

A *Storm* in My Heart

A DreamWynd Whispers Romance
Book Three

Neenah Davis-Wilson



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Author Note

Here's a ten chapter sample of the book. Why ten chapters? How generous! Well, the book is over 100 chapters long. 715 pages in print. Over 1000 pages in the ebook.

I hope it'll be enough for you to want to find out how they finally work through all that Dean, Helene, and Life toss at them.

This is a romantic saga as all of the books will connect. I plan 5 titles total for the series. At least, that's the plan right now. It could change at any time!

There is child speak in this book. I spelled their words as I heard them. Sometimes they get it right, sometimes they don't. And sometimes they imitate what they shouldn't. If you don't quite understand them, well, don't worry, some of the adults herein don't either.

A Promotion & A Summons

ONE

“That’s it, Kourt—you’re done. I’ll finish that stall. Sit yourself on that bench and wait for me. I’ll be done in just a few minutes.”

“I’ll finish it! Don’t *baby* me, Storm! And don’t get anyone else to work with the foals—”

“Kournay! Don’t argue, please! You need to take it easy—”

“Stormi, I am fine! It’s—it’s just a little stiff, today. That’s all!”

Karla Storm Deverill Van Kirk dropped her shovel against the stall door, and crossed over to her sister, undisguised skepticism in her face. “Don’t hand me that bull! That hip is more than just stiff today, Kournay! You’re as stubborn as Thomasyna, you know it? Don’t you fight me on this. Go sit!”

Kournay resisted her pull at the shovel she held. “You’ve done the worst ones. I’ll sit when we go up for breakfast!”

Stormi gazed into her sister’s gray eyes and fought the natural urge to give in to her pleadings. It was, after all, her fault Kournay was lame. Not that Kournay felt it was. She’d been thrilled to support her older sister’s decision to leave her cruel husband at the time. Especially after Dean—or one of his minions—set fire to the house and barns at Ascott Meadows—at the time, Stormi’s own thriving equestrian business.

Dean had hotfooted it after her, dragging Kourtney with him. In his rage, he’d run a stop sign and the vehicle to their right slammed into them. He’d come off with just a few cuts and bruises. But Kournay . . .

Shoving these thoughts resolutely into a remote corner of her mind—a corner that never seemed remote enough—she said now, “Look, Nick’s been all over my case this week for letting you do chores he doesn’t feel you ought to be doing. I agree, and I’ve said so, haven’t I? He should tell Nicky to make you quit. *Him* you’d listen to!”

Kournay blushed deeply. “No, I wouldn’t. Not for this!” She huffed a sigh. “Oh, look, this is the *first* place where we’ve been able to work together in three years. I know I was of more use to you watching Kailey then. No one wanted to hire me anyway! They wouldn’t’ve hired *you* either if I hadn’t been there to watch her for you.”

She made a sweeping gesture with one slender hand. “But *here*—it’s all different. Nick and Anetra are *different*! They’ve given me the same chance they’ve given you—pretty much. They never *once* asked who was going to watch Kailey. Here, *everyone* watches her!”

"Yes." Stormi pushed a lock of her dark auburn hair out of her eyes, gestured toward her sister's lame hip. "But, *today*, you should take it easy! I wish a cancellation would come up and you could see Dr. Graham today!"

"Come on, Storm! It's no different than you—"

"I see I may have to put you on leave for a couple of weeks, Kournay—or longer."

His arm resting along the edge of the door to one of his favorite mares' stall, Nicholas Tollefson stood observing his hired girls. Two pairs of expressive smoke gray eyes turned in his direction. He'd snuck up on them with the silent grace of his Sioux ancestors and now regarded them both with his penetrating emerald gaze.

"And I *have* told Nicky to speak to you. Apparently, he's chosen to disregard my wishes too. Or else you've persuaded him—as you're trying to do now—that you're entirely capable of amazing feats despite that hip."

Nicholas pushed away from the stall door and came to stand with the girls. Putting out a hand to Kournay's chin, he continued, "You *are* as stubborn as *any* of my girls would be—they're all alike! Don't smile—it's not a good thing!"

"But, Papa Nick, if I lay around, it's not any better! *Please*, don't say I can't help! I like working in the tack shop, but I miss . . . this."

His look, his tone, softened. "First time I've heard someone say they miss mucking a stall! Kournay, once you've seen Dr. Graham, and I hear it from *him*, I'll reconsider. For now, go sit as Karla asked you to. I've got a bit of business to discuss with her and after that, we'll help you to the house."

"I can help myself!" stated Kournay resolutely. Letting her shovel drop against the wall, she brushed past them, limped out of the barn and up to the house.

Watching her, Stormi bit her lip, wincing in sympathy as Kournay made her way across the stable yard and struggled up the seven stone steps set in the grassy slope that led up to the house.

"Well, you were right. You're off my hook for this as of this moment!" Nicholas brought his gaze round to meet hers. "It's a puzzle how you're able to get any of my offspring to do chores without a fight, but you have trouble getting Kournay to *stop* doing them without one!"

Actually, she had a good deal of influence over her sister. She just had never abused it. If she had just been able to have engineered her escape from Dean entirely on her own—

Said Nicholas quietly, "You shouldn't let your feelings get in the way of what you know is in her best interest."

She flashed him a swift glance, annoyed that he'd read her thoughts so precisely. Reassurance wasn't welcome, even from her employer whose opinion had come to mean a great deal to her in the short time she and Kournay had been in his employment. So much so, that she'd recently been persuaded into confiding a good bit of her life's history. More of it than she'd ever intended to tell anyone—*inside* her family, never mind *outside* it!

Now, she retorted, "Oh, yes! You're a fine one to talk! She only has to call you *Papa* or *Papa Nick*, and you're ready to back down yourself! You didn't—but you *wanted* to!" She made an expressive gesture that took in his powerful build and his six-foot six

stature. "You're bigger than I am, you know. You've got the same influence—and *you're* the boss!"

His lips twitched faintly at that, and he said, "A mere four inches taller than you are, Karla. She doesn't quake at either one of us. And she's certainly comfortable standing up to Nicky! But we'll leave this for now. I have an urgent message for you, plus—"

Giving him no opportunity to finish, she broke in, "Oh, *not* my mother again! I've too much to do today. You told her you couldn't *possibly* spare me, right?"

He looked apologetic. "I'm afraid her complaining spirit compelled me to spare you for this morning. I'll expect you back for lunch."

"Oh, I'll be back *way* before that! We won't be able to stand each other for longer than a sip of coffee. From a very small cup!"

"Well, that may be true. But, despite their deplorable failings, I'd like you to try putting up with your parents. Your uncle as well!" At her heated objection, he held up a hand. "Indulge me, Karla. I don't want to be held accountable for your behavior while you're here at DreamWynd—and I'm certain I would be! Arguing with me, however, might make me wonder whether I should go ahead with the decision Anetra and I arrived at last night."

She eyed him with misgiving. "What decision would that be?"

For there certainly could be several of those he and his wife might have arrived at. It might have to do with her casual relationships with four of their seven sons—or more accurately—with the relationship *they* all wished to pursue with her. Some rowdy moments occurred between them over her! It could also be about—

"The decision to promote you to foreman."

This pronouncement, delivered in his usual casual tone, took her entirely off guard, and she stared at him in open mouthed disbelief. "You can't be *serious*! Nick, I haven't been here even a month. How could you—*why would* you make such a decision like that when—when *Geoffrey's* really the best one for that job! Thomasyna, even!"

"Because I am the boss, Karla, is why I'm doing it! How long you've been here is not the issue. I could have hired someone off the street. Doesn't mean they'd be the best one for the job."

"Well, okay, no, but—"

He put a hand to her shoulder. "*You* have proven to us that you're who we need to oversee things here. Really, you've been doing it without anyone's asking you to since you started. Now, it'll be official—with all the benefits of the position. Your pay will double."

While their faith in her lifted her spirits immeasurably, she couldn't make herself accept the promotion gracefully. "But won't he—won't they all feel slighted by this? After all, they are your sons! And daughters!"

"Oh, I have a notion all of them would follow your lead blindly!"

"No, they *all* wouldn't. Geoffrey wouldn't follow *anyone* blindly." Nicholas raised an eyebrow, and she amended, "Well, all right, you say he'd follow Helene Stanley to the moon and back. I'll have to take your word for that! But you are *all* putting way too much faith in a futile hope he'll break up with her next time she blows in. Nicholas,

I can count on one hand the number of times he's talked to me—and I don't need all my fingers for that! Far as I can see, I've a snowball's chance!"

"You've a better chance than that! You've seen those photos Timmy and Jacqi sold to *Celebrity Tidbits* recently. They weren't just of Thomi and Stephan!"

"Yes, I know. Half the universe saw 'em," she returned unmoved.

"Regardless," he persisted, "the point is that those particular photos tell me he's questioning the wisdom of wasting anymore of his life waiting for her to commit. I think I can trust the signs that his breaking point is near."

Except for a slight hunch of a shoulder and averting her skeptical gaze to stare across at the stall that still needed finishing, she didn't offer to challenge that opinion.

"Moreover," he went on, "you can't tell me *you're* not wishing he would break up with her! Same photos tell that story just as plainly! Should I warn you Anetra's framed a couple of those very shots!"

At that, she brought her gaze back to him. "Oh, *why?*"

His eyes lit with some amusement at that, but he said, "Quit letting his feigned indifference get to you. Stop blessing those poker games the rest of 'em play over you every morning! I realize you've sanctioned them because they're more civil than a fist fight in the riding arena, but you've done yourself no favors here."

She let out a breath. "Well, it seemed only fair at the time. Okay, I admit, I've shamelessly used their infatuation to get them to pull their weight around here. Especially Timothy. But why they let him in on those games is beyond me. He's too young—in every way!"

"They know that. He's never won, has he? I'd order them to stop but they wouldn't obey it! They're so under your spell, it'll take more than a stern command and a cold shower to wake them out of it! Stop honoring the winner—you know none of them are who you want to spend your life with!"

She started to again protest, but Nicholas put a hand to her chin. Said, "Do you really want to belong to one of the twins or to Brett when Geoffrey comes to his senses? How would you handle that?"

She pulled away. "This advice from *your* experience?"

"No, but it could be yours if you're not careful."

She flung out a hand. "Well, I *have* tried to talk to them. I should have the right to play for my freedom to choose who I see or don't. *When* or *if* I want to! But they won't let me. And there have been occasions when I *haven't* honored the winner!"

"Well," mused Nicholas fair-mindedly, "it is understandable. You are, after all, a young woman who can look almost every one of them straight in the eye, and the rest a good deal closer to it. Which is an advantage you can take with them when you're issuing your orders for the day!"

He smiled at her look of amused reproach. He read in it also her continued reluctance to accept his promotion and settled his hand once again upon her shoulder. "You were the manager of Ascott Meadows, I understand since you were *eleven*! Well before your grandfather gave over the place to you. Your status in the show circuit hasn't been matched by many to this day. Your quick reaction to a bad situation isn't the only reason I hired you and Kourtney on the spot."

"No, it was because Mrs. Greene's raging against Wanda and Louise made them *quit* on the spot! Not that I'm sorry for it! For the fifteen minutes I was here before all hell broke loose, I wanted to send them packing myself. Why did Anetra feel they deserved a chance here?"

"We were hopeful, at the time, of their settling in after learning the ropes. Unfortunately, though, their equine passion exceeded their knowledge and ambition—which wouldn't overfill a thimble."

"Ah! So, they had one hundred per cent *more* than Timothy has! And two hundred per cent more passion!"

"And therein lies my great need of your expertise."

She laughed. Throwing up a hand then, she gave in. "All right. All right then, I accept!" She started to walk toward the tractor that pulled the spreader she and Kourtney had been tossing the waste into as they mucked the twenty-four box stalls housed in the main barn.

"I'm also promoting you to manager!"

That drew her up short. "Oh, *why*?" Stormi, betrayed into an unbecoming whine, sounded quite a bit like a petulant four-year-old rather than the self-possessed twenty-four year-old she was. "Give that promotion to Kourtney! It'll keep her off that hip and make her feel useful!"

It made him smile, but he shook his head. "I'm happy with the way she runs the tack shop and handles the trail schedule. She handles the accounts for that end of the business—as you well know. Plus," he said apologetically, "I am allowing her time to play with a few foals!"

She gave a laugh at that. "Ah, *see*!" Then with visions of his disorderly desk dancing in her head, she tried to get him to pass that end of the business to one of his other offspring.

He remained unmoved. "Kourtney tells me you were excellent at managing Ascott Meadows. You should be as excellent at it now, or better!"

"Nick, you're assuming that I'm going to become a fixture here. That may not happen, you know! If Dean—"

"You plan to quit today?"

"No."

"Tomorrow, then?"

"No! Or next week either. But—"

"Then, I'll expect to see you in my office after lunch this afternoon. Don't fail me!" He reached out for the shovel she yet held.

She couldn't let it go yet, the shovel or her argument. "Okay, look! If you'll let me have a computer—"

"No. And don't go asking Anetra for one! I've said I don't want any technology in my office. Except a phone!"

"You have an electric pencil sharpener and a coffee maker . . ."

He gave her The Look. She wasn't daunted. "Nick, please, it would make it all so much *easier*!"

"I'm not convinced of that. When Anetra's computer fried all her data was lost."

“She had a backup. It wasn’t lost for long!”

He didn’t care. Just took the shovel from her, saying, “You’re finished here for this morning. Go change and get over to Deverill Hall. Your mother’s expecting you to have breakfast there. Don’t be late getting back here!”

Reluctantly, she let it go for now and started to pass him. He half turned, having one more requirement to reinforce. “I’ll allow your slip to pass this time—mostly because it was an accurate description of that day’s events. Still, again, get into the habit of getting *out* of the habit!”

She glanced back blankly. What slip?

Then, before she needed to ask, she knew. While *hell* described the events of the afternoon in the boarder’s barn where Cedric, Mrs. Greene’s mammoth jack, and Mr. Wilson’s Quarter Horse mare, Squeaky, had gotten into a heated disagreement that left the ornery Cedric with a deep gash in his left hind leg, what happened later when her cousin, Stephan Deverill, had the audacity to spring a wholly unexpected and unwelcome proposal upon Nick’s eldest daughter, Thomasyna, had been worse than hell.

She drew a breath and responded, “I’m sorry—I am trying to.”

He gave a nod. “Yes, and I appreciate that. But, occasionally, you get caught up in your passion and let go with some colorful moments I can’t let slide anymore. Your youngest devotees are too ready to follow you down paths I don’t want them traveling! Not thinking I want to hear ‘em referring to anyone as a *stinking bag of weasel turd*, either!”

Ruefully Stormi recalled four year-old Daine-Anthony’s indignant outburst at Timothy just the day before, in which he’d recommended Timmy to rot in hell, that he was a dammed stinking, rotten bag of weasel turd, and that he’d pissed him off royal.

She apologized again for her lapses, promised *again* that she’d put a tighter guard on her tongue, and left the barn before his all-seeing gaze could detect that she meant it only for while she was physically at DreamWynd.

In the presence of her parents or her uncle Gregory, she couldn’t/wouldn’t make any promises at all.

A Tableful of Opinions

Two

Up at the house, Lyndsay, Brett, and Anetra worked to get breakfast on the table for their large family. Already platters of bacon, sausage, ham and pancakes were on the dining room table awaiting the arrival of the stragglers. Everyone cheered when Stormi walked in, but then grumbled when Nicholas didn't appear behind her.

"He's finishing up the last stall. Shouldn't be all that long!" Storm said as she went to wash up in the kitchen sink. "You need any help?"

"I been waiting *forever*! I'm gonna pass out in *two* minutes—no! Two *seconds*!" stated seven-year-old Jacquynne Jeanne-Marie melodramatically.

"Jacqi, go sit down!" Twenty-two year-old Lyndsay thrust a loaded platter into Stormi's hands almost before she had time to dry them. "If you'll set these eggs on the table, that'll be a help."

"No. Storm, go change and get out of here," ordered Anetra, moving to intercept the platter. "Your mother's called twice already!"

Stormi rolled her eyes. "Yes, she's apparently called Nick's office too. I'll go when I'm ready!"

Taking the platter from Lyndsay, she held it way above Anetra's reach as the older, but much shorter, woman attempted to take it from her. Off she went into the dining room with it. Decided she *would* have a bite here first. No guarantee she'd make it through breakfast at Deverill Hall! She'd need strength to deal with her parents and their endless hounding for her to reconcile with Dean—the poor, dear, long suffering, *innocent* soul! By now, one would have thought they'd have given it up. Of course, they *might* if *he* would.

She was greeted with enthusiasm by everyone at the table. Nicky, one arm possessively about Kourtnay raised his hand in a wave of sorts. She smiled at him, her gaze going from him to Kourtnay speculatively.

"What?" Kourtnay prompted, a trifle defensively.

She shook her head, disclaiming, "Nothing." then, "What, Kailey?" For the little girl called out to her urgently,

Kailey raised a tiny finger up at her. "I d'wanna go wid you to G'amma's house. I d'wanna see her, 'cause her d'wike my Nicky and my Thom'syna! And her d' wike *you* eider! I d'want you t' go. Her's not nice t' you!"

"You haven't been nice to her, eider!" Kourtney chided her small niece, freely mimicking her word for either. "Been horridly nasty to her since you found your blabby little tongue last week!" She tossed a challenging glance at the big man across from her. "*Your* fault, Geoffrey! She's snubbing Stormi because *you* do!"

"Yeah, he's an idiot!" called Lyndsay from the kitchen. "But, I've told him that a dozen times already this morning!"

"We all have," stated Nicky, who at thirty-two, was a mere ten months younger than Geoffrey. "But he's determined to operate in asinine mode!"

Geoffrey, whose appearance and build closely resembled his father's and Nicky's, sipped his coffee, sublimely ignoring both their jibes and Stormi, who set the platter down on the table rather nearer Tristen than to him.

Kailey stood up in her chair and leaned against Geoffrey. Laying her little arm across his broad shoulders, she declared with an adorable pout, "I wuv my Da'e Geoff, but her *don't*! And I want her to! And I want my Da'e Geoff to wuv *her*, too!"

"Yeah, well, *he don't*!" retorted Adrien, the younger and darker of the twenty-six year-old twins. "Which is fine with us! How come you don't hate him for that?"

Kailey played with a lock of Geoffrey's thick black hair. "I wuv him, that's all! He nice t' me, and he don't hurt us!"

"Well . . . he can't hurt what he won't get close to," observed Tristen, identical in features to Adrien, except his eyes were blue and his hair blonde like Brett's. "Or *no*—*he* can't *be* hurt by what he *won't* get close to. Although, it seems to me that it's inevitable *someone's* going to be hurt when he's playing Dad to the daughter and pretending her mom doesn't exist!"

"Yes, well, again, not that we *mind*!" Adrien raised a finger as he spoke. "Don't want him thinking he's got a prayer in winning her away from us!"

"Your happiness is intact for this morning, Adrien," Geoffrey assured him over the rim of his coffee mug. "But, go ahead, pray away if it makes you feel better!"

"Didn't do him any good today," said Brett smugly, "Did it?"

Adrien cast him a smoldering glance. "You cheated, I know you did! I can't prove it yet, but *you cheated*!"

Brett taunted him with a wicked laugh. Immediately, his brothers challenged him to a rematch, but Brett wouldn't be swayed. "It wouldn't matter. I'd win again, anyway!"

"He's been letting you boys win!" called Anetra from the kitchen. "Did you really believe your skill had improved all *that* much?"

"Yes!" responded Tristen and Adrien at once.

Brett gave his wicked chuckle again. He looked up at Storm. "You'd lose too. I see you're wanting to demand the chance to gain freedom from us!"

"I think it's only fair!"

"Fair, but useless. We're going to play for keeps tomorrow. You're mine forever—*they* haven't a prayer!"

"Oohooo! We accept *that* challenge, brother!"

Stormi put up a hand in protest. "Ah, no! That is *not* happening! Brett! Guys—"

The back door banged shut. Nicholas, having heard the discussion as he crossed the porch, for the open dining room windows overlooked it, poked his head in. "Karla, there's no need to wait! Eat, if you're going to, and leave!"

"Everyone else is waiting!"

He gave her a look that sent her for a vacant chair. She started for the one beside Kournay, but Daine, scooting one seat over, called urgently for her to come sit between him and his twin, Stacia. Since that would put her only one small girl away from the man who most disturbed her peace of mind—at DreamWynd, at any rate—she hesitated in granting him his wish.

The plea in Daine's hopeful eyes won her over. She sat, careful not to allow her gaze to dwell deliberately in Geoffrey's direction. Feigned or not, his cool indifference hurt more than she would admit.

Until that spread of Thomasyna had come out in this past Monday's *Celebrity Tidbits*, she'd thought she'd convinced everyone that Geoffrey's lack of interest in her meant nothing. Because of Dean . . . and Lawrey . . . she wasn't in any hurry to dash into a new relationship with anyone. Maybe if she hadn't been standing so nearby Thomi, she'd've been able to continue denying her feelings. But no . . . both she and Thomi were forever caught on in that photo with the same tell-tale wistfulness in their respective gazes.

So had Geoffrey. Stephan, too.

For Stephan and Thomi, she had no doubt of it coming true for them. They had things to work out, sure. Especially Thomi. Still, it wasn't difficult to see that, despite those issues, Thomi'd fallen for Stephan's sweet smile and his caring disposition. Whatever Nick's observations were of those photos, nothing had changed in Geoffrey's attitude since the tabloid's hitting the stands. In fact, if anything, he stood more aloof from her than before.

But in her dreams at night . . .

She suppressed those thoughts as she parked herself between Daine and Stacia. For dreaming of falling in love with any of the men of DreamWynd . . . or any other man, for that matter, just couldn't be. Stupid of her to think it could happen or even dream of it. Stupid of her to let her daughter think it should.

She took the time to serve the little ones their plates, Kailey informed her dutifully, "Da'e Geoff wants some pancakes, Momma." She patted Geoffrey's arm as she spoke. "Don't worry. Her's gonna get you some! Otay? Her will!"

This got involuntary chuckles from almost everyone, both at the table and in the kitchen. Ignoring them all, Stormi motioned for Stacia to get her eldest brother's plate, and she filled it for him.

While she often managed to be absent for several meals a week, she'd been present at breakfast often enough to know precisely what Geoffrey liked most. She placed his plate before him, meeting his eyes only fleetingly, letting Stacia's need to have her pancakes cut up for her exact her whole attention.

"Such a touching picture of domestic serenity!" observed Nicky teasingly. "If Thomi could see this now . . ." Two pairs of eyes reproved him, one pair, an enigmatic green, the other, a deep smoke gray. Didn't curb his teasing.

Anetra walked in with the last batch of pancakes and ham. "Nicky."

"Sorry, Mom. I couldn't resist. But I can hear her now, telling them all the same things everyone's been trying to tell *her* about Stephan. Come on, why keep pretending? We all want to break a baseball bat over Geoffrey's head! He's being an idiot, and even he knows it. Besides, look at them—close together with three adorable little children . . .!"

Suddenly, Stormi's desire to be as late as possible to Deverill Hall slid away. An unnerving sensation of claustrophobia gripped her. As it did almost every time she came to the table. Only, thanks to Nicky, it seemed far worse today. Handing Stacia back her fork, she rolled a sausage inside a buttered pancake and declared, "I'm late! See you all later!" She rose and started for the back door.

"Storm! Stormi—you haven't *changed*!" Anetra called after her. "Haven't showered, either . . . your mother's going to *love* that!" She swung around to eye her secondborn with deep reproof. "You ever consult your brain before you speak, Nicky?"

"What? Mom, I only pointed out what's right in front of everyone's nose!"

Not wanting to hear any more of what was right in front of everyone's nose, Stormi made sure that the door banged noisily shut the second she was outside. That Nicky was only trying to help her win her fondest dream, she didn't doubt. If he could be a little more subtle maybe she could welcome it!

The red Lexus Stephan had given his cousins to use during their stay in Rhode Island occupied a space in the family's private parking lot. And, well, look! Right next to Geoffrey's black Silverado. Here was a new development. At any other time, he'd made sure the truck was as far from the Lexus as it could possibly be. Often, he parked it elsewhere than the family's lot.

Still, parking next to her car and asking her to marry him were poles apart. Okay, maybe a move in the right direction, but nothing for Heart to get all gaga about. All right, all right, and that he'd actually allowed her to make up a plate for him was yet another miracle. He'd barely allowed her to pass butter to him before today.

"*Wait! Wait*, Storm! I wanna go with you! Can I? Mom thaid!" Daine-Anthony hopped off the porch steps and ran across the lawn toward her. He stopped at the edge and, impatiently hopping in place, he waited for her answer.

Stormi paused in the act of sliding behind the wheel. Those large, hopeful, blue-green puppy eyes were hard to ignore. Her mother would be aggravated if she brought with her any small child other than Kailey—whom she ignored totally once she'd given and gotten the obligatory hug and peck on the cheek.

Moreover, Daine worshiped her as deeply as any of his older brothers did, and it would be heinous if her mother snubbed him as cruelly as she had Nicky and Thomi upon their first meeting with the Deverill clan not all that long ago.

But then . . . *why* should her mother always expect *her* day to be steeped in perfection? Why did she always strive to annihilate it in those of her daughters?

"All right, come on! You're sure she knows you're asking to come?"

Daine dashed across the driveway to the rear door on the driver's side. "Yup! Her thaid no buggin' you, though. If you d'wanna bwing me then I gotta stay home!" He tugged open the door and scrambled into the back seat. Dutifully, he settled into

Kailey's booster seat and clicked the seat belt about himself, his face all smiles and happy expectation.

"Not me you're going to be bugging," replied Stormi, getting out to make sure he really was secure. "Gonna be *my* mother!"

"How come?" asked Daine with interest.

"She doesn't like little kids." Satisfied he was buckled correctly, she shut the back door and slid back behind the wheel.

"How come?"

Starting the car, she headed it out of the parking lot and down the long white stone driveway. "I don't know. I've never asked her. Probably thinks kids are way too much of a bother."

"Why?"

"Because that's the way she is. Mean and miserable. I wish *your* mother was my mother!"

"Well, my mudder can't be your mudder. 'Cause then you couldn't wike Geoffrey so much. 'Cause guyth ain't apossa marry their sisterth. Trissen thaid—"

"Daine—"

"What? Nicky thayth you wike Geoffrey thith much!" And he spread his little arms as wide as they would spread there in the back seat. She watched him in the mirror, a smile of amusement touching her lips. The tot continued eagerly, "But that ain't *wike*—that'th *wuv*! Huh, Storm? You really *wuv* Geoffrey, huh? But he'th bein' a damned thsnotfathe, huh?"

Thankful Nick wasn't with them to hear that sentiment, Stormi answered, "Yes, he can be a snotface sometimes. But Daine, I don't want you saying it that way, okay? You can probably call him a *snotface*—I think. I'm not really sure. But I *am* sure your father would make me very sorry that you called your brother a *damned snotface*!"

"How come?"

"Because he doesn't like to hear anyone talk like that. Really, we should not be calling anyone names at all. It's not—"

"You called Mr. Whitley a witheleth, stupid, asth—"

"Daine!" ruthlessly cutting him off before he could finish repeating her entire insult.

"I didn't say that! *You* did!"

"You don't have to repeat it. I *know* what I said. And I'm sorry you heard me say it!"

"How come you don't wike him?"

"Because he *is* a witless, stupid—donkey's behind!"

"That ain't what you thaid. You thaid—"

"Daine," she said with the utmost patience, "how about if we forget what I said and talk about something else. Don't ask *how come*—unless of course, you want to go home. *Now.*"

"Okay. I won't talk 'bout that. And I won't tell Dad you thaid his fwreakin' wulesth 'bout not widin' Wogue and Fairwind're all a bunch of sheep sh—"

She dragged in a deep breath, rolling her eyes heavenward. Didn't it figure that he'd conquer his lisp for something like this? If she'd been in any doubt that Nicholas exaggerated his claim of her corrupting the speech of the little ones, they'd been wiped

out in these last three minutes! Looked like she owed him a great many humble apologies.

“—shinure.” finished Daine, making use of her own euphemism for the word. He grinned at her in the mirror. “You thought I wasth gonna say sheep shit, huh, Storm?”

A great many very humble apologies!

More Unwelcome Opinions

THREE

“Is this your mudder’sth house, Storm?” Daine unbelted himself the instant she turned into the cobblestone drive. He pressed his face close to the window to study the great red brick mansion as it came better into view. “It’sth kinda big, ain’t it?”

“Yes, it’s big, but it’s not my mother’s place. It’s Stephan’s mother’s place. My parents have their own place in Newport. When they bother living there.”

“How come they don’t wive there?”

“I don’t know. They just seem to like to be other places.”

“Don’t they wike their own home?”

“You know, twerp, I think they like living with other people who think exactly the way they do. Well, I don’t know if I should pin that on Auntie Irina. She’s not allowed to think.”

“How come?”

“Daine, zip the lips, and let’s go inside and get this horror show over with, okay?” She got out and opened the back door for him to hop out. “Of course, that doesn’t mean you have to be quiet the *whole* time we’re here!”

He smiled up at her as he grabbed hold of her hand. “Okay! I be good, but not *too* good!”

She wasn’t sure whether to be reassured or on her guard by that. But no matter. She’d come. Her mother had better be happy with that.

They traversed the steps up to the great stone porch. While Daine appeared awed by the twin larger than life-sized black marble bears that flanked the double doors, he wasn’t afraid of them. “They scare all the bad guysth away, huh, Storm? Can I wing the doorbell?”

“Go for it!” And she lifted him up so he could perform this task, not once, but several times. It clanged throughout the interior, echoing for several seconds to the little boy’s delight.

Her Uncle Charles Ascott opened the doors to them. He stood about her own height—a slim man in his sixties, his thick chocolate brown hair, boyish looks and unflagging good humor made him appear far younger. “Good grief, what’s all this racket for? You trying to wake the dead? Hello, young man, you can stop ringing those infernal bells now. We know you’re here!”

"If that were possible, I'd let him wake Papa and tell him what a jack-ah—what a moron he was writing up his will the way he did!"

Her uncle's gray eyes twinkled, not at all shocked by her seeming disrespect toward his father. "You were probably more accurate with the first choice. But I see you're attempting to refine your vocabulary. I've got a two to one bet on you that you'll conquer that habit yet!"

"Uncle Charles—"

"Don't worry," he said as he waved away the servant that had come belatedly to answer the insistent clanging. "I'm not gambling a fortune away. I know I could lose here. But think how much closer to perfection you'd be if what came out of those rosy red lips was as beautiful as their owner!"

"My brotherth think her'th gordress! And they all wanna mawry her, and me too!"

"They want to marry *you* too?" Stormi pretended shocked surprise.

"No-oo. *I* wanna mawry you! But they won't wet me pway cards wike they do. I would win, and they would cwry!"

"My goodness, it seems your parents' worst fears *are* true." Charles escorted his niece and her little charge across the great hall to the Blue Room.

"I haven't fallen for any of them. Yet."

"Oohho, you know you lie, Karla Storm. Everyone here saw those pictures in that appalling tabloid, Monday afternoon. You had a dream in those smoke grays for one of his brothers!" He stopped and turned to face her. "You're probably going to hear of it today, but while I know you don't give a rasher of bacon for that, you should consider that likely someone else has also seen them. And he'll give his right arm to prevent your dream from coming true!"

"He's here, then?" She tried to keep her voice matter of fact. "Last I knew, he was being held for assault. Totally probable, however, that he's posted bail."

"Karley, don't you think you should make sure a restraining order is in effect before he tries again?"

His use of her childhood nickname reminded her of his genuine concern for her. She answered him quietly, "He won't honor it. A waste of time and money, Uncle Charles! It won't protect me! If Stephan married Thomi tomorrow it wouldn't protect me for long. And going back to him will be my death sentence for certain—although, he'd keep me guessing as to when that might be for as long as it amused him!"

"I don't believe he'd do it, Karley. My belief is—" Noticing, all at once, Daine's intent interest in this conversation, he finished smoothly, "we should get together soon and have a chat!"

"Thank you, Uncle Charles. You can find me at Dream Wynd anytime you want to drop by. Not coming here for that!"

"And I wouldn't ask you to. I've been invited to Stephan's new place if that would suit you. Look, you have to know that your mother's already discussed this outrage with Dee-Anne. And you know that Dee-Anne can't be trusted to keep any secrets from her darling boy!"

He set a hand upon Daine's curly head. "Which of this young man's brothers would best put Dean in his place? One about the size of Kourtney's fiancé would be ideal!" Charles flung open the door of the Blue Room. "They set any date, yet?"

"Haven't heard they have. I think it will be soon, though! Or at least it ought to be!"

He laughed. "That bad, are they? Well, that's the fun of being in love, after all!"

Stormi didn't reply to that as she had no wish to continue this discussion in the vicinity of her mother's ears.

Izette Ascott Deverill looked up from the magazine she'd been idly thumbing through all this while. Having had to wait what she felt was a needlessly long time for her daughter's arrival, her demeanor had long ago crossed the borders of boredom to peevishness. A circumstance that must often have been the case with her, for the frowning creases between her eyes were permanently etched there, marring a little, the physical beauty that once characterized her.

Her inches didn't match her eldest daughter's. More, perhaps Kourtney's height. Her hair, as was her siblings', a rich brown with auburn highlights. Her gray eyes, however, lacked the depth her daughters' held, and were of a lighter hue than theirs. Like ice on a cold winter's day.

Instead of greeting her eldest with pleasure, even feigned, she waved a disdainful hand in Daine's direction, demanding, "Storm dear, don't tell me they have you behaving as a *nanny* over there!"

Charles patted Stormi's shoulder. "Look, I hate to leave you alone in the lioness' den, but Cyn and I are breakfasting out this morning. Don't leave her in too many pieces, will you?"

Answered Izette with impatience, "Honestly, Charles, you talk as if I've a sword at my side!"

He shot his half-sister a look. "Wasn't talking to *you*, Iz." And out he went before his remark could be fully comprehended by her.

Her mouth opened to retort but Stormi, her amusement evident in her expression, cut her off, saying with mock graciousness, "Good morning, Mother. I'm glad we could have this time together too. This is Daine-Anthony. He's Thomi's youngest brother. Kailey had other plans, so when he asked if he could come in her place, I said yes."

"Well, you ought to have *made* her come! Really, what other plans could a *child* have? Don't you think I'd want to see my own granddaughter?" She looked Daine over with all the air of one regarding a repugnant bug. "Why would I wish to see anyone else's child? Unless you *are* acting as a nanny."

"I'm not a nanny, Mother. I've just—"

"Well, thank heavens for small favors. Although I don't know what would humiliate me more—telling our friends that you've made a career mucking stalls for people who once were circus performers or that you've consented to change the diapers of their babies!"

"Mother—"

"We don't wear diapersth no more," Daine informed Izette seriously. "I'm four—and 'Tacia is too. We wear big kidsth' unnerwearsth. And we don't wet the bed eider. Wyndsay and Stormi and Kourtney tell usth storiesth at bedtime, and they take

usth placesth, and we have wotsth of fun. You should come with usth thome time. You could have fun too. But thometimesth, Kourtnay don't wanna come, 'acause her wantsth to pway with Nicky and they—"

Izette's right hand went to her breast and she drew in a shocked breath. "Whatever is he talking about, Storm dear? *Playing*? What's *that* supposed to mean? Oh, if they're engaging in any inappropriate behavior and in front of a *child*, I'll—"

"All he means, Mother, is Kourtnay and Nicky are deeply in love and are often off on their own pursuits. You do recall what it's like to be in love, don't you?"

"I know I behaved properly at all times!" her mother retorted. "I didn't ask you here to discuss *my* romance with anyone, however."

"Whose?" Daine asked in lively interest.

"Oh, for Heaven sakes! Are we going to have a moment to discuss anything in private?"

"She wants to discuss mine with a man *I don't* love," Stormi told Daine frankly. "Look, see that pad of paper on the coffee table? Here's a pen." She drew one out of her tooled leather purse. "Draw me a picture."

"Okay. Will you hang it up on the 'frigerator when we get home?"

"Yes."

"Promisth?"

"Of course. Long's it's not sloppy."

He went and dropped to his knees at the coffee table, reached for the pad. "It will be a matherpieth!"

Looking relieved to have him quietly occupied, Izette got up from the sofa she'd been sitting upon and moved to another, well away from Daine. She ordered him to keep the pen on the paper and not to write on anything else.

"I know *that*," he said, irritated at being thought a moron—or worse, a baby. "And I won't make no meshth on the rug eider. How come everything isth white in here, 'cept the wallsth? Oh—you gotsth some bwack and bwue pillowsth . . ." He took a long glance about, finally pronouncing, "I don't wike thisth woom!" Exactly the sentiments of his sisters had he known it.

Izette made a sound of impatience and then motioned Stormi to sit opposite her in a stiff-backed chair. Exquisitely upholstered, it was a fright to relax in. The interrogation chair, Stephan called it. Seemed aptly termed. She stood behind it. For a moment, she thought to whip it around and sit astraddle, but then decided to be civil. For the moment, at least.

"You aren't planning to stay long with those people, are you, Storm dear? I've been putting out some feelers in your behalf, and Kosmos tells me that there's a position—"

At the mention of Dean's uncle, Stormi's stomach tightened. Here was a man very like his nephew. Possibly worse. She'd never known Dean's father, Jacob, so had no way of comparing the men except their physical attributes from photos. Jacob had been as lean as his brother was stout. Jacob's wife, Dee-Anne, had only the fondest of remembrances of him. But then, she only had fond ones of Dean.

"Mother, I've no inclination of following up any leads from Kosmos. I am happy—"

"You haven't even heard what he has to say!"

“Nothing he says will ever change my mind! As long as DreamWynd exists, I will be there. I’ll have nothing to do with Kosmos or his alleged job offers.”

“Alleged? What do you mean?” It dawned on her what she might mean. “Storm dear—are you saying they’d be improper?”

“I’m saying they’d be *immoral!*” Stormi returned frankly. “If you weren’t so blind, you would have recognized long ago how he views Kourtney and me! The man’s a lech!”

Her mother might be surprised to find out that Dean’s fat uncle could move incredibly swiftly when the opportunity of trapping one or the other of them in a compromising situation afforded itself to him. Deciding that her mother would probably be rather more skeptical than appalled, she kept those dark moments to herself.

She was certainly disapproving of her word choice now. “Karla Storm! I’m surprised at you! And in front of your little charge here! Unless of course, this is how his parents talk in front of him.”

“I didn’t hear that!” Daine called out reassuringly. “Go ‘head, I too busy to wissen to you.”

Stormi cast him an indulgent smile which her mother frowned at. She had no doubt he’d hear it all as he drew his pictures. Moreover, she had to admit that Nicholas had the right of it—he would be held accountable for her speech and behavior while she resided at DreamWynd.

After a pause, Izette resumed in a lowered tone, “Look, you may as well know—”

There came a tap at the door. Breakfast was pronounced ready. The rest of the family members awaited them in the dining room.

“We’ll continue this after we’ve eaten. I’ll have Della keep the boy in the kitchen with her.”

“I gotta finish my picture,” Daine protested, getting to his feet.

“You can finish it in the kitchen, young man. No back talk from you! You’ll do as you’re told!” Seeing Storm was about to come to his defense, she added, “We need to talk freely, Storm dear. Don’t put me off in this. Let the child go with Della.”

“Fine. But *only* after breakfast! He eats in the dining room with us! Because if he *doesn’t*, I’ll leave right now.” Her look promised it. “Moreover, he gave you no back talk! So, if you’re going to treat him like you used to treat Lawrey, I’ll leave right now.”

Izette took offense at this but as no compromise lived in Stormi’s gaze, she capitulated grudgingly, and they went out across the great hallway to the dining room left of the stairs and to the back of the hall.

“They gotsth a big house, huh, Storm!” observed Daine, impressed as his sisters hadn’t been only two days earlier.

Thomi, of course, had been to Deverill Hall a week before. Hadn’t been a successful visit that evening either. It hadn’t helped that Nicky had persuaded Kourtney to bring him along that evening to announce their engagement. This morning had the same feeling of doom drifting in it.

She answered Daine lightly, “It is big. You could get lost in it.”

This was a happy discovery for him. “Okay! Can we play hide’n’theek after?”

“Don’t be foolish! Besides, Storm is going to be busy with me. You’ll have to occupy yourself in the kitchen and be a good boy. If that’s possible.”

“It’th pothable,” Daine assured her. “I know you don’t wike widdle kidsth, so I gonna be good.”

Storm cracked a laugh.

“Storm, did you tell him that?”

Amazed her mother had been able to follow Daine’s lisping speech all along *and* without schooling him about it, she answered, “Mother, even if I hadn’t, he’d’ve known it the instant he met you. You haven’t said a civil word *to* him—or *about* him! And my warning still holds. I *will* leave!”

They passed into the spacious dining room. This room decorated in several shades of blue and cream—blue being Auntie Irina’s favorite color. Frankly, so much blue depressed Stormi. Maybe if it could’ve been *happier* shades of blue . . .

“It don’t matter.” said Daine generously, “I wanted to come with you, Stormi, so you didn’t have t’ be all awone. That’th all. Hey! Hey, Stephan don’t wive here no more, huh, Storm? He gotsth another placeth next to oursth, huh, Storm? And he wikesth it better there. I heard him say to Geoffrey he doesth!”

From the head of the long mahogany table, Gregory Deverill watched them enter. Sardonicly, he rested his gaze upon Daine. “Thought you knew better than to bring pets to the table, Karla.” And raised his cool blue gaze to meet hers. Daine’s innocent remarks irked him, and he didn’t mind letting her know it.

“Don’t be rude, Gregory,” chided his wife, who hoped this meal would pass off successfully. “Storm, come sit by me, dear. There’s a seat for him beside you. Kailey refused to come again?”

“Yes. She sounded a whole lot like you, Uncle Gregory. *Rude!*” Stormi settled Daine at her left. If she was aware of her uncle’s dark glance, she didn’t show it. Which seemed to irk him all the more.

“Well, you ought to have *made* her come!” Izette told her again as she sat down beside her husband. “You *are* her mother after all. Stop spoiling her! Edward, is that alcohol in that glass! Gracious, it’s not even nine o’clock!”

Edward Deverill raised his glass to his wife and his sister-in-law, toasted his daughter, saying, “Knew I’d need fortification if *she* was coming today.” He sipped deeply. “Scotch will get me through the meal. Possibly!”

“I don’t know, Unc,” observed Ryon Ascott who hadn’t gone out with his parents for breakfast, “you ought to have brought the bottle. If you two are bent on pushing her to accept Kosmos’ offer and/or forcing her to go back to that sleazeball nephew of his, you’re going to need more liquid courage than this.”

Said a deep sweet voice from the doorway of the kitchen, “Haven’t seen it actually build courage in him yet, though.”

There in it stood a younger, taller version of Gregory Deverill. While his father had ruthlessly schooled his red gold curls into order, Stephan Deverill let his pretty much spring free. His sapphire blue eyes held more warmth in them too.

“*Stephan!*” yelled Daine with undisguised pleasure. He bailed out of his chair to gallop over and fling himself into Stephan’s willing arms. “How come you didn’t eat with *usth* today? Did you see Thomi?”

Lifting the boy up, Stephan tousled his curls. Ignoring the disapproving expressions of some of his relatives for having been fraternizing in the kitchen, he answered, “No, I’ll see her later tonight. I have to show my sister how to take care of things at my father’s office. She’s going to try to do the job I used to do.”

“You d’wanna work there no more, huh? ‘Causeth you gonna mawry Thomi and take care of people’sth animalsth, huh?”

“That’s right. bud. I need a couple of assistants, and then I’m open for business!” Stephan ignored his father’s black look, exchanging a brief amused glance with Stormi.

It was entirely possible that Daine would render the morning interesting for more than one person today! His guileless remarks concerning his sister fostered the chill disfavor in the glances of her parents, her cousin Dyana, and her Uncle Gregory, possibly more than Stephan’s visit to the kitchen had.

Ryon, whose merry and irreverent disposition made a welcome diversion to so much pomp and propriety, raised his orange juice glass to his younger relative. “I’ll drink to that event, Dev! Wish you’d consider *me* for your best man! But, you’re probably going with one of your beloved’s brothers as your first choice, aren’t you?”

“I actually haven’t made a definite choice,” replied Stephan as he carried Daine back to his seat. He made Ryon move down one so that he could sit next to Daine. “But, yes, one of her brothers is first on my list!”

“I’m hurt,” Ryon responded in crushed accents. “Deeply wounded.”

Stephan gripped his cousin’s shoulder, said with earnest generosity, “Look, I’ll compromise. You can be Keeper of Pets at the Table!”

Stormi, in the act of swigging her orange juice, sprayed it out on an involuntary gasp of laughter. Coughing and choking, she covered her mouth with one corner of her napkin while she dabbed ineffectually at her plate with the other.

Della appeared at her elbow, replaced the plate with a clean one and provided her with another napkin. Schooling her features into a semblance of seriousness, she inquired, “Shall I serve, ma’am, or would you all prefer to serve yourselves?”

Irina gazed at her place setting without actually seeing it, an expression of long suffering on her delicate features. “I think we’ll manage on our own, thank you, Della.”

With a nod of acknowledgment, Della left the family to its own devices. From the kitchen, three seconds later, a hearty guffaw rolled out. They heard her husband, Andre, the chef, and his assistant demand to know what was so funny. She couldn’t reply. Her giggles and belly laughs continued for quite longer than some in the dining room considered seemly.

“Wonder she held it in so long,” murmured Ryon, reaching for a platter of eggs and bacon. “But look what you did to poor Storm. She’s turning blue.”

“It wasn’t *that* funny,” Dyana declared, reaching for the jam. “Auntie Izzie, please pass me the wheat toast. Stephan, we’d better hurry. We’re supposed to be there by nine-thirty.”

"And will Daddy fire us if we're not? Not that it matters to me—I've quit!" Stephan reached around Daine, gently pounded Stormi's back. "I'm sorry, Storm. Didn't see you raise your glass. I'd've waited."

Stormi coughed again, wincing when his hand hit a tender spot in the middle of her back. Tried clearing her throat in an effort to regain her composure. "I'll . . ." she hacked and coughed a little more. ". . . get you for this!"

"No, forgive me! He set himself up for it so neatly; I couldn't let it go by."

"A little cruel, though, considering what it really means!" She looked first at Daine then down the length of the table at Gregory.

"What?" demanded Daine through a mouthful of pancakes. "What doesth it mean?"

"Means my uncle thinks small children belong in a doghouse. Or a hamster cage." Ryon readily informed him.

Far from deeming it an insult, Daine immediately scrambled to his knees. "I can be a dog! I can be Ming!" To the annoyed protests of most of the adults, he barked enthusiastically and buried his face in his pancakes. He lifted it up again, all sticky with syrup and blueberries. Sticking his very blue tongue out as far as it would go, he panted. "I Ming now. See, my tongue is bwue jus' wike his!"

"You're a twerp," Stephan told him as he cleaned him up. "Sit down now like a real boy and eat those pancakes right."

"Okay." And he did, behaving impeccably from then on.

Edward passed his breakfast Scotch over in favor of coffee. "What is your sister up to, Storm? She could have come with you too."

Answered Stormi, "Didn't know the summons was for both of us. I didn't ask her if she'd care to come." Which, like Kailey, she wouldn't have.

Edward forked a sausage in half. "Haven't heard from her since she announced her engagement to that stable fellow."

"Mechanic, dear," corrected Izette, adding avocado slices to her toast. "Kourtney's following in Storm's footsteps. What is it with my daughters and auto mechanics? Why can't they fall in love with a doctor or lawyer or—"

"What? You never told them about that doctor fellow in Saratoga?" Ryon leaned out to direct a look at Stormi. "*Him*, they'd've been interested in!"

"What doctor fellow is that? Storm dear—" Izette caught herself up. "Well, it doesn't matter. She ought to be rethinking her divorce from Dean. He hasn't seen his daughter in ages! How—"

"He had the chance to see Kailey a month ago," stated Stormi coldly. "He blew it!"

A sudden guilty look shadowed Stephan's eyes. "Oh, lord! I totally forgot—I didn't hurt you just now, did I? Banging your back like that?"

"Whatever is he talking about, Storm dear? Hurt you *how*?"

"Fall off one of your precious ponies, Storm dear?" Dyana inquired, mimicking her aunt's way of addressing Stormi, but her tone completely a taunt.

Ryon cracked a derisive laugh and answered before Stormi had the chance to. "If she couldn't be tossed by that wild Welsh mare of hers when she was this little guy's age, I doubt she's been by any since. Unlike *you* . . . who kissed the ground before ever

your dainty butt kissed the saddle seat!" He glanced over at Stormi, adding hastily at her burst of laughter, "Don't start choking now!"

"Heh," uttered Daine, poking a few stray blueberries into his mouth, "*I* don't even fall off. And Kailey don't *eider*. Her can ride as good as my dad!" He looked up at Stormi. "And you can too. How come you got hurt?"

"It wasn't a horse that did it," she answered. She shot a look at Stephan, who, by now, was regretting his lapse.

"No," said the irrepressible Ryon, "it was a horse's ass!"

Daine gasped. "Oh-oh! He not apossa say *that*, huh, Storm? 'Acause it's a bad word, huh, Storm."

"Well, yes and no. After all, mules and donkeys *are* called asses. Cedric's one on both accounts! So, I guess if someone acts like Cedric . . ."

Ryon chuckled, unrepentant. "*You're* teaching this kid how to mind his language? *You*, who it cannot be said speaks as a lady should on every occasion? Or *any* . . ."

An exaggeration, but he loved to tease so she disregarded it.

"My dad thaysth her gotta stop thaying bad wordsth or he gonna make her very thorry."

"Yes," Stephan corroborated. "She's cleaned up her act quite a bit in the short time she's been there. She's almost as beautiful inside now as she is outside."

"Ah, give me a break!" uttered Stormi who set no store at all on her physical looks. Not that she didn't know she possessed remarkable beauty. If her parents had never praised her for it, others certainly had. She simply felt that not many had ever tried to look beneath the surface to find out who really lived in this skin. As if it didn't matter what was within her.

Irina Deverill reached out to clasp her niece's wrist. "But, what happened to you, dear? *Who* injured you?"

In her aunt's eyes, Stormi read genuine concern and worry. But, not willing to discuss it at the breakfast table or, indeed, at all ever, she merely replied, "Ah, Auntie, it's nothing to worry about. Really, Stephan needn't have said anything. Could I have the strawberries, please?"

Irina didn't appear convinced, but she let it go and passed her the bowl of fresh strawberries.

Izette carefully chewed her bite of avocado toast, sipped her coffee, and remarked, "There isn't a secret meaning we're supposed to read into this, is there, dear?"

Stormi pretended to be fully occupied in the act of sharing a huge sweet berry with Daine who smiled engagingly up at her, his face still bearing traces of blueberry syrup. She returned his smile with an affectionate one of her own, impulsively tipping his chin up and kissing the cleanest spot. His nose.

"Oh, for heaven's sakes, Storm! If you're done with your meal, I'd like to get to the heart of our talk. Irina, get someone to take charge of that child. I don't want him near us until we're quite finished!"

"I'll watch him!" Ryon volunteered. "How's that, bud?"

"Can we go in the kitchen?"

"Sure!" came the immediate promise.

“What’s this fascination with kitchens?” Edward wondered with an eye on Stephan as he asked it.

“*Cookies!*” chorused Stephan, Daine, and Ryon all in the same tone and depth of feeling.

“Good grief! At *this* time of the morning? I don’t think cookies are necessary now. Just keep him occupied and out of mischief!” Izette pushed back her chair and stood. “Storm dear.”

Stormi shared one more berry with her little buddy, then drank the rest of her juice. Seemed a shame to leave such a spread, but her appetite had vanished. Of course, had she come alone, and had Stephan and Ryon not been present, the meal would likely have been shorter still.

Which made her think of her other aunt and uncle. As she stood to leave, she said to Ryon. “I’m glad you decided to stay instead of running off with your parents this morning. Not that I blame them for ducking out!”

“Yes, they decided it might be nice to go someplace peaceful. Didn’t want to be here, knowing your mother was going to start World War III with you. She told my father that his interference wouldn’t be appreciated.”

“And it wouldn’t be. Storm is not his concern, though he’d like to think so.”

“She’s never been yours, either—except where Dean is.”

“That is all I want to hear from you, Robert Ryon Ascott. I’ll thank you to watch that child and keep your opinions to yourself.”

With that, she left the room. Stormi favored her father with a mocking glance. “What? Not coming, after all?”

He cast her up a look. “No. I’ve a meeting this morning with investors. Don’t have time for this nonsense.”

She walked away, uttering, “Don’t know whether to be hurt or relieved about that. But you’re right—it is nonsense!”

Her uncle Gregory had a sentiment to toss at her but she didn’t catch it. The door closed after her, cutting off his curt remarks. From the music room at the opposite side of the great hall, she heard her mother call to her.

“I’d rather be in the kitchen, Mother!” She uttered in a defiant undertone.

Memories In Blue

FOUR

Sounds of vacuums running in the Blue Room indicated a thorough cleaning was going on in there. The head housekeeper, whose name escaped her just then, barked orders to the underlings. How very like her mother she sounded! Poor Auntie Irina! Surrounded by so many others with a stronger will than her own. Had Auntie ordered the Blue Room cleaned, or had her mother?

Storm slipped in through the opened doors of the music room, shutting them after her. Turned to face her mother who stood across the room at the baby grand piano.

Stroking it wistfully, Izette confided, “I wish you’d wanted to learn to play, Storm dear. Oh, you did the scales, and learned a simple tune or two, but you’d never sit to practice anything worthwhile. Always wanted to be at that barn!” She looked up. “It’s no different now, is it? Whatever my hopes for you are—your heart will always be in some muddy barnyard.”

“*Your* hopes have been for me to spend my life with a cruel tyrant! *I* wanted better than that!”

“Nonsense! You seem to prefer to run with men who could ruin you!”

Stormi slammed a mental door upon memories of Dean’s many facets of cruelty that threatened to rush out with her mother’s declaration. She answered evenly, “I don’t *run* with men of any sort! Nor would *marriage* to Lawron have ruined me, Mother. Possibly my social standing in your little world, but you know that’s been just a shovelful of sheep sh—eets to me!”

That she’d achieved her heart’s desire finally, albeit for a short time, she didn’t mention. No one needed to know of it. Even Kournay hadn’t a clue. And . . . Lawron was gone now . . . so . . .

“Storm dear, your language . . .”

Stormi ignored her. “Your boy, Dean, hid his true nature until the honeymoon was over. Under *layers* of incredibly false charm! Which he turned on for *your* benefit. In reality he was a— a—” There didn’t seem to be a word to describe him—colorful or otherwise, and she said so.

“You only think it because you forced him to have to school you with firmer measures to get you to learn your place. So *headstrong*, so *willful*—you’ve always been so. I know you’ve exasperated *me* often enough to the point where *I* wanted to cuff you!

That you drove Dean to it . . . well, that's your own fault. You never could recognize anyone's authority. However do you do it at the Tollefson's, dear?"

"I've been promoted, Mother. I give the orders," replied Stormi, giving her mother back her look.

Izette lifted a brow in acknowledgment of it. "Really? Well! I suppose I should be impressed!"

"Well," said Stormi dryly, "plenty of mothers would be."

"I wanted so much more for you. For Kournay. You'll understand some day when you're facing these same issues with Kailey. I hope she won't disappoint you as you have your father and me."

Then, without waiting for any response to this, she made a sweeping gesture the length of Stormi's shapely body, changing the subject. "Couldn't you have had the courtesy to have come dressed more appropriately? Perhaps we won't ever see eye to eye, but need you demonstrate your disrespect by showing up in your work clothes?" Then, her eye turning keenly critical, she added, "For all your physical activity, you haven't lost much weight, dear. Maybe you should enroll in the gym!"

While the part of her mother's speech concerning Dean hurt more than she would admit, Stormi gave no reply to it. Moreover, she would never force her own daughter to marry one man to keep her from another—yet, she knew she wouldn't be happy if Kailey were to ever hook up with Mr. Wrong. But since that potential problem was, thankfully, at least fifteen years down the trail, she left it alone.

The last part stung only slightly. She certainly had the height to offset her weight. She'd never troubled to be fashionably thin. In fact, even Dean had told her she looked her best with the right amount of meat on her bones. Of course, his exact words, she didn't care to dwell upon. He'd been drunk at the time and had voiced his admiration in extremely vulgar terms.

Her mother, on the other hand, took pains to control her own weight, and she seemed rather pleased, really, to note that Stormi likely sported a few pounds more than she did. Her reference to the gym did goad her, however. For she knew she meant the one right there in Kingsdale which Dean had started years ago right across from his mother's place. It'd been the first one of his *The Total You by Dean Van Kirk* empire. Whether he still operated the original business or someone else did, she didn't know for certain, and had no desire to find out. Only one way out of the tiny town was there. It proved difficult enough to have to drive by it to and from DreamWynd.

Her first instinct, therefore, was to fling out an impatient, "I *came*, Mother. Isn't that the *main* thing? No one *else* seemed to mind!" Which, likely, had been a fortunate oversight. Almost everyone's focus in the dining room had seemed to have been upon Daine.

It was with Nick's instructions in mind that she beat aside her impatience and with a calmer tone than she'd been using, she amended, "Truthfully, Mother, I left in such a hurry, I simply forgot. If you think it's a lack of respect for you, forgive me. It wasn't meant to be."

“Mmm. So you say. You never forgot when Papa was alive, and you never forgot when you were with Dean. You disappear for three years and when you turn up again, you’ve forgotten what it is to be an Ascott and a Deverill!”

How like Uncle Gregory she sounded! All Stormi’s good intentions vanished. “Oh, please! I wasn’t able to disappear as completely as I wanted to! And I did come back in March when I heard Papa was ill!”

“Not that you stayed long *then*! Rushed right off to West Virginia and your mechanic!”

Well, that wasn’t quite true. But she saw no reason to correct her. “Where was the point in staying? I wasn’t allowed to see him, and I didn’t want to be trapped here!” A pause, then with more candor, “As for rushing off to West Virginia afterwards—I should have rushed off years sooner than I did!”

It got the reproving reaction she expected. Izette told her then, “You know, dear, Dean had been there all the while by his bedside. No one wanted to mention that to you but he was. If only you’d have seen reason, Storm dear, and hadn’t utterly refused to reconcile with him, Papa might be alive today. But when James came back alone, he simply lay there. Never spoke of you again. At least, not in *my* hearing! I imagine he’d had enough of your tantrums and didn’t need them at his death bed!”

Stormi recognized a guilt trip when she heard one. Once James had gone back into the house after delivering Papa’s ultimatum—reconcile with Dean or leave—she’d cried at the gates until her better sense kicked in. Dean could decide to come out to her . . . and then what? Or if the police came, what? Would they simply warn her away or actually arrest her for trespassing? Who would come set her free in that event? Stephan, hopefully. But more likely it’d be Dean. She’d be trapped. She’d left.

To this instant discover that Dean had been favored over her, she who had been Papa’s favorite for so many years, was a crushing blow. One that could tear her apart if she thought too long about it. Very likely, her mother knew it. Here was another who ruthlessly played the game of emotional manipulation.

Stormi drew in a sustaining breath, kept a guard on her tongue. Mentally resolving to have a few words with Stephan at some point, she said, “All right . . . here’s the deal. My life with Dean is a closed book. I have no intention of ever opening it again. In fact, I’m burning that book! Shut the book on Kosmos as well! You gave me his message. I’ve declined. I’m, oh, *so*, happy where I am!” She clapped her hands together. “There! I think that finishes our business!”

She half turned to the door, intending to leave before relations between them really exploded.

Her mother made a sound of irritated impatience, but, then drew her attention to a large and fairly thick blue envelope on the piano top. “That came for you yesterday.”

Stormi turned back around and for a moment just stared across at it, clasping and unclasping her hands. Then, slowly, she walked across to the piano. Halting with her back toward her mother, she lightly fingered one edge of the envelope.

Ruthe E. Merriwether

17 Merriwether Lane

Huntington, West Virginia

Lawron's mother. What could she be sending her?

Ruthe hadn't approved of her son's devotion to a young woman so clearly above him—he a mere mechanic, a rancher's son, and she the daughter of a wealthy shipbuilder and heiress to more wealth than they could imagine. Such a relationship would never work! Only unhappiness could be the result of it! Even without the added liability of an obsessed ex-husband ever ready to make sure it wouldn't?

"Well, for goodness sakes, Storm—just take it! What is the matter with you? Of course, if she's sent you his *love* letters, don't parade *them* out before me!"

This was all Storm could handle. Not so much for the words her mother spoke but for the way she expressed them. With utter revulsion.

"*Why* would I *do* that, Mother? In the first place, if he *did* write any sort of letter it would be *none* of your business. And if they *were* love letters, they're *private and none* of your business! In fact, *nothing* about my life is any of your concern! Which, really, is—"

"Don't you speak to me in that tone, Karla Storm! As I recall, *I* gave birth to *you*! And nearly gave up *my* life in the process! Stuck in that snow bank as we were, miles from anywhere, and a blizzard going on! Snow in April of all things! And *you* decide to come three weeks *early*! That's how it's always been with you! Impatient and insensitive to anyone else's needs! No concern for anything that's going on around you!"

Having heard some version of this rant on many an occasion during her lifetime, Stormi blew out an exasperated breath, uttering, "Oh, please! *Why* did I bother?" and resolutely headed for the door, flinging it open.

"Oh, don't you *dare* leave! *Karla Storm*—do you *hear* me! I'll make sure your precious employer hears about this! I'll have him *fire* you and make it so you *have* to take Kosmos' offer!"

A hot retort rose swiftly to Stormi's lips but as she turned to fling it at her mother, Stephan, Ryon, and Daine came out of the dining room, each carrying a plastic bag of freshly baked cookies. Daine ran up to her, eager to share his bounty with her. With an effort, Storm banished her anger and focused her attention on the happy little boy.

"And Andre thaid I could come back *anytime*, and he will make more cookiesth for me. And he thaid Stacia could come with me! That'sth good, huh, Storm? And bery nice of him!"

"Andre has no say over such things," declared Izette haughtily as she stepped up behind Stormi. "He's got no business making promises he very likely can't keep!"

"Well, *I* have!" Stephan reminded her coolly. He tousled Daine's dark head. "We had a great time in the kitchen, didn't we, bud? And we'll do it again soon!"

"*You* don't live here anymore," Izette pointed out, the edge in her voice sharper than even it had been with her daughter. "You've no right—"

Stephan's chin went up, the warmth in his blue eyes cooled instantly. "Tell my mother that, Auntie. And try to remember that this isn't *your* house and never has it been!"

Surprised by his cool retort if not the truth of it, Izette's lips parted to retort, closed, then parted again. In the end, he gave her no chance to utter a thing. Calling out to his sister that he was leaving, he picked up Daine, settling him in one arm, then with his

free one, he wrapped it about Stormi and made her come with him. “Done here, are you? I’ll walk you out!”

Izette halted their progress. Holding out Ruthe Merriwether’s fat blue envelope, she ordered, “Wait! Take this packet, Storm! It doesn’t need to sit here cluttering up Irina’s space!”

Stephan dropped his hand away allowing her to go back for it. Having had her fill of her mother’s condemnation, Stormi kept her gaze upon the envelope, hoping to escape without further incident.

However, as her fingers closed upon it, her mother informed her icily, “If you *are* having an affair with any one of that hus—with any of *her* brothers—I’ll *disown* you! You’ve brought enough disgrace to this family! I won’t tolerate any more!” She let go her hold of the envelope. “I can only thank heaven that your grandfather saved you from entering into a ruinous marriage with Lawron Merriwether!”

Stephan, not deaf to the fact she’d been about to insult Thomasyna, shot his aunt a cold glance of warning which she chose to ignore. Kept her gaze upon her daughter’s face, looking for a shred of remorse or repentance.

Neither showed in Stormi’s eyes. However, Stormi, stunned to actually hear such a declaration fall from her mother’s lips, drew in a sharp breath, but then let it out, her eyes darkening with hurt and anger. Instead of eliciting her repentance for her supposed errors, it only made Stormi hope that she’d be seen by the universe in Brett’s company later that night. And in Adrien’s or Tristen’s the next.

Of course, if it could forever be in *Geoffrey’s*—

“Like father like daughter, I see,” observed Ryon, breaking into Stormi’s thought. Reaching for the doorknob, he shot an accusing glance back at his aunt. “Figures.”

Izette flushed hotly but managed not to raise to his bait. The set of her own mouth appeared as stubborn as her daughter’s. She met his look for an instant, then, transferred it to Storm. With it, she let her know she meant precisely what she’d said. Satisfied she’d gotten the point, Izette drew back into the music room and closed the door.

Dyana, who’d been descending the stairs of the Great Hall while all this went on, crossed over to them, remarking, “It’s always a circus when you drop by, Storm dear. Have I ever mentioned, though, I’m not fond of circuses?”

“You’re *not*?” Ryon’s eyebrows rose in astonishment. “And here I was believing you thought yourself as much the ringmaster around here as anyone! Of course, *I* think you’re just a funny little clown!”

“I despise clowns!” huffed Dyana, sending him up an affronted glance.

“I *wike* cwoownsth,” announced Daine with a positive nod of his head. “And I *wike* *circusesth*. And I *don’t* wike you and I *don’t* wike Storm’sth mudder! You guys’re bad to Storm! Is they bad to Thomi, too, Stephan? They are mud turtlesth, huh? Stupid, mean, *damn mud* turtles, huh, Storm? Huh, Stephan? They are, huh?”

“Yes, they are,” answered Stephan with a tone that kept his sister quiet. He let Daine’s improper speech pass without counsel nor did he favor Storm with any blame for it. Instead, he agreed their tormentors would be sorry for their error one day and searched Stormi’s face intently. “She meant that, I know.”

"I know. It doesn't matter." She meant that relatively, not wanting to expound upon anything in Dyana's hearing. The woman was her father's patsy, and there simply wasn't any trusting her.

But Dyana, irked by Daine's declarations as much as she was by the unshakable bond of affection her brother had with their cousins—more of one than he had with her, in fact—flung at her, "That's it with you, isn't it? *Nothing matters!* Well, I'm sorry, but your mother is *right* in *everything* she says!"

Stepping in front of Stormi, thereby making everyone halt, she fixed her gaze upon Stormi's face. "You couldn't live up to *one* set of marriage vows, what makes you think you can live up to any other? Always supposing you get to make them again!"

Before Stormi could react to her hateful words, Daine, highly offended by her tone, leaned away from Stephan and slapped her soundly. "You don't *thay* that to Storm! I don't *eber* want you to *thay* bad things to her again!"

Dyana's hand went first to her stinging cheek then rose to retaliate. "Why, you little—"

At once, Ryon seized Dyana's arm and hauled her off to Stephan's Corvette. "I don't want you to say bad things to her ever again either, dear Dyana. Really, it doesn't become you at all. I can see the lines etching deep furrows between your lovely eyes this very moment! You're the image of Aunt Izzie, you know that? Well—except for your hair color, of course!" He visibly shuddered at the conjured image. "Heinous!"

"Oh, of course you're going to side with *her*! Just go away, Ryon! Just go away!"

"She's going to be fun to work with now!" remarked Stormi as if nothing had gone on.

Stephan shot her a glance, replying, "She'll try to be. You should have convinced Nick you couldn't be spared today."

"I tried! Believe me, I tried! He made me come. She made me leave!"

"Her made you cw,," Daine observed keenly. He put out his hand to her cheek and caught the lone tear that slid down before she could check it. "I don't wike her for making you cw, Storm."

"Don't worry, Daine. It's the only tear I'll shed over any of this! Let's get out of here!" Stuffing the envelope into her accommodating back pocket, she reached to take him from Stephan.

Stephan held onto him and held her gaze with a seriousness in his own she hadn't seen in it except a week ago Friday night when he announced he'd be marrying Thomasyna *after* Papa Ascott's appointed deadline. "When are you going to let yourself shed them for Lawron, Storm? Or is he included in that small token just now?"

For an instant, all of her feelings betrayed her in her expression. When she spoke, her tone was cool and impersonal. Had to be or she would lose it right there in front of him. "I don't have the time right now."

"Karley, you were going to give him your *lifetime*," Stephan interrupted, reverting to her earliest nickname. He lowered his tone, in case there were eavesdropping ears nearby. "You have no time to mourn? Stop pretending it's all a bad dream. You're not waking up from this one. You loved him. Grieve him. Grieve him, Karley, and move on!"

Ignoring his recommendation except for the last two words, she snatched Daine from his grasp. "I am moving on! Moving right now! See you later!" With that, she strode off toward the Lexus.

"It's not just Dean keeping you from actually moving on!" he tossed after her. "You're fooling yourself if you think so!"

The truth of that statement struck her as forcefully as if he'd slapped her. It drew from her another exasperated breath . . . one which ended on an involuntary sound that came dangerously close to being a sob.

At once, Daine twisted in her hold and clapped both his hands to her cheeks, "You gonna cwy, Storm?" But despite her unguarded lapse, he saw no evidence of tears. "You not, huh?"

"No," she said shortly. "I'm not."

By the time she'd helped Daine into the booster seat, Stephan had left with Dyana. Two seconds later, Ryon, watching the Corvette head out, apparently came to the decision that a drive *somewhere* . . . *anywhere* would be much preferable than staying at Deverill Hall. Hopping into the Camaro belonging to his brother Charley, he tore out behind Stephan.

Stormi resolutely kept her mind on securing Daine in his seat. Once behind the wheel, though, she let her guard down and slumped over it, her head pillowed upon her arms draped across it. No prying eyes that might be peering out the mansion's windows would be gratified by a notice of this, for a humongous weeping willow grew between this part of the circular drive and the house.

Didn't protect her, however, from those of one small boy. Immediately, Daine unbuckled his seat belt and wiggled out of the confinements of the booster seat. Scrambling over into the front, he knelt on the console, by turns patting her back and rubbing it soothingly. Thankfully, nowhere near her welts.

"It'sth gonna be okay, Storm," he said encouragingly. "I won't eber wet anyone thay bad thingsth to you eber again. But, I won't care if you wanna cwy. My mudder thaysth it'sth okay to cwy when you need to. Do you need to, Storm? Go ahead if you need to, and I will be wight here!"

Such a genuine concern in so young a heart! She couldn't help but be touched by it. As much as it would afford her some relief, though, she couldn't grant an outlet to the guilt and grief that had built up within her like a towering thunderhead. Built up since the rainy night she'd learned Lawron had accidentally driven his car off one of those unguarded ravines on his way home from picking up their wedding bands. Crying couldn't bring him back.

That stray tear had been an angry one—and the only one.

Daine wiggled a little closer, watching her anxiously. She moved slightly to meet his glance, and immediately his sunny smile lit up his eyes, and, well, his whole face.

Unable to remain aloof, she pulled him into a warm hug—something Kailey hadn't been permitting lately—and buried her face in his curls. "Oh, you're just too *cute*! Daine, you're such a sweetheart!"

But, then, she realized that the lump in her throat was as much for wishing his older brother had uttered such words to her as it was for Daine's having said them. For a wish

that it could be Geoffrey cradling her as she did now his little brother. That she could be telling him her most intimate feelings for him . . . Listening to his for her . . .

“Storm.”

“What?”

“I gotta pee!”

Revelations

FIVE

She took him to the Corner Art Gallery—Halleigh Tollefson's art studio—just a short couple of miles or so from Deverill Hall and located on Alden's Alley in the village of Littleton-by-the-Sea. It was a tiny one way alley, barely room for a car to travel it even with cars parked on one side of the road.

While Daine took care of business, Stormi strolled the gallery, admiring not only Halleigh's work, but that of several of her family members, including Rikki and Thomi. The woodworking crafts of Tristen and Adrien.

"Your whole family is amazing! This your mother's seascape? And she keeps telling me she has no real talent! Your father seems to be able to do whatever he puts his mind to and excel! Ah, Thom-*Halleigh*, sorry! This is sweet!" She picked up a watercolor of a sleeping foal done by Stacia. "Does anyone ever buy the things the little ones do?"

"Oh, yes. Some weeks, I sell more of their work than I do of mine!"

Stormi noted her pride in her youngest siblings, her perfect lack of jealousy in her statement. She was about to remark on it when her attention was caught by a large portrait in the corner. "Who did that one of Stephan?"

"I did," admitted Halleigh, a little embarrassed. "No one else has seen it, though. I'll probably give it to Thomi. Maybe."

Stormi examined it closely. In contrast to her tone a moment ago, Halleigh's now held a little—resentment? Definitely some jealousy going on where Stephan was concerned! Focusing on Halleigh's talents, she exclaimed, "This is really fabulous, Halleigh! Auntie Irina would love it. How did you get him to sit for it?"

Halleigh smiled slightly and shrugged. "I didn't. It's from memory."

Stormi looked amazed. "You're kidding! This is incredible!" Noting the dream in Halleigh's eyes, she said, "Wishing he had a brother, are you? Or maybe some other male cousins?"

Halleigh gave a slight laugh, shrugging a shoulder. "We all wish that, I think."

"Maybe you should be playing games each day for the privilege of dating him."

Halleigh shrugged again, replied, "We have already. Chinese checkers, actually! We let him play too."

Stormi let out a disbelieving laugh. "You kidding me? You *all* played?"

"Yeah. Thomi won."

"Really? And she chose to go ahead and see him?"

“Well . . . she was supposed to get the time to figure out what she wanted. But he didn’t really give her any. Took her to SeaCrest and charmed her into his ring the day she came home from the hospital.”

“So, that’s how it went. She admitted she’d been a roller skate to his freight train, but she didn’t detail anything for me.”

“That’s all right,” said Halleigh with a certain inflection in her voice, “You didn’t detail anything for her either!”

Storm shot her a glance, but her retort never left her lips. For another portrait caught her attention at that moment, making her forget everything else. “Ah, no! *Haraldayna!*”

There partially hidden by a stormy seascape upon one easel, sat a very large and lifelike painting of herself . . . gazing ever so adoringly into the equally loving eyes of a tenderly smiling Geoffrey. His hands rested at her waist while hers lightly gripped his strong arms at the elbow. The moment of an electric kiss, an ardent embrace appeared positively imminent.

It seemed her breath was going to be taken away a good many times that day—but, probably, nothing like this moment! She could practically feel his fingers holding her, feel the hard strength of his arms under hers. She could well imagine the taste of his kiss

...

Well, Halleigh couldn’t have done *that* from memory! Totally an inventive work! What, though, had motivated her to do it—besides a fond wish of her own to see the pair together! She turned her head to demand an explanation and encountered a wholly unrepentant grin. Between annoyance and amusement, Storm took a threatening step toward her.

Halleigh only laughed, folded her arms and informed her, “You’re blushing!”

“Oh, no, I’m not! I’m red with rage, you little snot! How could you *do* this?”

And then, she saw the other portrait just beyond it. Unthinkingly, she caught her breath in some shock. Of all the people Halleigh might have captured on canvas, she never expected Lawron Merriwether to be one of them.

But, just as soon as she thought it, she knew that wasn’t the case. It wasn’t Lawron smiling at her from the canvas, sitting on a rail fence with his arm about a good looking chestnut gelding. It was Matt Kelmman, one of Lawron’s cousins. There were certainly subtle differences between the two, yet so many similarities.

“Easily!” said Halleigh, answering her question. “You two are meant for each other. His twelfth anniversary of Helene’s first jilting him is coming around in a week or so. I’m planning on giving this to him!”

Stormi dragged her gaze away from the portrait of Matt, objecting forcefully, “*No!* No, Halleigh, you are not! I swear—if you do—”

“Okay, I all done! And I pooped too. Can we go watch the boatsth now?” Daine came out of the upper room, took the four steps down with noisy thuds and skipped over to them.

“Wash your hands?” They both asked him in exactly the same skeptical tone.

“Yep!” he answered proudly, holding them up for inspection. “Oh, boy! Halleigh! Did *you* paint that picture of Storm and Geoffrey? I *wike* it!”

"Strange he can do the Ls in *your* name . . ." murmured Stormi, looking to turn the subject away from the portrait and Geoffrey altogether. And to turn away her own attention from that one of Matt Kelmann.

"Just as strange that he can do the S in yours. He's getting better," Halleigh acknowledged. "Some things he does just fine, and others not so much. Like Kailey does. Stacia's always been pretty good with words. But that sort of thing doesn't bother you overmuch either. You're not getting out of this so easily, you know!"

Stormi shook her head and looked again at the picture. "It's beautifully done, Halleigh. But, it's all in your imagination! And Thomi's and Rikki's and Kailey's and—"

Halleigh moved to grab her arms and give her a reprimanding shake. "Oh, don't *say* you've given up on him! No, you haven't—you're getting redder as we speak!"

Storm shook her head again, her smile regretful as much as a warning, her eyes reflecting both. "We both have issues to resolve, Halleigh. You know that. He has Helene and I have Dean." She hesitated to add Lawron to them. and in the end, she kept him to herself.

Daine, sensitive already to her moods, pushed against his sister's legs. "You don't say nuffin' to make her cwy, Halleigh! Her mudder made her cwy! And I don't wike her mudder, and I don't wike that udder girl eider!"

"Oh, she didn't make me cry . . . not really. Tell you what, let's not discuss my mother, Daine. She's an as—sinine fool at times! So's Dyana!"

Halleigh caught Daine's hands and holding them tightly in one hand, she glanced up at Stormi. Acknowledging Stormi's near slip, she waggled a finger at her. "Nice save!" Her gestures became more expansive as she continued, "Look, here's a plan: We'll give Helene to Dean. Problem solved! What do you say?"

"I wouldn't wish Dean on anyone . . . except my mother! Be the only way she'd understand my position!"

Daine wiggled one hand out of Halleigh's grasp, tugged hers with his captured one to get her attention. "Her mudder yelled at her, Halleigh! And Storm wantsth our mudder to be her mudder! But she can't, huh, Halleigh?"

"Well, she could be if Stormi married one of the boys!"

"*I'm* a boy! *I* can marry her!" He slipped to Stormi's side and seized her hand in his. "I won't eber wet anyone be bad to her eber again! 'Cause I wuv her!"

"There you go!" Halleigh grinned up at Storm. "Feel like waiting twenty years?"

"Well," said Stormi frankly, "My problems with Dean should be solved one way or another by then! Course, by then, I'd be forty . . . four . . ."

"Can we go see the boatsth now, Storm? And I wanna hot dog on the beach!"

"All right. I guess we have time for that. Hide that thing, Halleigh! If I hear from anyone they've seen it, I'll be looking for you!"

Halleigh only chuckled. "It's his in a week and yours, too, when you marry him!"

"I'm not marrying anyone in a year, much less a week!" Stormi put a hand under her chin. "You're treading thin ice. *Hide it!*"

Didn't faze her in the least. Meeting her stern gaze with amusement, Halleigh replied, "Go eat hot dogs on the beach, my future sister-in-law, and have a thoroughly enjoyable day with your future little brother-in-law!"

Stormi rapped her cheek smartly and left with Halleigh's merry chuckles ringing in her ears.

Wasn't any help to her mood to have Daine ramble as he scrambled into the booster seat. "Eb'body wantsth you to mawry Geoffrey, huh, Storm? I would wet you mawry him, Storm! Cause it would be a wong time for me to grow up and Kailey needsth a fodder and I too wittle to be a fodder, so Geoffrey would be a good one, huh? And he would be good to you, too! He *would*! And Halleigh did that picture good, too, huh, Storm? You weally wike it, huh? You just pwetendin' you don't, huh? Because Geoffrey is being such a thnot to you, but you wike him anyway, huh, Storm?"

"You talk too much!" she answered, pulling his seat belt tight. "If you want hot dogs on the beach, you better be very careful not to say Geoffrey's name to me the rest of this morning!"

He smiled with seraphic sweetness but made her no promises. Just as his older sisters would have done in his place.

Sandcastles & Secrets

SIX

THE parking lot was already three quarters full when Stormi drove into it, ten minutes later. She unbuckled Daine's seat belt, and he scrambled out of the car, holding tightly onto her hand.

"I gonna hab two hot dogsth, fwiesth, and I wanna hab a milkthake. Okay, Storm? Okay?"

"If that's what you want, that's what you can have."

"And I wanna hab iceth cwearm, too!" He skipped along to keep up with her much longer stride. "What you gonna hab, Storm?"

"Everything you just said sounds terrific!"

He nodded happily. "Yeah, and then we can make big thandcastleth all down the beach, huh?"

"Well, maybe not *all* down the beach. How about right here near the food and drinks?"

"Okay! And I got cookiesth, too!" He suddenly ripped his hand out of hers. "Oh! I wef 'em in the car!"

"Well, let them stay there for now." She collared him and made him move forward again. "They'll be fine. We can eat 'em later for dessert."

He acquiesced without complaint, and they followed a small crowd of people also heading for the beach. Seemed crazy to have lunch already, but she'd not eaten much of the breakfast at DreamWynd nor at Deverill. Moreover, if she had something now, it'd save her from having to show up at the table when she returned to DreamWynd.

Stormi held Daine in her arms so he could give the cashier their order and the money for it. As she moved to the right to let the next family step up, she caught a glimpse of a rugged redhead, his arm about a slight brunette in line two families and a loving couple behind them.

When she caught her breath, uttering, "Ah, sheeep dip!" Daine cast her a look. "What? What, Storm?" Then saw what she saw. "Hey, that's Matty and Kwysta! And Jarwett, too! Can they eat with us, Storm?"

"They probably have their own plans," she answered, noncommittally. But inside, it was more like, "*No way!*"

Last weekend, at the open house barbecue at DreamWynd, she'd managed to avoid running into Matt and his family. Had heard his aunt, Wanda Stanley, asking Geoffrey

if he'd heard from Helene lately. He'd given her a noncommittal response and taken Kailey into the house to escape her. Stormi herself had hidden away in Nicholas' office.

Matt's aunts and Lawron's mother, Ruthe, had been the reasons she'd refused to attend Lawron's wake, his funeral, and the reception afterwards. For, undoubtedly, this Merriwether-Kelmann clan had their own brand of snobbishness that cut just as deeply as that of the Ascott-Deverills!

Mere weeks ago, Lawron still breathed. Walked with her . . . talked . . . dreamed her dreams with her . . . shared his for them both . . .

Stormi blinked back the tears she'd vowed wouldn't fall. Swallowed the lump that wanted to choke her now. No, the last thing she needed was for Matt Kelmann to join them for lunch. No guarantee could she make that she'd be able to keep her composure in his presence.

"Number eighty-seven!"

"Oursth!" piped Daine, hopping up and down in his anticipation.

Taking the tray, she said, "Where we sitting? Pick the place!" Wiped away the stray tear that had dared to slip over the edge, pretending that sand had invaded her eye.

"Okay!" Accepting this duty with an engaging seriousness, off he trotted in search of an unclaimed picnic table.

There were none unoccupied right then, so it appeared they'd have to make due sitting in the sand somewhere. A man wearing mirror sunglasses and his bikini'd woman friend vacated their table and waved them over to it. She thanked him. He merely nodded, put his arm about his lady and went away to their blanket which was spread near the lifeguard post.

"That was nice of 'em to wet us eat here, huh, Storm?" said Daine, settling in and reaching for the first of his franks.

Parking a generous helping of the fries before him, she agreed. Although, she had an uneasy feeling about their benefactor. People who wore that type of sunglasses generally did so to hide . . . *something*. Prying, spying eyes, for instance.

You're being paranoid. Not everyone wearing sunglasses is spying on you, Mind scolded.

But, another part of her brain countered, *Maybe not! But they could be!*

Beating back both those thoughts, she answered Daine, "Yes, we'd be eating on the sand with the seagulls." A pause, then dryly as one of those begging birds boldly landed on the edge of their table, "Well, we still are, but at least we—"

"Ain't on the thand with 'em," finished Daine. He bit a large chunk of his hot dog. "And we gotsth a umbrella!" Pointing up at the colorful item above their heads.

"An umbrella is definitely nice," she agreed. She helped herself to some fries. Tossed one to their bird guest.

At that second, Daine scrambled to his feet upon the bench and hollered loudly, "Hey! Hey, Matty! We gotsth a table and you can eat with us, 'kay? Storm don't care! Huh, Storm?"

Since she'd shoved a goodly portion of those fries into her mouth, she couldn't, with dignity, abort his invitation. So, a few minutes later, Matt and Krysta with little Jarrett-Andrew, joined them.

Matty set his small cousin's hot dog and fries before him, then tousled Daine's dark hair. Teased both of them for a bit, and then took a seat across from Storm, Krysta beside him. "You doing okay? Last week, you barely gave me a hello! Thought I'd offended you somehow. Just can't think when that would've been!"

"Was I so rude?" She knew she had been. "I'm sorry for that. It was a hectic afternoon."

He wouldn't let her get away with that. "It was! But I don't think that was the reason you avoided me. I'm figuring you're seeing Lawrey in me somehow."

Shrewd of him. Realizing she couldn't evade this conversation without appearing rude again, she reached for a few fries and her second hot dog. Said, "Forgive me. I . . . can't help it. You do look *so much* like him, and I—it's just—"

"You're not ready to face his passing? I get it. You *were* going to get married that weekend, weren't you? I think my mother said we had an invitation. All of us."

"Yeah, I wasn't up to that—so . . . we eloped. And no one knew." Good grief! Why had she confessed that out loud?

He looked, first, surprised, and then delighted. "Good for you! That's *awesome*!" A pause while he munched another bite. "But you didn't show up for the wake or the funeral. The reception."

She played with the straw of her milkshake. "I was there . . . in spirit. And I was at the funeral. Just—at a distance."

Matt's expression changed. Reaching across, he gripped her arm, said vehemently, "*You should've been right there with us! You* should have tossed the first rose onto his casket!" He saw the unease in her eyes, and he pointed at her. "You know I'm right! You don't look like someone who lets others push you around! Why didn't you say the hell with 'em all, and have been there for him? Fling it at them that you'd married him already! You pregnant?"

Her lips parted, Taken off guard, Stormi shot him a look of censure. Krysta, shocked, slapped him. "*Matty!*"

"Uht-oh! He thaid a bad word, huh, Storm? My fodder wouldn't wike it if him thaid it at my house, huh, Storm?"

"Matty says bad words a lotta times!" Jarrett disclosed, poking a fry into his ketchup. "But, he ain't apposed t' say 'em if I'm with him, huh, Matty? You promised Mom, huh?"

Matty eyed both boys with annoyed amusement. "Yeah—I'm in for it now, I see! As for you—" he stared across at Daine. "Don't you give me a lecture! She knows what I mean! You married him, Karley! You shoulda been there!" He gripped her arm once more.

"Matty, you're making her uncomfortable," Krysta told him flatly. "Maybe she just felt out of place, even if she did love him."

Matt started to refute that, but then realized that Krysta spoke out of her own experience. "You feel out of place in my family, Kry?" he asked with surprise, drawing his hand away from Stormi.

"Sometimes," she admitted. "But, maybe it's because we've only begun dating."

He slipped his arm about her. "My folks like you. Nothing else matters!" Giving her another quick squeeze, he brought his attention back to Stormi.

But before he could resume his lecture, Daine piped up. "Kailey wantsth Geoff to mawry Storm. Her don't want nobody else to mawry her." He didn't bother looking up from his plate as he spoke.

"Kailey's your daughter, right! I kinda thought she was Lawron's, but she isn't, is she?"

"Yes, she's my daughter," replied Stormi, casting her small charge a look. He just smiled at her, unaware he'd incurred her censure.

"Listen, Karley, we need to—"

"Make some thandcastleth now?" Daine broke in hopefully. "Do you know how to make thandcastleth, Matty?"

"I don't know about thandcastleth, bud. But I can build a mean *sandcastle*!"

"*That'th* what I *thaid*!" Daine exclaimed in mild exasperation.

"He knows how to build *anything*!" declared Jarrett-Andrew, with an enthusiastic gesture. "Matty can make a sand car, huh, Matty! A racin' Beetle or a-a—what kind o' car you and Irby got, Matty?"

"A Porsche, bud. That what you want to make?"

"Wanna make 'em both! Right, Daine? We want him t' make 'em both, huh?"

"Yeah!" Daine shouted, erupting from his bench and nearly spilling his milkshake.

Matty caught the cup midway in its spill, up righting it before any real harm occurred. "Sure, bud! We can build anything you like! Keep your cups. We'll need 'em!"

"Okay!" cried the boys emphatically. "Come on!"

Hopping down, they ran around the table to pull Matt off the bench. As Stormi came around to join them, Daine reached up to take Krysta's free hand, smiling up at her. She gave him one back.

Lifting her gaze to Stormi's, she said, "He's so cute!" Then, feeling she was slighting Jarrett, she added, "They both are."

Before Stormi could reply, an excited little voice hollered out from over by the snack bar. "Da'e Geoff! I see Momma ober dere! Wook it! See her?" Kailey waved to her mother. "Who are dose udder guys, Da'e Geoff? Who are dey? I don't remember!"

Geoffrey glanced over, surprised to see her there. Meeting her gaze for an instant, he answered Kailey's questions. Kailey waved some more, calling out, "I gonna go with Da'e Geoff on a boat, Momma. I be careful, and I not gonna fall in a water, 'kay, Momma?"

What could she say? "Have a good time, sweetie! I'll see you at home!"

"Hey! Hey! Kailey! Hey, Geoffrey! Know what—*hey*!" In indignation. For Daine, all at once, realized his brother wasn't alone. His tone changed from happy anticipation to deep disapproval and indignation. "*Hey! Hey*, why itsth Hewene with you? Tell her to go 'way! Kailey, how come you wet her be with Geoff? How come? Don't bring *her* on the boat!"

While Stormi quickly curbed his intent to rush over and attack, Matty couldn't resist tossing out a few taunts. "We're building thandcastleth, Geoff! You're invited—or doesn't Hewene wike building thandcastleth?"

“Her don’t wike nothin’ fun! I d’want her helpin’! You don’t ask her, Matty! *Don’t!* I o’ny want Storm and Geoffrey and Jarrett-Andrew and Kailey . . . and Kwysta!”

Well, when had Helene arrived in Rhode Island? To her knowledge, no one had expected she’d be turning up. No wait—Halleigh had mentioned it was nearing the twelfth anniversary of her jilting him the first time. Must be she had a habit of showing up around the same time each year?

Matty kept up his taunts. “How do you manage to have a good time with a fun sucker, Geoff? Don’t you wish you could be with us instead? No fun suckers here! But, hey, we won’t interfere with your plans. You need someone to babysit that child while you’re cruising?”

“No, I’m all set,” Geoffrey responded with a certain finality.

Matty shrugged. “Okay, then. We’re off! I got my choice of the best women on this beach! And a couple of little buds to boot! Wanna wager who’ll have the most fun today?”

Geoffrey just shook his head at him. Daine pulled out of Storm’s grasp, and running up to his eldest brother, he pushed him, ordering, “You don’t go home with her! Mom won’t wike it, and I gonna tell Thomi—”

“You don’t have to tell Thomi anything, Daine. Know why?”

“No, why?” Instantly intrigued.

Setting Kailey down, Geoffrey swung Daine up into his arms and whispered something in his ear. “Our secret, understand?”

“*Okay!* I won’t tell nobody! And I gonna—”

“Go build the biggest sandcastle ever—and bury Matt in it!” Geoffrey finished for him, shooting Matt a look of dark promise. He set Daine on the ground. As he did, his gaze met Stormi’s for an instant.

Her eyes widened and her lips parted in bewildered surprise. For his look held out a promise to her, and not the dark one he’d cast Matt. No, it *seemed* to be—a *sweeter* one. Her stupid heart leapt with a happiness she hadn’t felt in a long time. *Oh, you haven’t felt like this ever! Not even with Lawron, though you did love him! Confess it and be done with it!*

She bit her lip. Still too soon for that. Besides, could she really put faith in that look? Geoffrey hadn’t said one word to her at breakfast. Hadn’t acknowledged her when she’d come into the table. Hadn’t offered a thank you for the plate she’d fixed for him. No, she wouldn’t read too much into that look. For now, at any rate. But it would be sooooo wonderful if—

Don’t go there! Stop it! You’ve no business looking for happiness when you have your own fun sucker to beware of. One that might also like to vacuum the world of your existence actually.

“What’s so secret? What did you say to him, Geoffrey?” Helene’s high imperious tone cut into Stormi’s thoughts.

“Tell *me*, Da’e Geoff! I wanna know a secret too!”

Geoffrey picked Kailey up once again, settled her complaints with just a word and cast Helene down a look of indifference—a look that Stormi had grown to recognize

and loath. He didn't give her the satisfaction of a response. Could he actually be ready to kiss her off?

Chuckling at his friend's cool demeanor, Matt let Jarrett run with Daine down closer to the water, and he moved to settle between Stormi and Krysta, indicated his readiness to head off. "Looks like *her* happiness is going to be coming to an end! About damn time! Should be an interesting afternoon for 'em!"

Stormi cast Matt a quick glance. How could he be so sure of that? She quickly dashed the inclination to contemplate it further, however. For he'd drawn her closer than she wanted to be held by him. No doubt, he'd done it to try and annoy Geoffrey. When he wouldn't relax his hold about her, she began to plot how to flee the beach altogether without incurring Daine's disappointment. Without seeming too rude to Matt. Well, even his scent reminded her of Lawrey.

But when Daine begged her to buy pails and shovels at the marina store, she found she couldn't disappoint him. Her purchases greatly accelerated the creation of a grand castle, complete with courtyard, a moat, soldiers and a royal family.

Daine shed his clothes to his Spiderman underwear. They lay now, half buried some distance from the castle. Jarrett, having come prepared for the beach wearing Spiderman trunks, looked favorably upon his friend's underwear. "We gonna hab this castle finished in a minute, huh, Daine? Cause we're superguys, huh?"

"Yeah, and it'sth gonna be supergood, too. And it'sth gonna be here foreber!"

"Yup, foreber!" echoed Jarrett, and pointed at Stormi. "Lookit Storm, Daine! Look what her's doin' now!"

"Whoa, Storm, you makin' it bery 'pecial! Is you havin' fun, Storm? I havin' wots of fun!"

"Yeah, an' me too! Can we help y', Storm?"

Thanking them for their offer, and admitting she was actually enjoying herself, she told them some more water would be good. "I need to wet this sand just a little more!"

Matt left off his efforts or constructing a dragon outside one of the castle walls—requests of the little boys—to watch Stormi work. Tossing a gesture at her royal family that resembled Daine, Jarrett and the little girls of DreamWynd, he asked her, "Anyone know you can do this? You could make a living at this, you know it? You paint as well, I know. Halleigh'd have real competition if you wanted to give it to her!"

She smiled. At the same time a vision of that portrait of him sitting on the fence with his horse intruded. But then, that one of her and Geoffrey in so intimate a stance chased it away. She shook her head. Halleigh's work seemed pure genius to her, and she said so. "You flatter me too much, I think."

"No, I don't. You painted those stall plaques for the new foals, didn't you? Tristen lie to me about that?" He tossed a shell at her, which hit her arm. "You're good. Don't sell yourself short."

She made a slight sound of amused assent. "Stall plaques aren't the same as the portraits and things she does."

He was about to refute that when a chance glance to his right caused him to scowl and utter darkly, "What's *he* looking at!"

"Who?"

Matt juttet his chin in the direction of the lifeguard post. “Sal Cristiano. Thinks he’s God’s gift to women. Thinks he’s tough, as well. But he’s lost more bets and dares to me, almost than anyone else. Except, maybe, Turdy!”

“Turdy?” Stormi repeated, amused.

“My cousin, Tedd. Always called him Turdy when we were younger. Name stuck—for some of us!”

Stormi recalled Tedd being at Ruthe’s for the wake and funeral. Fairly tall, dark haired guy who also thought women should faint at his feet. He and his girl had ventured into the hay barn for a few private embraces. Probably that same leer lie hidden behind those mirrored sunglasses of Sal’s right now. Again, her stomach tightened with sick apprehension.

“Hey! Hey, Storm!” Daine hollered as he walked quickly back with his full pail. “Wook it! Nicky and Kourtney’n going to the boat now! How come *we* can’t go? And Matty and Kwrrwysta, too!” Obviously, Krysta had been trying to improve his diction while they dipped for water.

“I gonna go tell Nicky ‘bout Geoffrey and Hewene! *You* wuv him! And *we* wuv you! *Not* Hewene! No way! Her’s a big fat mud turtle! And I gonna go tell him to say to Geoffrey—” Setting his pail down, he started off.

With an exasperated, but muffled, little roar, Stormi reached across the castle walls to drag Daine up over them before he’d gotten two steps into his purpose. Clapped a hand over his lips. “*Enough!* Look, you’re giving all the world a picture of what’s going on at your house?” For a sizable crowd had gathered around them as they worked. “You know what happens when somebody does that to Thomi!”

“It’s bweakfast newsth!” He caught Krysta’s glance and tried again. “*Bwrrwreakfast* newsth! And Dad’sth not happy, eider!”

“No one is. So button those lips. I think we should be getting back, anyway. I’m sure your father will shoot me when we get back!”

“Oh, that’s right! You have a job there, don’t you?”

“I may not if I don’t get back soon!” she replied between seriousness and humor.

Someone from the *Littleton Liberty Press* happened along right then, and he snapped several photos. Got the talented creators to pose for a shot. Matty made sure Stormi didn’t sneak away. Parked the boys right before her, and then with her firmly ensconced in one arm and Krysta in the other, he bade the reporter to take his best shot.

“Be in the paper tomorrow!” he promised.

While the others were excited to hear that, Storm wasn’t so thrilled. But she did a decent job of pretending for the sake of the others. “Okay, now I do have to go! Daine, let Krysta have your pail for now, and let’s go.” Something else came to mind, and she said, “The concert’s this Sunday—don’t forget that!”

“Hey, that’s right! We’ll be there! See you then, maybe!”

Stormi acknowledged that, and with Daine in tow, made her way out of the sandy courtyard, and through the crowd. She’d just strapped Daine into his seat when he cried out urgently, “No, wait! My Cwothesth!”

She looked down at him, in nothing but his underwear. “Oh . . . sshh-eeep dip! How’d we forget those?”

“Are these the items in question?”

The amused tone came from her right, and she backed out of the car to face its owner. Daine’s sandy clothes were pressed into her hands. She managed to catch his socks before they fell to the pavement. At the same time, a strong hint of not quite stale tobacco insulted her nose.

Sal, the sunglasses dude.

Her heart began its thud-squeeze thing it did whenever she suspected a threat from Dean or his henchmen . . . his uncle Kosmos. Probably he wasn’t employed by either of them—but he could be. Seemed she was always on her guard. Why it had to be him bringing Daine’s things to her, she couldn’t guess. Too bad it couldn’t have been Krysta or Matt.

None of her trepidation showed. She’d learned how to perfectly keep it out of her demeanor in almost any situation. Even when gazing upon a pair of mirrored sunglasses that hid well the thoughts and intentions of her confronter, but showed her plainly her own. Dean always made sure he found associates who were her equal in height. And Sal was.

“Yes, they are. Thank you!” she said with just enough pleasantness to convey some gratitude, but not enough to encourage him to linger. Deliberately, she turned away to toss Daine’s clothes to him. “Here, bud—Never mind putting them on now!”

Sal leaned against the back fender. “Cute kid. Yours?”

“No.”

“I gotta go pee again, Storm. Can we go to Thomi’th? I wanna tell her I wanna have anudder cookout at her house and ‘vite all the buddiesth—”

Stormi cut him off abruptly. “Sure, bud, that’s a great idea. You can hold it that long?”

“Yep! But we gotta weave now!”

Stormi pushed the door shut and prepared to slide into the driver’s seat. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I need to get him to a bathroom. Thanks again for bringing his clothes to us.”

Sal put a hand out to the door. “Just a little advice—you should be careful. Matt Kelmann’s a real nutcase. Looked to me like he was regretting his choice in that little shy lady. Think he’d like to make a different one. With you.”

“You’re mistaken. There’s no interest between us.”

In a soft, coaxing tone, he wondered, “Got someone of your own?”

“No, but *you* do!” she answered with significance.

“That could change,” he countered, lowering his voice seductively. “If you wanted it to.”

“I don’t!”

Yanking the door closed, she started the motor. He stepped away. As he watched her drive out of the parking lot, he pulled a flip phone from his shirt pocket. “Hey . . . thought you might like to know . . .”

Farewell Helene

SEVEN

As Nicky boarded the family's cruiser, *DreamWynd Whispers*, he hailed Geoffrey, demanding in a mystified tone, "All right! I'm here, what's this all a . . . bout!" he ended flatly, catching sight of the fragile blonde woman tight to his brother's side. "Give it up, Helene! Get a life. Let him have one!"

"Nice to see you, too, Nicky," Helene responded sweetly. "I see *you* didn't come alone yourself!"

Kourtney smiled slightly, but her expression remained solemn. Nicky was right—she instinctively didn't like this clinging vine holding so tenaciously to her favorite brother-in-law! She met Geoffrey's gaze and for an instant, she saw his purpose there in it. Her eyes widened, her expression reading a joyous, "*Really?*"

As he answered that with a slight nod, perceptible only to her, he said to Nicky, "I need you to pilot this ship so that we can straighten some things out."

"What things? Which place you're going to get jilted at *this* time?" Nicky eyed Helene with undisguised contempt. "Last time, she just scurried on home! Didn't even tell you she'd gotten cold feet again! Got your money, too, I imagine!"

Kailey, who sat munching her hot dog at the cockpit table, called out to her aunt. "Kourtney, know what? Momma's pwaying in a sand, and her's with Warwey! And I d' wike dis—"

"He's not Lawrey, Kailey. That's his cousin." She looked up at Geoffrey. "Storm know you brought her?"

"She knows," Geoffrey replied. "Nicky, take us out for an hour or so. Should be long enough. First time you've been on *Whisper*?" he asked Kourtney.

"No, we've been out before. Where's Kailey going to be?"

"With us. Are you done, Kailey?"

"I done!"

Geoffrey held his hand out to her, and she came running over to him. Lifting her up, he took Helene's arm, led her below deck. "About an hour, Nicky!"

Nicky moved to the helm. "Was going to call this a colossal waste of time!" he confided, starting up the engine and guiding the vessel into open waters. "But if he's got Kailey with him, that ought to keep her from seducing him."

"He's honestly going to kiss her off! I saw it in his face! Oh, I hope I can be there when he lets Stormi know it!" Kournay pointed toward the shore as they sailed past. "Look, there's Storm with Daine and Matt like Kailey said!"

Nicky looked, but he said, "She'll likely be gone by the time we get back! I'd like to be there, too. He's had it stuck in his head that he owes her something for having ruined her life when they were teens."

Kournay thought about shouting to Stormi, even though, at this distance, she wouldn't likely hear her. This statement, though, made her turn back to him. "He ruined her life? How—or shouldn't I ask?"

He considered it a few seconds, then decided, what the hey. "Wasn't all his fault, although he keeps saying it was. She's trouble pure and simple, and he let his guard down. Next thing we're hearing, she's pregnant. Her parents forced an abortion on her, which he tried to stop. Wanted to marry her right then, but they wouldn't permit it—even though both were of age, but in their last year of high school. Helene disappeared off to her grandparents' place in Massachusetts. After about a year or so, she waltzed back into his life. Hasn't let him alone since. Shows up long enough to pretend she'll marry him, get some money, and a little fun, and then she disappears for another year. Same routine."

"Doesn't she care about his feelings? It must kill him each time she leaves!"

"It does. But he keeps it inside. She just wants his support, no strings attached. And he's so filled with guilt and remorse, he keeps giving. Keeps the dream alive that, one day, she'll quit her crap and settle down." He scoffed. "Never going to happen!" Enunciating each word with deliberate emphasis.

He lost his scowl and smiled at her. "Well, that's his story in a nutshell. Now let's discuss something more pleasant. Like *us*!" His expression compelled her to move closer and kiss him. Safely away from other vessels, Nicky wrapped one arm about her and kissed her with unconcealed passion. "Should be us down there!"

"You'll have to be patient," she said, her smile tender, yet teasing. It seemed to stir his flame even more. "Nicky, no. Just man this boat! If something happened, and he found out you weren't at this wheel . . ."

She'd never seen Geoffrey angry, but she thought it wouldn't be pleasant. Of course, Nicky's anger wasn't either, but it generally died as quickly as it flamed up. Too, she knew exactly how to manage him at those times, so it didn't seem to be much trouble to her. After a short pause, she said, "Hard to imagine Geoffrey in that kind of a situation."

"Was a huge shock to all of us at the time. But he was, then, a little more impulsive than now. He learned his lesson quick, I can say that!"

"Nothing like you, though?"

He chuckled. "No. But for me, I was lucky. You were older, and I could see you felt exactly as I did. Didn't take thirteen years for you to accept my proposal! Was, what? About five seconds?" He kissed her again.

Breaking it off, finally, she nestled into his embrace, content to be there while he piloted the craft one-handed. "I want to tell them, Nicky."

He looked down at her. "Not yet. Maybe after Stephan and Thomi's party. There's plenty of time."

There stretched a silence between them for several moments. Then, said Kourtney as she fixed her gaze upon a pair of sailboats racing out across the water, "Not really . . ."



Helene wanted wine, but Geoffrey poured her ginger ale. Plopping ice cubes into her glass, he handed it to her.

She pouted.

He didn't care.

A little disconcerted by his indifference, she set the glass on the bar, and moved to slip her arms about his waist. He didn't move or speak. Just waited. Her look turned teasing, her hands started down paths that had kindled fires in past trysts. This time, he didn't reciprocate. Nothing she did seemed to stir him. Resentful, and a good deal irritated, she stepped away from him.

"What's wrong? You haven't acted like yourself since I arrived." She altered her look, said seductively, "I do know how to make you melt! I've always known how to do it. Right from the first time I met you, I knew I could make you mine whenever I wanted to!" She chuckled with smug satisfaction at the memories. "Everyone believed you'd seduced me—or worse. If they only knew how long you held out . . . but I won you in the end. Was worth the wait!"

"Youth and its follies."

She inclined her head. "You didn't think so at the time! Didn't last time I was here, come to think of it!"

"About time I grew up," he murmured, unmoved. He'd flung that remark at Thomi not so long ago. If she could hear him say it now about himself, she'd probably faint from astonishment. "You don't really want to marry me, Helene. You never have."

She flushed, responded coaxingly, "I do care about you!"

"Really? Then why are you not yet my wife?"

She couldn't or wouldn't answer him. Couldn't quite meet his eyes, either.

"I'm done with the games, Helene. All these years I've wasted waiting for you. Time we called it quits and got on with our lives." A slight pause, and then, "I will thank you for keeping me occupied till now, though. It would really have been sad if I'd settled for you . . . and then the right one came along."

Helene glanced quickly up at him. "What? Who—?" The inquiry in her gaze turned to understanding. "It's that redhead on the beach, isn't it? This kid's mother?"

Kailey, sitting at the bar looking at a picture book Stacia had left behind the last time she had been on *Whisper*, looked up, offended by Helene's tone. Shaking a finger at her, she said darkly, "I want my *Momma* to mawrey my Da'e Geoff! And I d'want her to mawrey Wissen or Bwett or nobody else! And we don't want y'to be here."

"I think you should read your book and leave us adults to discuss our business alone!"

Kailey promptly shot back, "If my Da'e Geoff wanna be awone and talk, he would say, Kaiwey, you 'tay up dere with Nicky and Kourtney. That's what he would say t' me. But, I would come down'tairs, anyway, acause I d'wike you! And I d'want him to be awone wid you!"

"Well, I see your mother's taught you your manners well!"

"Don't blame Storm for Kailey's opinions," Geoffrey told her. "They're her own!"

Helene, all at once, got the point of Kailey's presence. "But that's *exactly* why you did bring her with us, isn't it?" She hit him. "You *don't* want to be alone with me! *Geoffrey!*"

"You don't hit my Da'e Geoff!" cried Kailey, sliding off the stool at once. "You don't hit him again! You just wike that bad man! You get off dis boat wight now!" And she strode over with a fiercely determined intent to make that happen.

Geoffrey plucked her up into his arms before she could make any use of her clenched fists. "Thank you, Kailey. But, I don't want her to leave yet. I haven't told her goodbye!"

Kailey clapped her hands to his face, gazed intently into his eyes. "You gonna say g'bye to her? Wight now? Weally? And you gonna mawrey my Momma?"

"One thing at a time, Kai. Let me kiss one so long before I go proposing to another!"

"No! I d'want you to kiss her! On'y tell her g'bye!" She wiggled in his hold until he put her down. She shoved at his knees, urging, "Otay! Go 'head! Tell her g'bye! I wanna go home and tell Momma you gonna mawrey her!"

"Geoffrey—"

"If you don't mind, Kailey, I'll tell her myself . . . in my own way."

"*Geoffrey—*"

"Otay—but I wanna hear you say it to her!"

"Fine. Go read your book. You're making it take longer than it needs to."

"*Otay!*" Kailey ran back to her seat. "Tell her g'bye now! I ober here!"

As he turned his attention back to her, Helene whined, "You can't tell me goodbye like this! Geoffrey, what am I supposed to do?"

"You seem to get along without me for months at a time. There must be someone else you can entice into your web. You've just admitted to me that it's a special talent of yours! I'm sure you'll find another fool you can suck the life from. I can't be the only one!"

She stepped toward him again. But before she could touch him, he caught her hands and held them trapped in his. "Listen carefully, Helene. In case you can't quite understand what I've said—" He transferred her hands to just one of his, and put two fingers under her chin, making sure her eyes met his. "I don't *ever* want to see you again. *Ever!* This *is* goodbye!"

Pulling away from him, she uttered flatly, "Fine. Tell Nicky to turn this ship around. I'd hate to have you waste time in my unwanted company."

"Oh, I won't be. I'm going up and taking the wheel so Nicky and Kourtney can have some time together." Calling Kailey to him, he started for the stairway. "Leave the wine alone!"

She stared after him, deeply resentful. When he was out of sight, she went looking for it. Pouring herself a glassful of her favorite red, she swigged a large swallow. "This isn't over yet, honey! Not by a long shot, it isn't!"

Daine Unfiltered

EIGHT

Daine accurately recalled the passcode that opened the gates of Cliff Top. Just at the moment, miraculously, there were only a few of Thomi's fans at them. Made it so much easier to get in.

"Her's gonna be happy to see us, huh, Storm? And I gonna share my cookies with her. But I won't tell her 'bout Hewene and Geoffrey, 'cause he don't want me to. But I gonna say—"

"Daine, don't say anything, okay?"

"Okay! I won't tell nobody! I gots two secretsth. On'y—"

"Not even Stacia, Daine." Guessing his intent.

"Her won't tell!" he assured her earnestly. "Her won't! Jacqi'sth the motor mouf, not 'Tacia!"

"Okay, then . . . don't ask me to take you anywhere ever again!"

His tune changed in a hurry. "Okay! I don't tell nobody, eben 'Tacia! I pw—pwrromise!" Attempting to mind his Rs as Krysta had instructed him.

Stormi pulled up beside Thomi's purple convertible Mustang. Daine unbelted himself almost before she'd let herself out. "I hope her wantth anudder cookout! And I want Geoffrey to bring poniesth for us wike before, huh, Storm?"

"Sure," she agreed, accepting his hand in hers. She looked him over. "I suppose she won't care if you're in your underwear!"

"Nope, her won't! And you gotta come next time, Storm. And you can help Geoffrey hitch the poniesth and *everything!*"

She shook her head, smiling, let him rattle on. They crossed the wide cement porch, sort of a light rose cream in color, and at the door, Stormi raised a hand to knock. Daine didn't observe such proprieties. He tried the door, found it open, and burst in. He headed for the bathroom, greeting Ming who came downstairs to see who'd invaded his space. His protective spirit became one of welcome, and once Daine had finished his business, he prepared to escort them upstairs.

"Thom'syna! Are you home? *Thom'syna!* Are you *home?* I hadda *pee!*"

Upstairs, a door opened and in a second, Thomasyna peered over the balcony railing at them. "Hey, what's up, guys? Why am I so honored with a bathroom break? Toilets not working over there at your uncle's?"

"Thomi! Know what? I had brweakfasth with Storm at Stephan'sth mudder'sth house!" he announced with cheery pride.

"Did you? Had some cookies too, I see!"

"You want one? I got wotsth!" He held up his plastic bag full of tempting morsels.

"Sure! Come on up, bud! Storm!"

Daine clambered up the steps after Ming, and Stormi proceeded after him at a leisurely pace.

"Stephan told me you were trapped in the music room earlier," Thomi informed her, "But, I didn't know it was also in the company of my darling little brother!"

Stormi came up around the head of the stairs, put a hand on Daine's head. "Oh, I wasn't trapped with him! He felt sorry for me when Kailey wouldn't come, and offered to go in her place. Worked for *me*. Not so much for my mother!"

"We don't care, huh, Storm?" Daine smiled up at her as he presented the cookie bag to Thomi. "You thaid her was mean and miser'ble! And know what, Thom? Her *was*!"

"I believe you, bud!" said Thomi, biting into a cookie whose chips still oozed warm chocolate from hanging out in the backseat of a sun warmed car. "She wasn't nice to us last week either!"

"Yeah, and her hollered at Storm, Thom. And her made Storm cwy! And Storm wantsth our mudder to be her mudder because her mudder is a—what, Storm?" Daine looked expectantly up at her, waiting for her to fill in the appropriate word.

A little rue crept into Stormi's eyes. "How about if we say *what* right now. Right now, respect isn't what I feel for her!"

"I won't tell Dad," he promised earnestly. "You can call 'em an' thing you want—even damned asth—"

Stormi swiftly clapped a hand over his month. "Daine, stop! I am *trying* to be good! *You* be good too!"

Thomi munched some more of her cookie, her gaze alight with amusement. "Picked up some questionable phrases from you, I see!" She laughed when Stormi's rueful expression deepened. "So, you endured a bad time along with a squirty little kid!"

"*Daine is entertaining! My parents are exasperating and enraging!* I begged your father to call her back and say he couldn't possibly spare me today. But—no! He's certain he'll be held responsible for my behavior while I'm at DreamWynd." She made an expressive gesture. "That is probably true, so . . . I went."

"So you went to please *him*!"

"Well, *his* opinion I care about!" She hunched an indifferent shoulder. "They have the finest disregard for my feelings, as well you know! Although, it was mainly my mother I had to endure this morning."

"Oh, well, if you were *provoked*!"

"I was. But then, I can be as insolent as you can be. So, yeah. Not a pleasant visit!" Her mother's threat to disown her again rang in her brain. No reason to voice it. Would only set Daine off again, as well as Thomi's determination to save her.

"Never thought it of you until last week! I was proud of you!" chuckled Thomi.

Stormi eyed her askance. "Were you? Thought you were going to pass out in shock at the time! And thanks for not quoting me the other day! Your father's got far more

subtle ways of making me ashamed of my lapses than my parents do. When it's them, I have an urge to keep it up. For him— I'm afraid I'm not the practically perfect being he'd like me to be!"

"Well, once he's cleaned up your vocabulary, you will be!" Thomi's eyes sparkled with a teasing glint. "Of course, we *all* think you're practically perfect—even Geoffrey, I bet. Just have to make him admit it!"

"Thomasyna," uttered Stormi, resting her hand heavily upon Thomi's shoulder and squeezing it warningly, "if you care to keep my friendship, you'll refrain from mentioning my troubles, my parents, my ex-husband, and your brother Geoffrey!"

Thomi moved back to the door of her study, motioning for them to follow. "Well, that pretty much wipes out conversation! So . . . you came to *pee*."

"Well, that and he'd like you to have another cookout."

"Yeah, and 'vite all the buddies, too!"

"That was fun, wasn't it? We'll do it again, bud. Don't trip over anything! I won't find you if you fall into any of these boxes!"

Thomi helped her brother pick his way around her mountains of mail. Then, perching on the edge of her desk, she directed her attention back to Stormi. "Your friendship, you know, means a good deal to me but so does Geoffrey. Now, if you say don't mention *Timothy*, there's a different story!"

"Timmy'sth a mud turtle, huh, Thomi? Storm wikes Timmy on'y a wittle. But her wikes Geoffrey thisth much!" Daine spread his arms wide as they could go to demonstrate. "But he isth mean and mizer'ble to her all the time! Her shouldn't wike him, huh, Thomi. Her should—"

"Daine! Enough, now!" Stormi told him commandingly.

From these observations, he could switch gears and disclose those secrets Geoffrey entrusted him with. Which, while she'd love to know what those actually were, she felt she ought to let his brother disclose them in his own good time.

To that end, she said, "Let's not chat anymore about him, okay!" Then, mystified, "What do you mean I *shouldn't* like him? How do you know if I like him at all?"

"I know!" he said in an absolutely positive tone. "You wike him wike Thomi wikesth Stephan!" Daine stated. He began poking through Thomi's mail. "And you wook at him wike my mudder wooksth at my fodder, and wike Kourtnay wooksth at Nicky!"

Stormi decided no response was best to that. Merely shaking her head, then, she began strolling about the room, examining the paintings on the walls, as well as the amount of mail in each box and bag that occupied every empty space in the room. Such an astonishing collection of letters, gift packages, and photos!

"They really send you all this stuff?"

Amused, Thomi nodded. "There you see it! Wanna read some? It'll amaze you more!"

Stormi eyed a particularly fat envelope under Thomi's hand. "I'm sure! What's in that?"

"I'll let you open it—if you let us bug you about Geoffrey." She picked it up and waved it tantalizingly before her.

“Should I bug you about Stephan? Or Charley? Or Simon, even? He’s got some stories, I discovered!”

Thomi wouldn’t be backed off. “As long as I get to bug you about Geoffrey . . . and *I* go first!”

Forgetting herself, Stormi blurted, “Thomasyna! Just so you know, he’s—” She stopped herself in time from revealing where he was right that moment, said instead, “—had phone calls from her this week. I’d say It’s *not* a promising situation here!”

Well—there was that look he’d favored her with. And he wasn’t alone with her now. So, probably, they wouldn’t be doing much fooling around . . . either pair of them! Probably he’d promised Dain a treat if he didn’t tell anyone he’d seen him at the marina with Helene. Was he expecting her to say nothing as well?

“Look, nobody wants her as an in-law. She’s a flake! Worse than Marianne! And far less likable!”

“Yeah, and her don’t wike horsesth eider, and her don’t wike to eat at our house and her don’t wike—”

“She just puts up with us to get what she wants from him at that moment!”

“Wike Charley, huh, Thom?”

“Yes, like Charley! So we don’t want to be stuck with her!”

“I see how it is,” responded Storm with a hint of accusation, “You’d like *me* to be *your* savior!”

Said Thomi candidly, “No, I want you to be *Geoffrey’s*! Come on, Storm! *Make* him recognize a *real* woman’s in the same house! And *then*, one game with the others, and you’re his forever! Guaranteed!”

“Bwett winned Storm today,” informed Daine, getting to his knees in order to better reach the desktop. “But Nicky thaid Bwett’sth too young for you, Storm. And you ith too good for the udder guysth! Thaid Geoff should wake up and smell the woseth ‘fore someone picksth ‘em. And Geoffrey thaid he wasn’t gonna steal Bwett’sth happinesth today! Maybe tomorrow, huh, Thom? That’sth what that meansth!”

“Ooo, perceptive!” uttered Thomi with a laugh.

“Doesn’t mean anything! Thomi, your idea is so much rotting manure! First of all, the man hasn’t acknowledged my existence from the first day we came to see Rogue and Fairwind—unless he absolutely has to. Telling you right now, he’ll never play! It’s a practice probably beneath him! Which—!”

She broke off at Thomi’s cynical, laughing, “*Yee-ah!*” Exasperated, she threw a hand out at Thomi, “Look, Thomi, you’re in some tough straits because of Charley’s gambling obsession! You’re going to say he should lower himself. . .” Her argument trailed off for Thomi’s look only accused her back. “What I mean is—”

“Ye-ess? You’ve let the others lower themselves since you came to work there! Geoffrey plays against them for other stakes and never loses! That’s why Charley wouldn’t play if he did.”

“Dad thayth Hewene’th got wess thensth than Thomi *or* Timmy, and Geoffrey’th a fool to keep hangin’ on her wine! Thaid Geoffrey’th dumb as Keaf and they gotta get a new wife!” The little boy uttered this bit of information as he sprawled across Thomi’s

desk looking for a sheet of paper. "Can I wite a wetter, too, Thom? I need paper and a pencil. Where is 'em?"

"Well, that part's true. Keath does need to get a new life. Not to mention, a *wife* of his own!" Thomi set her little brother up with what he needed and then poked him. "How come you know so much about all this?"

"I was hidin' under Mom'th desk eatin' Mom'th candieth," he answered readily. "And Dad thaïd Stephan'th the best o' all your a'mirerersth, and he wished Geoffrey would weal . . . wealwi . . ."

"Realize . . ." prompted Thomi and Stormi helpfully.

"Yeah!" he said happily. "He wished Geoffrey would wealwize that Hewene isth one big wife dwrainin' mithtake and dump her foreber and mawry *Storm*. Cause even if her thaysth bad words sometimesth and her'sth too dwrangerouswy pwetty for her own good, her'sth got bwrainsth and . . . and . . . *what*, Thom?"

"I don't know *what*, bud. I wasn't there. I could guess, though." She encountered Stormi's warning gaze and persisted. "See? It's not just me. *Everyone* wants Helene gone—and you with him. He's played her game for so long he doesn't know how to do anything else! So, put a storm in his heart, Storm! You have one in *yours* for *him*!"

Stormi's lips parted to retort to that recommendation, but Daine had further pronouncements to pass on.

"Nicky kithesth Kournay big long kithesth. *You* don't kith Stephan that way, huh, Thom? How come you don't kith him wike Kournay kithesth Nicky, Thom? You wuv him, don't you? When *I* get big and I got a girlfwiend, I gonna kith her wike Nicky kithesth Kournay! And I *ain't* gonna be dumb wike Geoffrey! *No way!*" Daine didn't bother looking up from his writing. "And I gonna tell her I wuv her alla time! And Dad'th gonna wuv my *all* my girlfwiendsth!"

"Thomasyna," uttered Stormi, her lips twitching at Daine's run on sentiments, "one of us had better shut this boy up—"

"And I gonna have more senthe than Thomi and Timmy and Hewene . . . and Mawrianne! And Geoffrey too!" he added.

While Thomi stared down upon him with amused but, nevertheless, black reproof, Stormi's rich chuckles bubbled forth despite her own strong feelings on this subject. She crossed over to rap the top of Daine's curly head, which only made him look up and grin.

Something else coming to mind, she said, "Speaking of your father, Thomasyna, let me inform you that he promoted me to foreman this morning, just before I left for Deverill Hall."

"Ooh! Now you can order Geoffrey to go out with you!"

Yes, she might have known she'd think of something exactly like that! Other than giving her a stern look, however, she wouldn't be drawn. "I never expected a promotion this soon! I've only been there a couple of weeks!"

"Why hire someone off the street? You can get everyone to tend to business! For that, you *are* perfect!"

"Uh-huh. Well, if business isn't tended to, I'll be looking for the life of the one responsible! So don't laugh, Thomasyna! It could be *yours*! But . . . that isn't all."

Thomi struggled to recover a more serious composure. "It isn't? What? He decide to make you stable manager, too?"

"Yes, damn it!"

"Oh, well, your past with your own place must've convinced him to do it. He doesn't let just anybody near his desk!"

"*Near* it? I'm amazed he can *find* it? I have never seen such a horribly disorganized office in my life! I will need a bucket loader for sure! Shovels *won't* cut it!" Thomi gave a wicked laugh, and Stormi regarded her darkly. "Oh, yes, laugh, damn it!"

She reached to pluck away the yellow envelope Thomi played with. "If you're not going to satisfy my curiosity here, leave it alone!" Tossing it aside, she resumed, "I hope you know I'd rather muck stalls, handle difficult births, or put up with the ignorant parents of an unpromising kid I'm struggling to teach—*anything* but sit behind a desk!"

"So would he," Thomi replied, still chuckling. "I do it for him when I can. It does take some time to figure out his system!"

Stormi eyed her skeptically. "He *has* one?"

"Sure! I'll teach it to you when I can get a note from God and Dr. Wray! I suppose I won't need one from Stephan." Her glance turned regretful. "'Fraid Mom's been right. Stupid concussion's bothering me longer than I expected! Shouldn't have run from him!"

That she harbored that regret also for the death of the colt she'd ridden that day, Stormi had no doubt. Stephan had made that rash proposal solely out of his concern for her. Had he not done so, there would have been no accident.

Noting the change in her expression, Thomi demanded, "What is it *you're* regretting?"

Mentally chastising herself for letting her feelings show, Stormi shook her head slightly. "Only that you were hurt. That Sherwyn was lost."

"If I—"

"Don't open the book to my business, Thomasyna! It is closed!"

"That's not fair! My book is wide open! Plus you live with my family!" She shot a look down at her little brother, still busy with his letters. "They're all free with the lips!"

At Stormi's acknowledging grin, she declared with heat, "I wish Charley had told me more of your story! But no—he just ranted about being cut out of everything." Her expression flooding with earnest concern, Thomi reached out a hand to Stormi. "No, really, if something were to happen to you because of Stephan's—no, because of *my* insensitivity—I'd—"

Twisting her hand about, Stormi caught Thomi's in a firm clasp. "Thomasyna! Neither of you are insensitive! I appreciate your concern. Really, I do! I've had no opportunity to form any real friendships. Dean never allowed it . . . so, it's nice to feel that I may be able to do it now!"

Thomi eyed her reproachfully. "You're putting me off again!"

"I'm not!"

"Yes, you are! Friends help each other, Storm! Don't forget *that!* And *any* one of my brothers would protect you from your ex! There's more than friendship waiting for you at DreamWynd! How could there not? You're just too dangerously pretty!"

"Kaiwey thaid That Bad Man a'wayth hurtssthy you, Storm. Her thaid Geoffrey'th gonna hurt him for you. Uh-huh! And—and Geoffrey thaid that guy ain't neber gonna hurt anybody eber again! And nobody gotta be asthcared of him!"

"There, see? Maybe he *is* waking up! Look, let's give Helene to Dean. Geoffrey plays one game of whatever to win you away from the others, and our problems are solved! What do you say?"

Recalling Halleigh had earlier proposed the very same thing, Stormi cast her a smiling look with a shake of her head. Letting go of her hand, she got up from the desk. "First, I say I wouldn't wish Dean on anyone. Second, it's not that simple to solve! After today though, I think if this one were twenty years older, I'd take my chances with *him!*"

"Me, Storm? *Me?*"

"Yeah, but you're way too young, remember? You'll have to marry Kailey!"

Forgetting what he'd said earlier at the Gallery, he persisted, "No! I be bigger tomorrow! Okay, Storm? I won't wet anybody hurt you no more, eider!"

"Ooohhhh, what have we started?" wondered Thomi with unholy mirth.

Storm eyed the little boy with amused resignation. "Ah, well! Rather listen to him for an hour than my mother for thirty seconds! What are you doing with those letters, Daine? Who are they for?"

"Thith one," he said, handing the first one over to Thomi, "is for thith one." Pairing it with a pretty blue envelope as yet unopened. "And thith one isth for who gabe you that yellow wetter . . . and thith one isth for *you!*" Smiling with pride, he held up a neatly penned note to Stormi.

"*I love you Storm. Big Kisses Daine.*" read Thomi as she gazed across Stormi's arm to view it.

"Wow . . . he spells better than he talks! And from right to left too. How can you read it so quick?"

Thomi shrugged. "I'm left handed too, remember. Wrote that way when I was his age! Still do sometimes. So does Geoffrey. Look at the size of that heart! I don't know. . . Looks like they'll have to deal this boy in tomorrow, too!"

"Don't be giving him ideas!" Stormi commanded ungraciously. She glimpsed the clock on the wall to the right of the desk. "*Three-thirty! Shi-eeep!* Is that *really* the time? I meant to be gone long enough to make him sorry he sent me to Deverill! Now he'll probably make *me* sorry for making *him* sorry!" She drew a long breath and let it out. "Ah, well . . . he probably won't make me regret my *whole* life! Are you ready, Daine? We've got to leave now." She held a hand out to him.

Daine stood up in the chair and held his arms out to Thomi for a hug. Grabbing him up, she give him a bear-sized one. Kissed his whole face. He giggled, then admonished her, "Don't forget to mail my wettersth!"

"I won't forget. And I won't forget to give you any when they write back."

"Okay!" he responded with his usual enthusiasm. "You got thome now?"

"You kidding me? *They write him back?*"

Wordlessly, Thomi reached into a box on the desk and pulled out a handful of letters she'd already sorted out which were addressed to Daine-Anthony in care of her.

"Some for Stacia and Jacqi. A few for Rikki and Halleigh . . . and Lyndsay . . . and, I think, my mom. Yep, here they are. if I dug around long enough, I'd probably find at least one for everyone!" She sorted out all those she could find immediately and handed them over to Daine. "Don't lose them!"

"I won't!" He dutifully tucked them under his arm and thrust his free hand into Stormi's.

As she helped him off the chair, something else came to mind. "Thomi, what did you do with that last bribe of my uncle's?" For he had tried to buy Thomi away from Stephan just two days ago.

"Shredded it. Halleigh took the pieces. I don't know why, but she kept the whole mess, dolphin fragments and all. Not sure how she came to have those, but she did. I just wanted to burn it!"

"Did she? Well, she's an artist. Maybe she has a purpose for it!" Stormi proceeded out into the hallway, accommodating her stride to Daine's shorter one.

Changing the subject, Thomi asked her, "Will we see you tonight for rehearsal? We'd be thrilled if you and Kourtney sang with us. You both have such beautiful voices! Nothing at all like a duck!"

"What?" uttered Stormi on a surprised laugh. "Who sings like a duck?"

"Cecily! You two are honey for the ears! Cecily should be shot and skewered on a rotisserie, but we'll not dwell on it now!"

Knowing Cecily was the local amateur actress taking Thomi's place in the play which would benefit Jaimee Shaine Kelmann's family, Stormi laughed outright. "A little severe, aren't you? She must have a decent quality somewhere!"

"She can dance!" As they descended the stairs, Thomi cast an appraising eye over Stormi's tall shapely person. "Bet you can, too!"

"Storm danced with me in the famwy woom wast night, huh, Storm? And Bwett, too. But her wouldn't dance with Timmy 'cauth he was wude, and he got mad!"

"Yes, he did. Next time he won't be such a boor!"

"Oooo, *more* drama!" Thomi grinned at Stormi's reproachful glance. "So, Come tonight?"

Stormi shook her head, softening her refusal with a tolerant smile. "No, Thomasyna! I am not interested in getting up in front of the world to either dance or sing! I'll sit and accept donations, but that is it!"

Thomi laughed and told her, "You know Mom and Halleigh are mustering courage for this. I imagine, because I have to give up the play." A shadow crossed her face. "He—he really meant for us to marry next Friday?"

They'd reached the bottom of the steps. Stormi half turned to wrap an arm around Thomi who stood on the next stair up and she gave her a brief hug. "Yes, he did. But don't dwell on it! He loves you, Thomi. He'll always take care of you!" Pressing her ribs, she challenged, "See, you're *not really* ready to marry him at all, are you? Never mind do it to save my drangerouswy pwetty behind!"

Recognizing that she used Daine's baby words to keep the tone of this discussion light, Thomi couldn't help but smile at it. Except for that, her expression remained unchanged, and she hunched a shoulder. Stormi shook her and started to respond to that action. But her little admirer sublimely cut her off.

"And when I'm a gwampa, I gonna be good to all the kidsth, too. I ain't gonna be mean to 'em wike yoursth!"

"I'm happy to hear it, Daine. Not that Papa was mean to us. He wasn't, you know! Now, my Grandfather Deverill—more commonly referred to as *Grumpa* Deverill—is another matter. Uncle Gregory is exactly like him! Always too busy to bother with us as you heard last week." She then vowed, "I'm going to start checking under desks and tables from now on . . . *back porches* . . ." Recalling that that was where Thomi had hidden to eavesdrop that past Saturday.

Thomi chuckled at that. She'd formed the intention to question her further about her grandparents when the phone rang. With a sound of impatience, she displayed every sign of ignoring it.

Stormi, her arm still about Thomi's slight shoulders, stopped before the cordless on the hallway table. "Answer it, Thomasyna! We can let ourselves out. We let ourselves in, after all! And the call could be important!"

Thomi bid her and Daine a reluctant so long and went answer the phone. Storm and Daine continued down the hallway to the front door with Ming trotting as escort in Thomi's place.

Just as Stormi pulled the heavy door open, Thomi's exasperated, "All right! All *right!* I'm *coming!* But I'd better be able to leave *way* before I did *last* night!" traveled out to them.

"Her'th mad, huh, Storm?" Daine observed. "How come?"

From those few words only, Stormi had a fair idea how come, but she chose to evade his question. "I don't know, bud. We'll let her worry about it, okay?"

He smiled up at her as he slipped his hand into hers. "Thomi alwayth gotsth probumsth, y'know. 'Causeth her'sth famousth."

Well, she was likely to be courting some more 'probrums'. For if Stephan were to learn she'd stolen off to the Little Theater today, he'd likely have a few choice words to say to her! His patience was almost infinite. He *might* allow her to live—*this* time. Well, that was between the two of them. She had her own concerns to deal with. No need to park herself in theirs!



As the red Lexus passed a dark blue Grand Prix parked opposite the first of the blue hydrangea bushes growing beside Cliff Top's stone walls, a cell phone suddenly blasted strains of *You Ain't Nothin' But A Hound Dog*. Its occupant ditched a half smoked Lucky out the window before answering it. "Yeah?"

"Where are you?"

"Outside Cliff Top."

“Thomasyna Tollefson’s place? What’s going on?”

“She was here with her for a while. She just left.”

“All right—all right, keep her in your sights. I want to know everyone she sees, where she goes, what she does.”

“And then what?”

“Not your business. Just report back is all I want you doing.”

The connection went dead on the words.

Popcorn & Promises

NINE

Traffic proved heavy all the way from Littleton-by-the-Sea through Jamestown, across the bridge to Newport and Middletown. When she passed Ascott Lane, she'd almost been tempted to check out Ascott Meadows, which Stephan had rebuilt for her in her absence. But—she wasn't quite ready for that yet, and she was already horribly late back to DreamWynd. She drove straight on. It was almost four when Stormi turned onto Kingsdale Street.

On her left sat The Total You by Dean Van Kirk, an exclusive lifestyle center Dean had founded right after their marriage. Built with money persuaded from Papa. From this one place, he'd gone on to set up others from here to Florida. And they all, she knew, were doing well. Well enough that he'd made some drastic renovations to this building. Classier outside and signage. Expanded parking lot . . . Yes, whatever was a person's dream in fitness and fashion, they could get it there. For a hefty price, of course. But that didn't matter to most of the clients that patronized the place. They had it to spend.

Directly opposite was the general store, and up from that the post office and town hall. Just a driveway up from the town hall sat a huge Victorian style house belonging to Dean's mother, Dee-Anne. There were a half dozen other residences in the tiny neighborhood, but hers was the most lavish. Second was that of the Drs. Bekka and Xavier Wray.

Two cars were parked in Dee-Anne's driveway, side by side. Parked, in her opinion, as if to give a message, for generally they would be parked in those spacious garages behind the house.

Her inclination was to step on the gas and fly by. Lucky thing she didn't. A lilac point Siamese cat darted out from the Wray's driveway. Streaked across the road in front of her, forcing her to have to brake suddenly. It scurried upon the porch and she saw the door slowly close after him. Hiro.

And where Hiro was, there also would be Dean. Who wouldn't be pleased should anything happen to his prized pet. Hiro went almost everywhere with Dean like Ming went with Thomasyna. And like Juno, the little terrier cross they'd picked up along their travels, had gone with her and Kournay.

Well . . . she could expect Dean to show his hand again at any time. The dread of that settled heavily upon her heart.

Equestrian Lane came into view down the road on the right. A few minutes later, she signaled to turn into DreamWynd's driveway, pulled into the parking lot between Lyndsay's white Mustang and Anetra's Voyager. Daine had fallen asleep even before they'd left Jamestown, so she'd missed his chatter on the way back. For his animated conversations kept her thoughts occupied. Left to their own devices, they'd wanted to walk darker paths.

Involuntarily, her eyes went to the blue envelope beside her on the passenger seat. Her fingers reached to lightly caress it . . . as if it were Lawron himself. She hadn't any photos of him, so it would be nice to have some. What would she be doing right now, had things worked out the way they should have? Probably searching for a place of their own. She couldn't imagine living with Ruthe the way she was living with the Tollefsons.

Ruthe had been solidly against their plan to marry. She'd been certain that Lawron would regret his choice at some point. Wasn't just the social thing, though, that made her think it. She'd flatly told Stormi that a woman as beautiful as she was could only be trouble. Too, Ruthe resented any advice Stormi offered concerning the ranch. Wouldn't acknowledge her expertise in training and teaching.

And, of course, there was the Dean factor.

"I'm sorry for your situation. But I shouldn't have to worry about my place burning down because he's holding a grudge against my son on account of you! I don't want to say you're not welcome here, but . . ."

She wasn't. And when Lawron's wrecked truck had been found at the bottom of the ravine . . .

Before she had the chance to recover from her thoughts, an exuberant Jacqi wrenched the door open. "Dad's gonna take away your popcorn!" she sang out cheerily. "You were supposed to be back a *llllooonnnnggg* time ago!"

"Yes, I know." Stormi got out and opened the back door to get Daine. "How upset is he? I mean, it's just my popcorn he's threatening, right?" Thinking it wasn't too bad if that were the case.

"Oh, you're gonna slave in his office forever! And *forget* about riding the trails too! Bread and water for supper! You're gonna be sleeping in the goat barn!"

Stormi hauled Daine into her arms. Backing out of the car, she cast a look down at Jacqi who grinned impishly, showing a couple spaces where teeth used to be.

"You're putting me on, aren't you, you little snot! Be careful! I'll remember this, you know!"

"Too bad you didn't remember what time you were supposed to be back!" remarked a deceptively mild voice just beyond the van. A truck door slammed, and in a moment, Nicholas came around to join them.

"You said after lunch!"

"I said you'd better be back *for* lunch! Fortunately, your afternoon lessons both cancelled. I will be working with Rogue and Smokey Joe the rest of this afternoon. Promised Gary that Smoky would be ready to go end of the month. So, you—"

"Oh, let me exercise Rogue for you!" she begged him.

He shook his head. "*You're* going to be seated at my desk the rest of the afternoon! I'm trusting you had some lunch at Deverill?"

"We had lunch," she confirmed, not feeling he needed to be apprised of where they'd had it. "Am I grounded for life then?"

"Oh, not for life, Karla. Unless Daine's vocabulary's been expanded today. Half your life, in that event! Take him up to the house. Don't stop for popcorn today!"

"Ah, Nick, *please*. A small bowl! I'm sorry, really!"

"I am, too. First day of your promotion, and you take the day off!"

"I didn't take the day off! *You made* me go!"

"I see how it is. I made you go, so *then* you took the day off!"

Storm poised to argue that, but upon reflection, was forced to concede she'd done pretty much exactly that, although, not intentionally. "All right! Yes, I guess I did! Next time, *please* just feed her some excuse!"

"She called here just after one. Apparently, you two couldn't finish a sip of coffee together?"

"I *tried* to be civil. But she nags on about Dean, and . . . and—I—" She ended with a vague gesture of hopelessness. "If she'd even just use a *different* tone . . . *something!*"

He didn't miss the sadness underneath the regret and the annoyed exasperation. "So, she so rude, this time, that you needed to find someplace to cry before coming back?"

Storm shifted Daine in her arms, shot Nicholas a curious look. He explained, "Kailey informed me, before going off with Geoffrey, that her Grandmother Iz is a rude lady—which is why she didn't go with you. Said she yells at you and wants you to go back to *That Bad Man*. You get mad, and you cry."

"So, he can't make you work if you gotta cry!" finished Jacqi, who'd been there for this conversation. "Kournnay says that's true."

Stormi let out a long breath, shaking her head, "I try not to let it get to me to that extent—anymore, anyway. But . . . today . . ." Her mother, in her face, promising to renounce her should she become involved with one of his sons rushed back at her. "Thing is, my family will never be anything like yours. Your kids are lucky, and most of them know that!"

"Well, they all have their lapses," Nicholas replied. "So do Anetra and I. if you didn't already guess it, I am foolishly harboring hopes that your folks will one day realize they possess a couple of talented and intelligent daughters, and love you for who you are—not for who you marry . . . or for how much!"

She smiled but shook her head. "Your hopes are too high, Nicholas. I have a mother and a father—period. They've never been Mom or Dad. You and Anetra have been that to us far far more! It's not just because Kournnay's in love with Nicky that she calls you Papa Nick and Anetra, Momma! Same for Stephan."

"*You* don't call him Papa Nick or Dad, Storm. How come?" asked Jacqi curiously.

Stacia, who'd stood all this while quietly beside Jacqi, had one possible answer to that. "A'cause, Storm don't like being called Karla, huh, Storm?"

"From the mouths of babes . . ." murmured Stormi, smiling faintly at the little girl's insight. Although, that wasn't the whole reason.

Nicholas made no remark to that, just said, "Take him up to the house. I'll meet you in my office shortly."

"And can she have popcorn?" Stacia prompted him expectantly.

"I suppose it *would* be cruel to deny her her favorite snack under the circumstances." He looked back at Stormi. "She told me, too, that I will need a big bowlful and a lot of tissues, myself, if I ever met her!"

A big bowl, a big bowl . . . sometimes she needed both—and the tissues! "Listen to her! She doesn't lie about this! You'll want to take up drinking again!"

Nicholas gave a laugh, shaking his head. Kailey's earnest account of her G'amma Iz's faults and flaws repeating in his head, he replied, "I'll pass on your mother's messages, Karla. Up to you what you do with 'em."

Her eyes widened at that. "*Thank* you! That means more to me than that bowl of popcorn!"

He smiled. "And *that* means a good deal to me!" He said then to his daughters, "Jacqi, you and Stacia go find Clark and Terrah. Tell them they if they haven't cleaned the pony pen by supper, they don't get any!"

"Why don't you just adopt them?" Stormi asked him. "They're here ninety-nine per cent of the time, anyhow!"

"I was thinking of letting you have a hand at training them to help out around here."

"Letting me?" she challenged, but then said readily. "Okay, as long as I can wave goodbye to the paperwork!"

He laughed. "Sorry! But after I raise their board, I would give *you* yet *another* raise!"

"You couldn't raise it enough—always supposing I'd want to do it!" She started off toward the house with her small burden. "Probably be regretting it within three seconds!"

"Possibly," Nick conceded, "but I honestly think you could do it."

"I'll think about it," she said, not really believing he meant it. "They might have more potential than those idiot girls you had here at first!"

"Absolutely!" he agreed heading off to the main barn. "Think fairly quickly! I want your answer in a day or so!"

Heh . . . he *did* mean it. Wondering what sort of figure he might put on that task, she hiked up the bank to the backyard, bypassing the stone steps. In a minute, she'd gained the porch and went inside.

In the kitchen, she met Anetra, who had just dumped a fresh batch of popcorn into a huge white bowl already heaped with fluffy kernels. The microwave oven beeped. The aroma of melted buttered assailed her nose. It was more than she could bear. Returning Anetra's greeting, she brought Daine across to the living room and deposited him upon the couch. She kissed his cheek, took off his sneakers, and then hurried back into the kitchen.

Anetra had an iced tea ready for her on the island. She said as she watched Stormi help herself from the bowl, "I figure he can't say anything if you weren't the one to pop it."

"Well, he *could*," Stormi replied fairly, picking up the glass of tea and sitting down at the island. "But, apparently, Kailey filled him in on how it likely had gone for me, so he's forgiven me my lapse—this time!"

Anetra smiled at that and pushed the bowl toward her. "What kept you? Or did she resort to locking you in the dungeon to make you listen to their demands?"

"I'm sure it's what she'd liked to have done. Actually, we were there for . . . well, actually, I don't know *how* long we were there! Let's see . . . hour, maybe less? My mother royally pi—ticked me off, and we left. Then Daine begged to go to the beach for hot dogs. And *after that*, we stopped to pee at Thomi's. Before I knew it, the afternoon was half over!"

"Ah! You tell him this?"

"No. But, as Kailey seems to have taken special care to cover my butt for me . . .!"

"Well, I can relate to your situation. My mother wasn't there for me. It's better now, but—not like I wish it could've been. Doubt popcorn would've consoled me then! Maybe some dark smooth chocolate!"

Stormi laughed. Pushing back the stool, she stood up. "I suppose I should take this and get down there. The faster I wade through that ocean of paperwork, the faster I can get out that door!"

"Storm! Stormi! Hey, you forgot *all* these letters in the car!" Jacqi burst in through the back door waving a bunch of envelopes in the air as she came in. "This one's yours! These are for you, Mom. And some for Lyndsay and me and Stacia, too! And for the boys. How come you got a letter at Thomi's, Storm? Do you—"

Her mother reached out and plucked them all from her, letting her keep those specifically hers. "Thank you, Jacqlynn! I hope you didn't open any that weren't yours!"

"I didn't! Can I take Stacia hers?"

"No. Where is she, anyway?"

"She's gonna go picking berries with Brett."

"Well, she'll get her letters when she gets back. Go help them pick—unless there was something you were supposed to be doing for someone else! Like your father!"

A look of sudden dawning in her face, Jacqi cried, "Oh! Clark and Terrah! I forgot!" Out she ran, banging the door behind her.

Anetra shook her head with tolerant amusement, and slid the blue envelope toward Stormi. "I know you didn't get any letters at Thomi's. This why your mother wanted to see you?"

"Partly. Told me Dean's uncle has a job prospect for me." She scooped up a handful of popcorn the same time Anetra did. Her handful made three of Anetra's.

"And you said?"

"Words to the effect I'd die here."

Anetra smiled, obviously pleased to hear it. "Yeah? I hope nothing happens to change your mind."

"Well, it won't be Kosmos who does it!" Then, nonchalantly, she changed the subject. "Where did you say Helene lives?"

Anetra munched another mouthful of popcorn, letting go their original topic. "Well, her parents live in Middletown. She went to live with her grandmother in Massachusetts after graduation, and as far as any of us know, it's where she still is. Why?" Then before Storm could make any sort of response, she said flatly, "She's *here*, isn't she?"

Not wanting to be the one breaking bad news, Stormi gave an elaborate shrug and disclaimed, “Just wondered, is all.”

“Yeah, out of the blue you ask me? What, where they on the beach? Or heading out on *Whispers*?”

“They took the boat out.”

“Nicky and Kourtney with them?”

“Yes.”

“Well, maybe this will be the last time he lets her invade his space!” Anetra thumped her glass back down upon the island’s top. “But I wouldn’t put it past Nicky to talk you up nonstop! Which could push Geoffrey into doing something stupid because of his fear of falling too far for *you* when he feels he has a loyalty to *her*!”

All right, that might explain his indifferent behavior, certainly. But—what of that promising look?

Oh, never mind that! commanded Mind. *Practice what you preach! You say Thomi isn’t really ready to marry Stephan, but what about yourself! You haven’t said goodbye to Lawron. Dean is still here. You’re letting poker games be played over you. You’ve got serious issues to straighten out before you start dreaming of a life with anyone else!*

Serious issues!

* * *

As much as she protested that she disliked the business end of the business, she had a head for it. Better than he did himself, Nicholas admitted with cheerful satisfaction when he looked in on her later.

“Yeah, you’re just saying that so you can scrape it off your boots onto my floor!” she retorted promptly.

“And now I’ll take my cleaner boots up to the house and get ready for rehearsal. Sure you don’t want to come? You’d make Thomi’s day if you did!”

Stormi shook her head. “Said I’d sit and take donations for her. Anything, but set a foot on stage—even for her!”

“Heard that before,” Nicholas mused. “She’ll be opening the show.”

“Anetra? You’re *kidding*! Thought she’d consented to do *one* set, and that’s it?”

“Yes, well, apparently, Jaimee has a love for the accordion. Polkas perk her up when she’s feeling bad. She called earlier this afternoon and begged me to persuade Anetra to play first. In case she couldn’t stay for the whole afternoon.” He smiled apologetically. “I couldn’t tell her no.”

“When you going to tell her? Tonight?”

“Or tomorrow. *Definitely* by Sunday afternoon!”

“Uh-huh. I foresee some fireworks, Sunday afternoon!”

“Yes, but she loves me,” he answered with cheerful confidence as he headed for the door. “She’ll forgive me!”

Storm watched him leave, shaking her head as he went out. Probably only take one of his lazy, apologetic glances and a deep kiss. Would work for her! Her vision of this scenario changed, becoming not Nick and Anetra, but she and Geoffrey. long, deep, sweet kisses . . . arms that held her protectively and possessively, yet gently. Slow hands that knew precisely what would make her—

A green bill fluttered down in front of her. A *one-hundred* dollar bill that settled upon the ledger open before her. Startled, she lifted her gaze from it to its owner. And drew in a deep breath. Her heart skipped a beat, then settled into a slow thud.

"For your thoughts. Looked as though they must be worth more than a penny!"

Her color deepened still more. Goodness, when had he gotten back? And where was Helene? Or—had he actually kissed her off? Not one to assume anything where it concerned Geoffrey, she inquired in a perfectly composed tone, "Aren't you going to rehearsal with the others?"

Shoving a pile of papers aside, he perched upon a corner of the desk. Something else he'd never done before—not while she'd sat at it, at any rate! "Not tonight. Enjoy your day with my little brother?"

"Yes, actually, I did."

He gave a slight nod. "He's entertaining. But, not, I think, as entertaining as *your* daydream. Who were you with? Thought it could be me, but—" He tossed a blue envelope down before her where it covered the hundred-dollar bill. "Could be him!"

The envelope was open and several photos spilled out. Photos of Lawron alone. Of them together. In a few shots, Kailey embraced him, kissing his cheek. But, as much as she was happy to have them, she discovered she couldn't bear looking at them long. The guilt, grief, and pain wouldn't permit it. Scooping them up, she stuffed them back into the envelope. Pushed it away, along with the hundred-dollar bill.

It was just too soon. Just . . . too soon.

One of the barn cats which had followed Geoffrey in, jumped upon the desk, then climbed over onto Stormi's lap. Purring, the pretty calico butted her chin, begging to be noticed. Grateful for the distraction, Stormi indulged her. Geoffrey reached to slide one of the photos out again. Storm shot him up a look of reproach.

"Kailey had them scattered all over the back porch. I rescued them for you. Thought you'd be happy I did." When she didn't respond, he said gently, "Hasn't sunk in yet, has it? Not fully."

As much as she had enjoyed her daydreaming lapse, she now wished he'd go on about his business. Unless . . . *she* was his business. One way to find out.

Before she had the chance to challenge him, Kailey burst into the office. "*Momma! Momma!* Da'e Geoff took my pictures o' my Wawrey. And I wanted to *wook* at 'em! Where are 'em?" Seeing him there, she trotted purposefully over to him. "You gib 'em back to me!"

"They belong to your mother."

"Well, I wanna wook at 'em. Moob, Chloe," she ordered the kitten as she climbed into Stormi's lap. "I sittin' here now!"

Stormi, feeling ganged up on, made room for her and Chloe both upon her lap. She poked Kailey's ribs. "Thought you were going to Thomi's with everyone?"

"Da'e Geoff not goin', I not goin'. I gonna stay here wid you. I had fun on a boat with Da'e Geoff, but I d' wike dat bad wady! Know what Nicky say? I gordress wike you, Momma, an' he say I wook wike Wawrey, too. An' wike *Stephan*. But I don't wook wike *That Bad Man*. An' I gwad. Is you gwad, Momma?"

"Yeah, you've got nothing to do with that side!"

Geoffrey slid the photo closer. Lawrey's smiling face beamed at her. His blue eyes crinkled with humor, his coppery hair, thick and wavy, glinting brightly in the afternoon sun. He stood next to a chestnut mare the same color as his hair, his left hand wrapped about her face just above her muzzle. *Damn*—this picture could be that portrait of Matt and his horse that Halleigh had done!

"That luck . . . or an admission?" He spoke it almost casually, without any accusation or judgment. A far different tone than he'd used a couple weeks ago when the reason Stephan needed to marry quickly had come out in *Celebrity Tidbits*. One might have expected him to use that tone now.

As this was not a conversational trail she wanted to trot on now, she flipped the picture over. She was about to ask him if he had some things to take care of when his cell phone rang out, "*Incoming transmission! Incoming transmission!*"

He pulled it out of his back pocket and flipped it open. "Yeah?"

"Hey . . . Helene's lurking out here beside the road. Can't think why she'd believe we wouldn't notice her." Lyndsay's voice, a touch sarcastic and definitely disapproving, carried clearly over to Stormi. "Daine says you went sailing with her? And you took Kailey? How'd *that* work out?" She gave him no time to respond. "Well, anyway, she's out here! Don't worry, we won't tell Thomi or Rikki! *Tonight*, anyway!" She clicked off.

Geoffrey slid his phone back into his pocket, got up from the desk. As he strode for the door, Kailey called to him, "Where you going, Da'e Geoff? Wook at da pictures wid us!"

"I will later, Kai. Look at them with your mother. Make her talk about your Lawrey with you!"

"*Otay!*" uttered Kailey fervently. "I gonna *make* her!" She twisted around to look up at Storm. "And you *gotta*. Da'e Geoff said!"

What the hell was it to him? Why should he care?

At the door, he glanced back. For a second his gaze rested upon Kailey, then traveled to her. He left without saying so long, goodbye, or see you later. But his look, similar to the one he'd given her on the beach, promised he would be back.

What? Had someone—Nicky, perhaps—finally found the brick or baseball bat harder than his head? Or . . . Thomi's ardent recommendation burst in to haunt. *Put a storm in his heart!*

So, *had* she done that? *How? When?* He'd never given a clue except in those photos of last week. And who could honestly say what his expression in them was really about? Although, come to think of it, his attitude toward Helene earlier hadn't been particularly lovely. Heart thudded with hope and some dread.

Her gaze alighted upon Lawron's photo which Kailey had flipped back over. Well, really, she had a storm in her *own* heart. *More* than one sort, in fact!

"Momma! How come we weft Wawrey at dat farm? How come, Momma?" Kailey spilled all of the photos and the letters onto the desktop. Shoving the letters aside, she eagerly perused the pictures. "Wookit, Momma! Kourtney taked this picture. I remember her did. Does Bwett kiss you wike dis? I don't wike it when the udder guys

kiss you. I want you to kiss my Da'e Geoff wike dis! Will Wawrey be mad if you kiss my Da'e Geoff wike dis?"

At this, Stormi's mind shut completely down, and her heart became a dead weight. "Kailey, I don't have time for this now. Maybe later, okay?" Like in thirty years. "I ought to see what Clark and Terrah are up to."

"They was going to da udder barn. An' Clark say he was gonna hab a 'moke 'hind da barn."

Didn't take her but a second to decipher this remark. "Did he? Terrific! He's going to be cleaning stalls for weeks!" Storm set both Kailey and Chloe on the floor and crossed to the door. Kailey hurried to catch up.

Stormi caught a whiff of acrid smoke and burning hay before she was halfway down to the boarding barn. Scooping up Kailey, she broke into a run. Rounded the corner of the barn in time to see ten year-old Clark and nine year-old Terrah struggling to separate a burning bale from the others piled by the back wall of the barn. A full pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes lay on the ground nearby. A neon green lighter not far off from those. In the barn, Cedric paced, braying his concern.

Setting Kailey down safely out of the way, Storm swiftly moved to grab the strings of the hefty bale and heave it aside. A second bale burst into flames. Tipping it off those it sat on, she kicked it away. The ground here was mainly dirt, so she had no fear of grass catching fire and spreading. Ordering the children to keep their distance, she dashed around the side of the barn to the outside water faucet. Uncoiled the hose and turned it on. In a few minutes, the flames were out.

Dropping the hose, she went over and kicked the bales apart, ordered Clark to get a shovel. She had to tell him twice before he went. When he came back with it, she cast him a reproving glance and began tossing dirt upon the charred remains. A few wisps of smoke escaped, but the danger was past. She turned to face the culprits.

"You're dead meat, you know that? Come on, we're going to have a *talk*. *Again!*"

"What're you gonna do, Storm?" Terrah asked with tearful apprehension. "We're sorry! We didn't mean to start a fire!"

"Maybe not. But, you did. What if I hadn't come along? What if all the horses had been in? That make you happy?"

"No-oo. We're sorry, right, Clark? We won't do it again! Really, we won't!"

"*You* were smoking, too, Terrah?"

"No, but—"

"Yes, she *was*! Don't lie, Terrah!"

"All right, we'll talk about this as soon as I figure out who I should call. I'd call your parents, but they never seem to be home!"

Should she disturb the rehearsal or Geoffrey? She bit her lip and glanced down at her small charges. Seemed like the rehearsal and this emergency were more important than Helene . . . Whoa, damn . . . that sounded heartless. Well, it couldn't be helped. The rehearsal *was* important, and this situation had to be dealt with.

She might be in charge, but it was the Tollefsons who allowed themselves to be used. It should be a Tollefson who decided their fate.

Shadowed Dreams

TEN

“**W***hy* are you here?” Geoffrey didn’t bother leaning down to her level. Her window was open. That would do.

“I felt you should know something.” Helene took off her sunglasses and parked them in her purse. Pulled a white envelope from another pocket of it. She held it away from him a moment, as if she wasn’t quite sure she wanted to hand it over, then flipped it toward him.

He kept his hands where they were, one at his hip, and the other hooked in his wide, tooled leather belt. “Whatever you think you have is not going to change my mind!”

“I think it will! It should! Look, I—I do care for you, Geoff. I do. It’s just . . . well, if you could only do something *else* for work! I’m scared to death of horses—you know that. I just can’t picture myself here. I’d never fit in.”

“You never tried. Doesn’t matter now. You’re free to do whatever you want.”

She cast him up an imploring look. “All I wanted was us to be our *own* family. *Away* from our families!”

“I can’t do that, Helene. I understand why you feel as you do about your own family, but mine is different. I told you that from the beginning.”

She got out of the car, set to seduce him. Said coaxingly, “If you really loved me—”

He brought up a hand, making her pause where she was. “Don’t! What’s done is done! You had your chances. You blew them. I’m moving on!”

She put her hand out to him. “I’m sorry, truly! Please, don’t—”

His cell phone’s distinctive tone interrupted them. He thought about letting the call go, but then, elected to at least see who needed him. Seeing that it came from his father’s office, he answered it. “Storm? What’s going on?” She told him, and he answered, “You have the authority to deal with them. But give me a second. I’ll be right there.”

Was as good as any excuse to leave this scene. Pocketing the phone, he said to Helene, “I have to go. I really don’t think we have anything else to talk about.” Still not accepting that envelope.

Helene shoved it back into her purse. Bitterly asked, “So, am I to be replaced with that redhead Daine was with this morning? Who is she—besides Kailey’s mother and Kourtney’s sister, I mean?”

“My father’s foreman and stable manager.”

Helene opened her eyes wide. "His *foreman*? *Manager*?" With a measure of disbelief. "You mean she's *working* here? Do *you* report to her?"

"I have to go. Have a safe trip!"

"I'm not leaving yet! You forget—I have family here, too!"

"Forgive me. Forget is what your parents wanted me to do. So now I have."

With that, he strode to his truck. Got in, spun around, and headed on down the white stone drive to the barn. Left her standing there alone.

* * *

"What did he say? Is he mad?"

"I don't imagine he's dancing with joy, do you?"

Clark shrugged. "I guess not."

"Your sister seems to be more sorry than you are, boy! Why's that? You looking to get kicked out of here? I can arrange for that, you know. Nick's made me boss around here, in case no one's told you that yet."

Terrah whimpered and pleaded with her to reconsider. Clark bit his lip but said nothing. Stormi paced the floor a space, trying to figure what she could say that would elicit some remorse from him. Finally, she stopped before him.

"You know, I'm sorry I didn't turn you in the first time I caught you with cigarettes. But, I gave you a second chance. And only *two days* later, you're out there again—lighting up! What if the barn caught fire? Cedric was the only one in there, but still—how happy would Mrs. Greene have been?" Stormi bent close to Clark and took his chin between her long fingers. "We're too lenient with you two. You ought to be tossed out of here, you *and* your horses. Never be allowed back!"

"And I agree with her! Clark, you're treading very thin ice here—and it's July!" Geoffrey entered his father's office in time to hear Stormi's declaration. "I've just inspected the damage. You're lucky Storm found you first! I'm inclined to find a suitable switch . . . Terrah, you can't be as innocent as you look! You knew he was smoking."

"*She* was, too!" Clark burst out.

"No, I wasn't!" Terrah swiftly shot back.

"Not right *then*," Clark informed. "But you were!"

"I just took one puff. I don't like it!"

"And you threw it away in the field!" stated Clark.

"*You* threw *yours* in the hay! Don't lie! You did!"

Storm straightened and looked over at Geoffrey. "We have a bigger problem than we knew with them. Not only are they smoking, I've caught them stealing things from our tack room. Not just the small things, either."

"I know. One of Thomi's best saddle blankets. Rikki's and Halleigh's bridles. *My* new blanket . . . *What* did you say you were doing with them, again?"

"Just showing them to people. They like seeing stuff that's hers and everybody's . . . and—kids pay me to show them stuff!"

"Just *showing* stuff? How is it that stuff never comes back to us?"

Clark hadn't anything to say to that. Just hunched a shoulder and looked away.

"My sisters are absolutely right—my father *isn't* charging enough!" mused Geoffrey, eying Clark with dark promise. "Storm, you shouldn't have called just me. You should have called the police—"

Clark's self-confidence suddenly turned to something near terror. "*No! No*, I'm sorry, Geoff! Honest! I won't do it again! Honest! Please, please, don't call the police!"

"You'd better mean it, boy! I find out you've even glanced at a butt on the ground, you're history. Both of you! As for *stealing* . . ."

"Okay, okay . . . we'll ask first!" It was spoken with earnest compliance, and Geoffrey seemed to accept it, so Stormi held her tongue. In her opinion, Clark Cabott's word meant nothing, and Terrah's not much more.

A horn sounded out in the driveway. Geoffrey put a hand at the back of Clark's head and made him get up from the chair. "Your parents are here. The only reason I'm not telling them what happened is because I doubt they'd do anything about it, anyway. We'll deal with it right here. You're on probation, both of you. Step out of line again, and the police *will* be called, and you *will* be out of here. Understand?"

They nodded. Geoffrey let go of Clark, and the two children scampered out of the office like bunnies on the run.

"He didn't show so much concern when I threatened to call the cops," observed Stormi. "Terrah did."

"Yeah, I think their parents are being watched. But as they don't mistreat the kids physically, as far as I can see, they're left alone. I'll alert Mom and Dad, and we'll keep a closer eye on them."

"I have been threatened with the absolute care of them."

Geoffrey looked amused. "Oh, that's cruel! Was he upset you spent the day at the beach instead of coming back home like you should have?"

"Upset I didn't come back. He doesn't know where I spent the day, actually. Unless your mother tells him. Or Daine. Which is totally likely!"

"Well, don't sweat it. He doesn't know where I spent the day, either. Or with whom. But now, I'm sure he's put two and two together. Helene sitting there beside the road like she was!"

There was that in his expression that alerted her his meeting with Helene hadn't gone well. She had a thought to a casual inquiry but refrained.

Spying the mess of photos littering his father's huge desk, he observed. "You shared these with her after all."

"Well . . . we were interrupted . . ."

Storm moved to clean them up and stuff them back into the envelope. She couldn't quite make the letters fit in as they had originally, so she jammed them into her back pocket. Stuck the envelope of photos in the other one. Left the hundred-dollar bill right where it was. So did he.

"I hung'y, Momma! Momma Netra didn't make nooo supper. Her said Thom'syna's makin' supper. Can we go to Thomi'syna's and hab supper, Momma?" Kailey gazed up at her with hopeful eyes, hanging on to one of her hands with both of hers.

"We'll have supper right here," Geoffrey told her. "Does your mother know how to make anything besides popcorn?"

"Yep, her does! And Kourtney does! Kourtney made wots of suppers for us when we wived on the bus, huh, Momma? I wike the bus. How come we don't wive on it no more?"

"Because Anetra said she didn't want us living in the bus if we were working here."

"That nice of her, huh, Momma? I wuv Momma Netra. Her's nicer than G'amma Iz!" Keeping her mother's hand in one of hers, Kailey reached for Geoffrey's with her free one. "And I wuv my Wawrey, and my Da'e Geoff, and *my* Momma, too!" She smiled up at them. "So, wet's eat!"

The thought of being alone in the house with Geoffrey, Kailey notwithstanding, filled her with a dreadful anticipation. She hoped it wouldn't show . . . *again*.

Geoffrey moved to put a hand to her shoulder, urging her forward. But she stepped away. Hiding her confusion behind defensiveness, she challenged him. "What's *with* you all of a sudden? This morning, I barely existed! Now, you're ready for me to make supper for you? Eat it in my company?"

He stepped around Kailey and buried his hand in the thickness of her hair. "Remember how I told Brett I wasn't going to steal his happiness this morning?"

Much too aware of his touch, she replied guardedly, "Yee-ah."

"Not morning, any more!" Heh. Well, obviously, Daine had gotten the true sense of Geoffrey's remark!

While it made her laugh, Stormi eyed him with lively disbelief. "But you've been so—so—"

"Mizzer'ble," supplied Kailey helpfully, guessing where her mother was going with this.

Stormi patted Kailey's head. "Yeah! So, what's changed? Is she *really* gone?"

He wouldn't acknowledge anything. Picking Kailey up, he urged Stormi toward the door. "Brett's got the most tender steaks in the fridge. You want to cook inside or out?"

"Out sounds good." Out might be safer for her peace of mind . . .

"Out it is!"

They shared the tasks of preparing and grilling the meal. As she imagined, it was difficult for her to work with him so closely and keep her feelings under control. Yes, Geoffrey could make her almost forget her feelings for Lawrey right now. *Would* make her forget . . . in time. Okay, not *forget*, precisely. But . . . lessen her sorrow considerably.

But then . . . she'd known it the very first instant she'd seen him out in the stable yard. Shirt off, shoeing a tall Percheron-Thoroughbred cross. Geoffrey'd glanced up at their arrival. Green eyes had met gray for an electric moment as Stormi exited the car. In that instant, her mind had gone missing, taking the memory of Lawron with it—as well as Dean's recent warning of what would happen should she embark upon a new relationship. All that filled her brain, at the time, was never had she glimpsed so gorgeous a man in her life!

While she had certainly noticed his superior height, his perfect form and the way the sweat glistened on well-developed muscles; thick, wavy, blue black hair that her fingers knew an itch to play in—the way Stephan played in Thomi's—what had attracted her

most were those eyes. So deep an emerald green. So easy to get lost in the mystery of them. As undeniably handsome as he was, eyes like those could trap a girl completely even if he hadn't been.

And she had been trapped. That quick.

Casually, Geoffrey remarked, "Fantasy's showing promise already. Dad mention his plans for her?" He plated the steaks, the grilled potatoes, and the corn on the cob, took it all over to the picnic table.

"Not to me," Stormi replied, lifting Kailey upon the bench and sitting beside her. "I expect she'll be for sale eventually. She seems to be a calm and quick study! Which isn't to say she has no fire!"

He chose to sit opposite them. As he accepted a full plate from her, he said, "You're the one who calms them. They fall under your spell, and they'll do anything to please you!" She shot him a glance but said nothing. Just waited. Sure enough, he added, "Like my brothers . . ."

"Yeah, I knew that was coming!" She poked a cucumber with her fork. "Didn't faze you!"

"Oh, sweetheart, you don't know how many sleepless nights you've caused me these past three weeks!"

She gave a disbelieving laugh. "What? You saying that your family has only told me the truth? That you've been struggling with what to do with your life, now that I've walked into it!"

He acknowledged it with a slight nod and smile. "That would be a fair assessment of it."

She shook her head, not ready to accept that as reality.

He looked at her over his corn cob. "You aren't just another pretty face. Not in the least conceited, and you don't try to seduce every male who gives you the eye! You can run this place by yourself, and you're the one up early mucking stalls. Follow orders without too much complaint. Honestly, you're the best thing that's happened to this place. Kournay, too."

"Who *are* you, and what have you done with Geoffrey Tollefson?" How wonderful it would be if her parents could hear him saying all this. Dean, too! Even Ruthe . . .

Geoffrey smiled and fished a few of Thomi's pickled jalapenos out of the jar. Stormi put her hand out for the jar once he'd gotten his.

"So . . . what was it that made you come to your momentous decision? And *when* did you?"

He swallowed his mouthful of food. Replied, "When Helene showed up last night."

"Last night? You went to Thomi's last night."

"The rehearsal broke up at around nine. I got Helene's call shortly after that. Said she was at her parents' house and wanted to meet. I met her for coffee at our usual spot—where we're sure we're safe from spying, prying eyes." A pause, then he confided, "She wanted more than coffee, but . . . I suddenly felt a brick, or possibly it was a baseball bat, upside my head. And I realized how futile my life would be—or rather was, already—with her dominating it. How pointless it would be without you and Kailey in it."

"Forgive me! I'm having trouble with this! You didn't let on a thing at breakfast! Why didn't you say something then?"

"You left."

"Ah, don't give me that line of horse sh-eets! Nothing in the way you acted even hinted you'd changed your mind!"

"You never let your eyes meet mine," he reminded her. "Of course, I had wanted to be more private with you . . . you know how much of that we would've had then. None at all!" His gaze became mischievously reflective. "But my brothers' lamentations would've been entertaining!"

She laughed. "Not how I see it! She's not seeing things as final?"

"No, but, I expected that. Still, I won't put up with her lurking about. We're done!"

Stormi played with her potatoes. Every bit of this had a surreal quality about it. Partly because she hadn't expected he'd ever wake up in her lifetime. But mostly because Dean still lurked in her life. Too, she couldn't believe Helene would give up without further fight. She likely wouldn't prove to be as dangerous as Dean was likely to be. Just another annoying obstacle to have to hurdle.

"I d'wike dat wady, Da'e Geoff! Nicky don't, eider! He was wude to her, huh, Da'e Geoff? He was! And I was gwad!"

"Yes, I ought to have confided better in him," Geoffrey said. "But, I didn't. Just phoned him on the way and told him I'd appreciate his piloting *Whispers* for us! She kept clinging and he kept ruthlessly throwing you into the picture . . ."

Stormi gave a short laugh. "Your mother thought he'd do that!"

"Annoying, but he meant well. She finally drank enough wine to fall asleep, and the rest of the cruise was pleasant."

Waving a carrot stick at them both, Kailey pronounced, "My Wawrey don't dwink wike dat! No, he don't! And he fixes things good wike Nicky does, too, huh, Momma?" Kailey looked up at her with happy expectation. "And he is good wid horses wike you! Even the wild ones! Cause you ussa hab a wild one, huh, Momma? Could I hab some more corn cobs, pease?"

Stormi buttered a fresh cob and set it before her, watched her bite into it with relish. Not in many months had she seen her little daughter enjoy her food. And enjoy so much of it! So thrilled that her mother and her Da'e Geoff were sharing time with her, and in perfect amicability. Like a real family.

"She's happy her fondest wish is coming true."

Stormi reached for her glass and took a swig. Looked at him over the rim of it. "I wish I was a kid so I could be that sure of it! There are loose ends here! Besides our exes, your brothers aren't going to be easily put off either!"

"One loose end at a time, Storm. My brothers are the simplest. One quick hand is all it'll take!"

She coughed and choked over her iced tea. "You *can't* be *serious*!" she objected when she could. "Told Thomi you wouldn't stoop to that! Should have recognized her better knowledge of you, obviously!"

"Obviously! In general, I don't make meaningless wagers. But, it's got to be clear to you by now, that I have to follow the rules already established where you're concerned!"

She eyed him darkly. "I just thought it would keep them from killing each other over me! I never expected it to become a *daily ritual*!"

Geoffrey reached for another slab of steak. "You're going to allow it to continue a little while longer."

Stormi eyed him with misgiving. "Why?"

"Because," he replied with feeling, "I don't want them singing songs of revenge, directed at, and dedicated to me, on Sunday! I'll play for keeps Monday."

"Ah! There would be that, wouldn't there? Some humiliation for me, too, for betraying them so heartlessly!"

"Oh, I wouldn't doubt it! I'd have to find songs to counteract theirs. Or exact excruciatingly painful punishment for it later. But I feel it's best avoided altogether, if possible." He contemplated his next bite of meat. "Poetic justice right now, actually. You were supposed to be Brett's prize tonight, but here we are, munching his delicious beef together behind his back!"

She thought of some other activities that would be even more delicious, but as he seemed to read her mind all too readily, she parked those dangerous thoughts away for the moment. Maybe, later . . . when she was alone. "I hope he forgives us!"

"He'll get over it! Have another!"

"Thank you, I've had my limit! You don't seem to have one, I notice!"

"I believe I've reached it!" He dropped his hand over hers. Idly, she observed that it covered it completely. Not even Lawron's had done so. "I believe, too, that you've missed eating with us because of my . . . confused indecision." His fingers squeezed hers. "I promise it's ended. From now on, don't stay away from our table."

She made a self-deprecating gesture. "I doubt I'd fade away missing a meal or two."

He swept a glance over her. "Possibly not. But you have the height and build that wouldn't let you be much slimmer. I'm not into scarecrows!"

She responded, "You're anything but that yourself!"

"That Bad Man is 'kinny. But he stronger, huh, Momma! That why he hurt you so much, huh? But Wawrey don't hurt us and Da'e Geoff don't hurt us. And I want you to call Wawrey and make him come wive wid us. That make you happy, Momma? I be happy!"

Stormi shifted her position on the picnic bench. Which made her all too aware of the photos and the letters shoved into her pockets, waiting . . . patiently. They suddenly seemed to become a fire under her seat.

"The next loose end we need to address." When she let out a long reluctant breath and tried to drag her hand out of his hold, he kept it fast. Said softly, "You can't move on if you haven't grieved him, Storm. Moreover, don't think it's only you who needs to talk things out! I have a few things you need to know as well."

She drew back a little. "Oh, no! What happened between you and Helene—that was all before me! I—"

"This isn't going to be a one-sided relationship, Storm. I've had enough of that sort of deal with Helene! We need to become close enough to share everything with each other. Good or bad."

He held her gaze for a significant moment. Since she honestly desired such a close relationship herself, she finally nodded. "All right. All right, yes, I want that, too. But—"

"Wawry holds your hand wike dat, too, don't he?" Kailey stood up on the bench and climbed across the table to plop herself in Geoffrey's lap. Looking up at him with big blue eyes, she wondered, "Da'e Geoff, can peoples hab two da'eies? I want two. Yep, that why I want Wawry to come wive with us. I gonna wite him a wetter. And I gonna tell him my Momma's sad widout him." She looked across the table at the point where her mother's hand disappeared into Geoffrey's. "Da'e Geoff gots big hands, huh, Momma!"

"The better to protect you both," he quoted with humor and glanced across at Storm who was thinking of something else entirely. Really, his touch was making it hard for her to stay focused on what was being said right now. She kind of just wanted to wander away in her pleasant daydreams. "That, too!" he added with a teasing smile that reached his eyes. "I don't think I need to drop a hundred bucks for your thoughts right now. Do I?"

She drew in a breath, at once annoyed and amused. And wholly embarrassed. Pulling out of his hold, she stood, uttering a firm, "I think we should clean up our mess now! Kailey, you're a little grunge! You need a bath!"

"I was hoping we could go for a short ride," Geoffrey said, letting Kailey go with her mother. "It's still early."

Before she could respond, his cell phone announced a call incoming. His eyes still on hers, he answered it. His lips parted in disbelief as he listened. "All right! I'll come. But, Elaina, it won't change *anything*." He looked at Storm as he pocketed the phone, "Helene's mother. Helene's tried to kill herself."

Stormi stared at him in appalled incredulity. Then, with a certain resignation, observed, "She's going to be as determined a loose end as Dean, isn't she?"

"It appears she's going to try to be!" he agreed. "At least we got to finish supper! We'll take that ride later! I'll be back as quick as I can." He strode away to his truck.

"Where is he goin', Momma? How come he don't wanna stay wid us? We was havin' fun, huh, Momma?"

"Yeah," said Stormi, taking her hand and leading her toward the house. "Looks like we're going to have a lot more fun pretty soon! Not the good kind, either!"

About the Author



Neenah began writing fantasy and mysteries in the fifth grade, fan fiction and westerns in her teens, and romances after her mother introduced her to Harlequin novels in her twenties.

She has taken courses in fiction writing and journalism, earning highest honors in short story writing. She has also spoken in classrooms and at workshops on writing, self-publishing, and writing as a career.

A proud lefty, Neenah often reflects that trait in her characters. Rather than portraying lefties as clumsy or inept, she enjoys showing them as capable, confident, and anything but ordinary—inspired by her two sisters, and the many other relatives and friends, who also share that distinction.

She is the author of several novels and short stories, and is currently working on the next two books in her romance/saga series, as yet untitled.

Vermont is home to Neenah and her husband of over forty years. She has four sons, two granddaughters, and a cute granddog named Tobi. When she isn't writing, she enjoys laser crafting, reading, biking, hiking, bowling, game nights with family and friends, her faith, and just about anything involving horses—having once owned a small herd herself! Maybe you could tell that?

With Sincere Thanks!

Thanks so much for reading *A Storm in My Heart*! I hope you enjoyed your time with Storm and Geoffrey—and their families.

Book Four and Book Five are being mapped out and first drafts begun. I hope you'll join me for yet more installments of the DreamWynd Whispers saga!

If you have a moment, I would truly appreciate it if you'd consider leaving a review at the retailer where you purchased your copy. Reviews help more than you know, and I'm grateful for every one.

Thank you again for reading the story, and for spending time with me and my worlds.

You can find more about my books and updates at [NovelsByNeenah](#), Join my reader circle for new release alerts and occasional behind-the-scenes updates from my horse and romance worlds.

Facebook author page: [Facebook.com/NeenahDavisWilson](#).

With warm gratitude,

Neenah Davis-Wilson

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