Give Me Liberty
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Chapter One

She roared into town with about as much force and impact as a meteorite — and with damn near as much noise, too.

The muffler on her fancy foreign sports car had blown out, and as she rolled past Luke Fulton's shop, he heard the racket and looked out of the big plate-glass window.

She parked directly across Main Street, in front of the grocer's. The car was an ancient Triumph Spitfire, painted an almost-neon shade of blue. The driver was...

Luke squinted to get a better look at the woman who climbed out of the little car.

Tall. She was very tall. More than six feet, he guessed, by the length of her legs. Her blue jeans fit her like a second skin. Luke could tell from the way they were faded that they were the original article, worn down from hard work and wear instead of an acid wash. On top, she was wearing a T-shirt, nothing fancy, just plain white, with the sleeves rolled up. It fit her snugly, revealing a body that was trim and well-proportioned to the rest of her.

Extremely well-proportioned, Luke thought. He knew he was staring, but he couldn't stop himself. Hell, with that racket she'd caused, no doubt half of the town had their faces pressed against their windows, watching her.

She shaded her eyes with her hand and looked up and down the street, as if searching for something.

She wore her hair pulled back into a ponytail, with a wispy fringe of bangs framing her face. Her hair was long and straight and a light shade of brown. Although he couldn't see her clearly, her face seemed pretty, kind of heart-shaped and sweet-looking. She was too far away for him to be sure though, or to see what color her eyes were.

As Luke watched, she crouched down next to her car, looking at the muffler. She opened the trunk and pulled out a tool kit. Then, without regard for her clothes, she lay down on her back and scooted underneath the car.

Luke pointedly brought his eyes back to the work he'd spread out on the counter. What was going on out on Main Street wouldn't get him any further in preparing these financial statements. But as he looked down at the papers and figures, he couldn't concentrate.

In exasperation, he finally locked the cash register and went to the door, turning the "Be Right Back" sign to the front. As he stepped outside, the bells on the door rang as if warning him that he was making a mistake. He locked the door behind him.

He was making a mistake. He had about seven more hours of work, and five hours to do it in, and he was out here in the street for no good reason.

It was a Tuesday afternoon in July, and the high temperatures had kept most people down at the lake. Not a single car moved on Main Street as Luke crossed the road, heading for the bright blue Spitfire.

A pair of worn, dusty cowboy boots and two slender legs were sticking out from underneath the little car. Luke crouched down and knocked gently on the hubcap.

"Hey, you need any help?" He was just being neighborly, he told himself. just being friendly, doing his duty as a member of the Sterling Chamber of Commerce.

The fact that this stranger had sparked something inside of him that he hadn't felt in a long time had nothing to do with anything. Besides, he gave himself two minutes before she totally turned him off. He'd played the part of the weekend distraction for rich young women before, and, quite frankly, it — and they — bored him.

"Can you hand me that wrench with the red handle?"

Her voice was low and musical, and Luke suddenly knew that he wasn't just making a mistake. He was making an enormous mistake. For years now, he'd kept his distance from women like this. Wealthy city women who breezed into town for a short vacation to ski and spend time up at the fancy resort on Gate's Mountain. They were beautiful, loaded with cash, and looking for a thrill, and many seemed to think Luke, with his dark good looks, was just the form of temporary excitement they needed. Although none of them would ever have broken their fingernails on a wrench. This had to be the first time he'd ever seen a rich tourist crawling around underneath her car.

He hunted for the red-handled wrench, spotting it at the bottom of the tool kit.

"Find it?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Sure you don't want me to do that for you?"

"I've almost got it," she said. "I just need that other wrench."
A hand appeared from the side of the car and Luke placed the wrench in it. Her fingers were long and slender, the nails short but neat. She wore no rings, at least not on her right hand. He wouldn't know if she were married until he saw her other hand.

With any luck, she'd be married. Not that that fact would necessarily matter to her, but it sure as hell mattered to him. If she were married, she'd be off limits. No exception to that rule.

"Is it one million degrees out today or two?" she asked.

Luke laughed despite his resolve. "Sign on the bank says only ninety-four."

"Only? I didn't think you guys allowed it to get this hot in Vermont," she said. "Of course, I shouldn't be complaining. At least I'm in the shade."

Luke heard the sound of the wrench slipping.

"Ouch," she said, swearing colorfully under her breath. She caught herself. "Sorry, I probably shouldn't say things like that until we've been properly introduced. For all I know, you're the pastor of the Congregational Church."

"Relax," Luke said with another laugh. "I'm not."

"You know what I really need?" she said.

"What?"

"I just can't get leverage," she said. He heard her moving around underneath the car, changing her position. "I could really use a cold soda and a place to change out of these jeans."

Do not offer to let her use the back room of the shop, Luke told himself firmly. Do not do it. "There's a ladies' room two blocks down at Bob's Bar and Grill," he said. That wasn't so hard, was it? "Of course you could always use the back room in my store. I don't have any soda, but it's right across the street."

What was wrong with him?

He liked her, that was what was wrong with him. He hadn't even looked into her eyes, but he already liked her.

"Have you got a name?" she was asking him. "Or should I just call you Sir Galahad, you know, because you go around rescuing damsels in distress all the time?"


"Got it," she said triumphantly.

She shoved the muffler out. "Careful, it's still hot," she said.

Luke grabbed it by the edges of the rag she'd used to hold it. There was a ragged hole in one end of the muffler. No wonder the car had made so much noise. He set it down on the ground as he pushed himself to his feet, watching the young woman inch her way out from under the car.

Her T-shirt was riding up, exposing her smooth, tanned stomach. Luke's mouth went dry. He couldn't remember the last time the sight of a woman's bare skin made him feel this way. Her white shirt was streaked with dirt and drenched with sweat, clinging to her full breasts. Her greasy hands grabbed the bumper, and she pulled herself the rest of the way out.

Lord help him, she was pretty. Not beautiful, not gorgeous, but most definitely pretty. Her eyes were an amazing shade of violet, surrounded by thick, dark lashes. Her nose was straight, about the right size for her face, and dotted with freckles. Her mouth was maybe a little too wide, but her lips were full and lush.

And then she smiled. Her smile transformed her face, changing her into drop-dead gorgeous.

He never should have left the store.

"Luke Fulton," she said, still smiling up at him from the ground. "Wow, I didn't know you still lived in Sterling."

She knew him. He didn't remember her. Was it possible that they'd been lovers? No, it had been years since he'd had a casual affair, and she looked way too young.

No ring. Her left hand was without a ring. She wasn't married. Could it get much worse?

She started to push herself to her feet, and he belatedly remembered his manners, holding out a hand to help pull her up.
She wiped her hand on her jeans before taking his. "I'm Lib Jones, Harriet's niece. You don't remember me, do you?"

Harriet? He didn't know any Harriets. Luke pulled much too hard, and wound up catching gorgeous Lib Jones in his arms.

Up close, nose to nose, she was even more beautiful. Luke stared at her, hoping to find some kind of flaw, hoping to see the edge of contact lenses that would prove the amazing color of her eyes was a sham.

"No," he said. Her body felt so soft. He searched his mind almost desperately, but didn't come up with anything. No Lib Jones's, no Harriets. Nothing. "I'm sorry, but I don't."

"That's okay," she said breathlessly. "Last time I was in Sterling, I was just a kid. I wouldn't expect you to recognize me." She looked at him for several moments, then smiled again. "Are you going to let me go, or do you have something else in mind?"

Luke had been watching her mouth as if he were hypnotized. Lib felt his arms tighten around her for a fraction of a second, right before he let her go.

"I'm sorry," he said again, backing away several steps. "I'm usually not so... rude."

He was looking at her with fire in his dark eyes. Only in her wildest dreams had she imagined Luke Fulton would ever look at her like he wanted to kiss her.

He'd changed quite a bit since the last time Lib had been in Sterling. Oh, he still had that wavy hair. It was still thick and as black as coal, although these days it was cut shorter around his ears and in the front. He was still as tall as he'd ever been, about a good four inches taller than her own six feet, and he still had the muscular build of a college basketball player.

His long face was still lean, with wide cheekbones and a firm, strong chin. When she was a kid, Lib had always thought Luke Fulton looked as if he could have posed for the glossy pictures in her book on the French and Indian War. Of course, it was no secret that he had both French and Native American blood running through his veins, which made it all so much more appropriate and romantic.

His eyes were still a deep shade of chocolate brown, so dark they seemed black, framed by thick lashes and elegantly shaped eyebrows. The color of his eyes hadn't changed, but Lib knew just from looking into those eyes that this man had done quite a bit of hard living since she'd seen him last.

As if he realized she could see too much in his eyes, he looked away.

"What kind of store?" she asked, turning to haul her tool kit into the trunk of the car. "Have you been working there long?"

It took him a few seconds to answer her, but Lib waited patiently, opening the suitcase that also sat in the trunk. She rummaged around until she found cut-off shorts and a pair of sneakers.

"Video," he said. "Video tape rental, you know, movies? And I don't work there. I own the place, but the kid who works afternoons had a tennis match to go to." He shrugged.

"Wow, you're a nice boss," Lib smiled, tucking the shorts under her arm and closing the trunk.

Luke shrugged again. "It's only a summer job," he said. His voice was low, a rich baritone. Lib wondered if he could sing. "It's not like the kid has any kind of a future working for me at the video store, you know what I mean?"

Lib considered his words, wiping the sweat that trickled from her forehead with the grubby sleeve of her T-shirt. "I don't know," she said. "Business must be pretty good for you when the skiers hit town." She smiled at him. "So. You gonna show me to your back room, or am I gonna strip right here in the street?"

Her smile had turned to a grin, as if she knew the effect her words would have on his system. It had been so long since he'd flirted with a beautiful woman, he'd almost forgotten how.

But he didn't want to flirt with Lib Jones, niece of Harriet — whoever Harriet was. He wanted to show her to the store, let her change her clothes and then say good-bye. The end.

He gestured with his head. "I'm just across the street."

Luke could feel the dozens of eyes that were watching him cross the dusty road with this gorgeous woman who was nearly as tall as he was. There goes our Luke, he could hear them saying, back to his old tricks.
"I heard that you had to sell your farm," Lib said, as he unlocked the door.


The video store was air conditioned, and Lib found a vent and stood directly underneath the stream of cool air. She closed her eyes. "This feels great," she said. "I may never leave." Her eyes opened. "Is there still an auto parts store in town?"

"Down the street, across from the bar and grill." Luke moved behind the safety of the counter and began shuffling his papers around. Anything, anything to keep himself from staring at her. "You know the guy who owns the service station on the corner does really good work. He's basically trustworthy, won't charge you too much. You might be better off going to him—"

"I do really good work," she said, "I'm absolutely trustworthy, and I won't charge myself a cent. Can't beat that deal."

Luke glanced up at her. "No, I guess you can't."

"Are you married?" She asked it point-blank, looking him dead in the eye. There was no question as to why she wanted to know. She was attracted to him. He could see it in her eyes, in the way she was standing, in her smile. "No." He answered abruptly.

"Seeing anyone?"

He couldn't lie. "No." She was going to be disappointed, but he wasn't going to ask her out. He couldn't. He wouldn't.

"Then will you have dinner with me tonight?"

Luke looked up in surprise. This was a new twist to the game. She had asked him out.

As he watched, she leaned against the counter, resting her chin in the palm of her hand, smiling up into his eyes. Lord, she was pretty, and so utterly self-confident.

"What time?" he heard himself say. He caught himself, and shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. I can't."

She smiled, undaunted. "Sure you can."

"I'm busy." He turned away.

Lib's laughter was as musical as her voice. Luke had to grit his teeth.

"What, you gotta wash your hair?" she asked, amusement in her voice.

Luke laughed despite himself. "You want me to be honest?" he said, looking back at her.

She still had her chin propped in her hand and she was still gazing at him. "Why is it that people feel they have to ask before they can be honest?" she mused. "Don't they realize that that implies they're lying the rest of the time?"

"Was that a yes?"

She smiled. "A hearty one."

"You're up here on vacation, right?" he asked.

Lib straightened up. "Actually, I'm — Well... yeah. You might call it a vacation." A lifetime vacation, she thought with another smile.

"I have a strict policy never to date women who come into town on vacation." He softened his words with a slight smile. "So, see? I can't have dinner with you."

"Oh, but, having a policy — especially a strict one — is no good unless you allow some room to make exceptions," she said.

"Sorry," he said, and for a moment, as he met her big violet eyes, he really, truly was. "No exceptions."

She was studying him, from the top of his dark hair down to the lightweight cotton button-down shirt that was tucked into his khaki Bermuda shorts, all the way to his scuffed high-topped basketball sneakers. Her gaze returned to his eyes. Luke forced himself to look steadily back at her, praying that his expression didn't betray him by revealing the desire that was churning inside of him.

"Well," she said. "Then I guess we'll just have to skip the dating and get right down to the important stuff."
His eyebrow lifted. "Like... what?"
Lib grinned. "Like, will you marry me?"
He laughed. He hadn't laughed so much in years.
Lib smiled, enjoying the sound of his laughter. The Luke Fulton she'd known of in her childhood had a reputation for having a great sense of humor and a happy-go-lucky attitude. The happy-go-lucky part was clearly gone, but she was glad to see his sense of humor had survived whatever had made his eyes look so serious.
"Or," she continued, "as an alternative, you could simply help me install a new muffler in my car. Although, in some countries, if an unwed man and a woman install a muffler together, it's considered scandalous."
Luke shook his head. "Why don't you go change," he said, "and then, yes, I'll help you install that new muffler."
She leaned toward him slightly, across the counter. "It might be a lot easier just to get married."
Luke found himself staring into her incredible violet eyes. Lib Jones was flirting with him shamelessly, making it very clear that she was interested in him. For one brief moment, he let himself remember how it had felt, holding her in his arms. It didn't take much imagination to picture her in his house, in his bed.
No, he wasn't going to let that happen. He didn't have time.
"That bathroom's in the back. It's the only door," he said, turning away, dismissing her.
Lib watched his broad back for several seconds before she took her shorts and sneakers into the back room to change. She knew a rejection when she saw one, but Luke Fulton's rejection had been the strangest she'd ever encountered. One minute he'd been flirting with her, with heat in his eyes that assured her that the attraction was mutual. The next, he'd shut down and turned off, giving her a textbook example of a cold shoulder.
Lib Jones had only been alive for twenty-three years, but she'd traveled far and met a lot of people along the way. And if there was one thing she'd learned, it was to listen to the message being spoken by a person's eyes. Words might lie, but most people didn't have the ability to totally disguise the truth, and Lib had learned to search out that truth in a person's eyes.
She smiled. If she could believe only half of the truth she'd seen written clearly in Luke Fulton's eyes, she was in for one heck of a summer.
Lib pulled herself out from underneath her car and began digging in her tool kit.
"What do you need?" Luke asked. "Just ask, and I'll hand it to you."
She was sitting tailor-style on the road, her long, tanned legs crossed. Strands of her hair had pulled free from her ponytail, and she wiped both the hair and sweat off her face with her arm.
She looked at him speculatively, then frowned. "You're not dressed for grunge work."
"You need an extra hand under there," he said patiently. "Hey, I said I'd help. So let me help."
"You'll ruin your shirt."
With one swift move, he pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it into the body of the car. "No, I won't."
He had a fabulous body. Hard muscles were covered by sleek, smooth skin. His shoulders were broad, his arms strong.
Lib found herself wanting to feel those arms around her again.
As if he knew what she was thinking, his eyelids lowered halfway. And for a fraction of a second, Lib almost thought that he was going to reach for her, to kiss her. But he didn't move. She looked away, clearing her throat, almost desperately searching for something to say. But she was speechless. Luke was just too damned sexy, looking at her like that.
He crouched down next to the car, looking underneath the chassis.
"It's been a while since I've been underneath a car," he admitted with a half-smile. "What do we do first?"
The moment had passed. He was very definitely not going to kiss her.
She took a deep breath to regain her balance. "First we need to see if we both can fit under this car," she said. "You aren't claustrophobic by any chance?"
"Only in small spaces," he said with an answering grin.

"Perfect," Lib said. "I'll go first, since I'm going to need more room to maneuver. You're going to have to squeeze yourself in next to me, okay?"

She wasn't kidding, Luke realized, as he quite literally wedged himself next to her under the tiny sports car. This was torture. She was pressed against him from his shoulders all the way down to his thighs. He gave himself about five minutes before he totally lost his mind and kissed her.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, forcing himself to concentrate on the muffler. "Although, I'm not sure I'll be much help since I can't move my arms..."

She glanced at him, her violet eyes lit with amusement. "Cozy in here, huh?" she said. She pointed. "Hold this, will you... " He shifted uncomfortably and reached up with his left hand. "While I... tighten... this—"

Luke felt her entire body straining as she tried to get leverage. Her head and shoulders were slightly off the ground, and even though he knew he shouldn't touch her more than he already was, he looped his right arm under her neck and helped her tighten the clamp.

"All right!" she said. "One down." She relaxed back against his arm. "Just once in my life, I'd like to be able to work on my car in a real mechanic's pit. Or with one of those whatchamacallits that lift the car up into the air..."

Her hair felt so soft against his arm. They were lying here, underneath her car, in a damn-near intimate embrace. If she moved her hip a fraction of an inch in his direction, she wouldn't be able to miss the fact that he was nearly fully aroused. And then what?

"Hold this," she commanded and he reached up again with his left hand. "Thanks."

"I can't play this game with you, Lib," he said suddenly. "Even if I wanted to be in a relationship — which I don't — I wouldn't get involved with someone who's not going to stick around."

"That's very wise," Lib said, gratefully accepting Luke's help as she fastened the other clamp. "But who says I'm not going to stick around?"

"Where are you from?" Luke asked.


"Maybe this is an easier question," Luke said. "Where did you live last?"

"L.A.," she said. "And before that, New York City."

"I knew it," he said. "You have 'city' written all over you. You'd never stay in Sterling. Not a chance."

Lib glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "I may do it, if only to spite you," she said.

"I give you six weeks, tops," he said. "And then you're out of here."

"You never know," she said. "But I don't think so. Hold this one more time, will you?"

He reached out again, felt her body tighten and pull.

"Damnit, the rust's making it stick." She turned her head to look at him. "Here — help me with this. Maybe using all four hands we can out-muscle the rust."

With Luke's arms around her like this, she could feel the hard muscles of his chest and stomach against her back. A few more seconds, and they'd be finished installing the muffler. They'd have to crawl out from under the car. What a shame.

"Are you ready?"


Lib felt her muscles strain. She felt Luke's muscles strain. "Come on, come on," she shouted at the bolt, and obligingly it moved.

"Yes!" she said, collapsing against Luke. "One more turn oughta do it."

Luke felt his lips brush the side of her face, and he stopped himself in shock. What the hell was he doing? This woman was a stranger. He didn't know her at all.

But his body did. His body had recognized her instantly. She fit against him perfectly, as if she'd been made with his
exact specifications in mind.

They repositioned their hands on the handle of the wrench. Her fingers were slender and strong and somehow cool despite the heat, sweat and grease. She smelled so good —

"Ready?" she asked.

Somehow Luke managed to nod.

"On three again," she said. "One, two, three!"

Luke was tugging so hard, his arms were starting to shake, and Lib was pressed back so tightly against him, he could barely breathe.

With a sudden lurch, the bolt turned and tightened.

He couldn't take it another second. Lib was lying there against him, with her beautiful violet eyes laughing up at him. Her lips looked so soft —

She lifted her face toward him and even though he had a chance to, he didn't move away.

Another mistake. But what a mistake! Her lips were as soft as they had looked, and her mouth was sweet and cool. She met his tongue eagerly with her own and he pulled her closer, as close as he could, considering the confines of the car and — Oh, Lord! What was he doing?

Luke pulled away fast, and bumped his head on the underside of the car.

Swearing loudly, he pulled himself out from under the car, away from Lib, away from temptation. She followed more slowly.

"Are you all right?" she asked quietly.

Luke dusted himself off and fished his shirt off of the front seat of the Spitfire. He didn't turn toward her, didn't offer her a hand up.

"I guess you're all set now," he said as she pulled herself to her feet.

Lib crossed her arms. "Are you really going to kiss me like that, and then pretend you didn't?" she asked.

He met her eyes then. "Yes."

Disappointment cut through Lib, followed closely by embarrassment. She must've been wrong, she realized. She must have imagined that attraction she'd thought she'd seen in Luke's eyes.

"Okay," she said. "Right." Lib took a deep breath and, hoped her cheeks weren't too red. "Well, thanks a million for helping me out."

Luke looked at her standing there next to her sports car. She had long, tanned, shapely legs that led all the way up to the frayed edges of very short cut-off jeans. Her T-shirt was grimy and soaked with sweat. Her hair had come free from its ponytail and there was a smudge of grease on her cheek. He'd never seen a woman that he'd liked or wanted more. And for the first time in years, he felt real doubt. As he walked, Lib turned and walked into the grocery store, leaving Luke standing in the middle of the street.
Chapter Two

It was strange driving on Forest Road, all the way out of town, out to Great-Aunt Harriet's farm.

Last time Lib had been here, she had only been fifteen. Harriet had let her drive the old pickup truck around the farm, but never into town, never out on Forest Road. So she'd gotten around on foot, or on Harriet's ancient touring bike.

She'd spent every summer at this farm from the time she was six until the year she turned sixteen — the year Harriet had that horrible stroke.

For the past eight years, Lib's visits to Harriet had been short weekend trips to the nursing home over in Bellows Falls. Harriet couldn't speak very well, and she couldn't walk, but she sure as hell could listen, so Lib had sat with her and talked.

Harriet missed her farmhouse as much as Lib did, and despite her problems with communicating, the old woman made it quite clear that her property was not to be sold. But it had been rented out, to cover the taxes and other expenses.

Last year when Harriet had died, Lib wasn't surprised to be named sole heir to the property. She and Harriet had always had a special bond, and the old woman knew Lib loved the farm. After twenty-three years of never staying in one place for more than nine or ten months, Lib was ready to do some serious settling down.

It was late afternoon by the time Lib pulled up in front of Harriet's old farm house. The paint was peeling, and one of the front windows was broken, but by God, it was hers!

It was also locked, tight as a drum. Richard Lowell, Harriet's lawyer, had told Lib that the neighbor across the way had the key.

She turned and looked across Forest Road. There was only one other house out here for miles around, and it was no more than fifty yards away. It was the old Fulton house. The Fultons had owned all of the land north of Forest Road since before the American Revolution — and the Harlowes — Harriet's and Lib's family — had owned all the land south of it. Back a few hundred years ago, Mrs. Fulton and Mrs. Harlowe had talked their husbands into building the two farmhouses within shouting distance of each other.

Lib had spent most of her girlhood summers hanging out of her bedroom window, watching Luke Fulton tend to his chores in the yard across the street.

Even when she was only six years old, she'd liked to watch Luke. Even at age fifteen, he was tall and handsome and he always had a smile on his face.

In addition to the work he did on the farm, he had a job in town, working evenings at the Dairy Bee ice cream stand.

Lib smiled. Up until this afternoon, the only words she'd ever said to Luke Fulton were, "I'll have a double scoop of chocolate, please."

And yet, this very afternoon, she'd spent several hours with the man — she'd even kissed him.

Her smile faded.

Except, aside from the first few seconds that their mouths had met, Luke hadn't seemed too interested in kissing her. It was no big deal, Lib tried to tell herself. Rejection was never any fun. But life went on. And she went on.

Lib crossed the road to the old Fulton house, and knocked on the front door. She wondered who was living here now that Luke had sold the farm. She peered in the front windows. No one was home.

She sat down on the porch swing. Man, she was tired. She'd been driving nearly all night, after only a short nap when near the Vermont border. And fixing that broken muffler had tired her out, both physically and emotionally.

Lib lay down on the porch swing, dangled her long legs over the arm rest, and closed her eyes. Sooner or later her new neighbors were going to show up, and she'd be here, waiting, to collect her key.

* * *

The sun was low in the sky when Luke pulled into his driveway. Lord, what a day. After he'd helped Lib Jones install her new muffler, he'd gone back into the video store. He'd watched from the window as she emerged from the grocery store carrying two paper bags of food. He wasn't sure whether to feel disappointed or relieved when she loaded the bags into her car and drove away.
Did he really expect her to come back into his store and give him another chance to turn down her invitation to have dinner? He couldn't go out with her, he told himself again. He didn't have time, and even if he did, he didn't want that kind of relationship.

He'd done that, played that game for too many years. Now he wanted...

Problem was, he didn't know what he wanted. For so long, he'd wanted nothing more than his land back. He'd worked hard, taken incredible financial risks, but he'd made it..

He was rich — one of the richest men in Sterling. He had nearly nine hundred thousand dollars in the bank, and he owned a large portion of the small town's thriving businesses. And in September, he'd have the chance to buy back his land, to redeem himself in the ghostly eyes of his ancestors.

Yeah, he'd made it.

Almost made it, he corrected himself. Two more months and one more deal to go down and he'd have the rest of the money he needed to buy back his land.

And then what?

He was a Fulton. The last Fulton. If he didn't have kids — a son — the name would die out with him. He supposed that meant he should start thinking about marriage. Not that a woman like Lib Jones conjured up images of white silk and innocence.

Black silk maybe. As in sheets, on the bed, with candlelight...

Luke shook his head. No, he was better off staying away from her. Which wouldn't be hard at all.

He cut the engine to the pickup truck and gathered up his briefcase from the passenger seat. It looked like a nice evening for sitting on the porch swing with a tall, cool glass of something.

He started up the steps.

Lib Jones was sleeping on his porch swing.

He was hit simultaneously with waves of desire, excitement and anger.

What the hell was she doing here? How the hell had she found out where he lived?

She looked so young and vulnerable as she slept. Lord, she was young. He'd figured she was somewhere in her late twenties, but now he realized that she was much younger. Better and better, he thought darkly.

"Hey," he said loudly, roughly. "Wake up."

Lib stirred and her eyelids fluttered, then opened. She looked up at him, and then her eyes opened even wider. Her startled expression was genuine — she was surprised to see him. She scrambled to her feet.

"What are you doing here?"

"I live here," he said. His anger had faded with the knowledge that she wasn't intentionally following him around. But now he had a tight, nervous sensation in his stomach. He forced himself to ignore it.

"I thought you sold the farm." She pushed her hair back from her face, raking her fingers through it as if to try and make herself look neater.

"I sold the back acres," he said. "I didn't sell the house or the land here by the road."

Lib obviously hadn't had a chance to wash up since he'd seen her last. She looked grubby and tired, but she smiled and his knees felt weak.

"I guess we're going to be neighbors then," she said.

Neighbors? Luke glanced at the old Harlowe house across the road. "Are you the new tenant?" he asked, his expression betraying none of his alarm.

Lib shook her head. "I'm the new owner."

"New owner?" he said. "I thought—"

"Harriet Harlowe died last December," Lib said. "She was my great-aunt."

about her in town. I didn't make the connection. She was always just old Miss Harlowe to me. I'm sorry."

"Thanks." Lib frowned. "The lawyer did say he contacted you — that you had the key to the place...?"

Luke put his briefcase down on the porch and unlocked his front door. "Yeah, I got a letter," he said. "I've been really busy, and I guess I didn't read it very carefully. I assumed it was notification about the next tenant." As he held open the screen door, their eyes met again. "Come on in."

Lib saw it there in his eyes again — all of the attraction and heat she'd thought she'd seen before. She hadn't been imagining it. It was real.

She went inside, well aware of Luke's presence behind her. She looked around.

The Fulton farmhouse was even more beautiful than Lib had remembered from the few times she'd been inside as a child. It was bigger than Harriet's house, with more rambling add-ons and extensions off the main building. It had been renovated many times since the main structure had gone up in the seventeen-hundreds. The big kitchen and the living room were still in the original house, and the wide wooden planks on the floor and the heavy beams overhead gave those rooms incredible charm.

Lib followed Luke into a front parlor that had been added on in the late nineteenth century, from the looks of the high tin ceiling. He turned on the light and crossed to a small writing desk in the corner.

"Here it is," he said, pulling out an envelope that had been slit open.

As Lib watched, he quickly skimmed the letter. His lips quirked into a smile, and he looked up at her.

"Liberty Jones?" he said. "Lib is short for Liberty?"

"What did you think it was short for?" she asked.


"Should I take that as a compliment?"

"Yeah," Luke said. Their eyes met, and he quickly turned away. "Let me find the keys."

Luke put the letter back in his desk, and rummaged through a small drawer. He spun the key ring on his finger as he came toward her.

"I guess I'll walk you over," he said.

Lib saw a mix of reluctance and fascination in his eyes. He wanted to walk her over to the house — but he also didn't want to. What was his deal? "You don't have to," she said quietly.

"I know," he said, brusquely leading her back to the front door.

She lengthened her stride to keep up with him as he walked down the road to Aunt Harriet's house, Lib's house now. "I haven't been inside this house for six years," she said. "But, man, I loved it and—"

Luke stopped short, turning to catch her arm. "The last tenants did some damage," he said warningly. "It's going to need some fixing up before you can sell it."

She smiled. "That's assuming I'm going to sell it," she said.

"Sooner or later you will."

He still held her arm, and she made no move to pull away. She could smell the scent of the grass he must have cut just this morning, heard the buzz of a lazy bumblebee, the sound of a bluejay calling through the early evening stillness. She knew she was finally home, and whether or not Luke Fulton believed her didn't matter. At least not too much.

He was studying her with a strange look on his face. "I do remember you," he said. "You came up and spent a few summers with old Miss Harlowe, right?"

"Ten summers in a row."

Luke looked surprised. "That many?"

"Yeah."

"You were just a skinny kid. I guess I didn't pay much attention." He smiled then. "I do remember that you used to
try to get our dog to ride in your bike basket. And you liked chocolate ice cream, right?"

"That was me."

"Who woulda thought—" He shook his head, releasing her arm.

"What?"

"You're a lot younger than I am." Too young. He didn't need to say the words. The implication was clear.

"I'm old enough to inherit a house." Among other things.

"Twenty-one?"

Lib crossed her arms. "Twenty-three."

Luke's eyes were somber, his expression unreadable. "I'm almost thirty-two."

"Almost?" she asked. "Really? When's your birthday? We should plan a party."

Now Luke crossed his arms. "You're deliberately misunderstanding me."

Lib smiled. "And you're still searching for reasons why we shouldn't go out together."

His eyes were fierce as he took a step toward her. "What exactly do you want from me?" he asked. He took another step, his voice low and dangerous. "Is it one night that you want, Liberty, or two?"

She stood her ground as he continued to advance on her. "I told you what I wanted," she said, her calm voice belying the fact that her heart was pounding. "I want to go out to dinner with you."

"And afterwards?"

He was standing so close to her, she could barely breathe without brushing against him. If she stood on her toes, their lips would meet.

"Afterwards we could maybe take a walk, maybe look at the stars." She smiled into his eyes with a confidence she didn't quite feel. "And if you're lucky, I'd let you kiss me good night."

His gaze dropped to her mouth and for a moment, Liberty was convinced he was going to kiss her, the way he had that afternoon, underneath her car. But he didn't. He turned away.

Luke started walking toward the Harlowe house again, shocked at the sharp pull of longing inside of him, at the way her words had appealed to him. He wanted to take Lib out to dinner, and then hold hands as they walked through the meadow, up to the pond, to sit with her in the darkness and look up at the sky. He wanted to kiss her good night as he dropped her off at her door.

Now that would be different. Instead of giving in to the brief, explosive attraction between strangers, they could take their time, get to know each other first. Yeah, that would be different — provided Lib really was going to stick around for more than just a few weeks.

Lib followed him up onto the front porch of the old farmhouse. The porch was sagging, the wood starting to rot. Luke pulled open the screen door and unlocked the bolt. The front door creaked open, and he stepped inside, into the dimness of the musty foyer.

Lib was right behind him. All the shades were drawn, and the house was damp and dark. Luke found the light switch next to the front door and flipped on the lights.

"Oh my God—" Lib stared in shock.

The big wooden staircase that went up to the second floor looked as if something enormous, like a piano, had fallen on top of it and crushed it. At least four of the stairs were broken in, and the railing hung crazily to one side, the bannister shattered.

Slowly, Lib walked into the living room. There was a gaping hole in one wall, and the walls were covered with soot, as if someone had lit a fire in the fireplace without opening the damper. Or — man! — as if someone had lit the curtains on fire. The charred remains hung pathetically from what, at one time, had been elegant brass curtain rods.

She started to walk faster now, through a set of French doors that were hanging on their hinges, through the dining room and through the narrow pantry that led to what had been the main house.

The kitchen was trashed.
The cabinets had been torn from the walls and someone had painted the huge rough-hewn beam that ran across the ceiling a bright shade of yellow. The hardwood floor was marked and scarred, and gaping holes remained where the stove and sink had been. The old brick oven fireplace had been used as a garbage container and the stench was nearly overwhelming. But worst of all was a huge hole in the ceiling. There was still a puddle underneath it on the floor.

What had leaked? Bathroom or roof?

Lib had to find out.

She moved, quickly now, up the back staircase.

The carpet that had covered the second floor landing had been shredded, as if a giant cat had used it to sharpen its claws.

One of the doors to the upstairs bedrooms was missing, and another had a gaping hole as if a cannonball had been shot through it. Lib looked around, trying to get her bearings, trying to figure out which room was directly over the part of the kitchen that had that hole....

With Luke at her heels, she pushed open the bathroom door and turned on the light. The toilet was missing and the old clawfooted tub was cracked in two, but there was no hole in the floor and the pipes were dry.

The next door led to the room that had been Lib's whenever she had come to visit. It was dark inside with the shades pulled down. The overhead light didn't go on when Lib pushed the switch.

She stepped into the room — and felt the floor give. The old wood creaked and groaned, and in that instant Lib realized that that was the sky she could see all the way through the ceiling, through the attic, and up through the roof of the house.

"Luke, get back!" she shouted, trying to scramble her way back to the door, back to the supporting beam she knew was underneath the hallway. But in the dimness, she saw he wasn't moving back, he was moving toward her, reaching out his hand for her.

She grabbed for him and felt his strong fingers close around her wrist as the floor underneath her feet collapsed with a groaning crash. He pulled her up and back, through the door, and they landed in a tangled heap of arms and legs against the far wall of the hallway.

"Oh man!" Lib was shaking. She couldn't stop shaking. That had been so close

"Are you all right?" Luke's voice was husky.

Dimly, she became aware of his arms around her, holding her. She felt him push her hair back from her face, and looking up at him, Lib could still see traces of real fear in his eyes. "Good Lord, Lib," he said thickly. "You could have been killed."

She could feel his heart pounding as she allowed herself the luxury of resting her head against his chest. He held her tightly, as if were he to let her go, she might still fall. Her eyes filled with tears. She may not have fallen, but all of her dreams for this house, all of her hopes for the future had given way beneath her feet, just as surely as that floor had collapsed.

Where was she going to get the money to fix this place up? Fix it up? Hell, forget about fixing it up, where was she going to get the money to make it livable? She didn't even have a toilet — or a kitchen sink!

She felt the tears start to escape and she bit back a sob as she suddenly pulled away from Luke. She didn't want to cry in front of him. She roughly wiped her face with a relatively clean part of her arm and forced her voice to sound normal. "Please, will you go now?"

She stepped toward the doorway of the room with the hole in the floor. Her eyes were used to the dimness now, and she could see both the holes in the floor and ceiling. What an incredible mess. What an expensive mess. She fought the tears, but in the stillness her breathing sounded ragged.

She heard Luke stand up. "Lib—"

"Please go," she said without turning around. "I mean, thanks for saving my life and all that, but I kind of need to be alone right now."

He didn't move. Damnit, why didn't he leave? She stared up through the roof at the sky. This used to be her bedroom. She used to be able to rush inside, slam the door, throw herself down on her bed and cry her eyes out without
anyone knowing. She looked at the hole in the floor. Only thing she could throw herself down on right now was the kitchen floor.

She laughed. She couldn't help it. Terrific. Now she was losing her mind.

"Liberty, come over to my house," Luke said softly. "Harriet must've forgotten to put something in the lease that forbid the tenants from firing rockets inside the house," Lib said, laughing harder.

Luke stepped closer and touched her arm. "Come on, Lib. Please?"

Her stomach hurt. And she suddenly felt so dizzy. Lib slid her back along the door frame until her bottom hit the floor. She wasn't laughing anymore. She was crying. And this time she couldn't stop.

Luke crouched down next to her and she turned away. "Please go," she said. "I don't want you to see me cry."

His mouth twisted into a rueful smile. "Too late," he said. "Come on, let's get out of here. You can stay with me for a while. Until we figure out how to get enough insurance money to put a roof back on this place."

Lib looked at him. He was so close, she could feel his body heat. As she gazed into his dark eyes, Lib knew there was no way on earth she could live in the same house with this man and not find herself in over her head. This animal attraction between them, this magnetism, whatever it was called, would always be there. The temptation would be more than either of them could take. And as much as Luke believed otherwise, Lib didn't want just one night or two — or a week, or even a month with him. She wanted... She shook her head, refusing to think about it.

"I don't think staying with you is a good idea," she said.

"Where will you go?" he asked.

Lib took a deep breath. "I'm going to stay right here. And fix it up."

The look he gave her was so incredulous, she had to laugh. She wiped her eyes. "Believe it or not, I've lived in places that were in worse condition than this," she said. "When my mother was living with Howard, we spent about five years moving into houses that were pretty close to being condemned. We'd buy 'em, repair 'em, and sell 'em for a profit. Maybe I can even get a loan. Haven't you ever heard of sweat equity?"


"I'd appreciate being able to use your shower every now and then," she said. "Most days I can wash up down at the pond, but there are certain times when nothing beats a warm shower." She smiled shakily. "Like right now."

Luke had to look away. The image of Lib, fresh and clean, with her hair wet and a towel wrapped around her, as she came out of his bathroom was almost too much to take. He took a deep breath. She was probably right. Having her stay with him wasn't a good idea. Either that, or it was the best idea he'd had in his entire life.

He stood, offering her a hand up.

She hesitated slightly before she reached for him, but he pulled her to her feet and immediately let go.

"Why don't you come over, then, and take a shower," he said, leading the way to the back staircase. "After that, I'll take you out to dinner."

He heard her laugh as they went down toward the kitchen.

"A pity date," she said. "Great. That'll really cheer me up."

"It's not a pity date," he said.

"Right." She sounded skeptical.

"Is that a yes?"

Lib looked from Luke to the pile of rotted wood and floorboards that now covered nearly half of the kitchen floor. She swore softly under her breath. "Sure, why not?" she said with a disparaging laugh. "I'm feeling pretty damned pitiable."
Chapter Three

Lib looked at Luke as he downshifted the gears in his pickup truck to make the long climb in the darkness up the mountain road. The angles of his lean face were exaggerated by the shadows of the night. His cheekbones seemed even more prominent and exotic, and the elegant shape of his lips was more pronounced, bathed in the green light from the dashboard.

He glanced over and smiled, his dark eyes glittering as they met her own, and her heart did a quick flip. Damn, he was good-looking.

Luke was dressed in a clean pair of jeans and a red polo shirt, and his dark hair was still damp from the shower he'd taken back at his house. The muscles in his arms rippled as he downshifted again.

"I have to drop something off at the resort," he said, "so I figured we may as well have dinner up there."

"At Gate's Mountain Inn?" Lib asked, her eyebrows lifting with the surprise in her voice. "We're not exactly dressed for it. Gee, if I'd've known, I would've unpacked my sequined gown and my diamond earrings."

"It's off season," Luke said, flashing her another brilliant smile. "No sequined gowns this time of year."

As Luke glanced at her, he could tell that she was still terribly upset about the condition of the Marlowe farm house. Despite the casual way she had one sneaker braced against the dash, her hands were tightly clasped in her lap. She was wearing a clean pair of cut-off jeans, a white, sleeveless blouse with the tails tied in the front and a pair of beat-up running shoes. The effect should have been androgynous, but Lib was so obviously feminine, all soft curves and long, shapely legs, slender arms — Arms that had real muscle, Luke thought, remembering the strength she'd needed to install the new muffler in her car.

She looked up, catching him watching her, and she smiled. Her hair was hanging loose around her shoulders. It looked pretty that way — long and straight and thick and shiny. It glistened in the light from an oncoming car. Was it really just this morning that he'd thought her hair was nothing special?

Reluctantly, he dragged his eyes back to the road.

"You know, since this is just a pity date, you can get away with buying me a hot dog at the root beer stand," Lib said. "Heck, since it's only a pity date, you can get away with driving me down there and making me buy my own hot dog."

"It's not a pity date. Besides, I don't feel like having a hot dog tonight," Luke said. "And as long as I have to go up this way..."

"What do you need to drop off?" Lib asked. "Construction estimates," he said. "We're thinking of adding on to the Inn."

"We?"

Luke looked at her and smiled. "I'm part owner," he said. "That's the deal I made when I sold Ken Avery the back acres of the farm."

Lib whistled. "So you're rich," she said, "on top of being single and gorgeous. Are you sure you won't marry me?"

Luke's laughter was low and sexy as hell. "What would you do if I said yes?"

"Plan a wedding?"

"I think it's more likely that you'd run for the hills — as fast as you could," he said.

"I must be missing something here," Lib said, narrowing her violet eyes as she studied him in the dim light. "There must be some fatal flaw in your character, or some personality defect that everybody knows about except for me."

"Well, let's see," Luke thought for a minute. "I'm stubborn and inconsiderate and a workaholic. I live in a rundown, drafty old museum that's probably haunted. I'm provincial and I'm probably inbred, and, oh yeah, I'm heartless. A man who loves his land more than he loves another person has got to have something seriously wrong with him. Or so I'm told."

Lib tried not to laugh, but when he glanced at her, amusement lighting his eyes, she had to smile. "Is that a direct quote, or are you paraphrasing?" she asked.

"A little of both," he said.
"Care to cite your source?"
He shook his head. "The list's too long."
"Former girlfriends?" she asked.
He looked at her again, his eyes unreadable. "I suppose you could call them that — for lack of a better label."
Lib nodded. "From your Don Juan days," she said. "Before you embarked on your current, dreary, monk-like lifestyle."
Luke winced. "You make it sound like so much fun."
"Don't mind me." She smiled at him then, flashing her teeth. "Personally, I find myself attracted to stubborn, provincial men who live in ghost-filled museums and work too hard. But what is this about loving your land more than any other person?"
Luke considered her question for a long moment before replying. "I love Vermont. I love living in the house my ancestors built with their own hands. I love being part of this town that they helped create." He paused, then added softly, "And I love my farm."
The hardest thing that he'd ever done was to give up most of his land. But after his father died, Luke had worked as hard as he could to pay off the medical bills and the back taxes and all the debts. He'd put in eighteen, nineteen hour days — backbreaking, killer hours — trying to turn things around.
But he'd failed.
No matter what he did, no matter how hard he worked, the farm kept losing money.
For years, Ken Avery, the owner of the Gate's Mountain Inn, had been pressuring the Fultons to sell the back acres of their farm to him, so he could expand the resort.
Sell the family land.
For a long time, Luke wouldn't even consider it. But finally, he'd had no other choice.
It hadn't been easy to throw in the towel. Luke Fulton had been raised a fighter, not a quitter. But in the hard cold light of reality, Luke's choices were clear. Sell the land, or go bankrupt — and have the bank sell the land for him.
It was a no-win situation, but Luke pushed Avery hard, negotiating a part ownership in the glitzy resort as part of the remuneration for his precious family land. That had been nearly five years ago. Lord, had it really been that long?
Luke pulled into the parking lot of the resort. The Victorian-style building was lit up like a national monument. The spotlights made the blue-painted inn seem to glow. Long-stemmed flowers, the buds closed up now for the night, moved gently in the evening breeze. The flowers decorated the edges of the parking lot and the walkways that led around the building. It was gracious and elegant, and on top of that, Luke knew that the view during the day was breathtaking.
* * *
The restaurant at Gate's Mountain Inn was exactly as Lib had imagined it. Light and airy, the main dining room had big windows that overlooked the valley and the town of Sterling below. In the darkness, the lights of town twinkled charmingly among the trees.
She looked across the table to find Luke watching her as the waiter cleared away their salad plates. Of course, her current view wasn't so bad, either, she thought with a smile.
Luke smiled too, studying her through heavily lidded eyes. He looked lazy and relaxed, sprawled back in his chair, but Lib realized his pose was misleading. His gaze was sharp and intense. He glanced up as the waiter took the last of the dishes, then leaned forward slightly, looking at her again.
"How'd you get a name like Liberty?" he asked.
Lib drew a line in the moisture that beaded the outside of her water glass. "It's... kind of weird," she said, glancing up at him. "See, my parents weren't exactly conventional."
He was still watching her, with genuine interest in his dark eyes. "Were they big John Wayne fans?" he said. "Or maybe they liked Jimmy Stewart?"
Lib laughed. "As in 'The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance?' Not exactly. I wasn't named after a movie outlaw. I was
named after a town."

One elegant eyebrow rose. "A... town?"

"Liberty, Georgia, to be exact. According to legend, that's where I was conceived."

Luke nodded, taking a careful sip from his glass of beer. He looked up to find Lib's violet eyes dancing with amusement.

"Thank God my parents didn't decide to stop for the night in Zebulon," Liberty said with a grin.

Luke narrowed his eyes, studying her carefully. "I don't know, Zebulon suits you almost as well as Liberty does."

Lib threw a bread stick at him. "Thanks a lot."

He caught it and took a bite. "You have any brothers or sisters?" he asked.

She nodded. "Three. Two brothers and a sister."

"I'm dying to hear their names."

"California, Rain and Freedom," Lib said.

"Am I supposed to guess their genders?" Luke asked, finishing the bread stick.


"Younger? Older?"

"Younger," Lib said. "They're all younger. I'm the oldest."

Luke was still leaning forward slightly in his seat, as if her family background was the most fascinating subject in the world. "California Jones, huh? Sounds like Indiana's cousin. He must have been teased mercilessly, poor kid."

"Cal's my favorite brother. He's a park ranger, if you can believe that. These days he's working at a state park, at some kind of wildlife sanctuary in Florida. But he's not a Jones, he's a Rodriguez. I'm the only Jones," Lib said.

"Well, me and Drew."

"Drew?" Once more, the eyebrow rose.

"My father."

"So your parents are divorced," Luke said.

Lib started tracing designs in the side of her water glass again. "Not exactly," she said. She looked up at Luke. He was clearly puzzled and waiting for an explanation. She sighed. "Clarissa — my mother — didn't believe in marriage," she said. "She was kind of, well, a flower child. You know. A hippie. She still is."

Solemnly, she watched Luke digest that information. He didn't say anything. He just gazed at her, without smiling.

Lib shifted in her seat. "Well?"


"Do you still want to be seen with me in public?"

She was joking, but there was more than a trace of seriousness in her eyes. She really wanted to know.

"Why wouldn't I?" He reached across the table and took her hand. Her smile faded as she looked down at their intertwined fingers, and when she glanced backup, he was shocked at the sudden vulnerability in her eyes. For the first time since they'd met — had it really only been that afternoon — Lib Jones actually looked her age. She looked young and afraid. Afraid of what?

Of him, Luke realized suddenly. She was afraid of him, afraid he was actually going to think less of her because of what she had just told him. She was afraid he was going to judge her and condemn her based on the way her parents had chosen to live.

Luke didn't let her go until he felt her hand relax in his.

Her fingers were slender and long, almost as long as his own, but the size of his palm dwarfed hers. "You can't choose your parents, Lib," he said softly. "That's for damn sure."

"But —" Lib started to protest.

"They chose their path," Luke said, "and you'll choose your own. That's all I'm trying to say."
He was lightly tracing the back of her hand with his thumb, and he looked up to see that Lib's eyes were filled with tears.

She pulled her hand free to brusquely swipe at her eyes. "This is only a pity date," she said, with a ghost of a smile. "You're supposed to be politely charming, not make me—" Confused, she wrenched her gaze away from him.


Looking down at the linen napkin that was spread across her lap, Lib shook her head and laughed. No way. No way was she going to let herself fall in love with Luke Fulton. It was out of the question, not an option, not possible. But why not?

Lib glanced up at the man sitting across from her. He met her gaze steadily, waiting for her to answer his question. A lock of his thick, black hair fell down across his forehead, and he raked it back with his fingers. He was almost too handsome for words. He was kind and generous and he made her feel special, the way he hung on her every word, the way he really listened, not just to the things she said, but to the things she didn't say.

So why shouldn't she fall in love with him?

Because despite his kind words, he'd never take her seriously. Because he was older than she was. Because he as much as warned her that he loved his land above all else in the world. Because he had a reputation for being a Don Juan.

"Make you what?" he asked again.

"You're not supposed to make me want to see you again," Lib said softly.

The waiter arrived with their dinners, and Luke was grateful for the interruption. He really didn't have the time to see her again. And if and when he did...

As Luke watched Lib across the table, it occurred to him that time was not on his side. If he waited until these two months were up, until the work he had to do was completed, it would be too late. Lib would be long gone.

He stared down at the grilled chicken on his plate and set his fork down. "You know, Lib, I've been thinking about Miss Harlowe's house — your house, I mean."

Lib was silent, waiting for him to go on. His eyes were serious, and he smiled, as if to soften his expression. "I've got some money," he said, "and I'm willing to invest it. If the house were fixed up, we could make a decent profit from the sale of your property. We could be partners, and..." As he talked, he could see the reservation forming in her eyes. "You hate the idea."

Liberty shook her head. "You're very generous," she said.

"But?"

"I don't want to sell the place."

He still didn't believe her. Lib could see skepticism in his dark eyes. She smiled. One of these days, he'd realize she was telling the truth.

"Will you lend me the money?" she asked. "I'll be able to pay you back — with interest — when I get the insurance company to cover the damages."

Luke did some quick math in his head. With the impending sale of the video store, and the return on several of his investments... He would have a fifty thousand dollar cushion, fifty thousand dollars to play around with. "I can lend you thirty," he said.

Lib choked on a sip of water. "Thousand?" she said. "As is dollars?" She shook her head. "The insurance company isn't going to give me more than ten. Fifteen, if I'm really lucky. I won't be able to pay you back the rest. At least not right away."

"If you change your mind, and decide to sell the house," Luke said, "then you can give me a percentage of your profit."

"I know you don't believe me," Lib said seriously, "but I'm not going to sell the house."

Luke smiled. "Then we can set up some kind of extended low interest payback schedule," he said.

"Low interest?" Lib said. "I don't want to take advantage of you. This deal doesn't seem to be in your favor."
He pushed his plate back from the edge of the table. "Sure it is," he said. "If you sell the house and leave, I stand to make some money. Even if you don't leave, I'll still make more interest loaning the money to you than I'd make by leaving it in my savings account."

A voice interrupted them. "Well, well. Luke Fulton. It's been a long time."

The first thing Lib noticed about the owner of the voice was diamonds. The petite blonde woman wore diamonds dangling from her ears, diamonds draped around her neck, and diamonds hanging from her wrist. Her fingers, however, were noticeably bare.

Lib glanced at Luke. His expression was closed, shuttered. He met her eyes briefly before looking back at all the diamonds.

"Stacey," he said, about to rise to his feet.

"No, no," the woman said, putting a perfectly manicured hand on Luke's shoulder and pressing him back into his seat. "Don't stand up. How are you?"

The hand lingered, and as Lib watched, Luke shifted in his seat, forcing the diamond lady's hand to fall away from him.

"I'm fine," Luke said evenly. He looked across the table at Lib. He introduced the two women, apologizing when he couldn't remember Stacey's last name.

There was a flash of anger in the blonde's eyes, but Luke wasn't fazed. "It's been at least five years," he said with a shrug.

"I'm not sure you ever knew my last name," Stacey pouted.


Lib took the opportunity to study Stacey. She was poised and confident, with carefully made up blue eyes. Her blonde hair was cut fashionably short, and she wore an elegant black dress over her lush curves.

Stacey, however, only glanced at Lib briefly before dismissing her. The older woman turned back to Luke.

"I arrived in town this morning," she said. "I was going to call you, to see if you're back in circulation yet. Obviously you are."

Luke reached across the table and took Lib's hand. "I'm afraid I'm not."

The implication was clear, and Stacey turned her porcelain blue eyes on Lib, really looking at her for the first time.

"You saved my life this evening," Lib said, her violet eyes dancing with amusement. "The least I could do in return was save your butt."

Lib loved the sound of Luke's laughter. It was rich and full and very genuine. She liked making him laugh, making him look at her with his pleasure evident in his eyes. She looked down at her hand, still firmly clasped by his strong fingers.

"How about our business deal?" he asked. "Should we shake on your low interest loan?"

Lib hesitated, then gently pulled her hand free. There was something about borrowing money from a man that she wanted to become involved with that rubbed her the wrong way.

"Can I think about it?" she asked.

He seemed surprised, but he quickly hid it under a smile. "Of course," he said. "But I don't think you're going to find a better offer anywhere else."

Lib looked at him and smiled. "You think I'm crazy not to jump at this, don't you?"

"It's not crazy to be cautious," Luke said. "You don't really know me. I can tell you there's no catch to this deal until
I'm blue in the face, but you have no real reason to trust me. So let's sit down with a lawyer, and draw something up. If you've got it in writing, you won't need to trust me.

Lib nodded. She already trusted him anyway. She just didn't trust herself.

* * *

The moon was out when Luke walked Lib up onto the creaking wood porch of the Harlowe house. She pulled her key from her pocket and unlocked the door before turning to face him.

"Thanks for dinner," she said. "And thanks for offering to lend me that money—"

"Are you sure you're going to be all right tonight?" Luke asked, frowning slightly. "You've got no furniture. You don't even have a bed to sleep in."

His face was shadowy in the moonlight, the dimness exaggerating the planes and angles of his cheekbones and strong jaw line.

"I've got a sleeping bag in the car," she said. "I'll be fine."

He was silent, just watching her.

Luke was wrestling with himself. He wanted to tell her to stay with him, to ask her to share his bed. Was he crazy? They'd only met earlier today. He'd known her, what? Maybe eight hours. This was definitely insane.

He had to go. He had to leave, to walk away, to go inside his own house and lock the door behind him.

But her skin seemed almost translucent in the moon-light, and her hair gleamed, and her eyes — He'd never seen such beautiful eyes in his entire life.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said, opening the screen door.

Good. She was going inside. That was smart, that was safest, that was —

"Lib." He couldn't stop himself. He wanted to kiss her good night. He wanted to pull her toward him and — He cleared his throat. "Will you have dinner with me tomorrow?" he found himself asking her.

If the question surprised Lib as much as it did Luke, she didn't let it show. She smiled, dazzling him. "Absolutely," she said. "See you in the morning."
Chapter Four

"So what exactly do you do to relax?" Lib asked from her perch atop the old farmhouse's roof.

They'd spread a weighted tarp over the hole, and now Luke looked rather longingly down at the ground, wishing he weren't standing on a ladder, three stories up. "You mean, besides risking my life as part of the Fulton and Jones tarp hanging team?"

Lib's musical laughter floated out on the fresh morning air. Yesterday's heat had been blown away by the cool night, breezes, but the morning sun was hot, and getting hotter every minute. It was going to be another scorcher.

"Isn't this relaxing? Look around," she said, spreading her arms wide, gesturing to the surrounding meadows covered with colorful wildflowers. "It's amazingly beautiful."

"I appreciate beauty more when I'm not clinging to the side of a house by my fingernails," Luke said. He started down the ladder, his dark hair moving in the wind. "I don't know," he added. "Maybe part of me knows that I've already taken too many risks."

"Do you still ski?" she said, peering over the edge of the roof at him.

She laughed at the disbelieving look he sent her.

"What kind of question is that?" he asked. He shook his head in disgust. "Of course I still ski. But I prefer to do it on snow-covered slopes. Not rotten old roofs."

"So in the winter, you ski to relax. What about the summer?"

Luke reached the ground and held the ladder as Lib swung herself over the side of the roof. "Softball," he said. "Sterling has a league. I play on one of the teams."

"Co-ed?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at him.

Luke tried not to be obvious about watching her rear end as she climbed down the ladder toward him. She was wearing her faded cut-off jeans, and the denim was stretched snugly across her posterior. "Uh, yeah," he said. "Co-ed. Yeah. The team's co-ed."

"What position do you play?"

"Pitcher."

"Got any room on the team for an extra player?" Lib asked. She wiped her hands on her shorts, then pushed her hair back from her face.

"If you're any good," Luke said with a grin.

"You ever see the movie, 'A League of Their Own'?" Lib asked.


"Good," she said happily. "I like movies, too."

They were standing practically nose to nose. The wind ruffled Liberty's hair, and Luke reached out to brush one strand away from her check.

He wanted to kiss her. It was all he could think about up on the roof. Hell, it was all he could think about all night long. He'd slept fitfully, waking up before dawn, unable to sleep. He kept seeing a smile that could outshine the sun.

He had a crush on Liberty Jones.

But that's all it was, he kept telling himself. He was infatuated, that's all.

He'd had crushes before. They'd last for about a week, making his head spin, leaving him dizzy with wanting, but then the feelings vanished, as if they'd never existed. Luke forced himself to take a step backward, away from her.

"I was an extra in 'A League of Their Own!'," Lib said, smiling at him. "Remember the scene where Geena Davis goes to the league try-outs? I was in that scene, in the background, throwing a baseball around with a bunch of other women."

"No kidding. You were an extra?"
"Yeah," Lib said. "I started while I was living in LA, when I was in high school. I was trying for legit acting jobs, but all I managed to get was work as an extra. I worked in about a dozen movies."

"I'm impressed," Luke said. "Wow, a real movie star, right here in Sterling, Vermont."

Lib lifted her nose into the air and raised her hands, as if warding off an admiring crowd. "Please, please," she said. "No autographs, no pictures..."

She laughed as Luke grabbed her around the waist and hauled her toward his truck. "Come on, Hollywood," he said. "I'll drive you down to the police station, you can file that vandalism report. Then I've got to get to work. You can take the truck into town and pick up the building supplies you need."

He set her down, but didn't let her go. "Tell 'em to put it on my account," he said, "and—"

Luke momentarily froze, briefly forgetting everything except the way her body felt against his. "You'd let me borrow your truck?" she said, gently trying to pull free.

He released her, realizing he was standing there, holding onto her like some kind of idiot. He helped her up into the truck. "Yeah. Just pick me up at the sporting goods store at around six-thirty," he said, adding, "Is that okay?"

For a moment there, she thought that he was going to kiss her. After her dinner with him last night, her dreams had been filled with romantic visions of Luke Fulton. Good grief, she had actually had a crazy dream in which she walked down the aisle of the Congregational Church, wearing a long, white dress. Luke had been waiting for her at the altar and

"Where do you want me to pick you up?"

Luke's straight teeth flashed white as he climbed in behind the steering wheel. "I'm working over at the sporting goods store this afternoon."

"Working?" Lib was staring at him, obviously surprised. "Don't tell me, you own the sporting goods store, too...?"

"I do."

She was silent for a moment, looking out the window as he drove down Forest Road, toward town. "Is there anything in Sterling that you don't own?" she finally asked.

"Oh, come on," he said. "It's not like I'm some business mogul. I own the video stores — which I'm in the middle of negotiating the sale of, the ski shop and sporting goods store, and the pizza parlor."

"Not to mention you've got a share in Gate's Mountain Inn," Lib said. "You know, I've never been friends with a millionaire before."

"Enjoy it while it lasts," Luke said, "because I'm only going to be a millionaire for another few months."

"Now that needs an explanation," Lib said.

"When I sold the back acres of the farm to Ken Avery, I made him add a rider to the contract," Luke explained, "saying that five years from that date, I had the option of repurchasing the land for one million dollars. Cash."

Lib whistled.

Luke smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Yeah. On September fifteenth, I'll have 24 hours to buy back my land."

He wasn't kidding. His expression was deadly serious. But amusement glittered in his eyes when he glanced at Lib.

"You think I'm nuts, don't you?" he said.

"How much did you sell the land for in the first place?" she asked.

"Two hundred thousand."

Lib shook her head. "My God, Luke, are you saying that you took two hundred thousand dollars, and in less than five years, you turned it into a video store — no, more than one. You said stores, didn't you? Video stores, a sporting goods store, a pizza place and on top of that, you have nearly a million dollars cash sitting in the bank...?"


Lib blinked. "What?"

"I started with less. Half of the money went to my sister, after taxes and my father's debts were paid off," he said.
"We each got about sixty-one thousand."
"And you got a share in Gate's Mountain Inn," Lib said. "Luke, you know, you don't need to buy the land back. As part owner of the resort, it's still yours."
She watched the muscles tighten in his jaw. "The land belongs to the Gate's Corporation."
"And the Gate's Corporation is owned by Avery, right?" Lib asked. "And you."
"And a bunch of lesser shareholders, yeah."
"Technically, it's still your land," she said.
"It should be Fulton land. It shouldn't be owned by a corporation," he said. "I can't pass it down to my children and my grandchildren."
"But you can leave them your shares in the resort," Lib said. "Think about it. That's probably far more valuable than the land."
Frustrated, Luke shook his head. "No, you don't get it," he said. "That land has been in my family for generations."
"And it still is," Lib said.
"That land was claimed by my ancestors," Luke said tightly. "When they came here, it was nothing but a wilderness. But they built that house and cleared that land with their blood and their sweat. They created something that could be passed along to their children, and to their children's children—"
"Which is exactly what you can do with your shares in Gate's Mountain Inn," Lib said.
"You don't understand." Luke's hands were clenched around the steering wheel.
"Yes, I do—"
"No, you don't. An outsider like you wouldn't ever understand," he said harshly.
Lib recoiled as if she'd been hit.
"Well, jeez," she said, her eyes bright with anger. "It's nice to know what you really think of me."
Silently, Luke cursed, regretting his words. "Lib, I didn't mean it—"
She laughed, but her smile didn't hold a trace of humor. "Save it," she said shortly. "Someone like me knows exactly what you meant."
There was one traffic light in town, and as Luke pulled up to it, Lib unlocked the door and jumped down out of the truck. "I'll find my own way to the police station, thanks," she said, slamming the door behind her.
"Damn it, Lib, wait!"
But she was already walking down Main Street, her shoulders set and her head held high. Luke swore under his breath, and as the light turned green, he jerked the truck into gear and followed. She hadn't gotten far, and he quickly pulled off the road in front of her, sending a cloud of dust and dirt into the air as he skidded to a stop.
As Luke climbed down out of his pickup truck, he caught more than one curious pair of eyes on him. Christmas, this was just what he needed — a public scene with the woman the entire town had no doubt pegged as his new girlfriend. Perfect. Just perfect.
Lib walked stiffly past the truck, ignoring him completely, and he forgot about the people watching them. "Liberty, wait."
He caught her arm, and she spun, glaring at him and shaking free of his hand.
Her eyes were dark with fury. "Sterling is the closest thing to a hometown that I've ever had, and I love it here every bit as much as you do. But you think that because I didn't grow up here, because I wasn't born in the county hospital, because I didn't spend every waking moment of my life breathing in this goddamned fresh air, you think that I don't understand what it means to have roots, to feel like I belong to the land?" She pushed him backwards, jabbing his chest with her fingers. "Well, let me tell you something, Mr. Founding-Father Fulton," she said. "It's because I don't have roots, because I don't belong anywhere that makes me love this town more than someone like you could ever possibly understand."
She opened her mouth to take a breath, and Luke grabbed at the opportunity to get a word in edgewise. "Lib, come
on. We can talk about this in the truck. Everyone's watching—"

Lib glanced around, as if aware for the first time that they were standing in the center of town. She took a deep
breath and let it out slowly. "There's nothing more to say," she said. "Except that you can take your loan and stick it.
I don't need it. I'll wait for the insurance company to pay up, thank you very much."

She turned and began walking away.

Luke felt something horribly like panic gripping him, and he followed her, lengthening his stride to keep up. "What
about dinner?" he asked quietly.

She barely glanced at him. "Why should I waste my time with someone who doesn't take me seriously?" She turned
suddenly, crossing the street, waving to an elderly woman who stood on the opposite sidewalk. "Mrs. Etherton! Hi!
Remember me? Lib Jones, Harriet's niece?"

Luke stood staring after her, shocked by how desperately he wanted to see her tonight. What on earth was wrong
with him?

He watched Lib walk down the street, arm in arm with old Mrs. Etherton. He was going to have to watch what came
out of his mouth around Liberty Jones. He shook his head, remembering the hurricane force of her anger, the
intensity and conviction of her words. It was clear that she felt like an outsider in Sterling, and it was equally clear
that his words hadn't helped any.

Luke sighed, climbing back into his truck. Fact was, she was an outsider. Someone like Liberty Jones couldn't come
barreling into a sleepy little town like Sterling, Vermont, driving a neon blue convertible, looking like something out
of a Hollywood movie and expect to fit in.

Lib saw Luke's truck do a one-eighty on Main Street. She wouldn't let herself turn her head to watch him drive out
of sight. Well, that was terrific, she thought, waving good-bye to Mrs. Etherton as the older woman went into the
public library. Lib kept walking, heading for the police station, mentally kicking herself. She had finally met the
man of her dreams, and what did she do? At the very first sign that he wasn't perfect, she lost it, and let him have a
double-barrel dose of her famous bad temper.

Luke considered her one of the enemy, lumping her in the same group as the tourists and skiers and vacationers who
flocked to his beloved mountains and frightened the wildlife, started forest fires and littered the camp sites.

Luke was a smart man. He'd made a fortune off of those same tourists and skiers. But even that didn't change the
line between the townsfolk and 'them' for him.

Until Lib could convince Luke that she planned to stick around, he wasn't going to trust her. Until he trusted her, she
didn't have a chance at winning his heart. And, God help her, that's what she wanted.

* * *

After filing the vandalism complaint, Liberty used the pay phone in the police station lobby to call Richard Lowell,
Harriet's lawyer and the executor of her estate. It took nearly all the change she had, but Lowell's secretary picked up
on the first ring.

Lib identified herself, and the older-sounding woman immediately knew who she was.

"Oh, good," the secretary said. "You made it into town. Rich has some documents for you to sign and—" She broke
off, listening to someone on the other end. "Can he meet you in town this afternoon? He's got an appointment in
Sterling at five o'clock. Can he meet you at four-thirty?"

"Sure," Lib said. "Where?"

"Coffee shop," the secretary said without hesitation.

"I'll be there." Lib hung up the phone and looked at her watch. It was barely nine o'clock. Her stomach growled, but
she resolutely turned her back on the bakery and started to walk home. She'd bought some bread and peanut butter
yesterday and it was still in the back of her car. Money was going to be an issue for a while — she couldn't afford to
buy any expensive donuts or pastries. She picked up her pace, breaking into a jog. just think how healthy she was
going to be.

* * *

In the late afternoon, Luke stood out on the sidewalk in front of the sporting goods store, and tried to stay awake
while his store manager ran through a list of the pros and cons of stacking the rowboats either to the left or to the
Lib's bright blue Spitfire turned the corner onto Main Street, and Luke instantly woke up. He watched her drive slowly down the street, toward him, and he ran his fingers through his thick hair and made sure his shirt was neatly tucked into his pants. Maybe she was coming to apologize.

She drove right past, not even acknowledging his presence with a wave.

"So what do you think, Luke?" Chet, the store manager, was waiting for some kind of voice of God pronouncement about the damned rowboats.

As Luke watched, Lib parked two stores down and crossed the street toward the coffee shop. She'd changed her clothes since that morning. She was wearing a pair of green safari shorts, and a darker green sleeveless blouse that looked as if it might be silk, soft and smooth to the touch. She looked fresh and cool despite the late afternoon heat. Her hair was back in a ponytail, and still damp, as if she'd just gotten out of the shower.

Except she didn't have a shower. She didn't have running water.

Luke had a sudden vivid image of Lib bathing in the secluded pond behind the Harlowe house, washing the dust of the day from her hair. He could imagine her rising up out of the pond, water streaming from her naked body as she crossed the grass, reaching for her towel.

"Luke?"

Luke cleared his throat, looking into Chet's waiting eyes. The rowboats. Right. "Whatever you think," he said, turning back to watch Liberty pull open the coffee shop door. "It's fine with me."

* * *

There was only one man in the coffee shop wearing a suit and tie. Lib approached his booth, and he looked up, then got to his feet.

"Mr. Lowell?" she asked.

He held out his hand for her to shake. "Rich," he said. "You must be Liberty Jones. Cool name. Sit down."

He was in his late forties, and was still a handsome man despite the hefty amount of extra weight he carried around. It was clear from the huge serving of apple pie and ice cream that sat in front of him, that 'diet' was a word that hadn't made it into his vocabulary yet. His eyes were a twinkly shade of blue, his smile was genuine, and Lib liked him immediately. Harriet surely would have liked him, too, especially considering that ten years ago, when Lib's great-aunt had first hired him, he'd been ten years younger and probably even more handsome.

Rich patted the file folder he'd set on the table next to his apple pie. "Paperwork. We need to talk about things like inheritance taxes. But are you hungry? Can I get you something to eat?" He waved the waitress over.

"I'd love an iced tea," Lib said. She looked up at the waitress. "No sugar, extra lemon, please?"

The waitress disappeared, and Rich opened the file. "Harriet left you a little bit of money," he said, "but to tell you the truth, it doesn't even begin to cover the taxes on the house and the property."

Lib sat forward, trying to read the upside-down figures. "When was the last time the house was assessed?" she asked. "I don't know if you've seen it lately, but the last tenants did an amazing amount of damage." Briefly she filled him in on the extent of the necessary repairs.

Rich nodded, glancing up as the waitress set an iced tea down in front of Lib. "Not good. I'm sorry to hear that. You're right, we should have it reassessed."

"Rich, what happened to Harriet's furniture?" Lib asked, taking a sip of the cool tea. "When I was a kid her place was packed full of stuff. Was it all sold?"

"I was getting to that," Rich said, flipping through his file. "Here it is. Triple A Self Storage, "'Contents of Number 2 Forest Road'." He read from the paper.

"Victorian sofa, writing desk, dining room table with eight high-backed chairs, dressing table. Etc. Etc." He handed the inventory to Lib.

"There's a catch," Rich said. "We paid the storage charges quarterly from Harriet's savings. The quarter's up this Tuesday. You have till then to move the stuff out — or pay the next quarter's charges."

"How much?" Lib asked.
"Eleven hundred dollars."

Lib sat back against the coffee shop booth, out of breath. "Eleven hundred?" She shook her head. "Harriet's been paying forty-four hundred dollars a year to have that stuff stored? It's been eight years!"

"I advised her to sell the furniture," Rich said. "But she insisted on saving it for you. She wanted you to have it. Apparently, it was worth it to her."

Lib flipped through the inventory. It took up three full pages, single-spaced. "I'm supposed to move this stuff by next Tuesday?" she asked, looking up at Rich. "Today's Wednesday. That's less than a week. Where am I going to put all of this? I can't put it in the house — the roof leaks."

"Let me know by Monday if you want me to release the money from Harriet's account," Rich said. He glanced at his watch. "Look, I hate to have to cut this short, but I'm meeting another client in a few minutes and—"

"One quick question," Lib said.

Rich nodded. "Shoot."

"Insurance," she said. "I need the name and address of the insurance company so I can make a claim and—" She broke off, noticing the look on the lawyer's face. "What?"

He just shook his head. His blue eyes were appalled.

Lib felt sick. Oh, God, no. She carefully kept her voice calm and even. "You're not going to tell me that Harriet didn't have insurance, are you?"

Rich pushed his apple pie away from him as if he'd suddenly lost his appetite. "Harriet didn't have a mortgage, so she wasn't required to have insurance. I tried to talk her into it, even just a bare bones policy, but she wouldn't budge, and... I'm sorry."

There was no insurance. Lib held onto the edge of the table, as if trying to anchor herself to reality. She owed thousands of dollars in inheritance taxes. The roof needed immediate fixing, with a price tag of close to five thousand dollars, or the house would be damaged beyond repair. But there was no insurance to cover it, and there were eight rooms of stored furniture that she had to move before next Tuesday, or pay another eleven hundred dollars.

"I hate to heap more bad news on you," Rich said, "But property taxes are coming due, and you'll owe about twenty-five hundred. Of course, it may be a little less after we get the place reassessed."

Shakily, Lib pushed herself to her feet. She had to get out of here. She had to go back to the farm, to sit down by the pond, think this through, figure out how she was going to deal with these financial burdens. But for the first time in her life, Lib actually felt faint. She caught herself on the table, and Rich leapt up, his face worried. "Wow, you're pale. Sit down. Don't stand up," he said.

But Lib shook her head. She had to get out of here. Her imagined worst case scenario hadn't even come close to this disaster.

"Look, it's not as bad as it seems," Rich was saying. "I can talk to the people at the bank, set up some sort of short term home improvement loan. You can fix up the house, pay off the taxes, sell the property, pay back the loan and still walk away with a profit. Not a big one, but a profit. As far as I can see, it's your only way out."

Blindly she pushed past him, heading for the door, and ran smack into Luke Fulton.

He smelled like hard work and soap, with an odd blend of ski wax thrown in — odd, considering the day's heat. As Lib looked up into his eyes, she had the wild urge to throw herself into his arms, to beg him to hold her tightly and never let go.

He caught her by the elbows, his dark eyes filled with concern. "Whoa, Lib, what's the matter?"

But she pulled free. Luke Fulton couldn't wave a wand and make her problems disappear. And he sure as hell wasn't about to sweep her up and carry her away to live happily ever after, that was for damn sure.

Lib nearly tripped in her haste to get out of the coffee shop. Luke started to follow her, but Rich Lowell caught his arm.

"Let her go," the lawyer said. He smiled ruefully. "I'm afraid I just gave her some bad news."

As Luke watched out the window, Lib opened the door to her car and got inside. She moved slowly, jerkily, as if the
life and energy had been beaten out of her.


Rich shook his head. "Luke, you know I can't tell you," he said. "Client confidentiality, and all that." The heavy man moved back to his booth and began to gather up his files and his briefcase. "I was just getting ready to head over to your office — unless you want to talk here?"

"Here is fine," Luke said, distractedly, still watching Lib out the window. "Are you sure she's okay?"

Rich looked up, following Luke's gaze to where Lib was carefully pulling her car out of its parking spot. "I should've figured you'd know her," he said. "She's been in town, what? Two days, tops? And already you've got that look in your eyes."

Lib drove out of sight, and Luke focused on Rich for the first time. "What look in my eyes?"

"The big, bad wolf look," the lawyer said. "Can I give you some advice, pal?"

Luke sat down across from Rich, in the seat Lib had occupied not more than a few minutes earlier. "You're my attorney," he said. "I pay you to give me advice."

"Cool it with this girl." All teasing had left Rich's eyes. "She's nice. She's too sweet for your games. She'll fall for you — they all do — but she's the type who'll think you're playing for keeps."

Luke stared back out the window, down the street, in the direction that Lib had gone. His teeth were clenched, he realized, and he made an effort to relax his jaw.

"Don't be fooled," he said, looking back at Rich. "Lib's got a temper that you wouldn't believe. And she knows what's going on around her. She's not some innocent that I'm going to take advantage of." He took a sip of Lib's iced tea and laughed. "To tell you the truth, I feel like I'm the one who's on shifting sand. One minute she's asking me out to dinner, and the next she's accusing me of being narrow-minded, and telling me to stick my money where the sun don't shine."

"Your money?" Rich said, interest in his eyes.

Luke shrugged. "I offered to loan her the money she'd need to fix up the house," he said.

"And she told you to stick it," Rich said, unsuccessfully hiding a smile. "You might want to make her that offer again."

"Why?"

But Rich shook his head. "Uh, uh, uh," he said. "You know I can't tell you that." He pulled another file from his briefcase. "Let's talk about this video store deal. I looked over the contract."

Luke tried to concentrate on Rich's words as the lawyer went through the contract point by point. But all he could think about was the way Liberty's violet eyes had looked just before she'd left the coffee shop. There had been more than sadness in her eyes. He'd seen despair, defeat. Even when the floor had fallen in, even after she'd seen the horrible condition of the Harlowe house, she hadn't been defeated. Angry, sure. Sad, definitely. But not defeated.

At quarter after five, Luke glanced at his watch and interrupted Rich. "We're going to have to set up another time to talk about this," he said. "I'll come into Bellow's Falls tomorrow if you want, but I can't do this right now."


"No, I'm not."

"This is the final deal — the big one that's going to push you over the top."


"What on earth do you have cooking that takes precedence over this contract?" Rich asked, pushing himself to his feet and following Luke to the coffee shop door.

The late afternoon air felt cool. Luke took a deep breath, filling his lungs.

"Whatever it is, you better let me in on it." Rich followed Luke onto the sidewalk.

"It has nothing to do with my financial affairs," Luke said.

"Don't tell me — it's Liberty Jones," Rich said jokingly.
Luke said nothing, but something, some flicker in his eyes, some movement of his face gave him away.

Rich was stunned. "My God," he said. "It is, isn't it? I don't believe it. You're blowing off a business meeting because of Liberty Jones."


"Let me know if you lose your appetite or start singing and dancing in the street when it's raining," Rich grinned. "I can write a mean pre-nuptial agreement."

Luke wasn't amused. He leveled a deadly look at the attorney — a look that would have had other men shaking in their boots. But Rich just laughed as Luke walked toward his pickup truck.

"Good luck," he called after Luke.

Luke didn't even turn around.

He got into his truck and drove through town, making a quick circuit around the village green, watching for Lib's blue Spitfire, just in case she hadn't gone straight home. There was no sign of her, and he quickly headed onto Forest Road.

Luke spotted her car from quite a distance down the road, and the relief that hit him in the chest was staggering. He forced himself to ignore it, and pulled into the dirt and gravel driveway behind her car.

He was aware of the silence as he climbed down from the cab. The sound of his door closing seemed to echo in the stillness.

"Lib?"

The front door of her house was open, and Luke walked inside.

This place was depressing. How could she live here? He caught sight of her carefully rolled up sleeping bag in the dining room, alongside a small suitcase and her pair of worn out cowboy boots. A boombox and a pile of tapes sat on the mantel, but that was it, the complete extent of her worldly possessions.

He quickly walked through the house, even though he was certain she wasn't inside. He let himself out the kitchen door and followed the well-worn trail that led through the back yard and up the hill to the fields — and the pond.

The field next to the pond was filled with wildflowers. Daisies and black-eyed Susans were everywhere. Luke spotted Lib near the pond, lying on her back in the grass, hands beneath her head. She was staring up at the frothy white clouds that were floating across the blue sky. He stopped, bending down to pick one perfect daisy, then he walked over and sat down next to her.

"I know I'm probably the last person you want to see right now," he said lightly, offering her the flower, "but what if I groveled?"

She smiled, shading her eyes to look up at him. "You? Grovel?"

He stretched out in the grass next to her, propping his head up with one hand. "I've never actually groveled before. Please be gentle."

Lib sat up suddenly. "I'm going to need to borrow an awful lot of money from you," she said. "I'm the one who should be groveling."

Luke sat up, too. "I already told you I'd lend you the money. Pay me back whenever you can."

"It'll be a while," Lib said. She hugged her knees to her chest. "Harriet didn't have homeowner's insurance."

Luke swore softly. "Lib, I'm sorry."

He couldn't help himself. He reached for her, pulling her into his arms. She didn't fight him, and he rested his cheek against the silky smoothness of her hair, holding her close. Her shoulders shook, and at first he thought she was crying. But she wasn't. She was laughing.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"You've got to marry me," she said, teasing. "If you can stand up to my temper, and come back for more, I'd be a fool to let you get away." Her eyes turned serious as she looked up at him. "I can't believe you still like me after the way I yelled at you this morning."

Their eyes met and Lib caught her breath. He was going to kiss her. This time, he was definitely going to kiss her.
But this time Lib backed away, gently pulling free from his arms.

"If you're serious about lending me this money," she said, "I'm not sure it's a good idea for us to... you know, date."

Her face and words were so serious, Luke was taken aback. "Why?" was all he managed to say.

Lib plucked a piece of grass, running it between her finger and thumb. "I don't want you thinking the only reason I want to be with you is because of your money."

A breeze blew a lock of Luke's hair down across his forehead and impatiently he pushed it away. "I'm not going to think that," he countered.

"Why don't you believe me when I tell you that I'm here to stay?" Lib asked quietly, glancing up at him.

He looked away. "I'd like to believe you."

"But you don't." She could see from his face that she was right. "I need to figure out what I'm going to do," she said. "I need some time to think."

Luke got to his feet, but just stood for a moment, looking down at her. He laughed, a short exhale of rueful air. This was nuts. Yesterday, he was the one who didn't want to go out with Lib, yet today, here he was, blowing off business meetings, dying to have dinner, or anything, just to be with her. "I want to lend you that money," he said. "And I'll respect your decision if it means you don't want to go out with me. But it doesn't mean that you're not going to see me, because you will. We're neighbors. And sooner or later..."

He let his voice trail off, and got up, brushing bits of grass from his jeans and leaving without a farewell.

Lib watched Luke walk down the path that led back to the house and the road. For a man of exceptional height, he was graceful, his movements fluid and sure. During her many summers in Sterling, Lib had ridden her bike past the high school, stopping to watch Luke and his friends playing basketball out on the playground. He'd moved like a dancer, his muscles rippling as he floated through the air to dunk the ball through the hoop. There was no doubt about it. The man was gorgeous.

And she was attracted to him to a dangerous degree.
Chapter Five

Lib sat in the self-storage unit, surrounded by Harriet's inventory of furniture and boxes. There was so much stuff. As she looked around, she realized that the eleven hundred dollar fee for a quarter year of storage was a very good deal. She'd lived in two-bedroom apartments smaller than this room.

Lib opened a trunk, and the unforgettable aroma of boxwood floated out. It was as if Harriet were suddenly standing in front of her.

The trunk had been carefully packed with dresses — Harriet's dresses — beautifully hand-sewn garments made from fabrics of all colors and prints. Harriet had worn them back in the 1930's and 40's.

The lid of the trunk had a mirror built into it, and Lib pulled out one of the dresses, holding it up to herself. She remembered looking through this trunk with Harriet, listening to her great-aunt's stories of the Depression and World War II. Lib had tried some of them on. At fourteen she hadn't yet reached her full height, and her gangly body hadn't filled out.

"Some day," Harriet had said with a twinkle in her blue eyes, "you're going to be as tall as I am, and damn near as pretty, too. If I don't say so myself."

"Oh, Harriet," Lib sighed now, looking at herself in the wavery mirror. "What should I do?"

The dress had a pattern of tiny black flowers over a tan background. As Lib moved to fold it back up, the overhead fluorescent lights reflected off of something. It was a pin. A golden locket in the shape of a heart. She hadn't noticed it, because it seemed to blend right in with the colors of the dress.

Carefully, Lib popped the catch and the locket opened. Instead of a picture inside, as she'd been expecting, there were words, neatly written in Harriet's spidery hand.

'Follow Your Heart.'

It had been Harriet's motto down through the years. Follow your heart.

Instead of putting the dress back into the trunk, Lib took it with her, carefully locking the door to the storage unit behind her.

* * *

The tiny fans at the base of the windows did little to stir the warm air in the church, and Luke felt nearly overpowered by the heat and his accompanying fatigue. He gave in to the urge to close his eyes as the organ started to play. He'd take a short nap during Mrs. Howard's solo, safe in the knowledge that his sister Brenda would gladly provide a swift elbow to his ribs if he started to snore.

But it was clear from the very first note that Mrs. Howard was not this morning's soloist. The voice that was singing was young and clear and Luke opened his eyes and turned to look up at the choir loft in the back of the church.

It was Lib. But it was a Lib he'd never seen before. She was wearing a dress and her hair was up in some kind of braid, off her neck. The dress was old-fashioned, like something out of a Katharine Hepburn movie. The neck-line was fairly modest, but not high, and while the dress wasn't tight, it fit Lib well, clinging to her soft curves in all the right places.

As Lib sang, she met his gaze and smiled at his expression of surprise. He caught her wink before she composed her features into a more properly devout expression. Luke couldn't pull his eyes away from her, feeling his blood pressure start to rise. Lord, she was beautiful. And what a voice

Brenda's elbow connected sharply with his side.

"Is that her?" his sister whispered. "Your new neighbor?"

Luke nodded. He could see the sly speculation in Brenda's brown eyes.

"No wonder you haven't been able to make it over for dinner for the past week," she said.

"It's not what you think," he said, shaking his head. "We're just friends." But as the words came out of his mouth, he could barely believe them himself. Still, it was what Liberty wanted. He'd loaned her the thirty thousand to start the renovations on her house, and they'd sat down with Rich Lowell and drawn up a pay-back agreement. Afterwards, Luke had tried to seal the deal with something a little bit stronger than a handshake, but Lib had stopped him.
She didn't want to get involved with him, that was clear. She'd insisted that her sole reason for keeping distance between them was because she felt uncomfortable due to the amount of money she'd borrowed from him. But Luke was convinced there was something more to it. After all, he was a lot older than she was — and he had a reputation he deserved. He couldn't blame her.

They would have to be just friends.

"You've never been friends with a woman in your entire life," Brenda whispered. "You don't know how."

"Sure I do," Luke whispered back. "It's not that hard." Well, it wouldn't be if only he could figure out a way to keep from wanting to kiss Lib all the time, to hold her, to...

Swell thing to be thinking about in church, he chastised himself.

He closed his eyes against all the questions he could see on Brenda's face, and listened to Lib sing. The words and melody were nothing out of the ordinary, but the clear beauty of Lib's voice made the little hymn something special.

Liberty Jones was full of surprises, that was for sure. She was unpredictable and bright, a ray of sunshine in a world that had become full of too many numbers to crunch, too many deadlines to meet and too much money to worry about. The more Luke was around Lib, the harder it was to leave her. The more he found out about her and her unconventional childhood and eccentric family, the more he wanted to know. And she could make him laugh like he hadn't laughed in years.

He wanted her in a way that went beyond mere sexuality, in a way that scared the hell out of him.

But wanting her was hard enough. Having and then losing her would be unbearable.

After the service was over, Luke stood outside on the steps of the church, waiting for Lib. The late morning sun beat down mercilessly on his shoulders and he loosened his tie and slipped out of his jacket. He was just starting to roll up his sleeves when she appeared.

As she closed the heavy door behind her, a gust of wind blew up, making her calf-length skirt flare out around her, and pressing the thin fabric of her dress against her slender body. Several strands of Lib's hair had come free from her braid, making her look somehow even more feminine.

Luke couldn't look away.

She moved down the steps toward him slowly, as if she were hypnotized by the heat in his eyes. Luke forced himself to smile and some of the apprehension left her face.

"You look beautiful," he said. "The dress was Harriet's, right?"

She nodded. A trickle of perspiration ran down her neck, over her delicate collarbone and disappeared below the wide neckline of the dress. Luke felt himself start to sweat.

"I'm not sure I would've worn this if I'd known it was going to be two hundred degrees up in the choir loft," Lib said, managing a smile.

"Only two hundred?" Luke teased. "Not a million?"

"No," Lib said, meeting his eyes again. A million degrees was what she felt when she looked into his eyes. The heat in the choir loft was nothing compared to that.

"You sounded great," he said. They started to walk down the sidewalk, and he hooked his jacket onto one finger, carrying it over his shoulder. "I didn't know you could sing like that."

Luke stopped walking when they reached the edge of the parking lot. He glanced across the gravel lot at his truck. He couldn't see Lib's blue Spitfire anywhere. "Can I give you a lift home?" he asked, trying to hide the hopeful note in his voice.

She fanned herself with the church program. "No thanks. I'm not going home. Mrs. Etherton invited me over for dinner. Mrs. Clancy and Miss Price are going to be there, too. They miss Harriet an awful lot, and... " She smiled and shrugged. "I remind them of her."

"Can I give you a ride over?"

"No thanks," Lib said. "I'm going to walk. It's not far."

"Mind if I walk with you?" He wanted to kick himself. Could he be any more obvious?

Lib just smiled. "Of course I don't mind," she said. They started walking again. "What are you up to today?"
"There's a softball game tonight," Luke said. "Want to play?"

"I don't have a glove."


"What time is the game?" Lib asked. "I probably won't leave Mrs. Etherton's until after one, and then, by the time I walk home... I wanted to get some more of that work done on the roof."

"Game's not til seven," Luke said, resisting the urge to take her hand. Another few yards and they'd be in front of the old Etherton house. He tried to slow his steps. "I'll help you with the roof. And I'll pick you up after dinner."

"You don't have to do that. Lib stopped in front of the picket fence that surrounded Mrs. Etherton's carefully tended yard. With her hand on the gate, she looked up at Luke.

But his attention had been caught by the heart-shaped locket that was pinned to her dress. He moved toward her and reached for it, his fingers lightly brushing her chest as he looked at it more closely.

"Was this Harriet's too?" he asked.

Lib nodded, wondering if he could feel the increased tempo of her heart.

"It's pretty," he said, letting it drop.

"Yeah, I thought so, too," she said.

He was still standing close, too close. Lib released the catch on the gate, and went into the yard, closing it behind her. Safe. Now she was safe. She tried not to sigh with relief too audibly.

"I'll pick you up at one," he said, lifting his hand in a wave as she started up the path to the front door.

Lib turned and watched him walk down the street. She leaned against one of the big wooden columns that supported the old house's wrap-around porch, trying to regain her equilibrium before facing a barrage of questions from Mrs. Etherton and her friends.

It had been over a week since she'd made the decision to borrow Luke's money — and the decision not to become involved with him. She smiled. Actually, she'd decided that she was going to become involved with Luke. Unfortunately, it seemed like the best way to do that was to become his friend first. It was a little scary, because being with him so often, getting to know him better, only made him seem so much more attractive. He was good company, a good listener, full of comments and insights, and hell, the fact that he was so handsome sure didn't hurt.

She knew he wasn't seeing anyone else, thank goodness. In fact, he'd told her it had been close to three years since he'd been in any kind of relationship. Inwardly, she shook her head.

According to town gossip, Luke had been something of a womanizer after he returned to town from college. Before his father had died, he'd worked for a while as a ski instructor up at Gates Mountain Resort, giving private lessons to wealthy women. Apparently, those lessons were not restricted to the ski slopes.

But five years ago, after he'd sold part of his farm, he'd changed. He spent more time working, and less and less time with the beautiful women who came into town for vacations.

Behind Lib, the front door swung open. "Don't just stand there, mooning after that young man of yours," Mrs. Etherton said. "Come inside."

Lib turned with a smile. Mrs. Etherton was a tiny, birdlike woman, well into her nineties. Her hair was thin but perfectly styled, and her eyes were still sharp. Too sharp, Lib thought. "He's not my young man," she said, opening the squeaky screen door.

Mrs. Etherton wiped her hands on her apron. "Coulda fooled me," she said.

She pulled Lib into the kitchen, where Mrs. Clancy and Miss Price were bustling about, putting mountains of food onto serving platters.

"Justin time," Mrs. Clancy smiled, her heavy face creasing with delight as she gave Lib a hug.

"She was standing out front," Mrs. Etherton said, "talking to that Fulton boy."

Miss Price sniffed. "He's a tomcat, that Luke Fulton," she said in her reedy voice. She looked at Lib, her expression dour. "I'd stay far, far away from him, were I you."

"Sure you would," Mrs. Etherton said, "and look where it's got you. Seventy-seven years old, and never been
kissed."

Miss Price sniffed again. "Better that than what happened to poor Harriet."

"Now, Allegra," Mrs. Clancy bustled over, and took a platter of steaming broccoli and cauliflower from Miss Price's hands. "That was years ago, and besides, Harriet's not around to defend herself—"

"What happened to Harriet?" Lib asked, intrigued.

Mrs. Etherton put an enormous bowl of mashed potatoes into Lib's hands. "Never mind," she said. "Bring this into the dining room, and then let's sit down. Shall we, ladies?"

The dining room was elegantly set with Mrs. Etherton's best china. The table was covered with a lace cloth and a bowl of beautifully arranged flowers sat in the middle of it all.

The women sat down, and after a quick grace, they started to eat. Everything was delicious, from the country ham that almost melted in Lib's mouth to the buttermilk biscuits. She hadn't eaten food this good since... well, since the summer before Harriet had had her stroke.

What had happened to Harriet? Lib was about to ask, when Miss Price leaned over.

"That Fulton boy is only after one thing, mind you," she said, her lips taut with disapproval.

"Allegra, you old bat," Mrs. Etherton said, "enough's been said about Luke Fulton."

Allegra Price's lips got tighter. "Someone's got to tell the girl."

"That boy's got to settle down some time," Mrs. Clancy said with a gentle smile. "Maybe he really is sweet on Liberty."

All three elderly women turned to look at Lib. "Is he?" Miss Price asked.

"We're friends," Lib said. "Neighbors. That's all."

"That's what Harriet said about Trevor Fulton," Miss Price intoned ominously.


Lib put down her fork. "All right," she said. "What exactly did happen to Harriet?"

Silence.

Three pairs of eyes blinked at her from behind thick-lensed glasses.

"Well?" Lib prompted.

"She fell in love, dear," Mrs. Clancy said.

"With that awful Trevor Fulton," Miss Price said.

Mrs. Etherton smiled. "He was as handsome as the devil." She winked at Lib. "Looked a lot like your young Luke."

"He's not mine," Lib muttered, knowing her protest would be ignored.

"Trevor was quite mad about Harriet," Mrs. Clancy said with a sigh, "and she did insist at first that they were only friends."

"Some friends," Miss Price sniffed. "Considering she was carrying his child."

Lib felt her mouth drop open. "What?"

"They were going to get married," Mrs. Etherton said hastily. "Harriet told me he gave her his ring before he left."

"But he never came back, did he?" Miss Price said.

"I'm sure he meant to come back," Mrs. Clancy said.

"We'll never know, will we?" Miss Price said.

Mrs. Etherton glared across the table at Allegra Price. "You don't actually think Trevor Fulton died in the war on purpose?"

"Of course not," Allegra said, but the set of her mouth said 'you never know'.

"What about the baby?" Lib asked.
"Miscarriage," Miss Price intoned. "Thank the Lord."

"Harriet was devastated," Mrs. Etherton said, sending Allegra a scathing look. "She'd just received word that Trevor had died a hero at Normandy, and she wanted that baby more than ever. It was a tragedy."

"A real tragedy," Mrs. Clancy echoed.

"I never knew," Lib said softly. She'd never imagined Harriet had ever been in love. But... follow your heart. She remembered Harriet giving her that advice. There had been a time, Harriet had said on more than one occasion, where she was given a choice, and she had forever after thanked God that she'd followed her heart. She'd had four months of the most intense, perfect happiness, she'd said. Some people don't even get a minute of that.

It all made sense now. She must have been talking about her love affair with Trevor Fulton.

"Time for pie," Mrs. Clancy said, standing up. "Who wants coffee?"

* * *

"Hey, batter, batter, batter, batter! Swing!"

Luke stood on the pitcher's mound, glancing at first base where Lib was crouched, glove in hand, taunting the man up at bat. One look at Lib was enough to throw his concentration totally to hell. She was wearing a short cropped T-shirt over a pair of tight bike shorts, and the combination was combustible. Even covered with dust the way she was from last inning when she slid into home, even with her hair falling out of its pony tail, even with that smudge of dirt on her nose, she could make his blood boil.

Pulling in every bit of mental energy that he could, Luke focused on the softball in his hands, and pitched. It was a perfect pitch, directly in the strike zone. The batter swung, and the bat connected with the ball, sending it in a hard line drive directly toward Lib's head. She caught it effortlessly, and the inning, and the game, was over.

"Good play," Luke said, as they trotted back to the bench.

"Easy catch," Lib said, tossing him the ball.

There was blood on it.

"Oh yuck," Lib said, taking the ball back from him and wiping it on the grass. "Sorry."

Around them, their teammates were jumping around, celebrating the end of their losing streak. But Luke pulled Lib aside, holding her right arm up to the bright stadium lights. Her elbow was scraped and bleeding.

"I did it when I slid," she said, wincing slightly. "I thought I got the bleeding to stop, but I guess it opened up again."

Luke's eyes were dark and unreadable. His hair was curling from the heat and damp with sweat. He hadn't let go of her arm, and she gently pulled herself free.

"You're going to need a shower," he said. "Come on, we'll get you cleaned up."

He took Lib's hand and led her to his truck. As he opened the door and helped her inside, she looked down at him.

"You know, people think there's something going on between us," she said. "I spent a few hours at dinner listening to Harriet's old friends warn me about you." She smiled. "You have one hell of a reputation."

Luke shook his head in exasperation, closing the door. As he crossed around the front of the truck, he pulled his T-shirt off and wiped his face with it, throwing it back behind the seat as he climbed in.

The truck engine started with a roar and he glanced at Lib before looking in the rear view mirror. "I'm afraid more than just the old ladies in town have been talking about us," he said. "Half the town is betting there's going to be a shotgun wedding, and the other half thinks there's just going to be a shotgun — and you're going to use it to shoot me."

Lib laughed. "Sounds like the stuff folk songs are made of," she said, trying not to gawk at him sitting there without a shirt. "And just think, we're only friends. We're fooling them all."

Luke was silent. The only ones they were fooling were themselves. "Lib," he started to say.

But she interrupted, as if somehow she knew he was going to bring up the subject of their relationship. It was clear she didn't want to talk about it. "We should have the roof finished in a couple of days," she said. "And I'm almost done stripping the wallpaper off the walls in the back bedroom. That's the room that's in the best shape. Any chance I can borrow your truck and get one of Harriet's beds out of storage? I've been sleeping on the floor too long."
"Sure," Luke said, pulling into his driveway and throwing the gears into park. He turned toward her, but she'd already climbed down out of the truck.

It was obvious that Lib didn't want to risk doing or saying anything that might move their relationship from friend to lover status.

And she was right. They were doing the right thing, he told himself as he followed her onto the front porch. Staying friends was good. It felt as unnatural as hell, but it was good. Wasn't it? Sooner or later, she was going to leave, and if they weren't lovers, he wouldn't ache for her, his bed wouldn't feel too big without her there, he wouldn't miss the way her body felt against his...

Later that night, after Lib had showered and gone home, Luke lay in his bed, staring up into the darkness, pretending that he wasn't thinking about her. Damn, he thought, recognizing the sharp stab of physical need. But there was something else there — a duller pain that made his stomach hurt and his chest ache. It was more generalized, less specific, and it scared the hell out of him. He closed his eyes, forcing himself to ignore it.

Rich Lowell's remark about dancing in the rain and pre-nuptial agreements came back to him. No way, he thought grimly. Absolutely no way.

* * *

"Hey! " Luke called, slamming the door of his truck and jogging toward the rickety ladder that led up to the roof.

Lib peered over the edge at him, pulling a nail out of her mouth. "Hey yourself," she called back. "What's up?"

She glanced up at the sky. "It's not six o'clock already, is it?"

"Three fifteen," Luke said, climbing up the ladder. He scowled at her. "My deal's on hold. You know, the sale of the video stores? The buyers are in Japan for the next three weeks. I had to choose between sitting in my office, tapping my fingers and going slowly mad, or coming out here, helping you with the roof and going slowly mad."

"And my roof won," Lib said. "Lucky me."

Luke grabbed a handful of shingles and took the hammer from Lib's hand, immediately starting in with the work. "You may not think you're so lucky after about day three," he said. "I'm going to be totally nuts by then. I hate waiting. Lord, I hate waiting."

Lib straddled the peak of the roof, taking a sip from the water bottle she'd rigged to hang around her waist. "You mean... You're going to help me for three weeks?"

He glanced up at her. "Do you mind? I've got to do something, and my other businesses basically run themselves. I suppose I could go downtown and have Tony teach me to make pizzas."

Lib was sitting there, dressed in a pair of ragged cut-offs splattered with dried paint. She wore a pair of clunky boots on her feet, a bright red sports bra top, and a smile that was as bright as the sun. Luke felt his heart flipflop, and for one second his foot slipped and he skidded slightly before he regained his footing. Still, far more frightening than the thought of falling off the roof was the inward sensation of free-fall that he felt when Lib smiled at him.

Lust, he thought, fastening another shingle to the roof. That's all it was. Sheer physical need. A normal reaction. An extremely normal reaction.

* * *

Less than a week later, the roof was completed, and Lib threw herself — and Luke — headfirst into the work that needed to be done in the interior of the house. The carting company brought a huge dumpster into the yard, and it was positioned strategically under the window in the room Lib was planning to make the master bedroom.

Luke joined her energetic efforts, matching her stamina and drive, and together they cleared the house of the trash and old lumber, the rotting drywall, peeling wallpaper and shredded carpeting.

By mid-afternoon of the fourth day, they were ready for a break, and they took Luke's pickup into Bellow's Falls to get a bed for Lib out of storage.

They carried it into the house, hauling the heavy oak frame and the mattress up the back staircase. Setting the bed up was more difficult than it looked, and the sun was sinking in the sky by the time they put the mattress on top of the springs.
Lib looked at the bed critically. "It needs a canopy," she said. "With that frame up there like that, but without a canopy on it, I'm going to feel like I'm surrounded by dinosaur bones. Let's get that trunk in from the truck. I'm sure the canopy's in there somewhere."

Luke flashed her a disbelieving look. "You're a slave driver," he complained. "We haven't even had lunch yet. Let's go get something to eat."

Lib lay down on the bed, looking up at the canopy frame. "Yep," she said. "Definitely dinosaur bones. I'll have terrible dreams."

"It looks nothing like dinosaur bones," Luke said. He lay down next to her on the bed to get the proper perspective. "Dinosaur bones would curve inward. You're thinking ribs, right?"

"Yeah," Lib said, stretching her arms above her head. "Maybe it's the color of the wood—"

"It looks more like trees in winter to me," Luke said. "You know, without the leaves on — plain and stark against a white sky."

"Dead trees," Lib said. "Great. Dead trees or dinosaur bones. Either way I'll never get any sleep."

Luke rolled on his side to look at her, propping his head up with one hand. "So you want to haul a five-ton trunk up that impossibly narrow flight of stairs, and hang up some dusty old canopy?" he teased. "You still won't get any sleep — you'll sneeze all night."

"I'm not allergic to dust," Lib said, smiling up at him.

"Yeah, well, I am," Luke said, with an answering smile.

Lib became aware of their intimate position at the exact instant Luke did — she could see it in his eyes. They were lying there together, on her bed, close enough to embrace, close enough to kiss. Luke's smile faded, and his dark eyes got even darker. Lib wondered for a few breathless seconds if he could see the same burning hunger deep in her eyes. Lord knows she felt it.

He glanced down at her mouth and leaned toward her, but Lib rolled away from him, off the bed. "Let's get that trunk," she said, practically running down the stairs and out into the coolness of the early evening air.

She braced herself against the side of the truck. Heaven help her, she didn't know how many more weeks of this she could take. But she wanted Luke to trust her. He had to trust her, or all they'd have was a fling, a brief affair. And she knew more than ever now that she didn't want to settle for that.

By the time Luke came outside, she was able to smile at him as she pushed the heavy trunk toward the tailgate of the truck.

But he caught her arm after he climbed up into the truck bed, and she could still see heat in his eyes. "I don't know how much more of this I can handle, Lib," he said softly.

She pretended to misunderstand. "Just help me get the trunk upstairs, and then we'll stop for the day," she said.

Luke wanted to kiss her. He ached to kiss her. But she pulled away, and instead he helped her carry the trunk upstairs and hang a delicately patterned blue canopy over her bed.

Now she'd be able to sleep well.

But he sure as hell wouldn't.
Chapter Six

"There I am," Lib said, pointing to the television screen. "Hit pause."

"Where?" Luke squinted at the slightly blurred image on the screen.

"There," Lib said, pointing again. "Left hand side of the screen. In the black dress, holding a martini glass and smoking a cigarette. Well, I'm not really smoking. I'm just pretending to."

"That's you?" Luke crossed his living room to get a better look at the television.

"I wore my hair really short back then," she said.

Luke pushed the rewind button, and then pressed play, watching closely as Lib, working as an extra, laughed and talked in the background of the movie scene. She was wearing long, sparkling earrings and a dress that looked as if it had been painted on. It redefined short, and her long, shapely legs ended in a pair of dangerously high heels that made her damn near close to his own height. Her hair was boyishly short, cropped closely around her ears, displaying her slender, graceful neck.

"Do you still have this dress?" Luke asked. "Or was it something they gave you to wear?"

"Yeah, I have it," Lib said. "It's my Hollywood party scene dress. Part of the deal for extras is that you have to come dressed for the scene — with the exception of period movies, of course."

Luke rewound the tape and played it again. "I like this dress," he said. "You should wear it sometime."

"Like when?" she said. "While I'm steaming wall paper off the walls? Or maybe to church?" She laughed. "I don't think so."

"We could go out to dinner," Luke said. "Up at the resort."

Lib threw a throw pillow at his head. "Are you kidding?" she said. "And get me mistaken for one of your ski bunnies? No way."

A crack of thunder made Lib jump, and as the sound of rain started, she looked up toward the ceiling and smiled. "It's raining," she said happily. "And I don't have to run home and make sure the tarp is secure and then scramble around to catch all the leaks with buckets." She sat back on the couch, pulling her feet up onto a footstool. "Man, just sitting here like this feels decadent."

Luke stood up and turned off the television, and when he looked back at her, he had a funny look on his face. "Lib, you didn't go up on the roof to fix it in the rain, did you?"

She didn't need to say anything. He could see the answer written clearly on her face. "Lib, I can't believe you'd do something so stupid," he said.

"Relax," Lib said. "Obviously, I lived to tell the tale."

Luke towered over her. "God damn it—"

"I was careful—"

"God damn it!"

Lib's temper was starting to fray, and she got to her feet, refusing to let him intimidate her. "What was I supposed to do, Fulton?" she asked, her voice raised. "Let the rain just pour into my house? Or wake you up at two in the morning to help me?"

Luke was silent as he stood there and glared at her. His face was tan and healthy-looking, Lib realized. And despite his stern expression, he looked relaxed, almost laid-back, more like the Luke Fulton she'd known as a child. Over the past several weeks, he'd begun to emerge from the too-serious world he'd locked himself into. Was it the fact that he was only a few weeks away from buying back his precious land, a few weeks away from victory? Or was it something else — someone else, herself for instance...? Lib couldn't dare to hope.

As she looked up at him, his expression changed, softened, and his voice was calm as he answered her.

"Yes," he said. "Absolutely. I want you to wake me up at two o'clock in the morning. Please." He smiled ruefully. "You know, I haven't had a real friend since Tommy Kearns left town back in eleventh grade. So don't go and get yourself killed, Lib. I'm just getting used to having you around."

Lib's smile was a blast of sunshine, creating an explosion of dizzying heat inside of him. Forget Tommy Kearns,

"Photos," she said, and he blinked. What?

Lib grinned at his expression of confusion. "You said you had a bunch of old photo albums," she said. "I wanted to see a picture of Trevor Fulton, remember?"

Luke frowned. "Trevor?" he said. "He died in the Second World War. I'm not sure we have many pictures of him as an adult."

Lib followed him into the front parlor and watched as he crossed to a built-in bookshelf that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. "He was Harriet's age," Lib said. "That would make him your grandfather's brother, right?"

"Right." He pulled a red leather-bound album from the bookshelf and flipped through it. "Lord, I haven't looked at these in years," he said. "No, this one's my mother's family."

Lib came to look over his shoulder as he took another photo album down. "Here we go," he said.

The first page of the album contained a posed family portrait taken during what looked to be the early 1920's. An older man stood stiffly next to a woman who was seated in a chair. Three solemn little girls in matching dresses with bows in their hair stood behind their mother, and two small boys stood beside her. On her lap sat a cherub-faced toddler.

"That's my grandfather," Luke said, pointing to the older of the two boys. "And that's Trevor, next to him."

Lib looked closely at the grainy old photograph. Both of the boys were successful in their attempt to keep a smile off their faces, but their eyes shone with barely repressed amusement. "Man, they were cute," she said. "Did you look like this when you were little?"

"Almost exactly," Luke said. "It's a little freaky, actually, you know, the whole family resemblance thing."

Luke turned the pages of the album, flipping quickly past photos of cousins and distant relatives. Lib was standing close enough for him to feel the heat from her body, and to smell the fresh scent of her clean hair.

"Wait," she said. "Turn back. What was that?"

Two young men, standing with their arms around each other's shoulders, dressed in overalls and straw hats grinned at the camera.

"That's them," Luke said. "My grandfather and Trevor. They must've been in high school — probably right before Trevor got kicked out."

"Kicked out?" Lib looked up at him.

"Great-Uncle Trevor was a hell-raiser," he said. "Whatever he did that got him kicked out of school triggered a fight with his father, and Trevor left home. He didn't come back until my great-grandfather died — right before the war."

"That must've been when Harriet met him," Lib said.

Luke was looking down into Lib's eyes, drowning in the amazing shade of violet. "Harriet?" he said distractedly. "She knew Trevor?"

"Fairly well," Lib said with a smile. "They were planning to get married after he came back from the war." Her smile faded. "Only he didn't come back."

"I never knew that," Luke said. He turned the pages of the album. "I think there's a portrait of him in here, you know, in uniform. It was taken right before he left. Yeah, here they are. There's two different poses."

Trevor's hair was cut shorter, and his nose was a little different, but aside from that, the man in those pictures looked exactly like Luke.

In one of the photos, Trevor looked directly into the camera, his face serious. But his eyes danced with humor and amusement. In the second photo, he was laughing, looking slightly off to the side, as if he were meeting the eyes of someone standing to the right of the photographer. There was such happiness, such love on his face.

"Weird resemblance, huh?" Luke said, glancing at Lib.

She had tears in her eyes. "Do you think there's a heaven?" she asked. "Do you think they're together now?"

"I don't know," Luke said softly. He put his arm around her shoulders and she leaned her head against his chest.
"I hope so," she said. "I used to wonder why Harriet never got married. I couldn't imagine going through life that way — choosing to be alone. But she didn't make that choice. She was forced to be alone, because Trevor died. She probably never married because no one could compare to him."

Luke's arms felt so good around her, so strong and safe. She closed her eyes for a moment, breathing in his familiar male scent. He smelled like soap and shampoo and fresh cut grass and . . .

She pulled away from him. "How could you possibly smell like ski wax in the middle of the summer?"

He laughed in surprise, reaching up to put the photo album back on the shelf. "I've been customizing an old pair of cross-country skis out in the barn," he said. "While you were in the shower, I was scraping the wax."

Lib shook her head. "You skiers are all alike. I bet you can tell me the exact number of days until winter," she teased.

"Not this year," Luke said. "This year I'm enjoying the summer. Winter will come soon enough." Lib was a summer person. In fact, she was the summer for him. And like the summer, he had a feeling she was going to disappear when the air turned cool and frost changed the colors of the leaves.

"When winter does come," Lib said, "will you teach me to ski?"

Luke felt a wave of hope flood over him. Was it possible that she really was going to stay? He kept his voice even, afraid to hope too much. "Sure."

"Wow, it's late," Lib said, catching sight of the cuckoo clock on the parlor wall. "I should go."

"I'll get an umbrella," Luke said, "and walk you home."

He was silent as they walked together underneath the umbrella, shielded from the light rain that was falling. Lib had told him right from the start that she was planning to live here in town. Luke hadn't believed her. But what if she was serious?

"Thanks for walking me home," she said as they reached her front porch. She put her arms around him and gave him a brief hug, standing on her tiptoes to quickly kiss the side of his face. "And thanks for letting me see those pictures. It really meant a lot to me."

Before Luke could respond, before he could reach for her, hug her back, kiss her properly, she was gone.

"See you tomorrow," she said from inside the screen, and then the door closed.

Luke stood on the porch, grinning like an idiot. She'd kissed him.

Still smiling, he went down the steps and out into the rain. There were puddles in the middle of Forest Road, and he splashed through them, doing a little dance of happiness.

She'd kissed him!

He froze. Oh, Lord! He was actually dancing in the rain. Lib Jones had kissed him on the cheek, for crying out loud, and here he was, acting like a fool.

Stepping carefully over the puddles, he hurried home.

* * *

Luke took off his jacket and loosened his tie, looking around at the crowd of people gathered on the village green, across from the church.

"Looking for someone in particular?" Brenda said.

He turned to see his sister smiling smugly at him. "Someone named Lib Jones, by any chance?" she asked, wiggling her eyebrows at him. "You know, I try calling you at work, but they tell me you're at home. And when I try you at home, you're never there, either. You haven't even turned on your answering machine. Tell me the truth, baby brother. Are you in love, or what?"

"Or what," Luke said, moving into the shade and rolling up his sleeves. "I'm helping Lib get her house fixed up. That's all."

"That's all?" Brenda crossed her arms. "Then what do you call having dinner together, and going to movies together, and showing up at softball games together, and leaving afterwards together—"

"I call it car-pooling," Luke said, looking over her head at the crowd milling around the ice cream table. He spotted
Mrs. Etherton over by the iced tea stand. "I'll talk to you later," he said, leaving Brenda shaking her head in mock
disgust.

Mrs. Etherton was squeezing a piece of lemon into her plastic cup of iced tea, and as Luke was approaching, she
turned and gave him a long appraising look. "Young Mr. Fulton," she said in her brittle voice. "A fine day for the ice
cream social, don't you agree?"

"Yes, ma'am," Luke said. "It sure is. How are you?"

"I'm eighty-seven years old," she said, "and I've still got all my marbles, so I'd say I'm better than fine, thanks."
Luke couldn't hide his amusement. "I'm glad to hear that," he said.

"You've got your great-uncle Trevor's smile, did you know that?" Mrs. Etherton asked. "He was a real rogue — at
least until he met Harriet." Her eyes narrowed. "You're a lady's man, too, aren't you, Mr. Fulton?"
Luke smiled vaguely, hoping she wouldn't press for an answer if he changed the subject. "I was wondering if you've
seen Lib," he said.

"Looking for her, are you?" Mrs. Etherton said, giving him another hard look. "Why?"

Why? "Because... I want to see her," he said. "Because I like being with her."

It must've been the right answer, because Mrs. Etherton smiled at him.

"It's nice to have Liberty home, isn't it?" the tiny old woman said. "I missed that girl, all those years she was away."
She gestured with her head toward the center of the green. "She's helping the band set up down at the gazebo," she
added.


He spotted Lib almost right away. She was wearing another one of Harriet's dresses. This one had hundreds of blue
flowers on a white background. It had short sleeves and a scooped neckline, and a long flowing skirt that moved
about in the breeze, making her seem like some ethereal creature — a fairy or an angel.

Lord, I'm losing it, Luke thought desperately. This woman is driving me clear out of my mind. He watched her
talking and laughing with the other people who were helping set up chairs around the edge of the big white-painted
gazebo.

She did seem at home, he thought, remembering Mrs. Etherton's words, 'It's nice to have Liberty home'. Everyone in
town seemed to agree.

She was going to stay. Liberty wasn't kidding when she'd told him she was going to stay in Sterling. It hit him like a
lightning bolt, and he had to hold onto the banister on the steps leading up to the gazebo to keep from losing his
balance.

Lib looked up, saw him and smiled. "Hey pitcher," she said, crossing toward him. "Ready for tonight's big game?"

Game. Tonight. Softball. Right. It took Luke several long seconds to figure out what she was talking about. "Yeah,"
he said.

"Aren't you supposed to keep your jacket on?" she asked. "You know, to keep your throwing arm warm?"

Luke laughed. "Considering it's 85 degrees in the shade, I'd say my arm's warm enough, thanks."

"Did you have an ice cream sundae yet?" Lib asked.

"Maybe later," Luke said, looking at the band tuning
up on the stage. "When are they going to start?"


Sunday Kind of Love. The song they were playing was called Sunday Kind of Love. Luke's grandmother had had a
music box that played that melody, and as a little boy, he'd spent hours in her room on rainy days, playing it over
and over. The beautiful melody still fascinated him.

"Dance with me," he said. He threw his jacket over the back of a chair, and took Lib's hand, pulling her out onto the
dance floor, allowing no room for argument.

"I didn't know you liked big band music," Lib said. Her voice sounded breathless, strange to her own ears. Luke was
holding her tightly, his right arm around her waist, his left hand tucking her hand close to his chest. Could he feel her heart pounding, feel the blood racing through her veins?

"I didn't know five piece bands qualified as "big," Luke said.

"The church social committee couldn't afford the fourteen piece big band," Lib said, "so we got the mini version."


Lib felt one of his muscular thighs brush against hers, and their eyes met and held. She gazed into the chocolate brown depths as his arm tightened around her, pulling her even closer, close enough that their bodies touched not just by accident, but continuously. Relentlessly.

Lib's mouth was dry and she moistened her lips. "Luke," she said. "People are watching us. They're going to think —"

"That I want you?" he said quietly. "They'll be right."

His eyes seemed to spark with a heat that pierced and flowed through her, pooling in a liquid mass deep within her. "I can't hide it any longer," he said. "Kiss me, Liberty."

It was crazy, absolutely crazy. There were so many reasons why she shouldn't kiss him. So many good, solid reasons. They were in full view of the entire town, for one. And she wasn't ready for their relationship to move in this direction, not yet, anyway.

But Lib didn't pull away, didn't move. And Luke bent his head and kissed her.

Lib closed her eyes. His lips were so gentle, the kiss so sweet. Sweet, yet with the promise of passion lurking just below the surface. She felt his arms encircling his neck, pulling him closer to her. She couldn't get enough of him. It shocked her to think what she wanted, and she pulled back.

Luke was breathing hard — as hard as she was. "Lord," he said, his voice breaking slightly. "You don't know how long I've wanted to do that."

"I should go," Lib breathed. "I'm supposed to be dishing out the strawberry ice cream."

"You're not really going to kiss me like that, and then pretend you didn't?"

"No, of course not," Lib said, flustered. "But this is hardly the place—"

"Relax. I was ragging on you," Luke said quickly. "That was like what you said to me the first day we met, remember? You can kiss me any time you want, and we don't have to talk about it at all."

He kissed her again. Lord, she was so sweet. "Don't go," he said.

"I promised I'd help—"

"Then let me help, too."

Lib pulled back in surprise. Realizing suddenly that they were standing still among a dozen dancing couples, she took Luke's hand and led him to the edge of the gazebo. "You really want to help?" she asked.

He kissed her again. Lord, she was so sweet. "Don't go," he said.

"I really want to be with you. Luke didn't say the words aloud. He couldn't say them aloud. They frightened him to death. Lord only knows how Lib would have reacted. "Yeah," he said.

"Lib, we do need to talk," Lib said.

Her violet eyes were so serious, Luke felt a momentary pang of worry. But then he remembered the way she had kissed him, the way her arms had tightened around his neck. He wasn't imagining this attraction between them. She felt it, too. He knew that she did.

Even if she had a hundred reasons why they should only be friends, he could come up with a hundred reasons why they should become involved. Her eyes, her smile, her lips, her nose and every single one of the freckles on it, the way she laughed, her sense of humor, the way she made him feel...

"Later," she said. "We'll talk later."

He nodded and she led the way across the green to the table that held huge containers of ice cream. The containers sat in tubs of ice, in a pathetic attempt to keep them from melting.
Lib spent the afternoon too busy to think, scooping out bowl after bowl of strawberry ice cream, working alongside of Luke. Every time she turned around, he was there, watching her with unmistakable heat in his eyes.

The look in his eyes was unmistakable to everyone else in town as well, Lib realized as she caught the brunt of old Miss Price's disapproving frown.

Lib wished she knew what to do.

She knew what she wanted to do. She wanted to kiss Luke Fulton again.

* * *

Lib leaned in through the passenger window of Luke's truck.

"Come on," he said. "Get in. We're late. The game's gonna start in fifteen minutes."

"I'll get in on one condition," Lib said. "You've got to promise not to kiss me again until after we've had a chance to talk."

Luke stared at her. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not."

He smiled his most beguiling smile. "Not even a good luck kiss before the game?"

"We've won the past four games in a row," Lib said. "We don't need luck to win. So... do you promise?"

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Damn serious. I'll drive myself over if I have to," she said, pulling back out of the window, as if she were going to jump down onto the driveway and get into her own car. "All right," Luke said hastily. "God. I promise."

Lib opened the door and climbed into the truck. She smiled at him as she fastened her seat belt.

"This is really great for my ego," Luke grumbled as he threw the truck into gear and spun out down the street. "First woman I've kissed in three years, and you only look happy when I promise not to do it again."

"Poor baby," Lib laughed.

"So talk to me," Luke said.

Lib shook her head. "We've got a game to play in a few minutes," she said. "You don't really want to start a conversation that we can't possibly finish now, do you?"

"I don't understand what there is to talk about," Luke argued, as the truck bounced into the softball field parking lot. "I know you feel the same thing I do, I can see it in your eyes. I don't want to be just friends any more, Lib. I want —"

"I know."

Luke parked the truck and turned to look at her, slipping his arm up along the back of the seat. She was looking down at the softball glove she held in her lap.

"It's this money thing," Lib said, glancing up at him. "I'm just not comfortable getting involved with someone I owe so much money to. There's too much room for misunderstandings and mistrust. So. I called Rich Lowell and asked him to set up an appointment for me down at the bank. I'm going to try to get a mortgage on the house so I can pay you back the money I borrowed."

"Excuse me for insulting you, sweetheart," Luke said with a disbelieving laugh, "but that's nuts. The way we've got it set up, you don't have to start paying me back until you've finished the work on the house. But the bank's not going to wait. They'll want your first payment right away. You're going to have to get a job — in fact you'll need to get one before they'll approve the loan. And if you're working full time, that leaves only evenings and weekends to finish the house. It's going to take you forever."

Lib didn't say anything. Out of the window she could see the team warming up. "The game's going to start—"

"To hell with the game," Luke said.

Lib looked up into dark eyes that were piercing in their intensity. Her gaze lowered to his mouth, to those lips that could kiss her and make her feel the way no other man had ever made her feel. She wanted him to kiss her again. She wanted it so badly —
"Priorities," she said, looking back into his eyes. "You're right — I want to finish the work on the house. I also want to be able to wait to start paying back the loan. But right now there are other things I want more."

"Like what?"

He still didn't understand. Either that or he wanted to hear her say it... Lib pushed open the door of the truck and unfastened her seat belt, looking out toward the field.

"Like winning this game tonight," she said with a smile. "Like kicking the Falcons' butts." She looked up at Luke and her smile faded. Time to be honest. "Like... you."

The red and orange light from the setting sun cast shadows across his face, making him look mysterious and even more exotically handsome than usual. As she watched, his dark eyes seemed to turn even darker. He slowly shook his head.

"No way," he said, sliding across the seat toward her. "Uh-uh. You're not going to say something like that to me and expect me not to kiss you."

"But we haven't finished talking," Lib said, backing away, climbing down out of the truck. "And you promised."

Luke frowned. "There's more to say?"

"You bet."

"Lib—"

"Luke, we'll have time to talk after the game," she said quietly. "Lots and lots of time. Let's not rush this, okay? Please?"

He was silent, just looking at her, but finally he nodded. "All right," he said. "We'll play by your rules."

"This isn't a game," Lib said, her violet eyes serious. "The only game I'm interested in playing is about to start over there on that field. So move it, Fulton. I want to blow the Falcons away."

Luke had to run to keep up with Lib as she jogged toward the softball field. Their team was up first, and he joined the other players on the bench, quickly changing into his softball cleats.


"Bout time you guys showed up. I was starting to think we'd have to forfeit the game." He grinned. "To tell you the truth, I almost wish we had. It woulda been much less painful. The Falcons are going to tromp us into the ground. Anyone taking bets? Are we gonna get shut out again by these guys?"

"Milt, you're supposed to tell us that we're going to win," Lib said from where she sat further down the metal bench. "Come on, guys, we can beat the Falcons. It's just not going to be as easy as the last four games."

"We are on a winning streak," one of the outfielders said.

"I don't know," Milt said dubiously, watching the first batter strike out. "We've never beaten the Falcons yet."


Luke met her eyes steadily, holding her gaze as he stood up and picked up a bat. "If it would make you happy," he said, "I'd do damn near anything."

The players on the bench let out a collective "Oooh," looking from Luke to Lib and then back again. Someone started chanting that old playground song about Lib and Luke sitting in a tree.

Lib felt her cheeks heat up. Good grief, what was wrong with her? She was blushing like a school girl. And naturally, Luke noticed.

He grinned at her, warming up the muscles in his shoulders and back by swinging the heavy bat.

There was a sound as the ball hit the wood of a bat, and Lib leapt to her feet, her embarrassment forgotten as she watched Joan run for first base.


She watched him step into the batter's box, digging in slightly with the toe of his cleats, lowering his center of gravity for balance, and bringing the bat back. He wore a Wed pair of baseball pants, and the stretchy fabric hugged
his muscular legs and derriere. It was undeniable. Luke Fulton had an incredibly cute butt.

As if he knew what she was thinking, he suddenly stepped out of the batter's box, and turned and looked at her. And grinned.

"Hey, Lib," he said.

The umpire was exasperated. "Luke. Get to it here, will you?"

Lib stood, crossing to the wire mesh fence that protected the team from stray balls.

"Does it have to be a triple?" Luke asked. He tapped the sides of his cleats with the bat, then made sure his T-shirt was tucked into his pants. "Can I hit a home run?"

She crossed her arms. "Oh, please," she said. "Be my guest."

Luke smiled, positioning himself over the plate again. The look on her face told him if he did something dumb, like pop up to right field, she'd tease him about this for the rest of his life.

But he knew this pitcher. This guy occasionally let go with a perfect floater — nice and soft and straight down the middle. And Luke knew if he hit a home run, his team would get jazzed. Ty Bartlett was up next, and he was another power hitter — but a total head case. If Bartlett thought they were going to lose, he'd strike out. But if he thought they might win

The pitcher let go of the ball, and Luke knew he had a real chance at hitting it over the wall. He felt strong. He pulled the bat back farther and swung, feeling the power in his shoulders and arms. It felt good. For the first time in years he felt really good, and it had nothing to do with being close to his goal of buying back his land. It had nothing to do with the land at all. It was all about Lib. She made him feel alive. She made him feel

The force of the bat hitting the ball jarred Luke's entire body, and the crack! was so loud, it hurt his ears.

The ball was brilliant white against the darkening evening sky as it rocketed in a high arc toward center field, but Luke didn't watch it. He didn't run toward first base. He didn't even walk. He simply stood at home plate and lowered his bat to the ground.

His mouth was dry and his hands were shaking and it had nothing to do with the fact that he'd just hit a home run that dropped a good fifty yards outside of the center field fence.

He turned and looked at Lib.

The rest of his team was going nuts, jumping up and down and shouting, but Lib was still standing at the backstop. "Show off," she said and smiled at him.

If he wasn't certain before, her smile clinched it for him. He was in love with Liberty Jones.
Chapter Seven

Victory was sweet.

Unfortunately, it was also messy.

Lib laughed as another can of beer was sprayed over her and her teammates.

"Awesome double-play," Joanie said, giving Lib a high five. "I can't believe we beat the Falcons. Nobody beats the Falcons!"

"Negative thinking gets you nowhere," Lib said. "How many times have I told you that?"

Joan laughed, then squealed as another can of beer was shaken up and opened.

"Frequently," she said. "At least four times a game. But winning this one proves it." The shorter woman smiled up at Lib. "You know, I'm beginning to think you might actually have a ghost of a chance with Luke Fulton."

Lib frowned slightly. "Only a ghost of a chance?"

Joan shrugged. "Hey, I'm only recently converted to your way of thinking," she said with a smile. "Luke's got to be the best-looking guy in town." She glanced across the crowd to where Luke was talking to Ty Bartlett. Lib followed her gaze, and as they watched, Luke pulled off his T-shirt. As if he could feel their eyes on him, he looked up at Lib and smiled.


"Would you believe the Western Hemisphere?" Lib said.


Joan scuffed at the dusty ground with the toe of her sneaker.

"Say it," Lib urged. "Just say it."

"The man's a snake," Joan finally said. "If I were you, I'd stay far away from him. You deserve more than just a chance at happiness. You deserve to be treated better." She looked up at Lib. "You know that I'm only saying this because I like you."


"Because you haven't slept with him," Joan said.

Lib didn't say anything, surprised that this woman she barely knew was delving so deeply into her personal affairs. "You haven't, have you?" Joan persisted.

Lib finally shook her head. No.

"I've known a few of Luke's lady friends," Joan said. "Apparently, he's all sugar and spice until the morning after. Then it's icicle time — if he even bothers to stay till the sun comes up."

"Joan, I don't want to hear this..."

"It's a game to him, Liberty," Joan said. "If you don't know the rules, you can't possibly win. He's after the conquest, the thrill of the chase."

"No, he's different now," Lib said.

"How can you be sure?"

"You don't have to be sure," Lib said quietly, "when you've got faith."

Lib looked up to find Luke watching her.

"Come on." She couldn't hear him over the celebratory noise, but she could clearly read his lips. He gestured with his head toward the parking lot. "Let's go," he mouthed.

"See you later, Joan," she said, pushing free of the crowd. Her stomach felt nervous. This was it. She and Luke were finally going to sit down and talk. She was going to have to tell him... what?

That she really wanted him to be convinced she wasn't going to leave town before they became romantically
involved? That she didn't want just a brief affair, just a fling? That she didn't want temporary or short term? That she was hoping for... that she wanted forever. She actually wanted to spend the rest of her life with Luke Fulton.

She could barely believe it herself. That she was actually considering marriage was crazy. The fact that she wanted to marry Luke was pure insanity. Joan's warning hadn't been idle gossip. In fact, Lib believed that at one time, Luke had been the very man that Joan had described. He had as much as admitted himself that he'd never been in a long-term relationship before. Hell, to Luke Fulton, long-term probably meant a month.

But she wanted him. Lord help her, she wanted him. She could hardly think about her feelings for this man without getting overwhelmed and having to sit down.

The real crazy thing was, she did have faith in Luke. She trusted him. Despite his reputation, despite his history, she believed with every fiber of her being that if they were married, if he promised her forever, it would be a promise that he would keep.

Lib sighed. If only Luke trusted her. If only he didn't think of her as an outsider. Then they could skip the talking and go straight to the kissing. And she wanted to kiss him again.

Lib came face to face with Luke, just on the other side of the team bench.

He'd been soaked with beer and his dark hair was curling and sticking to his neck. He wrung out his T-shirt and a stream of liquid splashed onto the dusty ground.

"Yuck," said Lib.

Luke futilely tried to wipe his face with his bare arm. "You're not exactly fresh either," he said, settling for pushing his hair out of his eyes.

"We should get hosed down before we get into your truck," Lib said. Her sneakers squooshed when she walked.

He opened the cab door for her. "A little beer won't hurt anything," he said.

"I would practically sell my soul for a swim in the pond," Lib said, climbing into the truck.

"So let's go for a swim," Luke said, shutting the door behind her.

"I still can't believe you hit three home runs," she said as he got into the truck and started the engine.

Luke looked over at her and smiled, pulling out of the parking lot. "I can't believe that after I did it twice, the Falcon's pitcher didn't walk me," he said. "Obviously, the guy throws 'em just the way I like 'em."

Lib's eyebrows rose. "Awfully humble talk for a man whose batting average has just gone over six hundred."

"Let's just say I've been inspired lately," Luke said, making the turn onto Forest Road. He glanced at her. "The whole team has. You know, we've already lost too many games to make it into the play-offs, but with you on the team, I wouldn't be surprised if we go all the way and win the pennant next year."

Next year.

Lib sat very still.

This was the very first time Luke had ever brought up the subject of the future. All the hundreds and hundreds of conversations they'd had about the past and the present and work and life, Luke had never used the words 'next year' and 'you' in the same sentence.

Maybe it was a slip. Maybe he wasn't thinking. Lib had to know.

"I don't mind playing first base," Lib said, hoping that her voice wouldn't start shaking and give her away, "but all through high school and college I played catcher." She took a deep breath. "What are my chances of being the catcher next year?"

Next year.

To Lib, the words seemed to hang between them heavily, like a thick, wet blanket. But Luke didn't seem to notice. He squinted slightly, thinking, "I dunno," he said. The truck bounced over the potholes in Lib's driveway and came to a shuddering stop. "Ty's been catching for about seven years. But he's always bitching and moaning about how much his back hurts when he crouches down, so you might have a shot at it." He glanced at her and smiled. "I've got to confess, I like having you play first base. Maybe next year, you and Ty can switch off."

Lib felt like crying and laughing both at the same time. Luke believed that she was going to stay in Sterling. Luke
had finally realized that when she said she was going to live here permanently, she meant it.
The rush of emotions she felt was overwhelming. Rather than throwing her arms around Luke, though, she threw
open the door of the truck and jumped out.
"Last one in's a rotten egg," she said, and ran for the backyard.
The moon was nearly full, and it bathed the meadow with its silvery light. The night air felt cool against Lib's face
as she ran along the path toward the pond. She could hear Luke behind her, gaining on her, and she picked up her
pace.
She hit the little wooden dock in full stride and jumped off the end of it, into the pond, with Luke still on her heels.
The water was cool and dark. Lib let herself float just beneath the surface, feeling the heat and dust of the day wash
away, escaping for a moment in the soothing silence underneath the water.
She surfaced with a splash only a few feet away from Luke. He smiled at her, pushing his wet hair out of his eyes.
"Do you always go swimming with your sneakers on?" he asked.
"Only when the moon's full," Lib said.
Luke swung himself out of the water, onto the dock and sat on the edge. As Lib watched, he began to untie his
sneakers. "Moon won't be absolutely full until tomorrow," he said, tossing the wet sneakers to the other end of the
dock and pulling off his socks.
Lib floated in the water, looking up at him. In the moon-light, his body looked sculpted and perfect, and his face was
as handsome as any Hollywood movie star's. He may very well have been the most handsome man in the world.
Luke crouched at the end of the dock, reaching out his hand for her. "Come on," he said. "Swimming time is up.
We've got to talk. Remember?"
Oh yeah. She remembered.
Lib took his hand and let him pull her up, out of the water, onto the dock.
Water ran off her in a sheet, and she pushed her hair from her face, wringing it out behind her back.
Fire flared in Luke's eyes, and Lib realized that the white T-shirt she was wearing was made transparent by the
water. It molded itself to her body, and combined with the lacy bra she wore underneath, didn't leave much to the
imagination. She could practically feel the heat of Luke's gaze as he struggled to keep his eyes north of her neck.
The desire Lib saw in his eyes was exciting. He wanted her. He truly wanted her. But it was the fact that he was
fighting to control it — that he cared enough about her to keep the promise he'd made — that was what pushed Lib
over the edge.
She moved toward him, reaching up around his neck to pull his mouth down to hers. She could feel his surprise as
she kissed him — surprise that faded quickly, replaced by sheer passion as he kissed her, too. His arms closed
around her, pulling her in tightly to him. She heard him gasp as the cool of her wet clothes hit his bare chest, as the
softness of her body molded to his.
And still he kissed her.
Lib held tightly to him as the world seemed to spin around her. Unlike the other times he'd kissed her, this was a kiss
of pure fire, pure heat. His lips were unyielding as his tongue swept past her teeth, into her mouth, tasting her,
claiming her, possessing her. She could feel her heart pounding, feel her control shatter, feel her fingers deep in his
thick black hair, pulling him even closer to her.
Just when she was sure he was going to drag her down with him onto the hard wood of the dock, he pulled back. He
still held her in his arms, and Lib could see the fire she'd tasted in his kiss lingering in his eyes.
But she also saw confusion. "Have we talked?" he whispered, his eyes caressing her face. His hands were against her
back, in her hair, touching, stroking, as if he couldn't believe she was actually in his arms.
"You know that I live here," Lib said simply, gazing up into his eyes, "that I belong here, in Sterling."
Luke laughed. Lib could see from his eyes that he didn't understand.
"You didn't know that a few days ago," Lib explained.
Understanding lit his face. "You're right," he said softly. "I didn't. But I do now."
Lib smiled at him in the moonlight, and Luke's heart went through its entire gymnastics routine. If this really was love he was feeling, it was no wonder wars had been started, countries and governments ruined and lost, individual lives damaged beyond repair, all as a result of this one overwhelming emotion.

He kissed Lib again, pulling her hips tightly against him, plundering the sweetness of her mouth with his tongue, wanting more, so much more. He heard her moan, felt her hands on the bare skin of his back, pulling him closer to her.

For the first time in a long time, Luke knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted this woman that he was holding in his arms. But he didn't want her only for one night, or even two. He wanted her for a lifetime. He wanted to grow old with her, to sit with her out on the porch of his house and watch ten thousand summer sunsets.

He wanted to marry her.

For one brief, crazed moment, Luke actually considered asking her right then and there. Marry me. The words were on his lips. But if he said those words, she'd think he was totally nuts. And she'd be right. He'd lost it. He'd totally lost his mind.

Standing there in the pale moonlight, looking down into Lib's beautiful face, Luke didn't care. He may have lost his mind, but, Lord, think of what he was gaining.

"Luke." The way she breathed his name sent rockets of heat searing through him. He kissed her again and again, losing himself in the softness of her lips, the softness of her body against his.

Marry me. Again, he almost gave in to the impulse to blurt out the words. But he held himself back. No, this wasn't the way to ask her. If he really knew what he wanted — and he did, that was for damn sure — then he had to work out a plan, figure out the best way to achieve his goal. He had to approach this with a level head, the same way he'd approached his financial goals, pragmatically setting up and sticking to a strategy.

As much as he wanted to throw himself on his knees and beg her to marry him, as much as he wanted to sweep her up into his arms and carry her up to that big canopied bed she had in her bedroom, as much as he wanted to surround himself with her, to make love to her, to hear her cry out with pleasure and passion, as much as he wanted all that, he held himself back.

Because he was scared to death of blowing it. He was scared of making a mistake.

Lib sighed as Luke kissed her again, closing her eyes and letting herself get swept away by the sensations, by the emotion. His lips were so warm and his mouth tasted so sweet —

Like sugar and spice.

Joan's words of warning came back to Lib. She'd called Luke a snake, implied he was only after one thing... Lib tried to push those thoughts away, and hated the fact that she couldn't. Joan's words were marring the perfection of Luke's kisses, invading the privacy of this special moment.

What if Joan were right? What if he only wanted sex? What if Lib slept with Luke and then, having achieved his sexual goal, he turned into a cold, impersonal stranger?

But he wouldn't, she told herself. He may have treated women badly in the past, but he was different now.

Luke was kissing her lightly, running his tongue across her lips in a way that made her flood with heat inside. She wanted him. How she wanted him. And he wanted her. She could feel the unmistakable evidence of his desire pressed tightly against her, she could see his need for her burning in his dark eyes.

Lib yearned to take him by the hand and lead him back to the house. She wanted to bring him inside, up the narrow back stairs to her bedroom. Yet something held her back.

A breeze swept over the pond and Lib shivered, as much from her fears as from the coolness of the air against her wet skin and clothes.


He gathered up his sneakers and socks in one hand and clasped Lib's fingers in the other, and together they began walking slowly toward the house.

Luke said nothing more, and in the silence, Lib wrestled with herself. She knew it was too soon, too early to invite him in, but her heart was urging her to go for it. Her instincts and her emotions told her that the timing couldn't be more right.
Luke dropped his sneakers and socks onto Lib's front porch and drew her back into his arms. "About that mortgage you're thinking of getting from the bank," he said. "What can I do to convince you to keep my loan instead?"

Lib sighed. "It just rubs me the wrong way," she said. "You know, being involved with someone I owe money to. I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea — you included."

Luke was quiet for a long time, just running his fingers through her still-damp hair.

"Don't you trust me?" he finally said.

Lib laughed. "Yes," she said. "But the real question is, do you trust me?"

She looked up into Luke's eyes and felt a twinge of disappointment at the uncertainty she saw there, at his hesitation to answer her question.

But to his credit, he answered her honestly. "I don't know," he said. "I'm trying to." He moistened his lips almost nervously, looking away from her for a moment. When he looked back, she could see real vulnerability in his eyes. "It's been a long time since I've trusted anyone besides myself," he said. "I trust you... as much as I can right now."

She nodded, unable to speak over the emotion that had suddenly welled in her throat and chest.

Luke took a deep breath. "I want to be honest with you, Lib," he said quietly. "I'm scared that if you take out this loan from the bank in order to pay me back, you won't be able to handle the bank's higher interest payments. I'm scared that you'll be forced to sell your house in order to pay back their loan." He closed his eyes for a moment, but not before Lib caught a glimpse of a sheen of emotion there. He cleared his throat and pulled her in closer to him, resting his cheek on top of her silky hair as he whispered, "I'm scared to death that something's going to happen to make you leave."

Lib felt her eyes fill with tears, touched that he would admit his fears to her, glad that he trusted her enough to share his feelings. She tightened her hold on him, pulling him closer, then stood on her toes and kissed him.

He kissed her back almost savagely, as if he couldn't get enough of her, as if he wanted to inhale her, to consume her.

Luke's head was spinning, and he fought desperately to stay in control. He'd already decided that he wasn't going to stay with Lib tonight, that he wasn't going to ask her to make love to him. It was too soon. Way too soon.

But he couldn't stop kissing her, each kiss harder and deeper and longer than the last.

"Liberty, let me stay with you—"

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them, and at the exact instant he spoke, she spoke, too, saying, "Come inside — will you come inside...?"

Luke pulled back, shocked that he hadn't been able to keep from asking, and thrilled that she wanted the very same thing. He stared into Lib's eyes. They seemed colorless in the darkness, and so beautiful.

For many long seconds they simply looked at each other. It could go either way, Luke realized. He knew that if she asked him again, he wouldn't be able to refuse. As he watched, Liberty took a deep breath.

"No." Again, they both spoke at the same moment, then laughed.

"I think—" Luke started.

"We should wait," Lib finished for him.

"I don't want to wait," he murmured, kissing her again.

"I don't want to either," she said, closing her eyes and melting against him.

"But we should," he said, still kissing her.

"I'm not very good at doing what I should," Lib said. "So maybe we should just—"

Luke cupped her face with his hands, silencing her by brushing his thumb across her lips. "I want you," he said simply. "But I want to do this right. Please don't make it more difficult than it already is."

His dark eyes were so serious, his face so unyielding, Lib could do nothing but nod.

He kissed her gently then, a light brushing of his lips across hers. "Good night," he whispered. "See you tomorrow."

He released her, stepping back, away from her, but she didn't move.
"Go inside, Lib," he said. "And lock the door behind you, because Lord help me, I'm only human."

Silently, she opened the door and went into the front hall. "I never lock the door," she said through the screen. In the darkness, Luke caught a quick glimpse of her white teeth as she smiled. "Good night, Luke."

It didn't have to end here, Luke knew. It would only take one word, and she'd be his for the night. But he wanted more than one night. He wanted every single night for the rest of their lives, and he needed some time to sit down, think it through and figure out the best way to get that.

Liberty was still standing in the doorway, and he made himself walk down the steps, down the front path, away from her.

"Luke." The sound of her low, musical voice made him stop.

He turned around, but he couldn't see her in the shadows, behind the screen door.

"I'm not going to leave." Her voice drifted out to him from the darkness. "I promise I won't."

Luke stood on the front walk, moonlight gleaming off his bare shoulders and chest, the nighttime shadows making his muscular body seem even more well-defined. He looked down at the wet sneakers he was carrying, down at his bare feet, then finally up toward the dark doorway, up at the screen door behind which Lib stood.

"I just... wanted you to know that," she said quietly.

He nodded, and his eyes seemed to find hers, even though she knew he couldn't possibly see her in the darkness.

"I'm going to hold you to that promise," he said, then turned and walked into the darkness.
Chapter Eight

"Luke!"

Luke skidded to a stop on the loose gravel out in front of the hardware store, almost dropping the bag he carried. He looked longingly over at his pickup truck, parked across the street, then turned to face his sister.

"You're in one heck of a hurry," Brenda said with a smile. "Can you spare a few seconds?"

Luke tried hard not to glance at his watch. "One or two," he said, hefting the paper sack a little higher in his arms. "What's up?"

"You tell me," Brenda said. "Rumor has it you've taken Lib Jones out to a different restaurant every night this week. I know for a fact that you haven't been in to work — at least not regularly — for going on three weeks. And my spies have reported seeing you two dancing together up at the resort. And I'm talking sloooow dancing." She smiled at her brother sweetly. "So tell me, are you still claiming you and Miss Jones are nothing but friends?"

Luke was looking down Main Street, as if he were watching the light stream of traffic that was moving around the town center. But his eyes were soft and out of focus, and the small smile that played around his mouth told Brenda he'd temporarily been transported somewhere else. She was willing to bet that wherever he'd gone, Lib Jones was nearby.

"Hello?" Brenda said, and Luke looked back at her, startled, as if he'd forgotten she was standing there.

"Sorry," he said. "Did you ask me something?"

He'd been thinking about last night. He'd taken Lib out to dinner, and afterwards they'd walked over to the Dairy Bee and he'd bought her an ice cream cone. As they ate the ice cream, they'd strolled around the town green, holding hands. After he drove her back home, they'd sat on her front porch for hours, talking and watching for falling stars.

At about one-thirty in the morning, he'd kissed Lib good night, the same way he'd done every single night during the past week, and he'd gone home. Alone.

He'd brushed his teeth, had what was rapidly becoming a habitual cold shower and he'd gone to bed. Alone.

When Luke was lying in bed, awake in the middle of the night, he wondered what on earth had possessed him to decide to take his romance with Liberty Jones at such a snail's pace. But he'd given the entire situation a great deal of careful thought and he'd decided he'd court her, slowly and carefully, the old-fashioned way. Truth was, he wanted her to take him seriously. And every single time that he said good night and left her standing on her front porch, he could see in her eyes that she took him a little bit more seriously. Every time he walked away from her without trying to press his advantage, without asking her if he could stay the night, his reputation was bleached another shade lighter.

A few more weeks, Luke thought, and he'd ask her to marry him. But, Lord, he wasn't sure he could last a few more weeks. He wasn't sure Lib could, either. He could see her desire clearly in her violet eyes, taste it in her kisses, feel it in the way she trembled when he held her in his arms.

Day after tomorrow, the jeweler would be finished cleaning Grandma Fulton's antique diamond ring. It didn't need to be sized. Luke had snagged a piece of Lib's costume jewelry, a ring he'd seen her wear a few times when they'd gone out, and it was the exact size of the Fulton heirloom ring. It was as if the Fulton ring had been made for Liberty. Maybe it had, Luke thought with a smile.

"You still haven't heard a single word I've said," Brenda said, crossing her arms. She gave Luke a long, speculative look. "You're in love with this girl, aren't you? Good grief, it's finally happened. You've been caught."

Out of habit, Luke started to protest, but then stopped. He'd always been so careful with his privacy, feeling that the things he did, and the people he did them with were no one else's business. But the way he felt about Liberty, and his plans for their future were Brenda's business. She would be gaining a sister-in-law, for Pete's sake.

"I'm crazy about her," he said. Lord, it still scared him to death to admit it. But he took a deep breath and went on. "She's the one," he said simply.

Brenda laughed, but her eyes filled with tears. She hugged her brother fiercely. "I was so worried about you," she said. "All this time, all you could think about was money and financial reports and buying back that stupid land." She squeezed Luke even tighter. "You may have had a lot of money, kid, but only now are you really rich."

* * *
There was a hint of the coming autumn in the night air.

Tomorrow was the day Luke would meet the business executives who were interested in buying his video stores. They'd scheduled a morning meeting in Boston, and Luke was planning to leave early — before six — in order to get to the city in plenty of time.

He was quiet as he walked Lib up the path to her front porch, and she could tell his thoughts were already in Boston. She'd had three solid weeks of Luke's company, and she wasn't ready for it to end. But tomorrow he was going out of town, and from that moment on, everything would be different.

Lib shivered slightly and Luke pulled her down next to him on the porch swing they'd hung just last weekend.

"Cold?" he said, putting his arm around her shoulders and pulling her even closer.

She leaned her head against his warmth. "No, just spooked," she said. "Summer's almost over and... too many things are changing. I can't believe you have to go back to work tomorrow."

"It's going to be pretty intense for the next few days," Luke agreed, "until I can get this deal closed. But after that, after I buy back my land, the work load oughta lighten up, and I can help you finish up the house—"

Lib suddenly sat up, turning to look at him. "You're kidding, right?" she said.

Luke stared at her, his eyebrows lifted slightly in surprise. "No," he said.

"What about the additions to the resort?" she asked. "Weren't you and Ken Avery planning on building guest cottages on part of the land you sold him — the land that you're going to buy back?"

"Well, yeah," Luke said. "But my share of the work's done. It's up to the builders now—"

"You don't really think Avery's going to go ahead with those building plans after you buy back the land," Lib said.

"Why not?" Luke said. "The site's perfect, and I'm prepared to lease him the land—"

"And you think Avery's going to build permanent structures on land he's leasing from you, when he could simply turn around and buy the Hodgekin's back acres, or maybe even the White's upper pasture?" Lib said. "It's really pretty up there, and I'd bet you Lance White'll give him a good deal — at least it'd be a hell of a lot better than any lease arrangement Avery could make with you."

Luke frowned. "But we've had the site surveyed," he said. "And the architect already designed cabins that will blend in with the countryside. The workers are scheduled to break ground at the end of September. If the architect has to start over with a new location, it would delay the project until next spring."

"That won't be a big deal to Avery," Lib said. "He'll be sitting on that cool million he just got from you. It's the workers who are going to suffer — the guys you've lined up to build the cabins. They're going to be laid off before they even start. If you want the project to go ahead, if you want Avery to lease your land, if you want those guys to stay employed, you're going to have to bust your chops to make it work."

Luke stood up, and his sudden movement made the porch swing rock crazily. Lib braced her feet against the wooden floor in order to stop the swinging as Luke crossed to the porch railing. He stood, looking out at the dark night sky.

"You don't think I should buy back the land," he said, with his back to her.

"I've told you what I think," Lib said quietly. "I think you already own that land because you own a share in the corporation."

He turned toward her, but his face was shadowed. "I don't know what to say to make you understand how I feel—"

"I know how you feel," Lib said, standing up and crossing to him. "I do understand. I just happen to disagree with you. I think you still own that land, and I think it's valuable as a part of the resort — more valuable than it'll ever be standing on its own."

Luke was looking back out into the darkness, and Lib had to wonder if he'd heard anything she'd said.

"I should go," he said abruptly. "It's getting late."

He kissed her lightly, distractedly, then started down the steps.

Lib ached to call out to him, to beg him to come back, but he didn't turn around to look at her or even to wave before the darkness swallowed him up.

She shivered, more from the chilliness of Luke's good-bye than the cool night air.
Luke couldn't sleep.

His digital clock clicked down every minute from two to three a.m., and still Luke lay awake, staring up at the ceiling.

He wasn't really worried about the sale of the video stores. Sure, there was a chance that it could fall through. But worrying wasn't his style.

So why couldn't he sleep?

Because he couldn't stop thinking about Liberty.

All evening long, he'd been looking forward to kissing her good night. All evening long, he had longed to feel her arms around him, pulling him close as she met his lips hungrily, as she matched each of his kisses fiercely.

So what did he do? He walked away without properly kissing her good-bye.

He could still see the flash of hurt confusion in her eyes as he turned away from her.

He'd hated the fact that she had disagreed with him about buying back the Fulton land. It bothered him, and he wasn't really sure why. It wasn't as if they'd never disagreed about anything before.

Maybe it was because buying back that land had consumed his every waking thought for the past five years. It had become his reason for living, his motivation to succeed.

Before he met Liberty Jones, that is.

For so long, he'd never looked past the five year deadline that was now so rapidly approaching. For so many years, he couldn't see beyond that September 15th date — he didn't bother to look further.

But now he did.

Lib was his future now, and that future was looking pretty damn good.

Provided that he didn't go and blow it...

He owed Lib an apology. And he'd be a fool if he left without giving one to her. He'd be a fool if he left without seeing her, without saying good-bye.

He sat up suddenly, looking over at the clock. Quarter after four. He swung his long legs over the side of the bed and went quickly into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

If he hurried he'd have enough time...

* * *

Lib's front door creaked as Luke pushed it open. The house was quiet and dark. He closed the door behind him and went up the front staircase, his shoes sounding loud in the hushed stillness of the early morning.

The door to Lib's bedroom was open and the shades hadn't been pulled, letting in the soft light of the moon.

Luke stood silently in the doorway, listening to Lib's steady breathing, watching her sleep.

She was lying almost sideways on the double bed, her sheets tangled around her, her hair spread out across her pillow. She slept on her stomach, one arm tucked under her head, the other thrown out wide, as if she were embracing the entire bed. One of her legs was bent, and the other was outstretched, her foot dangling off the side of the mattress.

She was wearing... Lord, she was wearing a man's white cotton racer-back undershirt and a very brief pair of white panties. Luke swallowed. Lord knows he'd seen more than his share of fancy lingerie in his time, but nothing he'd seen, no matter how expensive or lacy, had ever come close to turning him on the way Lib's makeshift nightwear did.

He knew he should go. If he woke her up, the way he'd intended to, if she smiled at him, if he touched her, he'd never leave. Never. But instead of turning around and walking down the stairs, his legs took him further into Lib's room.

Luke stood next to her bed, looking down at her. Her eyelashes looked about a mile long, lying against her sun-kissed cheeks. Her mouth looked so soft and moist, so inviting.
He felt the last tenuous bonds of his self-control straining, and he forced himself back, back toward the door. But before he'd even taken two steps, she stirred, rolling onto her back and gazing up at him with sleepy eyes.

"Luke?" Her voice was thick with sleep. She sat up and Luke realized that the T-shirt she was wearing was old and worn and virtually transparent. Her breasts were full, with large dark tips that showed clearly through her shirt.

"What time is it?" she asked, turning to look at her alarm clock.

Twenty to five. Lib pushed her messy hair back from her face and looked at Luke. He was standing in the middle of her room, dressed to the nines in a black, well-tailored suit. Instead of a traditional white shirt, his shirt was also black, as was his tie. The effect was outrageously attractive, emphasizing his dark good looks.

"You came over to say good-bye," she said, correctly guessing the reason he was in her bedroom. "I'm glad." She smiled at him rather wistfully. "I didn't get a chance to say good luck to you last night. So... good luck."

Luke's mouth was dry, and he couldn't for the life of him remember one single thing he'd intended to say to her. Apologize, he thought suddenly. That's right. He'd wanted to apologize.

"Lib, I'm sorry about last night," he said, and even though he knew he shouldn't, he sat down next to her on the bed. The springs sagged and moaned underneath his weight. "I wanted you to know that it's okay with me if we don't agree about me buying back the land." He looked down at his hands, tightly clasped in his lap. "I also wanted you to know how very important buying this land is to me. It's been the focus of my entire life for nearly five years. When I sold the land, I swore to myself that somehow I'd get the money and I'd buy it back. I've got to do it." He glanced up at her, and for several long seconds he forgot everything, lost in the beautiful violet color of her eyes.

"I know that," she said gently. "I just wanted to be sure you'd thought it all through, you know, considered it from more than just an emotional angle." She smiled at him suddenly, a quick, bright flash of sunshine. "Man, you smell good. And that suit..." she gave him a once over and then a thumbs up. "It works for me. You look great—"

"You do, too." There was no mistaking the heat in his dark eyes. "Your outfit works for me, too." He leaned forward and kissed her lazily. "It works extremely well."

He kissed her again, and Lib looped her arms up, around his neck. His dark hair was still damp from his shower, and his freshly shaven cheeks were smooth and soft against her face. She could taste toothpaste as he kissed her harder, the laziness of his earlier kiss replaced by an urgency that took them both by surprise.

Lib pulled him back with her, back onto the bed, and still he kissed her, deep, passionate kisses that sent rockets of heat soaring through her.

He was on top of her now, murmuring her name as he kissed her again and again. His hands swept her body, touching, caressing, and Lib heard herself moan. Oh, she'd waited so long for him to touch her this way. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him close to her, and that seemed to drive him wild.

"God, Lib," he said. Breathing hard, he pulled back to look down at the woman in his arms. Her eyes were smoky with desire, and she lifted her mouth to be kissed again, as if the few seconds that had passed since he'd last kissed her were way too long.

So he kissed her. "Lib, I want — Can we...?"

"Yes," she said, smiling up at him. "Definitely, yes."

Luke had planned to take Lib out to dinner on the night he bought back his land. He was planning to ask her to marry him that night. If everything went according to plan, she would say yes, and then he'd bring her home, only this time when she went inside, he would go with her. That was how he'd imagined they'd make love for the first time. It wasn't supposed to happen this way, but Luke was beyond caring. He wanted her — no, it was more than wanting. It was need. He needed her. Lord, he loved her so much.

He pulled off his jacket, turning the sleeves inside out in his haste. He kissed Lib again, hungry for the taste of her mouth as he loosened his tie.

And then she was sitting up, helping him with his shirt, her fingers deftly unfastening the row of buttons and pushing the soft cotton off his shoulders.

The sensation of her hands on his bare skin was excruciatingly sensual. She kissed him, her mouth warm and moist against his neck.

She was up on her knees, and he pulled her tightly to him. She rubbed against him, along the length of his erection, and he knew without a doubt that this was it. He was going to make love to her. There'd be no stopping them now.
But, Lord! Maybe they'd have to stop... "Lib, I don't have a condom," he said. His voice was hoarse in the stillness. Her fingers found the buckle to his belt and quickly unfastened it. "I do," she whispered. "In my purse." She gazed up at him with a smile.

It was the sweetest, sexiest smile he'd ever seen, and it damn near took his breath away as she held his gaze. But then her eyes flicked down and she unbuttoned his pants and pulled down the straining zipper. Luke pulled away.

He kicked off his shoes and his pants followed close behind. Then he rolled back onto Liberty's big bed, pulling her down with him. The sensation of her legs tangled together with his was nearly as delicious as what his hands found, exploring up underneath the thin cotton of her shirt.

Lib closed her eyes as Luke kissed her, gasping at the pleasure that flooded through her at his touch. Making love to him felt right, so very right. Sure, they'd been waiting, but for what? They'd been waiting for right now — for a perfect moment, for this perfect moment.

His hands pushed her shirt up, and she helped him pull it over her head.

"Oh, Lib," he said. There was a catch in his voice and Liberty opened her eyes and looked up at him.

He was gazing at her with such heat in his eyes, she felt certain she would go up in flames.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, touching her with his eyes and then lightly, almost reverently, with his hands. "You don't know how much sleep I've lost, lying awake at night, thinking about making love to you."

Lib had to laugh. "I think I probably do," she said. "You're not the only one who lost sleep, you know. All those hot summer nights... knowing you were just a short walk down the street... I'd lie up here, with the fan turned up high, thinking about you kissing me all over..."

The heat in Luke's eyes burned a shade hotter. "All over," he said. "Like... here?"

He lowered his head to her breast, touching her nipple lightly with his lips and his tongue.

"Oh, yes," Lib breathed.

He drew the tip of her breast further into his mouth, sucking, pulling, and sending arrows of pleasure shooting through her.

Lib heard herself cry out as she tried to pull him closer, even closer to her. His muscular thigh was between her legs and she gripped it tightly, pressing herself against him, wanting more, wanting it all right now.

But Luke was taking his own sweet time.

He kissed his way to her other breast, and then down, all the way down to her belly button. Lib's fingers dug deeply into his hair as he kissed and explored that sensitive area with his tongue.

"Luke, please—" she gasped, and he looked up at her, a fierce smile on his handsome face. His dark hair was a jumble of waves and his eyes sparkled and burned.

"I thought you wanted me to kiss you all over," he said. He was breathing as hard as she was. As he held her gaze, he kissed her just below her belly button. "You want me to stop?"

Lib didn't answer. She couldn't answer.

He kissed her again, lower, and then lower, and he ran his tongue along her skin just above the bikini-cut waistband of her panties.

"Should I stop?" he said again, his voice no more than a velvety whisper.

Lib found her voice. "No," she said, most definitely. "No, don't stop."

Luke smiled again, and reaching for the white cotton of her panties, he pulled them down, off her hips, down the long, shapely lengths of her legs and over her feet.

He kissed the instep of her foot, then left a trail of warm kisses as he worked his way up, up to her ankle, up her calf, up past her knee, up to the soft, extra sensitive area of her inner thigh.

And, as she'd requested, he didn't stop there.

Lib caught her breath as he touched her, then kissed her most intimately. The sensations were incredible, exquisite, and her hips thrust upward, almost of their own accord, driving him harder, deeper into her.
He kissed her again, caressing her with his tongue, stroking, laving, driving her to the edge until she writhed beneath him.

It was too intense, too much, too one-sided. Lib tried to pull back, away from him, pushing herself along the bed. But he followed, holding tightly to her hips.

"Luke!" she said.

He lifted his head, smiling at her, a devilish glint in his dark eyes. "You said not to stop."

"I don't want you to stop," she said. "I want..."

He was touching her, his fingers taking up where his mouth had left off. Somehow he knew exactly where to touch her, exactly how to make her feel so good...

"What?" he whispered, shifting his weight so he was lying beside her, still touching, always touching. He lowered his mouth to her breast, encircling her nipple with his tongue. "What do you want? Tell me what you want."

Liberty wanted forever, and gazing into his eyes, she could almost believe it was hers to have. She honestly believed that he loved her. How could he look at her that way, how could all that love she saw in his eyes be anything but genuine?

"At the risk of sounding old-fashioned," Lib said softly, "I want you to make me your own."

"I hate to break it to you, babe, but you already are mine," he said. "And I am absolutely all yours. We sealed that deal with our first kiss."

He was serious.

Lib felt all of her love for this man rise up and lodge tightly in her throat. "Make love to me," she whispered.

Luke smiled. "I thought that was what I was doing."

She wriggled free from his arms, raking her tousled hair back from her face as she knelt beside him on the bed. She slipped her fingers underneath the elastic waistband of his briefs and tugged them down, freeing him from their confines.

She let him see the pleasure in her eyes as she looked at him. She didn't try to hide the fact that his body — all six foot four inches of it — turned her on.

It was more than clear that she turned him on. She closed her hand around his hardness and he murmured his pleasure as she stroked him. She straddled his legs, still touching him, knowing that it wouldn't be much longer until he was inside of her.

He watched her, his gaze holding her in place, hypnotizing her with his intensity.

She had to have him now. Right now.

But first

Luke was thinking the exact same thing. Together, they dove for the side of the bed, where Lib's purse sat on the floor. She reached it first, pulling it up onto the bed with them. She quickly found the box that she'd picked up at the drugstore only a few days ago, in anticipation of this very event.

Luke took the box out of her hands and nearly tore it in half in his haste to open it.

As Luke tore one apart from the rest and then open, Lib pushed everything else off the bed. And then, God, he was covered and she lunged for him even as he grabbed for her.

He kissed her hard as he pulled her down on top of him, and Lib gasped as then, oh, he was inside of her, filling her completely, incredibly, perfectly.

Luke breathed her name, and as she looked into his eyes, she knew that this magic she was feeling was mutual. She knew he felt it, too.

Forever was starting right here and now. This love-making was a marriage of souls, a joining of hearts as well as bodies.

Luke kissed her, her mouth, her neck, her breasts, moving beneath her, holding her tightly in his arms, anticipating her every pleasure, her every want and need.
Liberty was in heaven.

Luke lowered himself back onto the bed, driving himself even deeper inside her. And Lib climaxed, waves of colors and lights and incredible, powerful pleasure lifting her up and spinning her around. She threw back her head and laughed with the sheer joy of the sensations, both physical and emotional.

It couldn't get better than this — but it was hers, Luke was hers until the end of time.

His body tightened and bucked as he found his release and she leaned forward and kissed him. He kissed her back, hungrily, savagely, inhaling her, possessing her as thoroughly as he possibly could. And then, spent, he held her tightly, as if he would never let her go.

* * *

Beep, beep.

The sound of a car horn cut through the early morning stillness, and they both stiffened. Lib lifted her head, staring down into Luke's deep brown eyes.

"That's my ride," Luke realized. It was nearly five-thirty, and the limo driver had arrived, ready to take him to the little local airport. He closed his eyes, swearing softly. "Lib, I don't want to go. I'll tell the driver I won't be needing him today."

Lib sat up, surprise in her eyes. "Luke, you can't be serious."

He pushed himself up on his elbows. "Sweetheart, I'm damned serious."

"You've been waiting three weeks for this meeting," she said. She lifted herself off of him.

"I've been waiting longer than that to make love to you," Luke countered, reaching for her and holding her close. "Now that I have, I'm not going to just get up and run out of here."

The limo horn honked again.

"Luke, please," she said, wiggling free from his arms. She sat next to him on the bed and pushed his hair back from his face. "If you don't go to the meeting in Boston, your deal could fall through. I'd never forgive myself."

"To hell with the deal," Luke said, leaning forward and kissing her.

Lib closed her eyes. It would be so easy to give in. He would go and dismiss the limo driver, and they would spend the rest of the morning, the rest of the day and probably most of the night right here in her room, in her bed. But eventually reality would return, and Luke would come to realize all that he had given up.

No, it would be a mistake.

She pulled away from him. "There's no way I'm going to let you stay," she said. "My God, Luke, before we got sidetracked, you were telling me just how important that land is to you! No way am I going to let you jeopardize your plan to buy it back."

"To hell with the land," he said, reaching for her again.

But she stopped him. "You don't mean that, and you know it," she said, her violet eyes serious. "Go to Boston. I'll be here when you get back."

She could see the uncertainty in his eyes, and she climbed out of bed, collecting his clothes from where he'd thrown them on the floor. She picked up his suit jacket, turned the sleeves right side out and brushed it off. "Maybe you should shower," she said. "I'll put on a robe and tell the driver you'll be right down and—"

"No," Luke said. He stood up and went into the adjoining bathroom, but he didn't turn on the shower. When he came back out, he pulled on his shorts and then his pants. "If I'm going, I'm going with your scent still on my body. I'll shower tonight. When I get back."

Lib handed him his shirt. She smiled at him. "What time will your flight get in?"

"Five-thirty," he said, slipping his arms into the sleeves. "Earlier if I can, and believe me, I'll be trying." He shook his head with a rueful laugh. "I can't believe you're standing here naked, and I'm leaving."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, running his hands up and down her bare back. Lib laughed and tried to button his shirt. "You're making this difficult," she said. "The driver's going to leave."
"No, he's not," Luke countered. "He's fifteen minutes early. He's going to sit there the way he always does, and drink
his coffee and eat a donut and wait for me to come out."

Lord, she was beautiful, and not at all embarrassed by the fact that she was still naked while he was nearly dressed.
He couldn't resist, and his fingers found the warm, slick area between her legs. "I want more," he said, his voice
husky. He could feel his body responding, hardening, as if he were some seventeen-year-old kid. She moved against
him, and he groaned. "Liberty, how can I leave?"

She kissed him and her mouth tasted like paradise.

"If your plane gets in at five-thirty," she said, "I'll see you at six." She smiled as she gently pulled free from his
hands. "We can celebrate the sale of your video stores."

Luke was silent as he watched her cross the room and slip into an old-fashioned-looking silvery-grey silk robe. It
covered her, but it clung in all the right places. If anything, she looked even sexier. She crossed the room, holding
out his tie.

"Let's go out to dinner tonight," he said, tying it around his neck and tucking in his shirt. Damn, was he going to
have an erection all day? Funny, he'd thought making love to Lib would relieve some of the pressure he felt. Instead,
it made it worse.

"Pizza or the Inn?" she asked, leaning closer to adjust the knot in his tie.

"The Inn," he said. "Let's get dressed up. I want this to be special." So what if it was a few weeks early. He'd ask her
to marry him tonight.

"You want me to make a reservation for dinner?" she asked as she led him out of her bedroom and down the stairs.
Her smile turned decidedly wicked. "At, oh, say, ten o'clock?"

Their gazes locked as Luke grinned back at her. "Yeah," he managed to say, his voice husky. "That sounds just
about perfect."
Chapter Nine

At five-thirty, as Lib was putting the finishing touches on her makeup, the telephone rang. She put the top back onto her lipstick, and answered the phone after the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Lib, you're not going to believe this, but I'm still in Boston." It was Luke, and he didn't sound happy.

She slowly sat down on her bed. "What went wrong?" she asked quietly.

He laughed, but there wasn't a trace of humor in it. "What didn't go wrong?" he said. "We've been negotiating since nine-thirty, and I still don't have a clue as to what these guys really want. If I knew, I'd be more than willing to give in — simply for the sake of getting the hell out of here."

Lib looked at her reflection in the mirror of Harriet's vanity. She was wearing her black dress — the one she used to wear as a movie extra for party scenes — the one Luke had liked so much. And she was actually wearing pantyhose. The gleaming black silk made her long legs glimmer, and the black leather of her high-heeled pumps gleamed in the late afternoon light.

"I'm sorry," Lib said.

"I am, too," Luke said. There was silence for a moment, then he said, "Lord, you don't know how much I want to be home right now."

Lib smiled. "Yes, I do."

She heard him take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Damn," he said. He sounded so tired and discouraged.

"I loved what we did this morning," Lib said softly.

Luke didn't say anything, not at first, but she could almost feel the sudden electrical energy crackling through the telephone wires.

"Yeah," he said huskily. "I did, too."

"I'm glad we waited," she said, "but I'm also glad that we finally stopped waiting."

"I should be kissing you," Luke said. "I should be taking off your clothes, not preparing for another damned meeting."

"I love the way you feel inside me," Lib said. "And when we move... oh..."


"And your mouth," Lib said. "The way you kissed me... I've been thinking about kissing you."

All over. She didn't say the words. She didn't have to. But the image it brought to mind was excruciatingly delicious.

"You're torturing me," he said.

Lib laughed. "Think of it as anticipation," she said. "Or incentive to close this deal and get back here soon."

Luke sighed. "I wish," he said. "The real bitch of the situation is that I'm not sure when I will be back. We've got a dinner meeting scheduled tonight, and Rich thinks it'll run into the early morning. I've got a room reserved at the Adam's Mark Hotel, if you need me."

"I need you," Lib said, her voice husky, "but I can wait."

***

Rich Lowell frowned at Luke across the breakfast table. "You can't be serious."

Luke pushed his half-eaten omelet back from the edge of the table, eyeing it with distaste. "I can't remember the last time I've been more serious," he said, taking a long swallow of his tepid coffee.

"You gonna eat your bacon?" Rich asked hopefully.

Luke waved the uneaten food on his plate away, and Rich reached for it. "You're not eating enough," the lawyer noted, for the first time looking Luke over carefully.

The man looked like hell. Slumped in his seat, nursing a cup of black coffee, Luke looked more like a refugee than a man working to unload a pair of very healthy video stores in an economically undepressed part of New England.
His eyes had smudges of black underneath them, as if he'd slept very little during the past three days of negotiations. His handsome face was lined with fatigue, and he pressed the heel of one hand to his forehead as if he had a headache.

"If you leave now," Rich said, using a strip of bacon to point in Luke's direction, "you can kiss this whole deal goodbye."

"They're not gonna buy," Luke said flatly. "We're wasting our time."

"Give it another twenty-four hours," Rich said. He looked back at Luke's barely touched omelet. "You want me to order you something else?"

Luke shook his head. He'd already looked. Liberty Jones wasn't on the menu.

* * *

Luke sat on the hotel room bed, telephone to his ear, listening to the electronic ringing. He'd packed up the extra shirts and underwear he'd been forced to buy when he realized he'd need to stay over in Boston more than one night. The inexpensive overnight bag he'd picked up was sitting next to the door. He let himself sink back onto the bed, lying flat on his back as, all those miles away in Sterling, the phone continued to ring.

Brenda picked it up on the sixth ring, out of breath. "Yeah, I'm here, I'm here," she said. "I was outside in the garden."

"Brenda."

"Luke! Did you close the deal?"

Luke closed his eyes. "No. It fell through."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Can I help?"

"You have ninety thousand dollars I can borrow?"

"I wish I did—"

"Damn it, Brenda, I was so close," he said, then took a deep, steadying breath. "What are my chances of selling either the pizza place or the ski shop before next Friday?"

Brenda couldn't hold back a skeptical laugh.

"That good, huh?" Luke said.

"Giving me six business days to sell a piece of real estate is hardly realistic," she said.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "But give it a try, will you? And can you do me another favor? Can you run over to Lib's, give her a message for me? I tried calling her, but she didn't answer. She's probably working outside, and she doesn't have an answering machine. See, I won't be home until Wednesday at the absolute earliest. Rich got a line on a couple of guys down in Texas who might be interested in the video stores. Tell Lib I'll call her as soon as I know where we'll be staying. And tell Lib..."

"Yes?" Brenda prompted.

Luke stood up, putting the base of the telephone back on the nightstand. He looked out the window at panoramic view of the city of Boston. "Tell Lib," he said again. What? That he ached for her? That he burned for her? That he wanted her more than he'd ever wanted any other woman in the world?

Or maybe that he loved her?

No, he hadn't said those words to her yet, and he wanted her to hear them directly from him, and in person, too.

"Tell her with any luck, I'll see her on Wednesday."

* * *

Lib was nearly finished painting the trim of the house when she saw the cloud of dust that heralded the arrival of a car on Forest Road.

Luke, she thought, with a surge of excitement that quickly turned to disappointment when she realized the car in question was a sporty station wagon, not an airport limousine.

As she watched from her perch on the ladder, the station wagon pulled into her driveway. The engine was turned off,
and the sudden silence was broken only by the quiet ticking sound of the engine cooling. Then the front door opened, and Brenda Fulton stepped out.

Luke's sister was wearing tailored pants and a matching jacket with a crisp white blouse underneath. She shielded her eyes against the bright sun as she looked up at Lib. "Hi," she called out.

Lib unhooked her leg from the ladder and climbed down, carrying her paint bucket and brush in one hand. "Hi," she said, when she reached the bottom. She set the paint down on the grass and wiped her paint-splattered hands on her cut-off jeans. "This is a surprise."

"Luke called me," Brenda said, noticing the light of hope that leapt into Lib's eyes.

"Is he on his way home?" the younger woman asked eagerly.

Brenda made a face. "Sorry, hon," she said sympathetically. "He wanted me to tell you that he's going to Texas."

"All the way to Texas?" Lib couldn't hold back a laugh of dismay. "Oh, poor Luke."

"He's not a happy camper," Brenda agreed. "He says he won't be back until Wednesday — best case scenario."

Wednesday? Today was Sunday — three more days with-out him. Lib sighed.

"Can you come inside?" she asked, starting up the steps of the freshly painted porch. "I could really use a glass of lemonade — how about you?"

"Sounds great," Brenda said.

Lib held the screen door open, and Brenda followed her into the house.

"Good grief, you've been busy!" Brenda said, looking around.

The wooden floors were polished to a rich glow. The walls were freshly painted and the woodwork around the doors and windows gleamed. Brenda peeked into the living room. The walls had been papered with a pleasant flowered print from the chair rail down and painted a soft shade of white up to the ceiling. The sun shone through the leaded glass in the windows, making the room light and airy. The French doors that led into the dining room had been repaired and the beautiful oak wood restored.

"You can look around if you want," Lib called out from the kitchen, and Brenda went through the living room into the dining room.

Lib had replaced the broken tiles that ornamented the fireplace, and she'd polished the rich Victorian paneling on the walls. Big bay windows kept the room from being dark, and the sunlight made the wood gleam.

A swinging door led into a narrow pantry area. Cabinets hugged one wall, along with a thick white marble countertop and a large ceramic sink with shiny new fixtures.

Another swinging door led Brenda into the kitchen — and what a kitchen!

The room was enormous, with a huge beam running down the center. One entire wall was exposed brick, with a huge fireplace set into it. The rest of the kitchen was modern, with a working island in the middle. The cabinets were anew, white and sleek, and gleaming appliances were strategically placed around the room.

Lib stood at the counter near the refrigerator, pouring them both a glass of lemonade. She handed one of the glasses to Brenda.

"This is terrific," Brenda said, gesturing to the house around her.

"Yeah," Lib said with a smile. "I'm almost ready to move the furniture back in. There's one more room on this floor that needs new wallpaper. And one of the bedrooms on the second floor really got trashed from that hole in the roof — I've gotta get carpeting for that room. I can't afford to replace the hardwood floorboards. And I haven't done more than clean the third floor. It's really just an attic, but I loved it up there when I was little, so I wanted to make it into a sort of a rec room."

Brenda was looking at her with an odd expression on her face. "How many bedrooms does this place have?" she asked.

"Five," Lib said, turning to pour herself another glass of lemonade. "Six if you count the room downstairs."

"Bathrooms?"

"Two upstairs and a half down here," Lib said. "Why?"
"I know some people who are looking for a vacation house," Brenda said. "They want it ready to move in to by Thanksgiving, but I happen to know they intend to pay in cash, so if they found the right place — like this house — they could probably be persuaded to close within the next few days."

Lib was shaking her head. "No," she said. "I don't want to sell."

"I could probably get you two hundred and fifty thousand," Brenda said bluntly. "That's enough to pay back Luke and give him a big enough return on his investment so he can buy back the land from Ken Avery."

Lib was silent.

"You don't need two houses," Brenda said. "If you're going to marry Luke——"

"Who said anything about marriage?" Lib asked with a laugh.

"I know he's going to ask you," Brenda said. She smiled at Lib, her dark eyes so like her brother's. "It's just a matter of time."

Lib turned away and looked out of the kitchen window. The view from where she was standing was wonderful. She could see the backyard and the path that led up to the pond. The hillside beyond it was heavily wooded, and in the distance mountains loomed.

She would do just about anything to help Luke, but sell her home? Yet Brenda's words made sense. They certainly wouldn't need two houses. If they were going to get married...

"I hate to dump so much pressure on you," Brenda said, "but I have an appointment to take these people out looking later this afternoon. There's a house they want to see over in Chester. It's not as nice as this, but--" Lib kept staring up the hill. "What did Luke think?"

"Luke?"

She turned around to face Brenda. "About me selling this house," she said.

Brenda shook her head. "Luke doesn't know," she said. "I didn't think of it myself until I saw how great your place looks."

"I want to talk to him about it," Lib said. "Did he leave you his phone number?"

"No, he wasn't sure where he'd be staying," Brenda said, "or even when he'd get here."

Lib was silent. She loved this place. How could she just go and sell it? A decision this major needed a great deal of careful thought and discussion. How could she just make an on-the-spot decision like this?

"Why don't I bring these people by," Brenda suggested. "They can look the property over. If they're interested..."

"All right," Lib said. "But if you hear from Luke again, tell him I need to talk to him."

* * *

Luke stood by the airport pay phone, willing Lib to hear it ringing from wherever she was outside. As it rang for the eighth time, Rich tapped him on the shoulder.

Luke looked up.

"We gotta get going," Rich said. "Or we'll miss our connecting flight."

Luke hung up the phone, but didn't follow Rich. Instead, he closed his eyes and let his head rest momentarily on the privacy guard that separated his phone from the one next to it. He wondered where Lib was, what she was doing. He wondered why the hell he was standing, exhausted, in the middle of the Atlanta airport, about to board a plane for Corpus Christi, Texas, when all he really wanted was to go back to Sterling. Back to Liberty's sweet smile and warm arms...

"Are you all right, Luke?"

Luke opened his eyes to find himself staring into Rich's concerned face.

"Come on, buddy," Rich said. "They called our flight number. We can get on the plane now."


He didn't care about selling the video stores. Hey, he didn't even care about buying back the goddamned back acres
of his land anymore. He didn't care about anything — except seeing Lib again. Had it really been more than five
days since he'd held her in his arms? Five days ago he'd planned to return from Boston in time for dinner, take Lib
into his arms and tell her that he loved her. He'd planned to ask her to marry him, and he'd hoped that she'd say yes.
He'd hoped that they'd make love again. Lord, he wanted to make love to her again.

*I loved what we did this morning.* Lord, he'd loved it, too. He loved her. He loved Liberty, and he'd been away from
her for too damn long.

Luke looked at his watch. It was getting close to dinner time — but he was five days off schedule.

He turned, searching for an airline counter where he could buy a one-way ticket home, but Rich was in his way.

"Luke." Rich had on his patient face. "We're halfway to Texas. I know it's a long shot, but face it, it's our last shot.
You're not really going to give up that easily, are you?"

There wasn't even the slightest flicker of hesitation in Luke's dark eyes. "I don't need this," Luke said, and to his own
surprise, he actually meant it. "I've kept Lib waiting way too long." He smiled, feeling his fatigue lifting off of him,
like some great weight suddenly gone from his shoulders. "I'm out here."

"But what about this deal?" Rich said, following Luke away from the boarding gates.


"What about your land?"

Luke got into a line marked 'Passengers Purchasing Tickets'. He smiled at Rich. "Lib thinks that by owning a share
in the corporation, I still own that land," he said, then laughed. I think I can take that woman on one hell of a
honeymoon with the nine hundred thousand dollars I have sitting in the bank."

The line moved forward leaving Rich standing all by himself. "*Honeymoon?*" he said, scrambling to follow Luke.

"Did I hear you say *honeymoon*?"

* * *

"They offered two-sixty."

Lib stared at Brenda.

"They absolutely adored it," Brenda said. "I don't know how many times Bess Wiltshire commented on the design
of this kitchen. And when they both saw that pond up in the back field — I'm telling you, they loved it!"

Two hundred and sixty thousand dollars. It was so much more than Luke had thought Lib would get for the farm,
back when he'd first offered to loan her money, back when he'd believed she wasn't interested in sticking around.

According to the agreement she'd made with him, if she sold the farm, she'd have to pay back the money he had
loaned her plus thirty percent of her profit. Luke's take would provide him with the money he needed to buy back his
land from Ken Avery, to realize his dream.

How could she say no?

Lib took a deep breath. "Let's do it," she said. "But they have to pay in cash, and we have to close before Friday, the
15th."

As Brenda picked up the kitchen phone to call the Wiltshires, Lib went out on the back porch.

The sun was setting, and the early evening light made the field and surrounding hillside seem to glow. The pond
would be absolutely calm in the evening stillness, like a mirror, Lib knew, without a breeze to ripple its surface. She
heard the enthusiastic tone of Brenda's voice as she spoke to the buyers on the phone, and she felt her stomach
tighten nervously. Was she doing the right thing?

She heard Brenda hang up the phone, heard the screen door open as Luke's sister joined her out on the porch.

"You've got a deal," Brenda said. "If it's okay with you, they want to close in the morning — at ten. That's when
their attorney can fly up from New York with the money. Fortunately everything on our end is in order. Because you
just inherited the property, there's already been a title search, and the land was surveyed within the past few months.
I know a guy with a truck who can help you move your things out tonight. You don't have that much in the house,
and I can help you pack. The Wiltshire's are really excited. They absolutely love this house."

They loved this house. Lib loved it, too.

But she loved Luke more.
Luke caught the stewardess's arm. "What's the deal?" he asked. "Why aren't we taking off?"

The woman smiled at him. "Weather delays," she said apologetically. "It's raining so hard, we're having flooding on the runways."

Luke looked at his watch. The flight was already nearly fifty minutes late.

"How much longer are they going to hold us here?" Rich asked.

"I don't know, sir."

"May I use the phone?" Luke asked.

"I'm sorry, phones aren't available on this flight," the stewardess said.

Luke tried to control the impatience that was bubbling inside of him. It wasn't this woman's fault that they couldn't get off the ground. Snapping at her would only make him feel worse.


* * *

Lib watched Brenda's friends load her bed into their truck. That was it. With the exception of her bedroll and her suitcase, the last of her things were out of the house.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay with me tonight?" Brenda asked.

"Yeah," Lib said. "Thanks, but I don't mind sleeping on the floor." She smiled, for the first time in what seemed like hours. "I want to be here in case Luke calls."

Brenda smiled back at her. "He's going to be really surprised," she said. "Really surprised."

Lib closed the tailgate, making sure her things had been securely tied down in the back of the truck. "Come on," she said. "By the time we get this stuff to Bellow's Falls it'll be past ten. I don't want to have to wait for Wednesday to talk to Luke on the phone."

* * *

Luke looked at his watch. Ten o'clock. They'd sat in the stuffy cabin of the plane for nearly four hours. Atlanta air traffic control had finally admitted it would be another few hours before the flight to Boston left the ground, so the passengers were being allowed to disembark.

Luke stood in line for the pay phones, impatiently tapping his foot. Finally it was his turn. He entered his calling card number and dialed Lib's.

Finally the phone was ringing. Once, twice, three times and she still didn't pick up. Luke let it ring another ten times before he allowed himself to admit Lib probably wasn't home.

It was ten o'clock at night. Where was she?

Luke forced his feelings of unease back down. He was stuck here in Atlanta for a few more hours at least. He wouldn't get to Sterling until morning, and that was going by the best case scenario. Lib was probably picking up some groceries. Or maybe she was in the shower.

He quickly punched in Brenda's phone number, but she wasn't home either, and she'd forgotten to turn on her answering machine again.

Before relinquishing the telephone to the next person in line, Luke tried Lib's number one more time.

Where was she?

* * *

Lib heard the phone ringing as Brenda dropped her off, and ran for the house. The front door was locked — Brenda must've done that when they were leaving — and she fumbled for her key. Finally, finally she got the door open and ran into the kitchen.

She grabbed for the phone.

Too late. A dial tone buzzed impersonally at her.
Cursing, she hung up the phone.

* * *

By the time Luke finally got to Boston, there was a crowd waiting to use the pay phones. After searching the terminal for an available telephone, Luke gritted his teeth and got in line. It was eight-thirty in the morning by the time he dialed Lib's number.

It only rang twice, and then a recorded voice came on, saying that the line was no longer in service.

Luke was frustrated, convinced that his fingers had slipped in dialing. When he got the message a second time, his frustration turned to confusion. The third time it happened, he called the operator.

Luke managed to keep his voice calm, but it took a great deal of effort. "Yeah," he said, when the operator came on the line. "I'm trying to call someone, but I keep getting a recording that says the line's out of service. Can you tell me what's going on? I mean, are the lines down in that area or something?"

"What was that number?" the operator asked.

Luke gave the woman Lib's area code and phone number.

Maybe they had some heavy weather last night in Sterling. Maybe that had caused some kind of malfunction. Maybe, Lord, maybe Lib had forgotten to pay her phone bill, and her service was disconnected. Luke could come up with a vast array of reasons why her phone wasn't working. But none of the reasons he came up with to keep the fear away. It was tiny, the fear. It was just the wisp of a cold needle that pricked at his heart. But it was enough to make his mouth dry and his stomach churn.

Because maybe Lib had left town.

"No," the operator finally said. "No, there's no trouble on the line. I'm sorry, sir, that line has been disconnected. As of eight a.m. today."

The needle became a knife. "Thank you," Luke managed to say before he hung up the phone.

There had to be a reason for it — a reason why Lib would have turned off her phone service. But Luke couldn't come up with a single one.

Except that she had broken her promise to him and had left Sterling.

* * *

After the closing, after the sale had been made and the keys to the Harlowe house handed over to the new owners, Brenda gave Liberty a hug.

"Don't look so sad," Luke's sister said. "How can you look so sad when you're holding a check that's got six digits?"

Lib smiled halfheartedly, glancing toward the other side of the conference room where the Wiltshire's, the new owners, were talking to the bank's attorney.

"I think to cheer yourself up, you should start planning a vacation," Brenda said. She grinned wickedly. "Dare I use the 'H' word?"

The 'H' word? Honeymoon. Lib blushed.

"I've got to recommend Barbados," Brenda said. "It's gorgeous. And very romantic."

Lib smiled, picturing herself and Luke together in a tropical paradise. She could imagine the sun-filled days — white beaches, blue sky, aqua water — and the hot nights... She glanced at Brenda. "Barbados, huh?"

The Wiltshire's came over to shake Lib's hand again before they left.

"Do you have plans to renovate any other old houses in this area?" Bess Wiltshire asked. "Because I have friends who would definitely be interested."

"That's actually not a bad idea," Lib said. She looked at Brenda and grinned. "But first I think I'm gonna take a side trip to Barbados."

* * *

The tires of Luke's rental car squealed as he turned the corner of Forest Road.
In just a few seconds, this nightmare would be over. He'd pull into Lib's driveway, and he would see her, perched on a ladder, painting the trim of the house. His fear would vanish, everything would be exactly the same as it was before he went to Boston. She would smile, then rush down the ladder to meet him. She'd probably be wearing those ragged jeans shorts she wore that were covered with old splotches of paint. Maybe she'd be wearing a bathing suit top, and when he pulled her into his arms, he'd run his hands across her smooth, golden-tanned shoulders and back. She would kiss him the way she did that morning he left and they'd go into the house, into her bedroom and make love again and

A strange car sat in the drive. It was a dark shade of red — a big, boxy all-terrain vehicle.

The fear was back in full, terrifying force.

Luke threw the car into park, leaving it right on the street. He ran up the walk, onto the porch.

The door was ajar, and he opened the screen and went inside the house.

Lib's tape player wasn't on the mantel in the living room. Luke stared at the spot where it had sat accompanied by piles of cassette tapes, then turned and took the stairs two at a time, up to the second floor.

The door to her bedroom was closed. Luke pushed it open and went into the room.

Empty.

Everything was gone.

Lib's bed, the antique vanity she had taken from the stash of furniture at the Bellow's Falls self-storage place, the ancient trunk that Harriet had used to store sheets and towels and the canopy that had hung over the old bed, Lib's suitcase — it was all gone.

The hardwood floor gleamed. There wasn't even a hair-clip or a pencil on the floor. Not one single piece of dust had been left behind as proof that at one time Lib had even ever been there.

She was gone.

Luke stood in the middle of the room, amazed that he was still functioning, amazed that he could continue to breathe, to think, even to stand up through the intensity of the pain that surrounded him.

"Can I help you?"

Slowly, Luke turned toward the door. A man and a woman stood there, looking at him.

The woman wasn't Lib.

"You must be looking for Liberty Jones," she said. "She sold us the house this morning."

Sold.

The house.

"I'm Cameron Wiltshire," the man said, holding out his hand, "and this is my wife, Bess."

Luke managed to shake hands and introduce himself to his new neighbors.

"Did Lib—" he started to say, then stopped. He couldn't ask. But he had to. "Do you know where Lib went?"

"I think..." Cameron Wiltshire looked at his wife. "Didn't she say something about..."

"Barbados," Bess Wiltshire said decisively. "She definitely said something about going to Barbados."

What was left of Luke's heart was demolished.

Somehow he managed to walk down the stairs and out of the house. Somehow he drove the rental car back down Forest Road and parked it in his driveway.

The inside of his house was stuffy and hot from the windows being shut all those days he was away. But Luke didn't notice, didn't open the place up.

It didn't matter, nothing mattered.

Liberty Jones was gone.
Chapter Ten

Lib locked the door to her room with a sigh and headed for the lobby of Gate's Mountain resort. Brenda still hadn't heard from Luke, wherever he was in Texas. But the last time he called, he'd said he'd maybe be back by Wednesday — tomorrow.

Lib was heading over to Luke's house now, stopping by Brenda's first to pick up his key. She wanted to leave him a message, telling him where she was staying. She'd tried calling his answering machine, but he hadn't turned it on before he left town. And she didn't want to leave a note for him outside, where it could be rained on or blown away.

Lib went down the elegantly curving staircase that led to the hotel lobby. Gate's Mountain was a nice place. Expensive, but very nice.

She stopped short, then sidestepped some people who had moved into her line of vision, craning her neck to get a better view.

No, she wasn't hallucinating. Luke was sitting alone in the dining room of the Inn! True, his back was to her, but it had to be him. Lib would recognize the back of that head anywhere.

Eagerly, she crossed the lobby and went into the restaurant. He turned slightly toward her, and she saw his familiar, elegant profile.

Dodging tables, she hurried over to him. "Luke!"

He looked directly at her, and for a fraction of a second, Lib saw unmistakable shock in Luke's dark brown eyes.

Why on earth would he be so surprised to see her? Lib didn't bother trying to figure it out. As he rose to his feet, she launched herself into his arms.

"You're back," she said, holding him tightly. "You're finally back."

Luke's heart had nearly stopped beating when he looked up and saw Liberty coming towards him. She was the last person in the world he'd expected to see up at Gate's Mountain Inn. He'd thought he would never see her again. And he certainly hadn't expected ever to hold her in his arms again. She felt so soft against him. Her hair brushed his nose and he fought the temptation to bury his face in it. When she lifted her lips to his for a kiss, he was nearly done in.

Somehow he managed to step back, pushing her away, holding her at arm's length by her elbows.

What was she doing here?

The answer came to him almost immediately. No doubt there had been some kind of delay in the money from the sale of the house. She was probably waiting for funds to clear, and then she'd be off, free as a bird, elusive as the wind.

Anger gripped him. But it wasn't the flash of hot temper that he was used to. This was cold — brittle, mind-numbing cold.

"When did you get back?" she asked, smiling up at him. "Yesterday," he said, his voice sounding harsh to his own ears.

Lib's smile faded. Yesterday? Luke was holding her so tightly, his fingers were starting to bruise her arms. And the way he was looking at her... His eyes were so different, so... cold. It was like looking into avoid. There was nothing there, nothing at all.

She shivered. "Why didn't you call me?" she said quietly. "I was starting to worry about you—"


"Luke, what's going on?" Lib asked, her voice low but intense.

"Gee, I could ask Luke the same question."

Lib turned and looked down into the cool blue eyes of a woman nearly a foot shorter than she was. Short blonde hair framed a perfectly made-up face and a white halter dress hugged the woman's well-endowed body.

Lib had seen this woman somewhere before, but it took several long seconds to register just where it had been.

Diamonds. It was the lady who wore all the diamonds, the one who had tried to hit on Luke the first night he and Lib had gone out to dinner. Stacey something.
Tonight Stacey wore emeralds. They dripped from her ears and lay shimmering against her perfectly tanned collarbone.

Luke hadn't wanted to talk to Stacey that other night, nearly two months ago. In fact, he'd let her believe there was something going on between him and Lib. So what was he doing with her, now?

Stacey settled herself comfortably in the chair across from Luke's and crossed her shapely legs.

He was obviously having dinner with her, Lib thought. She looked up into the coldness of Luke's eyes and suddenly her friend Joan's words of warning, spoken all those weeks ago, came back to her. 'He's all sugar and spice until the morning after. Then it's icicle time...'

"I thought we were..." Looking into the frozen wasteland of Luke's eyes, Lib couldn't finish. She'd thought what? That he was in love with her?

He smiled, but it never reached his eyes. "Will you excuse me for a minute?" he said to Stacey.

"Of course." The blonde woman leaned forward, resting her chin in her hand. "By the way, that phone call I made...? Daddy said I could have the money. It's yours, if you want it."

Lib stared at Stacey, unable to make sense of the woman's words at first. But as Luke took her none-too-gently by the arm and started to lead her out of the restaurant, it all clicked into place. Lib yanked her arm free.

"I can't believe you'd do this," she said angrily.

One of the desk clerks looked up at the sound of Lib's raised voice as Luke followed her into the lobby.

"You're getting the money to buy back your damned land from her," she said, whirling toward him and emphasizing her words with a hard jab to Luke's chest. "Aren't you? Aren't you?"

Luke stood his ground, an immovable brick wall. He crossed his arms, his eyes still cold, his handsome face hard.

"God!" Lib said, her violet eyes bright with anger. "How could I have been so stupid? You even warned me. You flat out told me that you loved that land more than anything or anyone else in the world!"

Standing there, looking at this woman that he had once loved so desperately, looking at the anger, the passion in her eyes, Luke felt a hot flash of pain penetrate the numbing cold within him. He was going to ache and hurt and bleed for Liberty for months, years, Lord, maybe for the rest of his life. His breath caught in his throat, and he suddenly wanted to hurt her as badly as she had hurt him.

"I never said that I loved you," he said, his voice remarkably calm despite the whirlwind of emotions that was inside of him.

Lib froze, as if he had cast some evil spell over her. As Luke watched, her beautiful eyes filled with tears, and he knew that he'd hurt her, but it didn't make him feel any better. It only made him feel worse.

"You heartless son of a bitch," she whispered. She couldn't believe she'd sold her house for him, that she'd given herself, heart, soul and body, to him.

Lib couldn't stop her tears as she turned and ran from the lobby, heading for the privacy of her room.

How could she have been so wrong about him? How could she have misread the softness, the love, she'd thought she'd seen in his eyes? She was a fool, an idiot. She'd given up everything, everything for a man who was only playing a game with her.

It would take all of three minutes to pack her things, and then she was as good as gone. She'd get in her car and head south, away from the Green Mountains, away from Sterling. Away from Luke Fulton forever, damn him.

But deep inside, she knew that no matter how far she went, no matter how fast she drove, her heart would still be broken in the morning.

* * *

Luke nearly collided with his sister as he was leaving the resort. Brenda was in such a hurry, she wasn't watching where she was going, and only his quick reflexes kept her from falling down the stairs.

"Yowl!" she said breathlessly. She glared at him as if he hadn't just rescued her from a twisted ankle. "I was looking for you."

Luke released her after he was sure she'd regained her balance. He straightened his jacket and continued on towards
the parking lot, not bothering to say a word. Finding out whatever he'd done to receive her wrath could wait. He'd had enough crap for today, thank you very much.

But Brenda wasn't at all put off. She followed him. "Where's Miss Moneybags?" she asked.

"I've never met anyone with that name," Luke said coolly.

"You know who I mean," Brenda said. "Bleached blonde, big bucks, bigger boobs, has more jewelry than the royal family...? Ring any bells? I couldn't believe it when Penelope Green called me and said she saw you having dinner with her."

"Her name is Stacey Harrington," Luke said, fishing the keys to his pick-up truck from his pants pocket. "And I said good night to her in the bar. She wanted a nightcap, I didn't. Not that that's any business of yours."

He unlocked the cab door and opened it, intending to climb quickly inside, but Brenda was quicker. She leaned forward and slammed the door shut before he could get in. Luke barely had enough time to pull his fingers out of the way.

"You're wrong," Brenda said dangerously. "This time, baby brother, it is my business. And you're not going anywhere until you tell me why the hell you were having an intimate dinner with some rich bimbette when you told me not more than a week ago that you were in love with Liberty Jones?"

Luke crossed his arms. "I never said that I was in love with her."

"You sure as hell implied it," Brenda said, her eyes shooting sparks. "Damnit, Luke! You tell me just what it is that you think you're doing!"

"I'm arranging a loan," Luke said. His voice was as cold as his eyes. "Stacey's dear old dad is going to lend me the rest of the money I need to buy back the farm from Ken Avery."

"You're what?" Brenda was floored, staring up at him.

"You heard me," Luke said, the muscles working in his jaw. "Now if you don't mind, I'm tired...?"

He reached for the handle to the truck's door, but Brenda blocked his way with her body. "Let me get this straight," she said. "You were willing to put your chance for a future with Liberty on the line, in order to sweet-talk some rich society girl into lending you money?" Her voice rose with every word she spoke, until she was shouting at him. "You idiot! God! And I was starting to think that maybe you hadn't inherited the Fulton stupidity gene after all. Obviously I was seriously wrong!"

"And you obviously inherited the Fulton trait of jumping to conclusions before you've heard all of the facts," Luke returned. "If you must know the truth, Lib was the one who walked out on me. She sold her goddamned house yesterday."

As he heard himself say those words, white hot pain ripped through him again and he had to brace himself on the side of his truck.

"Jesus, Bren," he said hoarsely, "she promised me she wouldn't leave—" Savagely, he turned, nearly pushing his sister away from the truck door. "Get out of my way, damnit!"


"Move!"

"You poor, stupid fool!" Brenda said, refusing to budge an inch. As she looked up at her brother, she was tempted to laugh. It was almost comical. Almost. If it weren't for the flash of utter misery she'd seen in Luke's eyes... "Liberty hasn't left you! She isn't going anywhere! She sold her house for you, birdbrain, so that you'd have the money to buy back the farm."

Luke was staring at her with such an expression of shock on his face, Brenda couldn't keep from laughing. "Talk about jumping to conclusions," she said. "Looks like you're the one who took a giant leap. Look, it was my brilliant idea to sell the Harlowe house. I had clients who were seriously looking and..."

Luke's head was spinning. Lib had sold her house for... him? She hadn't sold it because she wanted the money, because it was time to move on?

"I talked Lib into selling," Brenda was saying. "I told her you were going to ask her to marry you, and that you guys wouldn't need two houses."
Lib had sold her house for him. She'd sacrificed the one symbol of stability she'd ever had in her life for him. And how did he thank her? He could still see her violet eyes filled with tears from the sting of his cruel words.

"Barbados," Luke said suddenly. "The Wiltshire's said Lib was going to Barbados."

"God!" Brenda laughed in exasperation. "This is like one giant game of telephone, where the message gets amazingly mangled. I was teasing Lib about finding a place to go on your honeymoon, and Barbados came up as a good pick." She shook her head in disbelief. "You are so lucky Lib didn't see you wining and dining that—"

Luke turned and ran back into the Inn's lobby. The desk clerk looked up at him in alarm as he skidded to a stop on the polished hardwood floor.

"Liberty Jones," Luke said, pushing his hair out of his eyes with one hand. "What's her room number?"

The clerk accessed the computer with an excruciating lack of speed. "I'm sorry, sir," the man finally said. "Ms. Jones has checked out."

Luke swore.

Brenda came up behind him. "Luke, what are you—"

"When?" he asked the clerk. His knuckles were white from gripping the edge of the counter. "How long ago did she leave?"

"What?" Brenda said. "When did who leave?"

"Eight o'clock," the clerk said primly. "Two and a half hours ago."

"Did she say where she was going?" Luke asked desperately. "Did she leave a forwarding address?"

"I'm sorry, sir, she did not."

"My God," Brenda said. "Did Lib leave?"

Luke turned to his sister, anguish in his eyes. "Oh, Brenda," he said. "You won't believe what I've done."

* * *

He was going to find her.

Luke unlocked his front door and went right to the phone. His answering machine flashed three calls. Luke played them back, fast-forwarding through a long message from the manager of the ski shop. The second message was from Brenda, wondering if he'd found Lib yet. The last call was from Rich Lowell.

"Call me. I'm working at home today," the lawyer's recorded voice said. "I think I might've figured out a way to track down Lib."

Quickly, Luke dialed Rich's home number. Lowell picked up the phone after the first ring.


"The bank," Rich said without ceremony. "It suddenly occurred to me that Lib left town, but all of her money is still here — at the Sterling Savings and Loan. She couldn't have had more than a few hundred dollars on her when she left—"

"You're kidding, right?" Luke interrupted. "Lib doesn't carry around that kind of money."

"Well, apparently she had enough to get where she was going," Rich said. "Because it seems as if she's arrived. She contacted the bank and told them to wire her money to—"

"Florida," Luke finished the lawyer's sentence. A long-ago conversation with Lib had just come back to him. "How did you know that?"

"Lucky guess," Luke said. "One of her brothers lives down there. His last name is Rodriguez. Complicated family. She explained it to me once."

"Well, obviously you don't need my help—"

"Whoa!" Luke said. "Florida's a big state. You could help me narrow it down. I'm assuming you got her current address?"

"I would have if I could, pal," Rich said with a sigh. "But the bank wasn't going to hand out that information to any
old average axe murderer like you or me. I *did* manage to scrounge up the location of her new bank, though. It's out on Sanibel Island, in the Gulf, you know, off Ft. Myers."

"I owe you one," Luke said.

"Actually, you owe me about fifteen," Rich said before he realized he was talking to the dial tone.

* * *

Sanibel Island was sweltering. September was still hot as hell in Florida, hot and damp and oppressive. Cumulonimbus clouds were gathering ominously in the southwest, lurking at the edges of an already hazy and humid morning. By late afternoon, the weather would break, and it would cool off — for maybe twenty minutes. Then the heat and humidity would start building back up in preparation for the next day's thunderstorms.

Luke stood at a pay phone, scribbling in a little notebook as the operator gave him the phone numbers of all the Rodriguezes in the Ft. Myers area.

There were twenty-three of them.

He wiped a trickle of sweat from his face and started dialing.

* * *

Lib walked around the edge of the property, stopping to take a deep breath of the salty ocean air.

This service station was two blocks from the Gulf, and seabirds glided overhead, calling and shrieking to each other, occasionally landing on a rooftop or telephone pole. The pelicans were very cool, Lib thought, shading her eyes to look up at the peeling paint on the outside of the building. Pelicans usually flew in formation — three or four or even more huge, pre-historic-looking birds with their large beaks and enormous wingspans.

The real estate agent watched as Lib made another circuit of the building, this time looking at the foundation. It wasn't bad. It wasn't great, but it wasn't too bad, either.

Sanibel Island was nice. It was a kind of funky, artistic community. A large amount of the island belonged to the J.D. "Ding" Darling wildlife preserve where her brother Cal worked. "Alligator Crossing" signs were scattered throughout the surrounding neighborhoods. The first time Lib had seen them, she'd thought they were nothing more than cute jokes. It wasn't too long before she realized that those signs really did mark the places where the enormous reptiles crawled across the road going from swamp to swamp.

Lib liked Sanibel Island. Cal had been living there for about three years, and she'd been to visit him at least as many times. Sanibel was less built up, less commercial than many of the other islands on the west coast of Florida. Of course, because of that, property values were sky-high.

This service station that she was looking at, that she was considering buying, was going to cost her all of her profit from the sale of Great-Aunt Harriet's house. And then some.

Lib went into the large two-bay garage, trying not to think about Luke. But it was impossible. Everything she did was because of him. There was no denying it. She was standing here, now, in Florida, inside this empty building because of Luke Fulton. So it was hard *not* to think about the man.

She stared at the splotches of oil on the concrete floor, wondering how he could have fooled her so totally, 'so absolutely. No matter which way she looked at it, she couldn't figure it out. She couldn't reconcile the warm, passionate man she'd come to know over the past few months of summer with the cold stranger she'd talked to up at the resort. The two seemed so different. It was as if when he'd gone to Boston, his body had been invaded by aliens. She missed him. She didn't miss the cold, mean Luke who had hurt her so badly. In fact, she wouldn't care if she never saw him again for the rest of her life. But she *did* miss the Luke who had been her friend, her confidant, her lover...

Lib closed her eyes, remembering the morning Luke had come into her house, that morning he'd left for Boston. He'd looked at her as if he loved her. He'd kissed her, touched her, made love to her, awakening within her a passion she'd never felt before.

It was Friday, Lib realized suddenly. It was Luke's day of reckoning. It was the day he had the opportunity to buy back his precious ancestral land. She could picture him, dressed to the nines for the occasion, wearing one of his hand-tailored suits that fit him so perfectly. His dark hair would be carefully combed, perfectly in place. He would walk into Ken Avery's office with Rich Lowell his side. His dark eyes would gleam with satisfaction as he opened
his briefcase and placed a certified check for one million dollars on Avery's desk —

On the other side of the garage, the real estate agent cleared his throat. "This really is a remarkable deal," he said. "It's only on the market because the owner passed away, and his heirs don't want the bother of leasing the property. They priced it to sell, and it's going to go fast. If you're interested, don't wait to make an offer. I'm telling you, a service station combined with that apartment upstairs — this place will be sold by the beginning of next week."

"I don't know," a familiar voice said quietly. "I don't think the location's right."


He was leaning against the wall by the door that led into the front office. Lib's heart nearly stopped beating as she stared at him.

"Oh, no," the real estate agent said. "The location's terrific. This is one of our main drags. In fact, this intersection is the busiest on the island."

Lib couldn't take her eyes off of Luke. He was wearing his favorite pair of khaki shorts and an old Sterling Athletic Club T-shirt. His hair was curling around his ears from the humidity, and his lean face looked tired. But his gaze was sharp — sharp and very warm.

Lib turned away, suddenly aware that the real estate agent was watching them. "Will you excuse us for a minute, please?" she said.

The agent shrugged. "I'll be outside."

"What are you doing here?" she said, looking back at Luke.

He didn't hesitate. "I made a terrible mistake," he said. "I didn't trust you. I'm here to apologize. And I'm here to bring you back home."

Lib nodded slowly. "I'm supposed to forgive you," she said. "Just like that?"


She started for the door. "Go to hell."

"Liberty, Lord help me, I'm already there."

His words stopped her, but she didn't turn around. "Did you sleep with her?" she asked, her back still to him. She closed her eyes, bracing herself for his answer.

"No."

It wasn't the answer she was expecting, and in surprise, she turned to face him. "Why not?"

The answer seemed so obvious to him, but he said the words anyway. "Because I'm in love with you."

"That's not what you told me—"

"I was angry," he said, starting toward her. But she backed away, and he stopped. He took a deep breath, exhaling loudly as he raked back his hair with his fingers. "I didn't know you sold your house to give me the money. I thought you wanted to leave, hell, I thought you were already gone. I lost it, Lib. I was totally nuts."

"And that's supposed to excuse what you did?" Lib asked.


He felt tears well up, but he made himself meet her eyes, he wouldn't let himself turn away. She looked so good standing there, wearing those familiar cut-off jeans and a blue sleeveless workshirt. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She had a smudge of grease on one of her legs, and he knew she'd been working on her car earlier that day.

"I had a hell of a time finding you," he said, trying to smile. "I took the red-eye last night, and this morning I called every C. Rodriguez in the—"

"Last night?" Lib said suddenly. She looked at her watch. Three-thirty. "Aren't you cutting it a little close?"

Luke looked at her strangely. "Cutting what close?"

"It's Friday," she said. "Today's Friday."

He didn't know what she was talking about.
"The deadline?" she said. "For buying back your land? You have to get back to Sterling in less than nine hours."
There was a flash of understanding in his eyes. He finally got it. "I don't care about the land," he said. "The only
place I've got to be is right here, with you."
Lib caught her breath, unable to believe what she was hearing.
The tears were back in his eyes. "I love you," he said, "and dammit, I made a mistake. But that shouldn't mean I have
to spend the rest of my life paying for it. Lib, don't make me live without you. I need you." He had to stop, had to
take a deep breath. He wiped his eyes brusquely with the palm of his hand. "Tell me what to do," he said softly.
"Tell me what I need to do so that you'll forgive me."
She couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe he was actually giving up his dream of buying back his farm for her.
How could she let him do that? "You really love me that much?" she asked.
"I really do," he said.
"And you'll never mistrust me again?"
He shook his head. "I'm so sorry."
Lib nodded. "Then I forgive you," she said.
Luke didn't move. He just stood there, looking at her, as if her words didn't make sense, as if he didn't understand.
"Aren't you going to kiss me?" she said, her voice shaking slightly.
He didn't need to be asked twice.
Two large steps, and he was beside her, pulling her into his arms. He kissed her then, a long, sweet kiss. His arms
felt like heaven around her. He smelled so good, tasted even better. Lib knew if she let him, he'd kiss her forever.
But they didn't have forever — at least not right away. They only had eight and a half hours. She pulled back.
"Come on," she said, taking him by the hand and leading him to the door. "We've got to hurry."
The real estate agent was leaning against his car, and he straightened up as they came out of the garage.
"Sorry, bad location," Lib called to him as she pulled Luke toward her car.
"Why are we in a hurry?" Luke asked, watching her unlock the passenger door of her sports car. "Where are we
going?"
"Back to Vermont," Lib said. She kissed him quickly, and Luke took the opportunity to pull her back into his arms.
"If we're lucky, there'll be a flight that'll get us there before midnight—"
She tried to pull free, but he held her securely. "I'm extremely lucky," he said, "but I don't want to go back to
Sterling. Not yet."
"But—"
He kissed her again. "We're here," he said. "Let's take a vacation, hang at the beach for a while."
"But I thought—"
Another kiss stopped her. "We can take a week or two," he said, smiling down at her, "then we can go back to
Sterling."
"You were right about a lot of things," he said. "I called Ken Avery while I was at the airport and I told him I had
the million in cash as we'd agreed. He wasn't happy about that. He told me if I bought back that land, all of the plans
for the resort's expansion would be postponed. You were right, he wasn't interested in building on leased land. So I
made him a counter offer. I offered him five hundred thousand."
Lib blinked. "You offered him less?"
"It's a more complicated deal, and yeah, it's less cash for him, but he took it," Luke said. "You see, all I really get is
my name on the deed for the land, and a guarantee that if Gates Mountain Resort ever closes its doors, that land
reverts back to me or my children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren. As a larger investor, I'll also get a bigger
share of the profits from the resort. It's a win-win solution. It puts the land to good use, it's environmentally sound,
and it keeps all those workers and resort employees from getting laid off."
Lib nodded slowly. "And the land belongs to the Fulton's again," she said.
He nodded.
She laughed, shaking her head. "You got yourself everything you wanted," she said. "Plus an extra five hundred thousand in the bank."
"I don't have everything," he said. "Not yet."
"What else could you possibly need?"
He touched the side of her face. Her skin was so soft, so smooth.
"You," he said. "Marry me, and then I'll have everything I could possibly need for the rest of my life."
Lib's violet eyes welled with tears, but her smile shone with happiness. "Yes."
Luke kissed her. "I love you," he said. "You know I've never said that to anyone ever before."
"I know," she said.
"Let's get married tomorrow," he said. "We can fly to Las Vegas if we have to——"
"Are you kidding?" she said. "I'm getting married in Sterling, in the church, the way Harriet would've wanted."
"But I want to get married now, right now," he said. "I want our lives together to start as soon as possible."
She looped her arms more tightly around his neck and kissed him. "A wedding's just a ceremony," she said, "just a symbol of the way we feel. You're already all mine, remember?"
Luke smiled, closing his eyes as her body pressed tightly against his. Oh, yeah. He remembered.
"Get in the car," she whispered, her breath hot against his ear.
Luke got in the car.
Liberty smiled at him as she climbed in behind the wheel and started the engine with a roar.
"Muffler's out again," she shouted over the noise. "I'll help you fix it," he shouted back.
"In some countries, it's considered scandalous for a man and a woman to install a muffler together," she said with a grin.
"Not if the man loves the woman with all his heart," he said, leaning forward to kiss her.
She laughed, and pulled out of the parking lot. Luke didn't know where she was heading, and he didn't care. As long as he was with Liberty, he knew he'd be happy.
-end-
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