



Silhouette®

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September

What a Woman Should Know

CARA COLTER

SILHOUETTE
Romance®



Cara Colter

What A Woman Should Know

«HarperCollins»

Colter C.

What A Woman Should Know / C. Colter — «HarperCollins»,

WHAT A MAN'S GOTTA DO...J. D. Turner couldn't let Tally select a mate without understanding how things should be between a man and a woman. Especially since the innocent beauty was going to be raising his little boy! So he took it upon himself to show her just how life and real love could be. Tally Smith had a plan to find the right man to marry and create the perfect family for little Jed. That is, until J.D. kidnapped her on the premise that he was going to show her what she and Jed really needed. Well, she had a little news for him—what this woman and child needed was him!

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Was there any possibility that he could feel the same way about her that she did about him?

Of course not, Tally realized. J. D. Turner was the charter member of the Ain't Getting Married, No Way, Never Club. And if he ever gave up his membership, it wouldn't be for a girl like her.

He leaned toward her and cupped her hand behind her head. She knew she should pull away. She knew that, and yet she greedily wanted every moment he would give her.

Their lips met.

All the control—which she had tried so hard all her life to have—evaporated, just like that. She felt her lips part at his gentle insistence.

His tongue explored the contours of her mouth until they were both panting with wanting, both of them unleashing that which had been so tightly leashed.

Desire.

Passion.

And the scariest thing of all: hope.

Dear Reader,

If you're like me, you can't get enough heartwarming love stories and real-life fairy tales that end happily ever after. You'll find what you need and so much more with Silhouette Romance each month.

This month you're in for an extra treat. Bestselling author Susan Meier kicks off **MARRYING THE BOSS'S DAUGHTER**—the brand-new six-book series written exclusively for Silhouette Romance. In this launch title, *Love, Your Secret Admirer* (#1684), our favorite matchmaking heiress helps a naive secretary snare her boss's attention with an eye-catching makeover.

A sexy rancher discovers love and the son he never knew, when he matches wits with a beautiful teacher, in *What a Woman Should Know* (#1685) by Cara Colter. And a not-so plain Jane captures a royal heart, in *To Kiss a Sheik* (#1686) by Teresa Southwick, the second of three titles in her sultry **DESERT BRIDES** miniseries.

Debrah Morris brings you a love story of two lifetimes, in *When Lightning Strikes Twice* (#1687), the newest paranormal love story in the **SOULMATES** series. And sparks sizzle between an innocent curator—with a big secret—and the town's new lawman, in *Ransom* (#1688) by Diane Pershing. Will a seamstress's new beau still love her when he learns she is an undercover heiress? Find out in *The Bridal Chronicles* (#1689) by Lissa Manley.

Be my guest and feed your need for tender and lighthearted romance with all six of this month's great new love stories from Silhouette Romance.

Enjoy!

Mavis C. Allen

Associate Senior Editor, Silhouette Romance

What a Woman Should Know

Cara Colter



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my delightful nephew,
Chase Craig,
with love

Books by Cara Colter

Silhouette Romance

Dare to Dream #491

Baby in Blue #1161

Husband in Red #1243

The Cowboy, the Baby and the Bride-to-Be #1319

Truly Daddy #1363

A Bride Worth Waiting For #1388

Weddings Do Come True #1406

A Babe in the Woods #1424

A Royal Marriage #1440

First Time, Forever #1464

*Husband by Inheritance #1532

*The Heiress Takes a Husband #1538

*Wed by a Will #1544

What Child Is This? #1585

Her Royal Husband #1600

9 Out of 10 Women Can't Be Wrong #1615

Guess Who's Coming for Christmas? #1632

What a Woman Should Know #1685

Silhouette Books

The Coltons

A Hasty Wedding

CARA COLTER

shares ten acres in the wild Kootenay region of British Columbia with the man of her dreams, three children, two horses, a cat with no tail and a golden retriever who answers best to “bad dog.” She loves reading, writing and the woods in winter (no bears). She says life’s delights include an automatic garage door opener and the skylight over the bed that allows her to see the stars at night.

She also says, “I have not lived a neat and tidy life, and used to envy those who did. Now I see my struggles as having given me a deep appreciation of life, and of love, that I hope I succeed in passing on through the stories that I tell.”

J. D. Turner’s idea of...

What a Woman Should Know

- 1) One should not settle for stainless-steel appliances instead of wild nights of passion.
- 2) Too many rules are damaging to a small boy’s spirit, to anyone’s spirit.
- 3) Germs are rarely deadly. Dog kisses are one of life’s delights.
- 4) Small boys (and big ones) need to get dirty.
- 5) Life needs to hold surprises.
- 6) Women who get married for security end up like dried old prunes who don’t laugh enough and are prone to depression in their middle years.

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Chapter One

John David Turner loved to sing. The louder the better. He loved to sing until the rafters rang with the sound of his voice, until the walls vibrated around him. He sang when he was happy, and today had been a damned good day, even if he had hurt his shoulder pulling the engine from Clyde Walters's '72 Mustang.

Of course, there was only one place a guy with a singing voice like his—raspy, out-of-key and thunderous—could make noise like that, and that was in the shower. J.D. was indulging himself now.

The hot water pounding down on him, soothing the ache in the shoulder muscle he'd pulled, he belted out his all-time favorite tune. The bathroom was steamy, despite the wide open window, but he had a theory that steam greatly improved acoustics.

"Annabel was a cow of unusual bovine beauty..."

He held the note at the end until it was wrenching, like the song of the coyotes that haunted the shrub and willow-filled gullies west of his place. Sometimes, like now in the early summer, when he finished that final gut-twisting note, drawing out "beauteeeeeeee" endlessly, the coyotes even answered him.

So, he paused now to see if that would be the case.

Every window in his small house was open, letting the cool early evening air chase out the unusual heat of the day. His engine repair shop and house sat on the edge of town, just far enough out of Dancer, North Dakota, so that only the coyotes could hear him when he got in one of these I-gotta-sing moods.

But it wasn't the voices of coyotes he heard in the sudden void left by the absence of his voice. He heard a determined knocking on his front door.

He frowned, considering this breach of his privacy. He considered not answering the door. No one knew he sang. No one. Except once, a long time ago, in a moment of pure madness, he had sung a love song.

Don't go there, he told himself.

Though he tried to outwait it, the knocking continued on the front door.

J.D. turned off the shower and grabbed a towel. How could a person go from being so happy, to this in the blink of an eye?

Whether he was mad about remembering the love song, or mad because he had been caught singing, or mad because his intruder didn't have the good sense to go away, J.D. was just plain mad as he stomped across his bedroom, towel around his waist, dripping water on his carpets. Who the hell would dare to encroach on his most private moment?

Probably his pal Stan, the town's other bachelor and the only other charter member of the Ain't Gettin' Married, No Way, Never Club—known by its initials A.G.M.N.W.N.C.—who dropped by in the evenings, sometimes, with a couple of beers. They'd spend the evening out in the shop tinkering on some old car. If it was Stan, it would be all over Dancer by tomorrow afternoon that J. D. Turner sang about cows in the shower.

Maybe that wouldn't be big news in most places, but Dancer was a little short on news, big or small. The most inconsequential snippets of private information could tear through the town's eight-block radius like wildfire.

J.D. had the lousy feeling he was going to be listening to cow jokes for a long, long time.

And, of course, if he asked Stan not to say anything, that would only make it worse.

On the other hand, if it was Stan, he could tell him about the progress he'd made on the Mustang today. Would that be enough to wipe serenades to bovines right out of Stan's head? Slightly cheered by the possibility he yanked open the door to his bedroom and marched into the hall.

Expecting Stan, J.D. skidded to a halt in the darkness of his hallway, and stared at the shapely silhouette framed in the last rays from a fading sun that spilled in the round oval screen of his outside front door.

She had turned away from the door, and was looking over the overgrown lilac hedge toward town, hugging herself against the little nip in the prairie breeze. She was wearing a pencil-line skirt that might have looked businesslike, if it hadn't been her. On her, that skirt hugged the seductive swell of hip and buttocks, showed off the long, sensuous line of her legs.

Oh yes. Even though her back was to him, he knew who it was.

Her blond hair shimmered in the last of the day's light. It looked like it was in a bun, but some strands had broken free, and the breeze played with them, and they tickled and swayed on the slender column of her neck.

For a moment his mouth went dry, and he remembered the man he had been once, a long, long time ago, when he had sung a woman a love song.

He reminded himself, sharply, he was not that man any longer. He knotted the towel firmly around his waist, and strode down the hall.

Every step increased his fury.

Five years. Not so much as a goodbye. No letter. No phone call. No explanation at all. And then she just reappears in his life?

His plan was to slam the door, and lock it. He'd been bewitched by Elana Smith once and that was more than enough.

And so he was shocked when his fury propelled him past the interior door, right out the screen door, and onto the porch.

He was appalled when his anger spiked, overriding everything in him that was reasonable. He took the slenderness of her shoulder in his hand, and spun her around, and without fully registering the shock on her face, he pulled her hard into him, and kissed her.

It was not a hello kind of kiss.

It was a punishing kiss. Savage. It held the bitter sting of love betrayed, the hurt of five years of asking why. And it held the power of a man who been severely wounded on the battlefield of love, but who had survived, and let those festering wounds make him stronger, harder, colder than he ever had been before.

She was shoving against him, frantically, trying to escape his hold, his lips. He felt momentary satisfaction that her strength was so puny compared to his.

But then it registered, somewhere, peripherally, that something was wrong. Elana trying to escape his lips? She would have delighted in the savagery. She would have given back as good as she got. She probably would have drawn blood by now.

As he was arriving at these conclusions, he felt the woman surrender beneath the punishing onslaught of his lips. The struggle stopped.

He was contemplating this development, letting the doubt take hold where certainty had been, when she yanked free of him, and belted him up the side of his head with a purse that felt like it had a brick in it.

He staggered back from her and regarded her with narrowed eyes.

He felt as if he'd been hit with more than a brick as he studied the exquisite face that looked back at him.

"How dare you!" she sputtered angrily, glaring at him, and then began wiping away at the front of her blouse, which was wet from his shower-damp skin, as if she could erase his touch from herself.

Oh, it was Elana's face, all right. Heart-shaped, exquisitely feminine, vaguely exotic. How well he remembered those lines—the incredible cheekbones, the pert nose, the faintly pointed chin.

But the how dare you in that clipped, tight tone was not Elana. The woman in front of him simply was not Elana.

Underneath the sooty sweep of thick lashes, he realized the eyes were a shade different. Elana's had been blue. These eyes were indigo, like the center of a violet-colored pansy.

Of course, with contact lenses, anything could happen, and he studied the woman more intently.

The anger and fear in her lovely eyes were real. And right behind them was softness. The same softness he had felt in those lips.

Not, on closer study, Elana's mouth either. Hers had been wide and sensual. This woman's mouth was small, her lips little bows, puffy from being so thoroughly kissed.

He swore under his breath. He'd just kissed the living daylight out of a perfect stranger who had the bad luck to show up as he was remembering that he had once sung a love song. He crossed his arms over his naked chest.

It was obvious to him that she didn't like that he was only wearing a towel. She didn't like it one little bit. She was studying her blouse as though she expected daffodils to bloom from the bosom.

"You've ruined my blouse," she said, finally, her voice stiff with control. "It's silk."

"Yeah. I figured."

She gave him a look that said she didn't think he would know the first thing about silk, so of course he felt prodded to deepen the great first impression he'd made.

"Silk is always see-through when it's wet," he said easily.

Her eyes grew very round. Her mouth formed an indignant O. She blushed, and crossed her arms over her breasts, snap, snap, like it was a military maneuver. By-the-numbers, cover chest.

"Too late," he said. "I saw it. Lace trim."

"Oh!" she said.

"Don't hit me with that purse again," he warned her.

"Well, then quit looking at me like that!"

"Like what?"

She sputtered, "Like...like a complete lizard."

J. D. Turner, avowed bachelor, still enjoyed the fact that his charms could turn heads and make hearts beat faster. A lizard? He could hardly believe his ears. He was tempted to kiss her again, even if it did earn him another wallop with the purse.

He studied her more closely.

Well, no wonder she was showing immunity to his charms. Her close physical resemblance to Elana had made him assume she was like Elana.

But a closer inspection showed she wasn't.

That blouse was buttoned right up to her throat. Her hair had been forced into a tight nonsense bun. Her makeup was understated. Her lips were pursed into an expression of disapproval that was distinctly schoolmarmish.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, curtly. She might not be Elana, but she was of Elana. A relative. Maybe a twin sister. No, a younger sister. But whoever she was, nothing about Elana was going to be good news. He felt that right down to his gut.

She released an arm from where it guarded her wet breast, and swiped at her lips as if removing germs from them. Her arm returned immediately to its guard position. Then she looked around, and he saw it register in her eyes that she was on the front porch of a strange house with a near-naked man who had just kissed her, and the nearest neighbor was not within shouting distance.

Under different circumstances, he most certainly would have tried to reassure her. But Elana meant danger.

Even if this woman in front of him looked like the least dangerous person in the world, he had tasted her lips. There was something in that kiss that was not nearly as cool as she was purporting to be.

Her hair, the color of ripening wheat, piled up primly, still framed a face so beautiful she could be mistaken for an angel. Of course, Elana could have been mistaken for an angel, too.

He saw now his visitor was slender. Elana had been slender, too, but somehow voluptuous at the same time. And Elana had liked the sexy look, miniskirts, black leather. His present visitor's tailored suit reinforced that impression of a schoolmarm. The pastel blue reminded him of something his dental hygienist wore. The whole package screamed "prim and proper," Mary Poppins arriving at her assignment.

Elana had not been prim and proper. Still, the danger crackled in the air around this less vivacious copy.

"What can I do for you?" he repeated, his voice deliberately cold.

"Nothing," she decided. "I've made a mistake." She took a shaky step backwards, and then turned to flee.

He didn't honestly know whether he felt regret or relief that the mystery of his visitor was going to go unsolved.

He supposed he was leaning a bit toward regret, since he had to bite back the "wait" that wanted to pop out of his mouth.

In her haste to get away from him, she stumbled on the second stair. Instinct made him reach for her, but it was too late. She went flying; he could hear the dull thud of her head hitting the cement pad at the bottom of the steps.

He was at her side in an instant, animosity forgotten.

She looked at him, dazed. "Don't touch me," she ordered groggily.

Her forehead was cut, a lump growing around the cut at an alarming speed.

"Don't touch me," she ordered again, as he picked her up. She was so light, it didn't strain his hurt shoulder to lift her. Her weight was unexpectedly warm and sweet in his arms.

"Put me down," she demanded, then had to close her eyes, the effort of making that small demand too much for her.

He ignored her, tried to ignore the fact the towel was slipping dangerously, and carried her back up the steps. He coaxed the screen door open with his toe, and went through to the kitchen. He set her in a chair, instantly feeling the cold where her warmth had puddled against his chest.

She tried to stand up. He noticed, even with all the excitement, she was managing to keep her wet chest protected from his gaze.

"Sit," he ordered, sternly and then did some quick adjustments to the towel.

She gave him a defiant look, took one wobbly step toward the door, and then sank reluctantly back down in the chair. Her eyes darted around his kitchen, which was not in the running for a Better Homes and Gardens feature.

The room was plainly furnished—Formica table, steel-framed chairs with burgundy vinyl padding. His dishes—three or four days worth—were piled in the sink. Her gaze came to rest, with faint disapproval, on the engine he had taken apart on his countertop.

J.D. thought that was just like a woman to be noticing the decorating—or lack thereof—at the very same time she was entertaining the idea she was in mortal danger.

His dog, Beauford, a nice mix between a coonhound and a basset, had been sleeping under the table. He chose that moment to rise on stubby legs, stretch his solid black, white and brown body, and then plop his huge head on her lap. He sniffed impolitely, blinked appealingly with his sad brown eyes, and began to drool.

She squealed, dropping her arms from their defense position across her chest, and pushed the dog's head out of her lap.

"Filthy beast," she said, staring at the new wet spot on her pants.

Okay. J.D. could tolerate a lot, and he knew Beauford had a tendency to have bad breath, and he drooled, but that did not a filthy beast make. This was about as much of the home invasion as he could tolerate.

He held up his fingers. He would pronounce her medically sound, and then it was out of here for Miss Priss. Filthy beast, indeed. “How many?”

“Three,” she said, once again folding her arms over the wet spot on her blouse and glaring at him.

“What day is it?”

“June 28.”

“What day were you born?”

“How would you know if I had that right?”

Good point. And the fact that she could make it probably meant her brain wasn’t too badly addled. Time to send her on her way.

But she looked like just the type who would sue if she ended up with a concussion or something so he reluctantly turned from her and got a pack of frozen peas out of the freezer compartment of his fridge. He placed it on the bump on her head, and held it. She closed her eyes, briefly, and then struggled to get up again.

“Just relax,” he said, holding her down with one finger on her shoulder. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Then why did you do that?” she asked. Her bosom was heaving sweetly under the thin, wet blouse.

For a moment he thought she was accusing him of knocking her down the stairs. “What exactly did I do?” he snapped.

“You kissed me!”

“Oh, that.” He shrugged, as if it meant nothing, when in actual fact the taste of her lips was lingering sweetly on his mouth. “I thought you were someone else.”

She pondered that, and understanding dawned in the violet depths of her eyes. It was clear she now understood the passionate nature of his relationship with her look-alike.

“You are Jed Turner, aren’t you?”

He tried not to flinch when she said that. Only Elana had ever called him Jed. Everyone else called him J.D.

“John,” he corrected her. “Or J.D. J. D. Turner.”

“I’m Tally Smith. I believe you knew my older sister, Elana,” she said, finding her voice, sticking her chin out at him as if to prove she wasn’t afraid, when she was trembling like a leaf on a silver aspen.

He waited, holding the bag on her forehead, not having any intention of making anything any easier for her.

“I knew her briefly.” He kept his voice curt, devoid of emotion, not a hint in that cold tone of a man who had once sung a love song.

She took a deep breath, contemplated, and then plunged. “She died.”

Two words. He registered them slowly. And realized that for him, Elana had died a long time ago.

He didn’t know what to say. That he was sorry? He was not sure that he was. He was glad when the phone rang, giving him a chance to think. He took Tally Smith’s hand—which was small, and soft and warm—and put it over the frozen bag of peas, then turned to the phone.

“Mrs. Saddlechild? Yeah. It’s ready. Ten bucks. I’ll bring it over tomorrow. My pleasure.” He hung up the phone, wishing it had been a longer call, maybe Clyde phoning to consult about the Mustang, something, anything, that required more of him.

And then he turned back to her. Tally Smith, Elana’s kid sister. Tally looked to be in her mid-twenties. Elana had been his own age, which was thirty now.

She was out of the chair, easing her way, shakily, toward the door. The peas were still pressed obediently against her forehead.

“When did she die?” he asked, reluctantly.

Her eyes were cloudy with pain, and he didn't think it had all that much to do with the bump on her head.

"Nearly a year ago."

"And why are you telling me? And why now?"

"I don't know," she said.

He could hear something in her voice. It had been in Elana's voice, too. Mysterious, faintly seductive. But in her voice he could hear smokey mountains, dark green hills, deep, clear water.

Or maybe that was a John Denver song. Elana had come from a prairie town, not very different from this one, across the Canadian border.

"Are you from Saskatchewan?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"You came a long way to tell me." He could explain to her that he hadn't seen her sister for years. And that he had known her only briefly. But it seemed to him this stranger in his kitchen was not entitled to know any of the details surrounding his heartbreak.

She looked at him, hard, and he knew, sinking, she did know why she had come. She just wasn't saying.

"Yes, I did come a long way" she said stiffly, and despite the stiffness, he saw the weariness in her. The dog padded after her as if she was his best friend. She gave Beauford a look of distaste, and the teaspoon of sympathy he'd been feeling for her evaporated. What kind of cold-hearted person could dislike Beauford with his beautiful, soulful eyes and slowly wagging stub of a tail?

J.D. followed her out the door, holding the dog back on the top of the steps. She negotiated them without incident this time. He glanced beyond her, and saw a little gray Nissan. It looked like an older model. Those cars went forever. He made note of the Canadian plate.

"You should have used the phone," he said, unsympathetically.

People did not come a long way to tell you bad news without a reason. He'd tangled his life briefly with a Smith girl five years ago. And he felt he'd been lucky to get out alive. He wasn't tangling with another one. It didn't matter if she was temperamentally Elana's polar opposite. Whatever she'd come here for, she wasn't getting it.

She hesitated at the gate, stopped and looked back at him. He could see the struggle on her face. She wanted to tell him something.

And he knew whatever it was, he didn't want to hear it.

"Nice of you to drop by," he said, pointedly. "Don't let the gate hit you in the backside on the way out."

She got the hint. But rather than seeming perturbed by his rudeness, did she look relieved? As if she wanted him to be rude and rough and rotten?

He frowned at her.

Her shoulders set proudly, she walked down the pathway to her car. She was no Elana, but even so, he was irritated that everything that was male in him noticed the easy grace of her walk, the casual unconscious sensuality in the way she moved. While her back was to him, he wiped the last tantalizing traces of her from his lips.

She got in the car and sat there for a moment looking at him. He looked right back. She blinked first, started the car and backed up.

He stood on his porch in his towel, his arms folded across his chest, watching until her car was well out of sight. J.D. hoped that was the last he was ever going to see of a Smith girl, but he had an ugly feeling that he was being wishful.

He realized, that despite the swipe with his arm, he could still taste the cool sweetness of her lips on his mouth. He wiped ferociously before he went back in to finish his shower.

Annabel the cow had lost her appeal entirely. He showered in smoldering silence.

“You should be relieved,” Tally Smith told herself on the short drive back to the town of Dancer. “He is not the right man for the job. Not even close.”

Despite the firmness with which she made that statement, she felt woozy and she hoped the bump on the head was all that was to blame.

But she knew it wasn’t.

It was the fury of that kiss. The pure, unbridled passion of it.

“Ugh,” she told herself, but she felt like she was a bad actress reading a required line in a play. J. D. Turner’s mouth on hers had been appallingly delicious. If she hadn’t come to her senses in time to hit him with her purse, she was not sure what the outcome might have been.

She had the awful feeling that something wild in her might have risen up to meet his fury, and his passion.

“Ugh,” she said, again, with even less conviction than the last time.

His arms around her had taken her captive, held her tight to his hard masculine body like bands of steel. She had been forced to feel his slippery wet skin, the rock hardness of pure muscle under that skin. The effect, in combination with the unrestrained sensuality of his lips, had been rather dizzying. Really, any self-respecting woman in this day and age should not have reacted with fervor to such a primitive display of strength and aggression.

But she had a feeling that might have been fervor she felt—that heat and trembling at her core—right before smacking the man with her purse.

“He is not the man for the job,” she repeated out loud, as if she was trying to convince her weaker self. Her weaker self that might have actually liked that kiss. A little bit.

She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, lifted one up. “One,” she said. “He came to the door dressed in a towel.”

Rather than seeing that as a fault, her weaker self insisted on recalling that picture in all its lewd detail.

J. D. Turner had looked like some ancient and ferocious warrior. With a faint shudder, that she tried unsuccessfully to convince herself was revulsion, she recalled his thick dark hair wet and curling, his dark eyes smoldering, the firm unforgiving line of his mouth. His naked skin was bronzed and unblemished, his shoulders massive, his chest carved. He was flat-bellied and long-legged. In other words, he was totally intimidating, fiercely masculine, and gloriously strong.

Nothing about the worn photo she had found among Elana’s things, when she had finally found the energy to begin sorting through stuff, had prepared her for the reality of the man.

Oh, in the picture J. D. Turner had been handsome, but his vitality, his essence had not been captured. He’d been dressed in faded jeans, and a white shirt, open at the throat. He’d had his backside braced against the hood of a car, one leg bent at the knee resting on the bumper, his arms folded across his chest. That shock of dark brown hair had been falling carelessly over his forehead, and his eyes had engaged the camera unself-consciously, deep and dark, laughter-filled. His grin had seemed boyish and open, faintly devil-may-care.

When she had heard the song, robust and raspy, bursting out the windows of that tiny house, she had thought she had found the man in the photograph.

But there had been nothing boyish or open about the angry man who had appeared at the door in a towel, and that she had just left, near-naked, and perturbingly unself-conscious about it, on his porch. No laughter in the dark brown of his eyes, no suggestion of a grin around the firmness of those lips.

She shivered thinking of the water beading on the sleek perfect muscles of his chest, of the way his flat belly slid into that towel, of the strength in those naked legs. When he had crossed his arms across his chest, the biceps had bulged, and the muscles of his forearm had rippled with a masculine strength and ease that had made Tally go weak at the knees. No wonder she had stumbled off his porch.

And no wonder Elana had succumbed to him, not that Tally wanted to start thinking about that.

“Stop it,” she ordered herself. “He will not do. Answering the door in a towel was bad enough. But his kitchen was a disaster, and his dog was poorly behaved and stinky. J. D. Turner was rude, disrespectful and nasty! He won’t do. Won’t. Won’t. Won’t.”

Taking a deep steadying breath, doing her best to clear the residue of J. D. Turner from her mind, Tally drove slowly and deliberately the one mile back into Dancer, North Dakota.

Even though the town was like an oasis of green in the prairie gold that surrounded it, Tally could not really imagine a town less likely to be called Dancer.

“Sleeper would be more like it,” she muttered, passing the tiny boxlike houses slumbering under the only gigantic trees for miles. The only sign of life was an ancient dog who lifted his head, mildly interested, when she drove by. She was willing to bet he stank, too.

Finally, she pulled into the motel. For some reason it was called Palmtree Court, even though there was no court, and the nearest palm tree was probably several hundred miles south. Well, if a sleepy town could be called Dancer, why not stretch the truth a little further?

The Palmtree Court was a collection of humble little cabins, and it was the only commercial accommodation available in Dancer. Tally had woken up the clerk, an old man snoozing in a rocker behind the desk, earlier. Once awake, he had shown an inordinate interest in prying her life story from her, but she had closed her cabin door with most of her secrets still intact.

She had been relieved to see that despite the modest exterior, her cabin was clean and cozy. The quilt on the bed, on closer inspection proved to be handmade.

She went in now, and sank down on the bed. Ridiculously, she was still in possession of J.D.’s peas, and she put them over the bump on her head.

“I should call Herbert this moment,” she said, but she did not pick up the phone.

Herbert Henley was, after all, the front-running candidate for the job. On her birthday, three months ago, he had put a tasteful diamond ring—nothing ostentatious—on her finger. But that had been before Tally had had the god-awful luck to find that photo of a laughing J. D. Turner.

Herbert owned Henley’s Hardware store. He never dressed in towels. He owned a neat-as-a-pin home in the historic district of Dogwood Hollow, Saskatchewan. Even in the comfort of his home he always wore a nice shirt and that adorable bow tie that had made her notice him in the first place. And he would never in a million years have taken an engine to pieces on his kitchen counter. He took great pride in his kitchen, especially his stainless steel appliances. He shared her dislike for dogs, and owned a prize-winning Persian cat named Bitsy-Mitsy.

That was quite a different picture than J.D.’s Engine Repair, where the little white house was nearly lost among overgrown lilacs. The house needed a coat of paint and was overshadowed by a large gray tin shop. The grass was too long around the several open sheds that contained monster machinery that she thought might have been combines.

Though she didn’t necessarily believe that neatness pertained to character, the fact that he’d also answered the door in a towel and then kissed a perfect stranger were adding up to a pretty complete picture.

Then there was the fact that J.D. had not been wearing a wedding ring.

“That doesn’t pertain to character, either,” she told herself, adjusting the peas, which were starting to defrost. Did her noticing the lack of a wedding ring mean she was still considering him as a possibility?

How could she be so foolish? She had always considered herself the person least likely to be foolish.

And foolishness was what she could least afford now that she was embarked on this task of such monumental importance.

“This is the most important thing I’ve ever done,” she reminded herself sternly. In all fairness to J. D. Turner, perhaps she could not cross him off her list because she had caught him at a bad moment.

Okay, he'd accosted a complete stranger with his lips, but he had mistaken her for her sister. And he had come to the door wearing only a towel, but he'd probably thought she was one of his buddies. Dancer didn't look like the type of place where too many strangers showed up on doorsteps.

He'd had an engine on the counter, but maybe that wasn't a fatal flaw. And the dog was horrible, but at least it was friendly, which was more than she could say about Bitsy-Mitsy.

She'd come all this way. She could not let emotion cloud her reason now. The man was her nephew's biological father, and her all-important task, her life mission, had become to find Jed a father.

She had known who J. D. Turner was from the instant she had found his picture among her sister's things. He was the father of Elana's son, Jed.

And now, since Elana's death, Tally was Jed's legal guardian. Her life now was about doing what was right by that child. Her child. She had begun researching how to raise a happy and well-adjusted child as soon as he came to her. She'd been dismayed to learn happy, well-adjusted children came largely from happy, well-adjusted families, with two parents. She had been further dismayed to learn that the same-sex parent had a particularly important role in a child's development.

Since then, she'd been conducting an informal father search all over Dogwood Hollow and beyond. Her plan was simple—she would systematically find the right father for her nephew, marry him and create a perfect family. She saw it as a good thing that emotion was not clouding the issue. She'd seen what too much emotion could do in a life, namely Elana's.

Herbert Henley, solid, practical, infinitely stable was her choice.

Until she had found that photograph. And then her sense of fair play had said that the man in the picture at least deserved a shot at being a father to the son he obviously had no idea he had sired.

So, she'd come here to Dancer to meet him. Well, he'd made a bad first impression, but what if that wasn't the whole story? Someday, when her nephew Jed was older, she would be accountable for the decisions she was making right now.

Her decisions had to be cool and pragmatic, based on fact, not impulse. So, despite her initial reaction, tomorrow she would interview J. D. Turner's friends and neighbors. She prayed she would find out J.D. was a beer-swilling swine with three ex-wives and a criminal record. And then she could go home and happily marry Herbert, her conscience clear.

Though, she wished, suddenly, wearily, she could put the lid back on that box she had opened, and never find that photo with the name Jed Turner written in her sister's hand on the back of it.

Chapter Two

J.D., lying flat on his back underneath a car, gave a mighty heave, ignoring the pain in his shoulder, and the rusted bolt finally came loose. He took it off with much more vengeance than was strictly required, and tossed it aside. Then the phone rang and he bumped his head on the oil pan.

Not a good day, so far, he thought, sliding out from under the car. He glanced at the clock. And he was a full five minutes into it.

“J.D.’s,” he answered abruptly, cradling the phone in his ear while he wiped the grease off his hands.

“Stan here.”

Where were you last night when I needed it to be you standing at the door instead of her?

“What do you want?”

“Geez. Nice greeting.”

“I’m having a bad day.”

“It’s five after eight!”

“I know.”

“Well, this should cheer you up. There was this stranger in the Chalet this morning having breakfast. Female. Kind of cute in the librarian sort of way. You know the kind where a guy thinks about pulling the pins from her hair—”

“And this news would cheer me up for what reason?” J.D. cut off his friend before he went too far down the pulling-pins-from-her-hair road. He knew full well that was a path of thought that could make a man spend the whole night wide awake and staring at his ceiling.

Pins from her hair, lace under a sheer damp blouse, eyes an unreal color of indigo, these were all thoughts that ultimately led to heads banged on oil pans first thing in the morning.

“Because,” Stan said with glee, obviously saving the best for last, “Guess who the librarian slash goddess was asking about?”

“Fred Basil?” J.D. asked hopefully. Fred was another town bachelor. He was sixty-two, built like a beach ball and changed his overalls once a year whether he needed to or not. He had politely declined joining the A.G.M.N.W.N.C., saying he would like to get married if the right gal came along.

“Guess again, good buddy,” Stan said, his good cheer bordering on the obnoxious.

J.D.’s head started to hurt. He hoped it was a delayed reaction to hitting it on the oil pan, but he knew it wasn’t. He prided himself on leading a nice quiet life. Simple. Devoid of intrigues and mysteries. A man such as himself did not probe this kind of gossip. He rose above it. Performing at his best, J.D. would have said a firm goodbye and hung up the phone. Maybe he could blame the oil pan for the regrettable fact that he was not performing at his best, and he did not hang up the phone. But he suspected it was more pins and lace and indigo eyes.

“I’ll give you a hint,” Stan said sagely to J.D.’s silence. “You might have to think of relinquishing your membership in the A.G.M.N.W.N. Club.”

J.D. said three words in a row that would have made a sailor blush. Those three words were followed by a terse sentence. “What the hell kind of questions is she asking?” Five minutes later he hung up the phone, fury burning like coal chunks in his stomach. She had crossed the line. It wasn’t enough that she had caught him at a bad moment yesterday, singing his fool head off, wrapped in a towel.

Oh, no, now she had to publicly connect herself with him, provide all sorts of gossip to the eager mongers of the village. She was embarrassing him. She was invading his privacy. Enough was enough. He had no choice.

The sane thing, of course, would be to ignore her, to rise above.

The insane thing would be to track her down and tell her, like a sheriff in a bad Western, that this was his town and there wasn't room for the both of them. Of course, he did the insane thing, stoking his fury all the way to town.

Of all the nerve! Asking sneaky questions about him to his friends and neighbors.

The Nissan was not parked at the Palmtree and was no longer in front of the Chalet. J.D. felt a moment's hope that Tally Smith had gone away, but he knew he wouldn't sleep well until he knew that for sure. Even after he'd confirmed her departure it occurred to him the pins-out-of-her-hair thoughts might plague him for awhile.

He began a slow patrol of Dancer's eight blocks of residential streets.

Sure enough, there was her little gray Nissan parked in front of Mrs. Saddlechild's house. He was willing to bet it was no coincidence it was parked there because he had made the mistake of uttering Mrs. Saddlechild's name when he spoke to her on the phone last night, while that spy had been ensconced in his camp, with his frozen peas on her head.

He went up to her door and knocked hard on it.

Mrs. Saddlechild looked as ancient as the lawn mower he had repaired for her. Today, she was dressed in a flowered housedress, her hair newly blue, her smudged glasses sliding off the end of her nose.

"Just in the garden shed, J.D., thanks," she said briskly, through a crack in the door. And then she closed her door in his face.

She thought he was delivering her lawn mower!

He frowned. He could go and wait in his truck for Ms. Tally Smith to come out. He could pull all the wires out from under the dash of her car so that she couldn't escape without answering a few questions, without hearing that he was running her out of town.

He could do all that, but it would be too close to playing her silly little game of cloak-and-dagger.

Plus, there was no telling what Mrs. Saddlechild was telling the insatiably curious Tally Smith. Mrs. Saddle-child had seen him naked, for God's sake, and it was possible she was old enough and addled enough to forget the all-important detail that he'd been three years old at the time.

The front door had three little panes of frosted glass in it. He glanced up and down the block, and then peered in one of them.

The house seemed very dark in comparison to the bright sunshine outside. Still, after a moment, he could see through to the kitchen, where windows were letting light in.

There was a huge platter of cookies on the kitchen table. Mrs. Saddlechild always had cookies for him when he delivered the mower. As he watched, a slender hand reached out and took one. He was sure he caught the briefest glimpse of bright blond hair before it moved back out of range of his vision.

Just as he'd suspected, Tally Smith was in there! Eating his cookies. Talking to a woman who'd known him since he was a baby, a woman who had personal information about him that could be both embarrassing and damaging.

What the hell did Tally Smith want? He banged on the door again.

Mrs. Saddlechild came, opened her door that same cautious crack, and peered at him, annoyed. "You're still here, J.D.?"

"Apparently," he said.

"Oh, your money!"

Yeah, like he'd been standing out here on her porch waiting for ten dollars

"This is not about your lawn mower," he said with poorly disguised impatience. "I want to speak to your guest."

Mrs. Saddlechild eyed him warily, and closed the door without inviting him in. It seemed like an awfully long time before she returned.

“It’s not convenient right now,” she said.

“It damn well better become convenient,” J.D. said. “You tell her—”

“J. D. Turner! When she told me you had not behaved like a gentleman toward her, I barely believed it. But here you are on my step, cursing.” She shook her head and made a little sucking sound with her lips.

He could see his future unfolding dismally before his eyes. All the senior citizens in Dancer would be looking at him sideways now. He’d have to do free lawn mower tune-ups for a year to remove this smudge from his character.

That woman in there was ruining his life without half-trying.

“Kindly tell her I’ll be waiting,” he said tautly.

Mrs. Saddlechild sniffed regally and snapped her door shut. He figured he’d be cooling his heels for a good hour, and so he was relieved when Tally appeared a few moments later.

“Yes?” she said, stepping out onto the porch.

His relief was short-lived. Her hair was in the same crisp bun of the pulling-the-pins-from-it fantasy. She was wearing a crisp white shirt that was not silk, and pressed navy blue shorts that ended at the dimple in her knee. It reminded him of the kind of outfit lady golfers or off-duty nuns wore.

If you did not know there was a lacy bra underneath it, it was the kind of outfit designed to inspire trust and nothing else.

“Don’t ‘yes?’ me in that innocent tone of voice,” he warned her. He looked at her eyes, thinking last night’s fading light must have lent illusion to the color. But no, they were more purple than blue. Amazing.

The cool light in them made him want to pull all the pins from her hair.

“Leona said she’d call the police if you didn’t mind your manners.”

Leona. Great. This was just great. Was that actually a twinkle of amusement warming her eyes? How dare she be amused at his expense?

“I want to know what the hell you think you are doing,” he said, his tone low. He could see Mrs. Saddlechild peering out from behind her front curtain. He smiled for her benefit, but the smile felt stretched and taut, like a wolf baring its teeth.

“I’m having tea,” Tally said, unforthcoming. “And ginger snaps.”

He wanted to grab her and shake her until the pins flew free. Or kiss her again. He tried to remember the last time he had felt this passionate—this uncomfortably out-of-control—but the answer evaded him. “Why are you doing this? Why are you asking questions about me? Why are you so hell-bent on creating problems in my life?”

Her eyes were very expressive, and she looked guilty, a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar, but she said, her tone dignified, “I don’t see how asking a few innocent questions could create problems in your life.”

“Really? Well let me tell you something. When a stranger shows up in Dancer and starts asking if J. D. Turner pays his bills on time, by the next day it’s the talk of the coffee shop that he probably gambled away his life savings in Las Vegas.”

The guilty look darkened her eyes, so he pressed onward, “And if somebody asks if he has an ex-wife or two stashed away somewhere, then the talk in the barbershop and the hairdresser’s for the next three weeks will be about the possibility that he might have a secret wife or two. People will begin to ‘remember’ little incidents that back up this theory. There will be sightings in nearby towns.”

“Surely you exaggerate,” she said uncertainly, and looked guiltier than ever.

“And does J. D. Turner get drunk on Friday night? Or Monday? Or Tuesday? I guarantee you, there will be lookouts outside the New Life Church where AA meets twice a week for the next year trying to catch me making an entrance.” He was enjoying her guilt, immensely, the fact that she had dropped her gaze from him and was now studying the toe of a sneaker so absurdly white she must have polished it.

“And let’s not forget the final question. Does J. D. Turner like children? Good God, that coupled with me tracking you down here will have Mrs. Saddlechild posting the wedding bans in the Dancer Daily News!”

He saw, suddenly, and with grave irritation, she had not lowered her eyes from his out of guilt alone. Her shoulders were shaking suspiciously.

“Are you laughing?”

She glanced up at him, and shook her head, vehemently, no. But it was too late. He had seen the line of her mouth curve up, the mischievous sparkle it brought to her eyes.

“I fail to see the humor in this,” he said sternly. Thankfully, she quit smiling. That smile would make it way too easy to forget she was an uptight menace, and that his mission was to run her out of town.

She looked at him squarely, drew back her shoulders. “You don’t strike me as a man who gives two hoots about what the people of this town have to say about you.”

“Just because you’ve been digging up dirt, don’t assume you know one single thing about me, Tally Smith.”

“As a matter of fact,” she said, and he did not miss her reluctance, “there is no dirt. You appear to be a highly respected member of this community.”

“Your tone implies I have somehow managed to pull the wool over the eyes of an entire town.”

“Apparently most of whom have been spared the sight of you in a towel. And also,” she continued, “as a charter member of the Ain’t Gettin’ Married, No Way, Never Club, it strikes me as bizarre that you would kiss a complete stranger on your front porch.”

Stan had a big mouth. The club was secret!

“Kissing has nothing to do with marriage, unless you read a certain kind of novel, which I am almost certain you do.” He had scored, because he saw indignant red splotches bloom in her cheeks. “Plus, for as fascinating as all this is, you haven’t answered my original question. Why the curiosity in the first place?”

She looked at the toe of her shoe again. So did he. The whiteness of those runners really bugged him. Didn’t she have anything better to do with her time?

Didn’t she have a fellow chasing her around trying to get the pins out of her hair?

He reminded himself firmly, that only one question about her was any of his business. The question that pertained to him. Everything else entered distinctly murky territory.

“Cat got your tongue?” he asked silkily. “I want an answer. I want to know why you’ve been asking questions about me all over town.”

“All right,” she said. “My sister left you a small inheritance. I wanted to see if you deserved it. I’ll mail it to you.”

He watched with extreme interest as the tip of her nose turned red, and then her earlobes, and then her neck.

He was willing to bet she had never told a lie before in her life.

“Try again,” he said, folding his arms over his chest, and giving her the mean look that always made Stan flub his pool shot.

She took a deep breath and looked everywhere but at him. She touched the button at her throat to make sure it was done up tight, not an ounce of her exposed to him.

“I found your picture in my sister’s things,” she said finally, her tone clipped and uneasy.

“And?”

“And I was intrigued. I wanted to know more.” Her glowing red nose and earlobes changed to a shade of beet.

“Don’t even try to appeal to my male ego,” he said. “It won’t work. There is no way you drove all this way because you looked at a picture and found me irresistibly attractive. You could have any

guy you blinked your big eyes at back home, wherever that is. You wouldn't have to drive halfway across the country looking for one."

"I wasn't trying to appeal to your male ego," she said indignantly. "I have a man at home. I most likely will marry him before the year is out."

Her enthusiasm for her upcoming nuptials was under-whelming. She sounded like a Victorian maiden, in one of those books he was positive she read, who'd been promised against her will. So much for a guy chasing after her trying to get her to let her hair down.

Not that J. D. Turner wanted the details of her excruciatingly boring love life. Not that he wanted to even think why the flatness of her statement made him feel an unwanted stab of sympathy coupled with a desire to kiss her all over again.

"I want the truth. A hard concept for you and your sister, I know, but I'm not settling for anything less."

"Please don't say anything bad about my sister."

The sudden ache in her voice, the tenderness nearly undid him more than her emotionless announcement of her upcoming marriage.

"Elana was sick," she said quietly.

Ah, the truth, finally. "Well, you said she died. I assumed she was sick first."

"No. She died in a car accident. She was sick all her life. She had a mental disorder."

"Elana?" he said incredulously.

"Sometimes she hurt the people who loved her. She didn't mean to."

"Elana?" he said, again.

Tally nodded. "You probably met her in an upswing. Lots of energy? Incredible enthusiasm? Unbelievable zest for life?"

He was staring at her, openmouthed.

"Everybody loved her when she was like that," Tally said, almost gently.

"I never said I loved her," he said fiercely.

"I think you did, though." No glow to her ears and nose, no color blooming at the base of her slender throat now, when he most needed it!

"That's ridiculous. Why would you think that?"

"Because of the picture I found." She faltered. "And because of the way you kissed me when you thought it was her."

If he'd been a really smart man, he would have hung his Gone Fishin' sign on the shop door after Stan's phone call this morning and taken off for a week or two. All this would have blown over by the time he got back.

But he had not done that, and now he bulldozed on, determined to get to the truth, more determined than ever to see Tally Smith riding off into the sunset.

"You still seem to be dodging around the question. Let me put this very simply. What is Tally Smith doing in Dancer, North Dakota?"

"I wanted to find out some things about the man my sister loved."

He snorted. "She didn't love me."

"I think she did. That's probably why she left you. She started to go down. Loved you enough that she didn't want you to see it."

He looked at her closely. Little tears were shining behind her eyes. He wasn't the only one Elana Smith had caused pain to. Tally had said everyone loved her sister when she was up. He suspected very few people had loved her when she was down.

The last thing he wanted to do was see Tally in a sympathetic light because it blurred his resolve. On the other hand, her man wasn't chasing her trying to get her hair down, and she had coped with a sick sister.

"I'm sorry she was sick," he heard himself saying. "I really am, Tally."

She blinked rapidly, and then said, way too brightly, “Anyway, I’ve found out all I wanted to know. You’ll be happy to know I’m leaving first thing tomorrow morning. No more questions.”

“I am happy to know that,” he said, but he didn’t feel completely happy or completely convinced, either.

“Goodbye, J.D.,” she said. She stuck out her hand.

He made the mistake of taking it. He felt a little shiver of desire for her, the smallest regret it was over before it ever started.

He yanked his hand away and went back down Mrs. Saddlechild’s walk more troubled than when he had gone up it. Something was wrong here.

But he’d gotten what he wanted, an assurance she was leaving. He went home and went back to work. He ate supper and showered, no singing. Unease niggled at the back of his mind, as if he had missed a piece of the puzzle, as if he should know something that he didn’t. He felt as if she had never given him the real answer to why she was here, but that if he just thought hard enough, he would figure it out.

When no answer came, he ordered himself over and over to forget it. But as soon as he let down his guard, the unanswered question filled his mind again.

He went to sleep nursing it.

J.D. woke deep in the night, moonlight painting a wide stripe across his bedroom floor, the cry of a coyote still echoing in the air, lonesome and haunting. He lay still, aware of the deep rise and fall of his own chest, feeling momentarily content.

But then the question he had gone to sleep pondering swept back into his mind, and the contentment was gone, like dust before a broom.

Why was Tally Smith really here? Beyond driving him crazy? And beyond getting the citizenry of Dancer worked up into a nice gossiping frenzy, the likes of which had not been seen since Mary Elizabeth Goodwin, prom queen, had gotten pregnant without the benefit of marriage almost a half-dozen summers ago.

All this nonsense about Tally wanting to see who her sister had loved, about being intrigued by a photograph, just did not add up. Elana might have been compulsive, but her little sister looked cautious, organized, responsible.

The person least likely to act on an impulse.

For some reason Tally Smith was lying, or at the very best, not telling him the full truth. He could see it in her eyes—and in her ears and nose and throat, come to that. In the darkness of his room, he allowed himself the luxury he had not allowed himself during the day. J.D. contemplated the color of her eyes.

They were astounding, shifting from indigo to violet, sending out beacons when she felt guilty and troubled. He thought of that one moment when she had smiled, and a brief light had chased the somberness from her eyes.

The coyote howled again, and the sound shivered in the night, and that shiver went up and down J.D.’s spine, and stopped at the base of his neck. It tickled there, a premonition that his life was about to change in ways he could have never imagined.

Why was she asking people if he liked children?

Had there been the tiniest bit of truth threaded through her statement that Elana had left him an inheritance?

And then he knew. With that clarity that comes in the night sometimes, in those moments partway between sleep and waking, he knew.

He sat up, his heart racing crazily.

He tried to tell himself it couldn’t be, that it was not even possible, but he failed utterly to convince himself. A sense of urgency overcame him, and he tossed back the tangle of sheets and

blankets and put his feet on the floor. He hoped the cold would slam him back into reality, but the sense of urgency did not abate.

Cursing, he pulled his jeans from a heap on the floor and yanked them on. He shoved his arms in the sleeves of his shirt as he ran for the truck, not stopping for shoes, barely aware of the rocks digging into his bare feet.

What if she hadn't waited until morning? What if she was gone already? He didn't know one single thing about her, except that she was Elana's sister and that she was from north of the border. How many Smiths would there be?

It wouldn't matter. If he'd missed her, if she had folded up her tent and slunk away in the night, he would track down every last Smith in Canada, until he had confirmed the truth that had unfolded in his heart and his head a few minutes ago.

He didn't bother to button the shirt, just started the truck and barreled toward town. Not much law enforcement out this way at the best of times. None at—he glanced at his watch—three-thirty in the morning. He pressed down the accelerator, and watched with satisfaction when the needle jumped over ninety.

J. D. Turner knew how to rebuild a truck engine. If he was as good at other things, it might not have taken him so long to figure out why she was here.

The roar of the engine split the quiet of the prairie night. He squealed his tires at the one stop sign on Main Street. If he wasn't more careful, if all of Dancer wasn't speculating about him and Tally Smith by now, they certainly would be soon.

He felt almost weak with relief when he raced into the parking lot of the Palmtree and saw the little gray Nissan parked in front of a darkened cabin. It was the only car at the Palmtree. Good. He didn't have to wake up everybody in the whole place banging on doors until he found her.

He got out of his truck and hammered on the door closest to her car, waited, hammered again.

After a long moment, he saw movement at the cabin window. The curtain flicked open ever so slightly and then flicked back into place, swiftly. Silence. Not a hint of movement outside, or inside either. He could picture her standing with her back against the wall, palms flat against it, holding her breath.

"Tally Smith, I know you're awake." It was a challenge to find the right voice volume—one she would hear, but not the rest of the town.

Silence.

"Open this door right now or I'm breaking it down." This a little louder.

More silence. After all her research, she should really know better than to try calling his bluff.

"I'm counting to three." He was just a little short of the decibel level that made walls shake and blew out windows.

Did he hear a little scuffling noise on the other side of the door?

"One." He lowered his voice, marginally.

He heard the bolt move.

"Two."

The handle twisted.

"Thr—"

The door opened a crack, and she put one eye to it, and regarded him with grave annoyance.

"What are you doing?" she whispered. "You'll wake up everyone in town."

Her hair was spilling down around her shoulders in an untamed wave that gave complete lie to the long-sleeved, high-collared nightgown, straight off Little House on the Prairie.

"Let me in," he demanded.

"No. It's the middle of the night. Are you drunk?"

Drunk? "No, I am not drunk," he told her dangerously. "Isn't that somewhere in your notes? That J. D. Turner doesn't get drunk?"

She sniffed. “There’s a first time for everything.”

“You know, come to think of it, if I was going to get drunk, you would be a pretty good excuse.”

“I’m not going to stand here in the middle of the night and be insulted by you.” She tried to shut the door, but he slipped his foot in.

“We need to talk,” he told her.

“It will have to wait until morning.”

She was so bossy. This took on new and significant meaning now that he knew his life was going to be tangled with hers, one way or another, forever. “It’s morning actually.”

She opened the door all the way, and glared at his foot until he put it back on the other side where it belonged. Her hair was all sleep-messed. It looked exactly the way he had known it would had he been given a chance to remove the pins from it—thick and rich and wild, tumbling over her shoulders and softening the lines of her face. She looked more approachable. Sexy, actually.

He knew he must be mad, because he had that urge to kiss her again. Mad, angry. Mad, crazy, too.

“So,” she said, tapping her foot, “talk.”

She had a watch on and she glanced at it pointedly, to let him know her middle-of-the-night time was doled out thriftily. The cascading hair had not changed her tone of voice, nor her snippy attitude.

He said, with deliberate slowness, enunciating each word, “You didn’t come here checking out your sister’s lost loves.” It was a statement, not a question, and she knew it.

Whatever sleepiness was left her in face was replaced by wariness. “And your theory is?” she asked tartly.

“She had a baby.” That wasn’t a question, either. “My baby.”

He saw the answer written in her face. The color drained from it so rapidly he thought she might faint. She stood frozen, her eyes huge and frightened.

In delayed reaction to his earlier decibel level, the light blinked on in the motel office. Some instinct for self-preservation made him take her shoulders. He guided her backward, inside the cabin. Then he closed the door and leaned on it.

“Boy or girl?” he asked, ice-cold.

“Boy,” she whispered.

“I want to see my son. Get dressed. Because we are leaving right now.”

Chapter Three

“We are not going anywhere,” Tally said, finding her voice, and trying desperately to insert a note of steel into it. If this man ever got the upper hand, there would be no going back.

Though it must have been a mark of the lateness of the night, and the shock of his springing his newfound knowledge on her, that she could not think of what was so attractive about her life that she would need to go back to it.

J.D. glared at her, his eyes dark and challenging in the dim light of her room. She could see the strength and resolve in those eyes, and it occurred to her that there would be no winning a battle of wills with this man.

When she lost the staring contest, she dropped her eyes. Unfortunately, his shirt was unbuttoned and hanging open, revealing the broad and magnificent landscape of his chest. It occurred to her that she had seen more of J.D.’s chest than Herbert’s, which was unseemly, given that she was planning an intimate lifelong relationship with Herbert. She shivered.

J.D. was a magnificent specimen of a man, and the anger that sizzled in the air around him did nothing to reduce his attraction. She could feel the power of him, vital and exciting, but that was exactly the type of thing that turned a woman’s head, clouded her thinking. Being drawn to the unknown mysteries of a man was precisely the type of impulse that had gotten Elana into trouble again and again and again.

“Get dressed,” he snapped, obviously mistaking her befuddlement for weakness. “And get packed.”

She folded her arms over her chest. She could feel how rapidly her heart was beating, as if her very survival was being threatened by him taking control of her. But she wasn’t going to let him know that she was thrilled and frightened in turn by this extraordinary twist in her plan.

“No,” she said, giving herself a mental pat on the back for her calm tone. “You will have to haul me out of here, kicking and screaming.” He seemed unmoved by that threat, and so she tacked on, “And won’t that make a fine front page for the Dancer Daily News.”

He leaned very close to her. She could feel his breath on her cheek, and it was warm and sensuous and dangerous. His eyes had a steely glint in them that did not bode well for her.

“I’ll take that as a challenge, if you like,” he said, his voice deceptively soft. “It wouldn’t bother me one little bit to toss you over my shoulder and carry you out of here. You don’t look like you’d weigh more than a sack of spuds. And I’m not worried about the Dancer Daily.”

“That is not what you said earlier,” she reminded him pertly.

“I was a different man then. My whole world has changed since then.”

It felt like her whole world was shifting dangerously, too. She had to hold on to reason! She was always the one who made the plans, who knew what to do, who took charge. Surrendering was not an option.

Still, she tried a less aggressive stance. She softened her tone, touched his arm. “Could we be reasonable adults, here? There is no reason this can’t wait until morning.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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