” Vida grinned.

Lindsay closed her eyes, wishing her grandmother would understand. “Grams, I didn’t even know it was his birthday. It made me realize how

little I actually knew about him, and how much I had given away in spite of that.”

Vida raised a brow. “Oh.”

“Yes, oh,” Lindsay echoed. “It scared me that I had jumped so far, so fast, and didn’t even bother to check if there was a net below.”

Vida massaged her chin. “So you broke it off?”

Staring down at the plate of crumbs a while, Lindsay pushed the plate away. “No, I let it linger. I shouldn’t have, but part of me wanted him even though part of me was afraid to take him. We had made plans to meet at Christmas. I was going to fly out here, stay with you.”

“Convenient,” Vida interjected.

Lindsay ignored the comment. “I think we had different ideas about what it would be like. I wanted to spend quiet time with him, get to know him, learn more about whom he was. He wanted to take me to Seattle to meet his parents and his friends, show me his business. He seemed so sure about everything. He was at a point in his life when he could afford to think about stability, even marriage. He even said as much.”

“You weren’t?”

“I don’t know, Grams.” Lindsay mulled over the question a moment. “I’m still feeling my way through life. I don’t know how much longer I’ll be with Sam if he’s elected to the House. I’m not sure I want to go back into teaching, especially if I can’t get tenure, or a decent paying position.

Then all of a sudden, here's this wonderful, intelligent man, who's one part Frank Lloyd Wright and one part hunk in a hard hat, and he's telling me he'd like three kids, a dog, and a summer cabin on the island."

She rubbed her eyes with balled fists. "He was moving miles and I wanted to move inches. I didn't know him that well. Every conversation we had proved it. But it didn't seem to bother him. He was so damned sure!"

"Why didn't you tell him you weren't as certain?" Vida asked.

"I tried," Lindsay answered. "Every time I got on the phone with him I wimped out. He always sounded so confident I let myself be blindsided by it. The optimism he left with me would last about two days, and then the doubts came back."

She blew out a deep sigh. "By Thanksgiving I was a basket case. He called and I found myself telling him things were so crazy at City Hall, and with the primary coming up that I might not be able to take vacation time at Christmas. I left the door open, but two weeks later closed it and told him I had to cancel. He knew something wasn't right. He was so quiet."

Unable to go on for a moment, Lindsay paused. "Then we said good-bye, as we always did, but he didn't call again."

"Maybe he was waiting for you to call him," Vida suggested.

“Maybe.” Lindsay glanced up, a little taken aback by the idea.

Vida shifted in her chair. “You hurt him.”

“I know.” Lindsay slumped. “I thought it would be better.”

“You should have told him.”

The irritation in her grandmother’s voice caused Lindsay to cringe.

Vida rose from the table and took the carafe from the coffee maker. She warmed Lindsay’s cup, then poured herself a measure. “You know, Lin,” she said as she replaced the carafe on the heating plate, “it’s a fact that men are more romantic about love than women.”

Lindsay scrunched her face in doubt.

“It’s true,” Vida insisted, resuming her place and taking her cup in hand. “Men are very naive in relationships, maybe because they see life in linear terms. One takes point A to point B, and so forth. Women know there are curves and detours, probably because we’re left to handle all the details men don’t want to be bothered with. We tend to face doubts and uncertainties head on. We know it isn’t smooth sailing once the decision’s been made. Women are actually far more practical in matters of love.”

“Women have to be practical.” Lindsay sniffed. “We can get pregnant.”

Vida tapped the side of her cup with her manicured fingernail. “Good point. However,

leaving that aside for the moment, believe me when I say men bruise more easily. They don't show it. They don't deal with it, either, for the most part. But their egos are much more fragile than ours." Vida set her cup down. "You should have explained it to him, Lin. Kent deserved that much."

Lindsay crossed her arms and found it impossible to look into her grandmother's face. "I guess I didn't know what to say. I'm new at this sort of thing. Besides," she insisted, "I'm not sure I was wrong to pull back when I did. I have an ego to protect, too. There was nothing solid or secure about any of it."

"Solid? Secure?" Vida repeated. "If I closed my eyes, I'd swear your mother was sitting across from me."

Lindsay set her mouth into an irritated pout. "Mom has a pretty good life, Grams. She did something right."

Vida lifted her chin. "All I'm saying is she's a fine one to preach security and caution. She gave up a full scholarship at Northwestern University to marry a Navy pilot she'd known for two weeks. She had a baby at twenty, and was a widow at twenty-one. I can't say for sure, but I don't think Katherine thought much about security at the time."

Lindsay lowered her eyes, unable to refute any of it.

Vida sighed. “She was in love. She didn’t see the dangers. Maybe that’s the way it should be. Maybe that’s the way it has to be. If every young person were born knowing the pitfalls and pain of giving up part of themselves to someone else the human race would have died out long ago for lack of interest.”

Vida reached over and took Lindsay’s hand in hers. “Your mother learned too young what it’s like to be left adrift. I can’t imagine it. Sometimes I still miss your Grandfather so much it makes me cry. I had thirty-eight years of love and companionship with him. And, I have thirty-eight years of memories to comfort me. Your mother had little more than a few months with Thom. She lost her sense of security early in life, and she taught you to protect yourself from ever losing it. Sometimes I think she taught you too well.”

Lindsay gave her grandmother a tired grin. “Everyone has an opinion about my upbringing tonight. And right now, I’m not sure Mom taught me well enough. I didn’t remember *anything* last summer when Kent Stuart came along.”

Vida drew her hand back and crossed her arms. “Maybe you needed to have your heart broken, just to soften it up a little.”

“Grams!” Lindsay retorted, stunned and hurt. “You don’t think it might have the opposite effect?”

Vida puckered her forehead. “Maybe. That’s

what happened to your mother. But you're a different person, Lin. You keep forgetting that. You keep trying to find and hold on to this vague notion of 'security.' Who's to say what it is, or that it's the same for everyone? Unfortunately, you're stuck with her indoctrination."

"'Stuck?'" Lindsay echoed tartly.

Vida shrugged. She leaned over the table and braced her weight on both arms. "What are you going to do? Do you love him?"

The question shouldn't have surprised her. Lindsay had just spent the better part of an hour detailing all but the most intimate aspects of her four-day romance with Kent Stuart. When she opened her mouth to speak, she didn't know how to answer.

She wet her lips. "I don't know."

Vida glanced at her skeptically. "Back in the '60's your mother would have called that a cop-out."

Lindsay grimaced. "We still do, Grams. I'm really not trying to sidestep the question. I'd like to think I'd never have let myself go like that unless I did love him. On the other hand, I'm not so naive as to deny it might have been just physical attraction and the right opportunity."

She shook her head at the memory. "He was so good looking, we were alone in his room, and laughing about those damned scars. Then all of a sudden we weren't laughing or talking any more."

Lindsay paused, feeling a familiar, languid

warmth steal through her body. Embarrassed that she could still react so acutely to a mere memory, she cleared her throat and rubbed her forehead.

“Besides,” she continued in a low voice, “Kent never said he loved me, not even during our phone conversations last fall. He just made plans.”

“Maybe that was saying he loved you.”

Lindsay shut her eyes a moment, then opened them and stared into her grandmother’s pensive green eyes. “Maybe. But it wasn’t enough for me. Now what am I supposed to do? He’s marrying Sarah.”

Vida spread her hands apart. “Oh, Lin!”

Lindsay went rigid. “That’s it? I pour out my heart to you and that’s all you’re going to say? ‘Oh, Lin!’”

“The last time I gave advice about love your mother ignored it and married Lieutenant Thom Jackson,” Vida reminded her.

Lindsay’s annoyance floundered. “Was that so bad in the long run?”

Vida’s features softened. “No. They had you. And they had each other for a little while. I guess that’s what I mean about this overdeveloped need for absolute security. You can’t see that *everything’s* a gamble. Sometimes the gamble doesn’t pay off in the short term, but it does over the long haul.”

Lindsay understood what her grandmother was saying, but she wasn’t ready to give in to the wisdom.

“Are you going to talk to Kent about it?” Vida asked.

Lindsay’s head snapped up. “Why?”

“I think he should know,” Vida replied. “Besides, you can’t go on holding all this in. There was so much tension in the air tonight I thought the walls would crack.”

Lindsay shuddered. “No good can come of it. Let him think what he wants about me.”

“Do you want to know what I think?”

Lindsay blinked. “I thought you didn’t want to give me your advice.”

Vida tilted her head. “I changed my mind. It’s my prerogative as matriarch of this family.”

Lindsay chuckled without humor. “I’m not going to want to hear this, am I?”

“Probably not,” Vida warned. “But it’s as simple as this. You’re not through with him, and from what I saw tonight, he’s not through with you. You still have feelings for each other. I don’t know what those feelings are, but you’d better clear the air about them. Soon.”

Lindsay groaned.

Vida fixed her with a stern glare. “If you really mean to end it, say it. Don’t let him go on wondering ‘what if.’ Don’t let yourself.”

Lindsay slumped a little further into her seat, pulled the plate back in front of her and started rearranging the dark crumbs again. “Grams, he’s marrying Sarah.”

“They’re not married yet.”

Lindsay studied her grandmother a moment. “What exactly are you saying to me?”

Vida shifted a little on her chair. “You’re an adult, Lindsay. Moreover, you’re a young woman who isn’t quite over Kent Stuart. Use your common sense, but don’t ignore your heart.”

Lindsay tinkered with the handle of her fork. “I do believe, Grams, that I run the risk of misinterpreting your advice.”

Vida raised a brow. “I doubt it. You’re smarter than that. You haven’t misunderstood one word. I’m saying follow your heart, not your head.”

Lindsay let go of her fork. It dropped to the table with a sharp ping. “I’m not about to follow any part of my anatomy. I’m out of this.”

“You’re very much in the middle of it,” Vida countered, her voice touched with rare impatience. “Sarah put you there tonight. I don’t know why, but she did. How can you say you’re out of it when you care for both of them?”

“Grams, Kent made his choice,” Lindsay argued.

“Maybe he made the wrong choice.”

Lindsay jumped in astonishment.

Vida let go a short, sassy sigh. “We don’t all get it right the first time, Lin. Hasn’t politics taught you that much?”

Disturbed by her grandmother’s insistence, Lindsay scowled. “Sam Briggs is the politician. I

just keep him on schedule.”

“How dull,” Vida came back without missing a beat. “And how unfortunate. I think it’s time you read his campaign strategy book and take a lesson in real life.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re trying to blame me for the whole mess!”

“Well, you are just a little responsible, aren’t you?” Vida threw up her hands. “Lin, you’ve fought for everything you’ve ever had in your short life. If there was even a slight chance you thought yourself in love with Kent last summer, why didn’t you fight for him?”

She sounded sad and angry and confused. Lindsay couldn’t say she felt any differently at that moment. She wrapped her arms around herself. “You know the answer to that.”

Vida bristled. “Unfortunately, I do.”

Lindsay held in her annoyance. “Fine. Maybe you’re right. I’m too motivated by self-protection.”

“Don’t sound so disgusted,” Vida quipped, though more gently. “It’s a damned good analysis of the situation. I’ve accumulated some wisdom over the past seventy years!”

Lindsay grinned in spite of her dour mood. “Whatever I decide to do, it’s not going to be easy.”

“Finding out the truth and making decisions never is,” Vida answered. “Just be sure that whatever you decide, it’s for the right reasons.”

Lindsay shut her eyes. “How am I going to know, Grams?”

Lindsay heard the smile in her grandmother’s voice. “You’ll know, Sweetie. You’ll just know.”

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She began writing "romantic" stories as a pastime in high school for an audience that consisted of her sister and a friend in Minnesota. After attending college near her home in north central Illinois she married, raised two children, lived in several regions of the United States, and pursued varied work experiences. All the while she wrote for her personal enjoyment until family and friends convinced her to share her stories with a wider audience.

Barbara currently resides in Illinois with her real life hero-husband, Craig. Readers can contact her through e-mail at Serraine@aol.com.



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