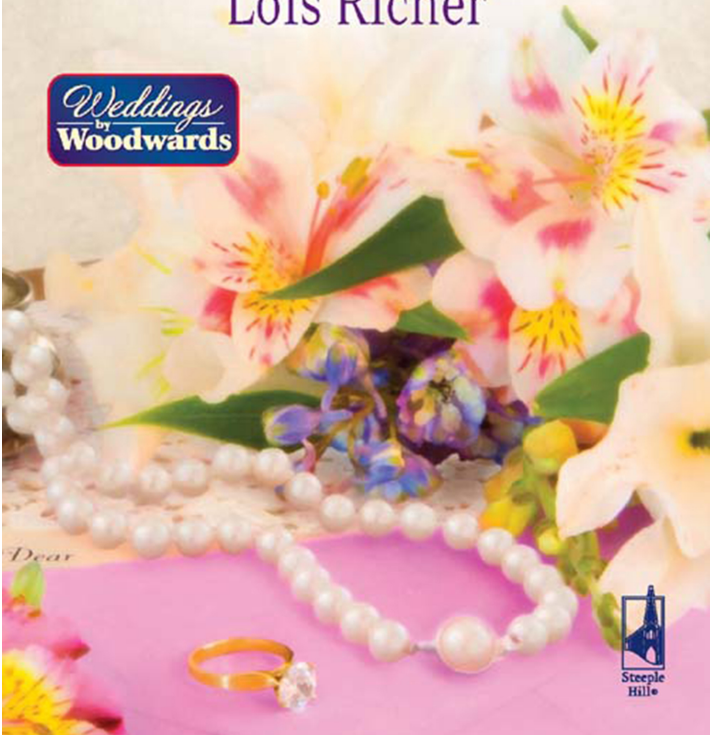
HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

A Ring and a Promise

Lois Richer

Weddings by Woodwards



Steeple Hill

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Аннотация

Five years ago, Abby Franklin thought she'd marry Donovan Woodward.But her first love walked out of her life. Now, he's back in town, with his motherless godchild, Ariane, in tow. Avoiding him is essential –and impossible. Because Donovan has rejoined the family business, Weddings by Woodwards…where Abby works as a jewelry designer.Then Abby meets Ariane, and something about the silent young girl draws Abby in. In spite of herself, Abby finds herself opening up her heart…to Ariane and Donovan.

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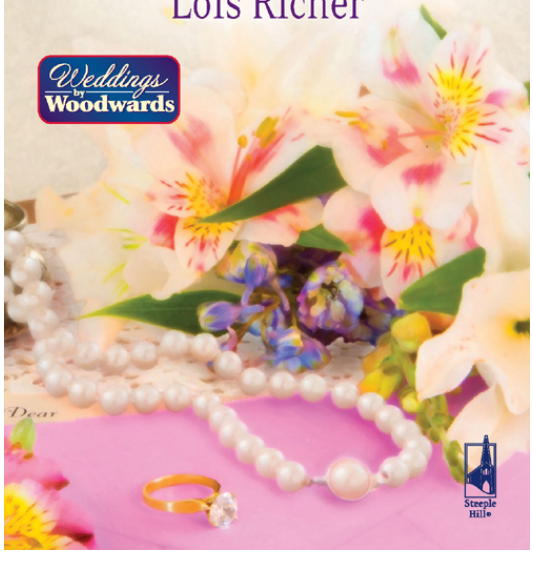

Steeple Hill

“Abby, about that proposal.”

“I’m not going to talk about it, Donovan. It’s over. I’m over it. I’ve moved on. So should you.”

“You sound so hard. I don’t remember that about you.”

She stared straight at him.

“Time and circumstances do that to you, Donovan.”

He returned her look without flinching.

“Maybe you should tell me what you think happened that night, Abby,” he said, a quiet tension threading his voice. “What did your mother say?”

“What’s the point in rehashing that period of our lives? It’s over. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to work.” Abby turned her back, pretending to concentrate on the ring in front of her.

A few minutes later, she heard the door close.

So Donovan was back.

So you avoid him, she thought. Keep yourself busy and away from him. Donovan never sticks to anything anyway. At least not the Donovan she remembered.

LOIS RICHER

likes variety. From her time in human resources management to entrepreneurship, life has held plenty of surprises. She says, “Having given up on fairy tales, I was happily involved in building a restaurant when a handsome prince walked into my life and upset all my career plans with a wedding ring. Motherhood quickly followed. I guess the seeds of my storytelling took root because of two small boys who kept demanding, ‘Then what, Mom?’” The miracle of God’s love for His children, the blessing of true love, the joy of sharing Him with others—that is a story that can be told a thousand ways and yet still be brand-new. Lois Richer intends to go right on telling it.

A Ring and a Promise
Lois Richer

Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but be a new and different person with a freshness in all you do and think.
—Romans 12:2
This book is for Lesley.

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Chapter One

Doing your best usually meant redoing. Abigail Franklin had learned that at her mother's knee.

With a sigh, Abby squeezed her forceps, lifted the paste stone and dropped it in the center of her newest platinum setting for the third time.

"Looks good," a voice offered.

"Good is never good enough," she muttered. Then the familiar voice hit a nerve.

Abby's fingers numbed. Her forceps slid out of her hand. She lifted her head and stared.

"Hello, Abby."

He was back—after five long years.

Forcing taut muscles to obey, Abby slid from her stool and faced Donovan Woodward, the man who'd promised her the world. And never delivered.

Memories of that smile, all sparkle, charm and appeal, swamped her.

"I'm not an April Fool's joke, so stop staring," he ordered, his grin slashing his handsome face. "How are you?"

"Okay." She studied his jutting cheekbones. "And you?"

"I'm all right."

He didn't look all right. He looked tired.

But the longer Abby stared at Donovan Woodward, the more

she knew tiredness wasn't the right word. True, there were deeply carved lines around his ocean-blue eyes, stripped now of the sparkle of pure fun that once dared her to join in. But tiredness wasn't the reason. Donovan never got tired, not the life-of the-party Donovan that Abby had known.

Still, a girl didn't forget the face of the first man to ask her to marry him, even after five years. Yet his face had changed, matured.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" he demanded when the silence stretched too long and the air bristled with tenseness.

His testy tone irked her.

"Such as what? Welcome home?" Abby suggested, glaring at him. "Or maybe we could discuss that note you told my mother to give me five years ago. How did it go? 'I made a mistake. I'm leaving. Sorry.'"

She gritted her teeth, irked she'd let that slip out.

"That wasn't my best moment," he admitted. "But if you'll listen a minute, I'll explain—"

"After five years you're finally offering an explanation?" She tossed him a scathing glance before turning back to her worktable. "Forget it."

"Abby." Donovan touched her arm, wordlessly asking her to face him. "I know I should have explained my reasons to you personally. Asking you to marry me on prom night and leaving two days later for Europe wasn't exactly what I'd planned, but I figured you'd understand I was doing it for you."

“For me?” Incredulity filled her. “Is that how you justify it?”

“I didn’t have to justify myself after—” Donovan shook his head, cleared his throat. “The gossip must have been awful. I’m sorry I left you alone to face that, Abby.”

An apology from Donovan? That was nice. But all he was apologizing for was the gossip. He’d even intimated his leaving had somehow benefited her, which was ludicrous. But then, maybe five years in Europe had changed his memories.

Still, how could he say his decision had anything to do with her?

“The past is over, Donovan. Let’s agree to disagree on your part in it.” She refocused away from the painful memories. “Will you be working at Weddings by Woodwards?”

“Uh-huh.” His shaggy walnut-toned hair moved in a ripple of assent.

“Your grandmother will be ecstatic. That’s great.” She winced as her voice echoed around her work room like some kind of cheerleader.

“Oh, Abigail. The way you say that,” Donovan mocked.

“When did you get back?” Funny how she struggled to talk to him when once they’d never had enough time to say everything.

“Flew in tonight. Grandmother didn’t tell me you’d be here,” he mumbled with a frown at the array of tools she’d spread out.

“Sorry.” If she’d known he was coming she’d have stayed away.

“Don’t be. I needed to apologize, Abby. I owed you that.”

"I don't want your apology."

"Tough. I needed to give it." A smile flirted with his lips, but didn't quite reach his eyes. "Want to reciprocate?"

"I have nothing to apologize for." Something lurked beneath the surface of his remarks, something Abby didn't understand. "Anyway, I told you, I don't want to discuss the past. We're different people now. I've moved on, Don. So have you, I'm sure."

He'd always been Don to her; charismatic, showering everyone in his life with laughter and happiness, always fun, totally irresistible.

And then he'd left.

"I'm sure you agree that leaving was the right thing to do, but I should have talked to you first. My only excuse is I was upset."

The right thing to do?

"Upset by what?" Confusion filled her. "Proposing?"

"No." He studied her intently. "Have you forgotten everything about that night, Abby?"

"I've tried," she said, meeting his stare. "It wasn't the best time of my life."

"Nor mine." Something lay hidden in those words. Something Donovan evidently decided not to clarify because after a moment of further scrutiny, he shrugged, stepped closer and brushed the edge of her creation with one fingertip. "Is this a special order?"

"A private commission." She studied the setting with a critical eye. Not her best yet, but better. "It's an idea for a project,

actually."

Donovan nodded as if he'd expected that answer.

"What's the project?"

Abby didn't want to share her dream with him. But this awkwardness between them had to end. Weddings by Woodwards was a tight-knit family company that offered everything a bride and groom could need. Winifred Woodward expected her employees to get along.

"Is it a secret?"

"No." Abby strove for a bland tone, ignoring her inner discomfort. "It's for a contest in New York. Jewelry designers can submit fine designs. Well known designers will judge. It's great exposure and a chance to get my designs into New York. Entries close in two weeks." She bit her lip, then admitted the rest. "I haven't yet settled on the complete design."

"As I remember, you always had plans to go to New York."

With him. She'd thought they'd shared that dream.

"So what's holding you back?" Donovan leaned one hip against the counter and waited for her explanation.

"Time. My parents recently moved from their home into a retirement condo. It was a difficult transition."

"Ah, your parents."

Abby winced at his tone. Her mother had never accepted Donovan in her life. She'd always claimed he was never serious enough about anything. He'd endured her disapproval and caustic comments many times, and always without losing his charm. His

faultless manners and quirky sense of humor had helped Abby weather many embarrassing confrontations.

"How are your parents? I suppose the two dedicated doctors of genetics are still buried in their world?"

"No. Dad's in the first stages of Alzheimer's. He gets frustrated by the memory lapses. Mom's finding it difficult." Wasn't that an understatement?

Her parents had always lived and breathed their work. They'd assumed Abby would follow in their footsteps and were less than pleased when she refused to attend college. Jewelry design was so not the career of choice her mother wanted for her only child, a fact she constantly reiterated.

"I'm very sorry, Abby." Donovan looked genuinely upset. "It can't be easy on you."

"I manage."

The casual hand he brushed through his hair, mussing it even further, was so Donovan. Abby blinked at the flicker of silver on his finger. He still wore the ring she'd made for him in junior high? That shocked her.

"So you entered this contest because—?"

Again Abby shoved back past memories.

"Because it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to showcase my work to some of the top people in the industry. If I win, I'll finally be able to move to New York and work with one of them."

Donovan studied her solemnly.

"Still proving yourself, Abby?" he asked quietly.

She gripped the edge of her worktable and swallowed hard, suddenly furious.

"That's not fair. Don't I have a right to extend myself, see how far my abilities can take me? You're not the only one who has dreams beyond Denver you know."

Donovan's face altered. "I didn't mean that. You're a talented designer who can work marvels with metal and stone. It's only natural you want to stretch yourself."

"I can hear a 'but' in there."

He searched her face. The sparkle that usually blazed through his eyes dimmed.

"I know how hard you must have fought to make your own way, Abby."

"Nothing's changed there," she admitted grimly. "My mother still hopes I'll have some kind of awakening and realize I really want to be a scientist."

"Is she why you've entered this contest?"

The astuteness of his comment proved that Donovan had lost none of the perspicacity that had always rendered him capable of sizing up a situation in seconds. But Abby didn't want him looking too closely into her motives.

"I'm doing this for me," she told him firmly. "Because I need to stretch myself, to do more unusual designs, ones Weddings by Woodwards has no market for."

"And if winning means your mother finally accepts your capability, so much the better, right?" He nodded as if he

understood. “I suppose it’s the only way she’ll be convinced now.”

A simple uplift of one eyebrow breathed life into his entire face. Abby slammed the door on her memories. The past was dead. Her goal was the future.

“Have you got a stone chosen for this piece? You’re surely not doing paste?”

“The fellow who commissioned it is buying the diamond from Woodwards.”

“So you’re looking at what, three carats?” he guessed. “Nice.” He tilted his head to one side.

Then Donovan pulled a dark blue box from his jacket pocket.

“I saw this in Greece. It reminded me of that essay we did together in our senior year, the one on classical Greece.”

She didn’t want to talk about their past.

Donovan snapped the latch exposing a gorgeous bracelet crafted in the Byzantine style.

Abby lost her breath when he slid the web of gold onto her wrist. No sooner had he closed the clasp than she brought the bracelet closer to study it.

“The detail of the granulation is incredible. It looks like it was spun into shape.” She twisted her arm left, then right, to examine each bend and fold, admiring the painstaking craftsmanship.

Then reality returned.

“I can’t take this, Donovan. It’s too expensive. Besides, you don’t owe me anything.” She tried to slip it off, but he grasped her hand and held it between his.

“I’m not trying to repay you, Abby. Why would I?” He lifted one eyebrow. “I bought it years ago because I knew you would appreciate it.”

And then what—he’d forgotten he had it?

Or he now wanted to be rid of all reminders of the past?

“You can’t return a gift, Abby.”

“But this—”

“Is yours.” He watched her tip her wrist toward the light, as if he understood how little she wanted to give back this bracelet. And he probably did.

Donovan hadn’t changed. He was still like a chameleon, spinning dreams and fantasy so well that everyone fell under his spell. But the man himself was impossible to pin down. Only now, seeing him again after so long, did Abby recognize that he’d abandoned the charisma he’d used to skate over life.

“Thank you.” Abby undid the clasp and set the bracelet back in its box.

“Abby, about that proposal.”

“I’m not going to talk about it, Donovan. It’s over. I’m over it. I’ve moved on. So should you.”

“You sound so hard. I don’t remember that about you.”

She stared straight at him.

“Time and circumstances do that to you, Donovan.”

He returned her look without flinching.

“Maybe you should tell me what you think happened that night, Abby,” he said, a quiet tension threading his voice. “What

did your mother say?"

"What's the point of rehashing that period of our lives? It's over. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to work." Abby turned her back, pretending to concentrate on her ring.

A few minutes later, she heard the door close.

Her legs weakened and she had to sit down for a minute to regain her equanimity.

So Donovan was back.

"So you avoid him. Keep yourself busy and away from him. He's probably here for only a month or two, anyway. Donovan never sticks to anything anyway." At least not the Donovan she remembered.

For his first week at work, Donovan stuck to his office, familiarizing himself with everything about Weddings by Woodwards. Wednesday night he stayed late, poring over the ad campaigns the company had used in the past.

Puzzled by something he read, Donovan was doing a survey of the sales floor when he saw a light shining in a back room. He checked it out and then wished he'd stayed upstairs.

Abby was hunched over a table, her face determined as she twisted one of the ring's claws tighter.

"It must be tough to find the spare time to do what you love."

"That's life." Abby ignored him.

"Tell me more about this contest." He poked his finger at the fake stone.

"It's for jewelry designers across America who want to reach a broader audience with new designs."

"Meaning the chichi moneyed set?" he pressed on, determined to get rid of the tension between them.

"Meaning people who know jewelry," Abby substituted. "The kind of people I want to know better. In New York."

Donovan detested the snappish self-righteous tone in her voice. He was the good guy here. Five years ago, he'd given her the chance to pursue her dreams.

"You never let anything stand in the way of your goals, do you, Abby?"

"What does that mean?" she demanded, her forehead pleated in a fierce frown. "Do you?"

Donovan sighed. What was he doing—trying to make her admit he'd been right to leave?

"Grandmother says your designs are hot at Woodwards."

"Sales have been going well." She set the ring down before facing him. "Why are you back, Donovan? Are you suddenly interested in the family's wedding planning business?"

Do not take offense, he ordered himself.

"It was time."

"Why now?"

"Grandmother wants a new marketing campaign that will spread the company logo across the country. Something young and hip," he explained. "If the Chicago store goes well, she thinks she might start another on the East Coast, provided I can up our

brand recognition to national status. I'm to get to work and earn my keep."

"Oh. No one told me about another store, but then, why would they?"

Donovan winced at the hint that even though Abby had always been like one of the Woodward family when they were dating, there was no reason for them to consider her as part of their inner circle since he'd left. He hadn't considered how that might impact her.

"I heard you were working with one of Winifred's contacts in Paris and enjoying it," she said.

Unasked question: Why leave now?

"I had some changes in my life," he said. "I thought maybe you'd heard."

"Heard what?"

"I brought someone home with me."

"Oh."

"Her name is Ariane."

Something flickered through Abby's expressive eyes, but it was gone so fast he couldn't decipher it.

"She's seven."

"Seven?" Abby blinked.

"I'm her godfather." He saw her disbelief. "Improbable as that may sound, it's the truth."

"I see." Abby kept staring at him.

"She is the daughter of my very best friend. George's death

was a shock to all of us." It still hurt to think of that vibrant man silenced in a boating accident. "Ariane's mother died of cancer when she was two. There was no other family. I couldn't leave her a ward of the state. Besides, I'd promised George that I would take care of her."

He paused, collecting his emotions from those horrible weeks.

"I'm very sorry." At least Abby sounded genuine.

"I just wanted you to know. You never seemed like the motherly type, so you probably can't understand my actions, but I knew if I could bring Ariane home, then the family would help her."

"That was very generous of you."

Abby had closed him out. She said the right words, but her heart wasn't in them. She just wasn't interested. Her focus was on her ring.

Like that was unusual. Jewelry had always come first with Abby.

She was packing away her tools.

"Donovan, I've got to go. There are a thousand things on my plate and I'm way past the time I'd allotted for working tonight. Maybe we can talk more another day?"

"Sure." He nodded, watching as she locked her project in a small personal safe near her desk. "Sorry I bothered you."

She didn't say anything and he wondered if she'd even heard. But after a moment she turned, smiling at him.

"Sorry. I had an idea for the contest."

“Totally career focused, as usual.” He didn’t bother to mask the disparaging tone lacing his words. “It really matters that much to you?”

“Yes, my career matters to me. Just as much as yours does to you,” she said, defiant in her own defense. “One way or another, I intend to get my chance in New York.”

“I’m sure you will.” Irritation chased confusion and a hint of hurt. What had he expected?

“Because you’ll be working here, I guess I’ll see you around,” she said as she flung on her coat. “Will you lock up?”

“I’m leaving now, too. I must get back to Grandmother’s. Ariane and I are staying there, for now.”

“Oh.” Abby trailed behind him to the back door and set the security alarm. But outside, standing on the step, she hesitated.

Donovan didn’t know why, so he waited.

“Does it seem weird to be back?” she whispered.

“It seems right,” he answered just as quietly. “God used George’s death to remind me of how much I need my family and their love and support in my life. Especially now that I’m to care for Ari.” He paused to study her. “I hope you can understand that, Abby.”

“Understand that family matters? Of course I understand that. Or are you trying to tell me that you’re not interested in picking up where we left off five years ago?” Her smile was hard and forced. “Believe me, Donovan, neither am I.”

He was making matters worse. Donovan wished he’d never

left his office.

"My family is very important to me," he said.

Abby jumped on that.

"So is mine. I might not have the family support that you have, Donovan, but the past five years have taught me one thing." Sparks flew from Abby's hazel eyes.

Donovan opened his mouth, but didn't get a chance to speak.

"If I'm going to get to New York, I'm going to have to do it on my own. Alone."

With that she walked away into the night.

Chapter Two

Abby's words helped Donovan decide his course of action.

He would avoid her as much as possible while he figured out how to do his job and be a father to Ariane. Maybe later, somewhere along the way, he'd figure out a way to breach the chasm between them without getting caught up in the past.

It was a fine decision.

Unfortunately, his grandmother blew it out of the water on Thursday evening when she called him into the living room after he'd tucked in Ariane.

"Sit down, dear. I made some coffee."

"You're not supposed to be drinking coffee." He shook his head at her. "And don't say it's for me. I don't drink coffee this late at night."

"I'm allowed this much." Winifred liberally laced her half cup with cream. "Have you settled in? Ariane's all right?"

"We're fine, Grandmother. Thank you for hosting us." She had something on her mind. He could see it in the sparks lighting her eyes. "I hope we're not putting you out too much."

"I'll let you know when you do." She tapped the spoon on her saucer twice before she set it down and leaned forward. "You and Abby talked? There aren't going to be any problems between you?"

Not if he stayed away from her.

“Well, after five years, it was a little difficult to squeeze everything into a couple of fifteen-minute discussions,” he temporized. “But I’ve apologized and Abby said she didn’t want to hark back to the past. We’re both professionals. I think we can do our jobs at Weddings by Woodwards without conflict.”

“I see.” Winifred leaned back and sipped her coffee, her eagle eyes trained on him. “You never did clarify why you left town so quickly after proposing to the girl.”

And he wasn’t going to explain now.

“First you announced your engagement and then, bang, you were on the next flight to Europe, a job for which you had already turned me down.” Clearly Winifred wanted an explanation.

“I—uh, realized I’d made a mistake. So I corrected it.”

“The way you did it seemed kind of hard on Abby.”

“What did she say?” Donovan asked curiously.

“Abby?” Winifred shook her head. “Nothing to me. I overheard an argument between her and her mother that grad night. The next day, I learned she’d left for a short holiday. When she came back, she moved into her own place, put a smile on her lips and focused on whatever work I assigned her.”

“For the summer, you mean.” Just as he’d done, Donovan thought.

“From then until now. Abby’s never left Woodwards.”

Donovan sat up, confused.

“But what about when she went to college?”

“Abby didn’t go to college.” Winifred frowned. “She’s taken a

number of courses over the past few years, of course. She's fully qualified as a jewelry designer. But she never formally attended college. She's always focused on her work."

"Because her career is so important to her." For five years Donovan had prayed hard for the bitterness to leave. Guess that needed more work.

"I'm not sure that was true back then. She seemed to need the work to give herself focus five years ago." Winifred smiled. "But she's certainly career-oriented now. Not that I'm complaining. Abby is the best thing to happen to our jewelry department."

Something didn't make sense. Abby had won a full college scholarship. Why hadn't she gone?

Winifred set down her cup.

"Actually, Abby is why I wanted to speak to you, Donovan."

"Oh?" Trepidation climbed up his neck.

"I know that girl is going places. She has the drive and she has the capability. Before she does, I want to use her skills, and yours, to make some changes in our jewelry department. I want the two of you to come up with some kind of campaign or revamping of ideas—something that will give Woodwards Jewelry a whole new look. In short, I want you two to work together."

Donovan went cold.

"Grandmother, you've already asked me to put together a national campaign. I'm not sure I can manage that and—"

"Aren't you the marketing guru who said he had a thousand ideas?" Winifred's perceptive gaze narrowed. "I want the jewelry

department modernized, Donovan. If two projects are too much for you, we'll put the national one on hold."

She was shrewd. Donovan knew there was no way to avoid this assignment without admitting to his grandmother that he'd never resolved exactly how he felt toward Abby.

"Unless there's some reason why you can't work with her." Those all-seeing eyes dared him to argue.

"If that's what you want, Grandmother, then that is what I'll work toward. I can't help thinking though, that Abby is already swamped. And now she's entered this contest." He told her what little he knew about it. "With her parents' situation, I know she's struggling to fit in enough time to work on her first entry." Donovan slouched into his chair and fiddled with his shoelace, pretending nonchalance.

"I'm glad she's entered it," Winifred said with satisfaction. "She has talent. Loads of it."

"Of course preparing for the New York contest will be on her own time, but still, it's a lot to ask of her to help revamp her department right now, isn't it?" Donovan said.

Winifred was not put off.

"You and Abby are both idea people. I'm sure that with your creative gifts combined you'll come up with something fantastic." Winifred sipped her coffee, closing her eyes to savor the last drop. Then she reluctantly set cup and saucer back on the tray. "One of the things I most regret about this old heart wearing out is cutting down on my coffee."

Because he could see weariness creeping over her smooth porcelain face, Donovan stifled the other arguments he'd lined up.

"When would you like us to start?" he asked quietly.

"The sooner the better. Perhaps you can talk to Abby about it tomorrow, do some preliminary work. She's been in charge of the department long enough, I'm certain she has ideas of her own. It shouldn't take more than a couple of weeks to put together some kind of generalized plan, should it?"

Two weeks? That left him no opportunity to avoid Abby. Donovan searched for some excuse to explain the intricacies of his work to Winifred and realized there wasn't any point. Only someone who had spent days, weeks and months knitting ideas together into one solid focus would understand that overnight successes of the marketing variety seldom happened.

"I think it's better if you don't put a time frame on it, Grandmother. I don't know what ideas Abby might have, but I will need time to take a look at the department. I always like to allow things to percolate inside my head before I start planning a campaign." Donovan watched her eyes narrow and knew what she was thinking. "I'm not trying to weasel out of this or to put you off. But I hadn't really considered any kind of marketing plan for the jewelry department. I've been focusing more on the company in general."

"And you need time to switch gears," she murmured.

"Yes."

Her stare was intense.

"You're sure it's not working with Abby that has you bothered?"

"Why should it be? I hope we can be friends again, but there's nothing between us. We each have our own lives now and my focus is on Ariane." Donovan forced out the image of Abby storming away from him.

Avoiding her shouldn't be that difficult.

"However, I do think it would be better if you explained this idea to her, rather than me," Donovan suggested. "After all, I'm the new guy and you're the boss returning to work after a long hiatus. You should be pointing out the new direction for the company."

Winifred said nothing as she studied him. But Donovan could almost hear her clicking over details in her mind.

"Fine. I'll talk to her. I just hope your past isn't going to cause problems."

"You don't have to worry, Grandmother."

But as he sat in his room later, Donovan's confidence slipped. Although he preferred to pretend the past was dead, it was obvious he and Abby both had issues that needed resolving.

Abby might prefer to pretend their breakup was his fault, but he knew differently and he didn't understand why she tried to lay it all on him. A hard core of resentment balled a little tighter inside Donovan's heart.

But bitterness did no one any good. George's death had been

God's wake-up call, a challenge to stop wasting his life as a good-times guy, skating over the surface, reveling in the good times and avoiding the bad.

Donovan was determined not to ignore that call anymore. He picked up his Bible and read a few verses, hoping to ease the knot of anger at Abby's pretense that he'd run out on her with no reason. But the words blurred together and he knew there was only one Person who could truly help.

"Father, you know how hard it was for me to come back. You also know how much I need help with Ariane. Please help me to look forward to the future you promised, and let go of the past and anger at Abby. Amen."

As prayers went, it wasn't fancy, but Donovan was learning that God preferred honesty over pretense.

He wished Abby felt the same.

"Abby, I can't thank you enough for helping me decorate for Grandmother's party."

"My pleasure." Abby attached the last swag to the corner of the dais and ignored a little voice inside her head that said she should be working on her contest entry. "How does that look?"

"Perfect!" Sara, Donovan's youngest sister, stood back and admired their handiwork in the ballroom at Weddings by Woodwards. "Once Dad brings in his flowers and everyone's here, the place will come alive. Don't you think?"

"Absolutely." Abby felt dumpy and dowdy, doubly so against

Sara's blond glistening beauty.

"Donovan took us all by surprise, coming home the way he did." Sara grinned. "He's always been so adamant about staying in Europe. But I'm glad he's back. And I'm thrilled Grandmother's well enough to return, too. My big sister is getting too intense," she whispered as Katie pushed through the doors.

"I heard that, brat." Katie made a face at Sara, then turned to her. "Abby, how is your mother?"

"She'll be sore for a while. The osteoporosis has really left her bones weak which is why her vertebrae crushed so easily when she fell down the steps." Which only added to the list of things on Abby's already overly full plate. "Thanks for understanding about yesterday, Katie. I just couldn't get in."

"Of course not. Family comes first." Katie scanned the room. "Wow! You two have done a wonderful job for our double celebration tonight. We'll be a big group. I've given the kitchen staff the evening off so they can join us."

"So who's feeding us?" Sara demanded.

"Caterers. They should be here soon."

"That's my cue to get going." Abby headed for the door.

"Going? But you'll be here for the party, won't you?" Sara's big eyes probed.

"Won't you, Abby?" Katie asked.

"Sure. I just have a few things on my desk to tidy up." And then she'd quietly slip away.

"You're always working overtime. Katie won't care if you take

the last hour to go home and change. Will you, Katie?"

"Of course not. You must be here, Abby. You're part of Woodwards. Excuse me. I'm to check on a certain string quartet Grandmother loves." Katie hurried away.

"Thank goodness she's gone. My feet are killing me."

"I wonder why?" Abby chuckled, glancing at the very high heels Sara wore. "You borrowed Katie's shoes again?"

"My sister has such lovely shoes and they make me look elegant, which is not an easy feat, trust me. But they're sheer torture. I can't imagine how she wears them all day." She kicked off the offending articles with great relief. "That's better."

"Sara, if you don't like the way the shoes feel, why do you wear them?" Abby had always found Donovan's youngest sister confusing.

"Because I want to look beautiful for my husband." Sara's flushed cheeks and eyes glittering with unshed tears gave her away. "Although if I trip and fall flat on my face, I guess I won't be so elegant. And he'll be furious."

"Furious? That doesn't sound right. Cade loves you." A twig of envy sprouted inside Abby's heart. "Very much. I can't believe he'd be angry with you."

"He does love me and I know it." Sara sniffed inelegantly. "But in a little while I'll be so huge I won't be able to see my toenails, let alone fit into shoes like these. Just for now I want to be the most beautiful woman he's ever seen."

"You're expecting," Abby guessed. "Oh, my."

"You can say that again. I'm over the moon, but sick as a dog every morning. Not very romantic, you'll agree?" Sara tried to smile, but frustration took precedence. "I feel horrible most of the time and I grouch at Cade about everything. Today I wanted to look extra pretty, but now my feet hurt so much I can hardly walk."

She burst into tears.

As Abby patted her shoulder, she marveled at this beautiful Woodward daughter's uncertainty. She had everything and yet she was still upset. Abby had to help.

"Come on, let's go see what's in the shoe department." When Sara tried to slide her feet into the heels, Abby snatched them up. "Give me those," she scolded.

When they arrived at the shoe department, Abby took the sales assistant aside and explained the situation.

"I know the exact thing. Keep her sitting there. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Sara lay sprawled in her chair, eyes closed, obviously resting. Abby examined her own reflection in the mirror opposite and wished she hadn't. She was dusty, part of her hem was loose and the shirt that had been pristine this morning looked tired.

Not exactly party material.

She caught sight of a rich red dress in the next department and longed to try it on. Just looking at it made her feel lighter, prettier, younger.

"How about these?" The shoe salesman held a pair of wedge-

heeled shoes that, while flattering the ankle, didn't have the wobbling height of Sara's borrowed stilettos.

"Perfect," Abby whispered. "Now how do we get her to wear them?"

"I can hear you talking about me, you know." Sara tried on the shoes and asked to have them put on her account. "What are you staring at?"

Abby turned away, but she was too late.

"That dress is perfect for you, Abby. You haven't got time to go home and change now anyway because of me." Sara frowned. "Unless—do you have to do something for your parents about dinner?"

"No. It's all taken care of." Her parents thought she was working. And she'd intended to be. But she hadn't known about the welcome-back party when she'd said that. She gave the dress another wistful glance.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to wear a dress like that? But buying the dress would take a bite out of the savings she needed for gems for her project.

"I can't afford it," she said to quell Sara's urging.

"Yes, you can. It's on the forty percent–off rack. Come on, Abby. Tonight's a celebration."

Once she had tried the dress on, Abby knew she couldn't give it up.

Sara agreed.

"It's perfect."

"I think so, too." Abby giggled. "Stop pushing. I'll take it already."

"Good. You deserve to do something nice for yourself once in a while." Sara's phone pealed. "Hi, honey," she said into it, her face a wreath of smiles. "I'm helping Abby pick out a dress. Yes, I'd love to go for a drive. Why don't we take the twins? It would give Olivia a breather. In fact, tell her to trade places with me. Abby might try and put this dress back and she shouldn't. Olivia will persuade her."

Sara's obvious joy in talking to her husband carved a little jealous hole in Abby's heart. How wonderful to feel so loved, so precious to someone else without feeling you had to earn it. Sara wore the same glow that Abby saw in Reese Woodward's eyes whenever he looked at Olivia, his new wife. Abby could only imagine what it was like to have someone with whom to share her life, to feel his support when you stretched to reach your goals.

Sara shut off her phone.

"I'm going for a ride with Cade and the twins," she said, her voice breathless, as if she couldn't wait.

"Congratulations again. You haven't told anyone about the baby yet?"

"No, and we'd really appreciate it if you'd keep our secret for a little while longer, Abby. We're going to tell the family tonight."

"They'll be ecstatic." Amid the family's excitement over this momentous event, no one would even notice what she wore, Abby was sure. But she refused to give up the dress. There was

something about wearing it that made her feel as if she could fit in anywhere, as if she didn't have to try so hard to prove herself.

A minute later, Olivia arrived, breathless and laughing as she hugged Sara first, then Abby.

"That is the most fantastic dress, Abby," she enthused. "You're a knockout."

"Thanks. With this new project I'm working on, I might even get to wear it a second time."

"What project?"

"I'll show you, if you want."

"Olivia! You're supposed to take her mind off work," Sara scolded. "I have to go." She touched her lips to each of their cheeks, then hurried away in her new shoes, glowing like a bride.

"She looks so happy." Jealousy tugged at Abby.

"She is. God did a wonderful thing when he put Sara and Cade together." Olivia followed Abby to her office. "What are these?" she asked, looking at a tray on a cart.

"Beads. I sometimes fool around with them when I'm trying to come up with a design." Abby pushed the cart against the wall, out of the way, before she showed Olivia her ideas for the contest.

Olivia oohed and ahhed over Abby's preliminary sketches.

"Very ambitious. I know you'll win."

"Thank you."

"It's a lovely design for a ring. Is it for someone special?"

"Yes. A consignment that I want to use as my project centerpiece."

“How do you come up with ideas like this?”

Abby had just begun to explain when she realized Olivia’s attention had drifted to something behind her.

“Hello.” Olivia’s voice softened. “I’m Olivia. This is Abby. You must be Ariane.”

A young girl stood in the doorway, dark head nodding. Abby caught a flash of interest in the wide brown eyes when they rested on the little cart full of beads. One slender hand reached out to touch the yellow ones.

“Would you like to make something?” Abby offered. She drew a roll of wire from the drawer and cut off a six-inch length.

Ariane frowned at her and backed away as if afraid.

“I’d like to make something,” Olivia murmured. She drew two chairs forward, one obviously for Ariane. She sat down, then picked up the wire. “What do you do now, Abby?”

“It’s very simple. Choose the beads you like and thread them onto the wire. Like this.” Abby demonstrated, peeking to see if Ariane was watching. She was.

“I can do that.” Olivia slipped two on the wire, but then hesitated. “I don’t know what to do next,” she said with a wink at Abby. “Should I choose red or blue?”

Abby remained silent, pretending to be perplexed. After a moment, Ariane stepped forward, picked up one red and one blue bead and slid them on, placing a white one between.

“You’re absolutely right. That’s perfect. Thank you, Ariane.”

Ariane nodded. She smiled at Abby, then turned and left.

“Well, that was interesting.” Abby put back the beading tray. “I guess she’s here waiting for Donovan.”

“She looked lonely. I’m going to see if she’s all right.” Olivia hurried away.

Abby stared at the little bracelet Ariane had begun. She added a few twists, some bigger beads and little closures on the end. She laid the finished product on the cart. It was too girly for Olivia’s twin boys. Maybe she’d give it to Ariane if she came back.

“Donovan has her. She’s a sweet child.” Olivia picked up the bracelet, shook her head. “I had no idea you could create something like this out of beads. It’s lovely.”

“I only embellished on the red, white and blue theme she started,” Abby demurred, an idea flickering through her mind for her own collection.

“Ariane looked so defenseless that I wanted to hug her and reassure her that she’s not alone. She has a great big new family now. Of course, that would overwhelm her and I don’t want to do that, but as soon as I can, I’m going to have a chat with Ariane. Maybe I can slip in a few words about God.”

“God?” Abby’s confusion must have shown.

“You know, how God is always on our side. That we can always count on him. That we’re never alone,” Olivia prodded.

“Oh. Yes. That might reassure her.”

“You’re not really with me, are you, Abby? I can see you’re itching to get your fingers working.” Olivia grinned. “Go ahead. I need to talk to Reese, anyway. See you later?”

“Sure.” But Abby didn’t hear her leave. Her brain was too busy rehashing Olivia’s words.

God is always on our side. We can always count on him.

Was Olivia right?

Abby decided to take another look through the Bible that Donovan’s mother had given her last Christmas.

It would be nice to have somebody on her side.

Chapter Three

"Waiting for someone special, brother dear?"

Donovan studied his baby sister. Sara sparkled with happiness as she flitted around him like a pesky mosquito.

"Like maybe—Abby?"

Sara's husband, Cade Porter, lounged a few feet away, ostensibly listening to Donovan's mother chatter about something at work. But the man's protective stance told Donovan that the tall, lean cowboy would know exactly where his wife was at any given moment this evening. Cade and Sara had been flashing secret messages back and forth with their eyes ever since they'd arrived.

"Let it go, pest." He'd never get a better time to apologize. "I'm really sorry I missed your wedding, Sara. I should have been here and I wasn't. I let you down because I let business overwhelm me. That was a stupid thing to do and I wish I hadn't."

"I was very mad at you for a while, Donovan." Sara pouted for a minute, then smiled. "Very mad."

"I deserve it."

"But Cade pointed out that you'd be coming home someday and then I could get payback at my leisure. Which I will," she promised. "Cade is a smart man."

"Yeah, he seems okay. A little too ready to pounce maybe, but nice."

“He’s wonderful. I love him and we’re very happy.”

“I can tell. You deserve happiness, Sara, and I hope you and Cade get it in spades.” Donovan hugged her close, wishing he hadn’t missed everything. Which was odd for him. Regrets were not a usual part of his life.

“I like Ariane,” Sara said as she drew away. “She’s a sweetheart, but I wish she’d loosen up. She looks so scared.”

“If you had this family thrown at you all at once, you’d be a little scared, too. Give her time and she’ll be fine.” I hope. “In the meantime, I think I’d better rescue her from Brett and Brady. They make me afraid and I’m not a little girl.”

“No, when it comes to women, you’re a big chicken, brother dear.”

Sara’s laughter followed him across the room. Donovan gave his father the high sign and soon Brett and Brady, Reese’s rambunctious twins, had left Ariane to regale their grandfather with tales of their afternoon at Cade and Sara’s ranch.

“Everything okay, Ari?” he whispered.

She said nothing, simply nodded. He might have been a complete stranger for all the attention she paid him.

“Hey, everyone.” Fiona’s voice cut through the hum of noise like a paper shredder. His mother had never required amplification. “Abby’s here.”

It had been easy to avoid Abby on Thursday because she was away. Donovan had stayed away all day Friday out of sheer busyness. But he wouldn’t be able to keep it up forever. They

would have to work together sooner or later.

But that wasn't why he sought her out now. Tonight he was going to introduce her to Ariane because he wanted the little girl to meet all of the people who worked at Woodwards.

"There's someone I want to introduce you to," Donovan whispered.

Ariane grabbed his hand and held on, fear filling her expressive eyes.

"Don't worry. You'll like her." He straightened, glanced toward the door and gulped as if he'd been swamped by one of the waves off Big Sur.

Abby had always been pretty, but tonight she was stunning. Her streaked hair usually fell to her shoulders, thick and straight. Tonight it was drawn up on her head, adding to her height. Slim and graceful in a red dress that hinted at her femininity and offered a glimpse of elegant legs, she looked like a fashion model. Sparkling stones nestled into her earlobes as if they'd grown there. On one wrist she wore the bracelet he'd given her on Thursday.

This was not his old school pal.

"I'm so glad you're back," Abby said to Winifred, right before she hugged her.

"Thank you, dear." Winifred touched her chin. "You look lovely."

"It's one of your creations. How could I not?"

"I want to know about this New York project you're working

on."

"Of course. Any time." Abby turned, saw him. "Hello, Donovan," she said, her voice as cool as an Arctic breeze.

"Hi, Abby." His throat felt swollen, like a school boy's. He drew Ariane forward to hide his sudden attack of nerves. "I want you to meet someone. Ariane, this is Abby."

He'd been going to say, "my friend," but dropped it at the last second.

"We've already met. Ariane stopped by a little earlier to check out my beads. Hello." Abby stretched out her hand and gently shook Ariane's. "Next time when you come we'll make something really pretty. Okay?"

The little girl regarded Abby solemnly for several moments before nodding.

"You're always welcome," Abby told her with a smile, though it was clear she wondered why Ariane didn't speak.

Brady and Brett came rushing up to invite Ariane to taste the punch. After a quick silent check with Donovan, Ariane followed, at a much slower pace.

"I hope she didn't get in your way, Abby."

"Of course not. She was just curious."

"I should have told you this before but—" There was no easy way to say it. "Ariane doesn't speak. She hasn't since she witnessed her father's accident. He was water skiing and another boat hit him. The doctors say it will take time before she feels able to talk again."

“Oh, the poor thing.” Compassion glittered in Abby’s pretty eyes. “I wish there was something I could do to help her.”

Donovan frowned. A five-year-old conversation returned.

Abby detests kids. She puts on a good front, but she’s not interested in the things other girls are, like family. She’s totally focused on her future.

Could she have changed that much?

“We checked out her school this afternoon. She’s to start Monday morning.”

“I’m sure she’ll fit in beautifully.” Abby’s cool look was back. “You’ll do fine, Donovan. Excuse me. I want to speak to Sara.”

“Sure.”

Abby hurried toward his sister. The two shared a laugh before Cade offered them each a glass of the cranberry punch Winifred adored. Donovan felt as if Abby deliberately avoided looking at him when she turned to speak to Olivia.

“You’re frowning, Donovan. Is something wrong?” Winifred studied him with the same eagle eye she used to employ when he was a toddler in her Sunday school class. Her glance tracked to Abby.

“Nothing’s wrong.” One look told him she wasn’t satisfied with that response. “It’s just a bit awkward with Abby.”

“Bound to be, I imagine. You asked the girl to marry you, after all.” Winifred gave him a dark look. “Then you welshed on the deal. Still, you’re both adults now, pursuing your own careers. I’m sure you can get past it. Can’t you?”

The real question was, would he let the past influence the future?

"She seems so different."

"Five years changes everyone. Including you. Now come over here. I want you to meet someone." Her voice softened. "This is Art Woodward. He's your grandfather's stepbrother."

"I didn't know he had one. Nice to meet you, Art." Donovan shook the older man's hand and noticed how quickly the man's other palm encircled Winifred's waist.

"Neither did we know until recently. But we're so glad Art's here. He owns part of the local television station. He's just come back from buying another in Tucson," Winifred said.

"Well, that may come in handy for my publicity campaign," Donovan teased. But his brain filed the look on his grandmother's face, the way Art smiled at her, the sense of togetherness the two projected.

"Let me know what you need, Donovan, and I'll aim to provide it," Art told him. "But not tonight. This is a party and I want the first dance with this beautiful lady."

Art and Winifred walked to the dance floor and slid into each other's arms as if they'd been a couple for years. As they glided around the room, Donovan couldn't help but admit they looked good together.

"What do you think of him?" Reese asked quietly.

"I don't know what to think. Is he always that…friendly with Grandmother?"

“Pretty much. They’ve seen a lot of each other ever since he arrived and more so since she had her operation. She seems to adore him.”

“Who’d have thought?” Donovan looked for and found Ariane. She stood in a corner, sipping punch, her attention on Abby who was smiling and gesturing as she talked.

“Made your amends there yet?” Reese asked.

“I apologized. Abby said it didn’t matter, that she’d moved on.”

“You believe it?”

“I don’t know what to think. She’s changed a lot. More focused. Harder.” Donovan shrugged. “Not that it matters. I don’t have time for anything but my work here and Ariane.”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?” Reese held up a hand. “I don’t need an answer. But if you want to talk, I’m available. It’s good to have you back, little brother.”

“Thanks, Reese. I hope I can share some of the burden for this place.”

“Just don’t make the same mistake I did in thinking work is the panacea for pain.” Reese clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Take it from me, it isn’t. Think I’ll go dance with my wife.”

“You do that. Olivia’s a beautiful woman. You’re a lucky man.”

Reese shook his head.

“Not lucky,” he said firmly. “Blessed.”

Donovan watched him nudge Olivia, then murmur something in her ear. She smiled and inclined her head toward the twins

who were staring at the welcome-back cake that sat on a stand at the front of the room. Reese looked as if he'd go and get them, but Olivia shook her head and lifted her hand to his shoulder. They stepped onto the floor with the comfort of two people who understood each other.

Winifred, with Art in tow, touched Donovan's shoulder, drawing his attention to his parents. He watched his laughing mother tease his grimacing father, who was not following her lead on the dance floor.

"Everyone seems to have a partner but you," Winifred murmured. "Why don't you ask Abby to dance?"

"She doesn't dance," he said, and then wondered if that was still true. So many things he'd thought he knew for certain had changed. Abby dancing was probably the least of them.

"Even if that's so, it would still be nice to ask her."

"It would be a little awkward, don't you think, Grandmother? Dating isn't in my future and I'm pretty sure Abby's focused on her contest."

"You don't have to date her," Winifred sniffed. "But it might be nice if you two could get rid of the barriers."

"We've done that already." Because he was watching Winifred so closely, Donovan saw the slight rose flush that colored her delicately powdered cheeks. "Don't matchmake, Grandmother. Whatever was between Abby and me in high school died five years ago."

"I wouldn't dream of matchmaking," Winifred sniffed. "I

know you're trying to be responsible. I know you're working hard to be a good father to Ariane and I applaud you. But being a father can't and shouldn't become your whole life. Reese can tell you about that." Winifred asked Art for some punch, then threaded her arm through Donovan's and drew him toward a table where he helped her sit.

"Are you all right?" he asked, worried by her pale color.

"I'm fine. Listen to me. Abby's become as precious to me as if she was my own granddaughter. I want her to achieve all of her dreams. I believe she has the capacity to reach great heights."

"So do I," he agreed.

"I don't want her to feel awkward about working here just because you're back, Donovan."

"I don't think Abby's that easily upset," he murmured, watching as she danced with the twins, laughing at their antics. So she did dance.

Abby detests kids. It hadn't rung true then and it didn't now. Her eyes sparkled with fun, her smile spread across her face.

"Abby hides her feelings. She's had to. Talk to God, Donovan. Find out how he wants you to respond to Abby."

Having said her piece, Winifred signaled Katie who asked everyone to have a seat. Donovan beckoned Ariane to sit beside him as the others all found places. Art sat next to Winifred.

When the room was silent again, Katie took the microphone.

"Welcome to our welcome-back party," she said, grinning. "It is our greatest pleasure to have Grandmother with us tonight and

my special pleasure to tell you that come Monday morning, she expects to be seated behind her desk, making sure we're all hard at work."

The room erupted in cheering. Katie waited until there was relative silence.

"Dad?"

Thomas Woodward rose, lifted his glass.

"I'd like to propose a toast to my mother. May she be behind that desk for years to come. Welcome back, Winifred."

"To Winifred."

Donovan tinkled his glass against Ariane's and waited for her to taste the apple cider. She wrinkled her nose after a sip, but gamely gave it another try. Katie turned to him.

"My brother Donovan has at long last returned from Europe to head up our own in-house marketing department. We're glad he's back and thrilled he brought his goddaughter Ariane with him. Welcome home, Donovan and Ariane."

Slightly embarrassed, Donovan rose, bowed and promised he'd do his best for Weddings by Woodwards while Ariane stared at everyone with her huge dark eyes. Finally, Fiona rose to say a blessing over the food. When Donovan looked up, Abby had slipped into the seat across from them.

"There wasn't anywhere else," she apologized in a whisper.

"No problem."

"I saw Winifred talking to you earlier. Is she all right?"

"She's fine." He waited until their salads had been served.

“Ariane’s been admiring you.”

“Oh.” Abby blinked, then glanced at his goddaughter. “Why?”

“I think it’s your earrings. She loves all that sparkles. Your design?”

Abby nodded.

“They’re lovely.”

“Thanks.” She averted her eyes and concentrated on eating.

“Abby makes lots of jewelry, Ari. She’s a quite-famous jewelry designer.”

“Not yet, but soon, hopefully.” Abby smiled at Ariane who seemed intrigued by the bracelet Donovan had given Abby. “Do you like jewelry, Ariane?”

The little girl nodded eagerly and after signaling that she needed a pen from Donovan, she drew an altered picture of the bracelet she’d helped Olivia form.

“Ah, I see you’ve had a change of idea. That’s what we designers do.” Abby smiled at her. “The bracelet’s in my office, waiting for you.”

Ariane seemed happy to hear that and settled down to dinner, like everyone else. Donovan couldn’t reconcile the easy camaraderie she and Abby shared, with what he’d been told. As the meal drew to a finish, his suspicions about that conversation multiplied, but Donovan stuffed them away and focused on enjoying the evening.

Reese took his turn as MC. Sara sang a song about homecomings and Cade announced their pregnancy. Once

congratulations had died down, Katie had her parents act out a charade about the Chicago store.

Donovan took it all in like a bystander and realized that his sisters, his brother, Grandmother, his parents were all genuinely enjoying life, friends and family. Only he felt as if he had to work to smile. Even though Ariane was beside him and Abby across from him, even though the room was full of his family, he suddenly felt lonely. In that moment, he realized something else.

Abby wasn't the only one with a pressing goal.

He wanted to be an integral part of his family's lives now. He wanted to be the one they turned to when they needed to talk things over, the one they called on when they needed a shoulder to lean on. He wanted to be the son they counted on.

The prospect both terrified and tantalized Donovan. He'd never been good with long-term anything, especially commitment, although he'd wanted to try with Abby. A few hours talking to God might help him figure out how to become more than the carefree role he'd always defined for himself.

Maybe then Abby wouldn't look at him with that funny little smile that clearly said she felt sorry for him for having missed so much.

Chapter Four

Monday mornings were always hectic.

Today leaned more toward crazy.

Anticipating the furor, Abby had arrived early. She filed her approved sketch for a newly commissioned diamond engagement ring, made changes another customer had requested on an anniversary ring and released the delicate tiara she'd created for a local fashion show.

Then she allowed herself a coffee break and a few moments to study the ring she wanted to send in for her contest entry. It was almost ready. A tweak or two and—

A child's wail erupted from the front of the store. Assuming it was Brett or Brady, both of whom knew exactly how to create disaster at Weddings by Woodwards, Abby hurried toward the sound. She found Donovan kneeling in front of Ariane, his face taut with worry.

"It's okay, Ari. Just tell me what's wrong? Are you sick?"

One negative head jerk.

"Is it your clothes? But this is the school's uniform."

Ariane wailed a little more. Only it wasn't really a wail. More like a soft, mewling cry.

"Honey, if you'll just tell me what's wrong, I'll fix it. Do your shoes hurt?" Another shake of that dark glossy head left Donovan looking completely mystified and adorably uncertain.

Although she longed to ignore them both, Abby had to help.

"Hello, Ariane. Donovan. Can I help?"

"I don't think so, thanks, Abby. Something's wrong, but—" He stopped as Ariane walked over and threaded her hand into Abby's. "Oh."

"I have some drawing crayons in my office," Abby mused. "Why don't you come and draw me a picture while we figure out what's got you so upset?"

Ariane nodded and after a reproachful look at Donovan, walked beside Abby to her office. Seated in a chair, she waited until Abby handed her crayons and some paper. Then her eyes moved to Abby's ring for the contest. She poked at it curiously, picked it up and slid it on her finger.

Donovan stepped forward as if to stop her, but Abby rested a hand on his arm.

"Wait," she murmured.

Ariane studied the ring for several moments. Then she put it back and began drawing a representation of it but with added swirls that resembled a flower circling the stone. It took Abby several moments to recognize a gardenia—Winifred's favorite flower. Did the girl know Art had commissioned the ring for Winifred?

Ariane held up the paper for her to see.

"It's lovely. May I use it in my design?"

Ariane nodded.

"Good. Now, tell me what's wrong." Judging by Ariane's

frown, this was touchy territory. Abby got the ball rolling. “Today’s your first day of school, isn’t it?”

The little girl nodded while big tears dripped down her cheeks.

“But that’s not a sad time. School is fun. You’ll see.” Abby hunched down beside her. “There are lots of books. Do you know how to read?”

Ariane nodded, sniffed.

“She loves stories,” Donovan added.

“And there’s playtime. And craft time. You’ll be good at that.” She touched the girl’s cheek, dabbed at her tears. “You’ll learn lots and lots of new fun things. I did.”

Ariane grabbed another paper. Did you wear a uniform? she printed in a childish scrawl.

“Yes. So did Donovan.”

Ariane tilted her head to see if it was true.

“Abby’s was always clean. Mine got a little dingy.” His funny face made Ariane giggle.

“I suspect you’ll be very popular at school, Ariane. Just like Donovan was.”

“Abby always got the best marks. She beat me in spelling. But I beat her in baseball.” Donovan winked at Ariane who glanced from him to Abby, her confusion evident.

“We got to be friends. When you go to school, you’ll find a friend, too. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Ariane’s bottom lip thrust out. Abby glanced at Donovan. But he was clearly confused by the girl’s distress and couldn’t help.

Abby tried again.

"Wouldn't you like to go just to see who's there?" She crossed her fingers.

Ariane shook her head.

"But how can you know what might happen if you never try something?" Abby wasn't sure how to approach this. Being an only child didn't offer a lot of knowledge about kids.

"Keep going," Donovan urged.

Abby shot him a glare. As if she didn't have enough to do. But suddenly she had an idea.

"Do you like ice cream, Ariane?"

Ariane nodded eagerly.

"You had to eat an ice-cream cone first to know you liked it, right? It's the same with school," Abby said.

Ariane's glowering glare said she wasn't buying Abby's train of thought.

Abby looked to Donovan for help. Worry colored his eyes and spread fine lines over his forehead. He would be no help.

"What flavors of ice cream do you like?"

Ariane drew a cone with ice cream with brown dots.

"Chocolate chip?" Abby grinned when the child nodded. "What other kinds?"

Ariane frowned, poked at the cone she'd drawn.

"Yeah, I know. But there are lots more ice-cream flavors than that. I often try a new one, just in case I might find something better than butter pecan. It's my favorite." Abby picked up a

crayon and drew a cone with a pink top. “Strawberry. Peach. Fudge, they’re all pretty good, but butter pecan is the best. Do you like these flavors?”

Ariane pointed to the fudge and the strawberry.

“You don’t like peach?”

Ariane’s shrug said she’d never tried it.

“I like peach. And pistachio. That’s my favorite.” Donovan was getting into the game. “Do you like pistachio, Ari?”

She frowned, thought about it then half shook her head no.

“How do you know?” Abby asked. “Did you try some?”

The little girl crossed her arms across her thin chest, leaned back and glared at them both. She wasn’t going to be easily persuaded. Abby didn’t want to alienate her, but she had to emphasize what she might miss, so she pressed on.

“I know two boys, your cousins, who love bubblegum ice cream. Lots of kids do. You probably would, too,” Abby mused, “if you tried some. Just as you’d like school, if you tried it.”

The dark head gave a very emphatic negative shake.

“Really? You’re sure about that?”

Ariane wasn’t backing down.

“You’re positive? You won’t change your mind and love it later?”

Ariane’s head moved from side to side as her jaw tightened.

“I don’t think that’s true. I think you’re afraid.”

Donovan caught his breath and shifted, but Abby stepped sideways so Ariane couldn’t see him. She kept speaking.

"I think you're terrified, Ariane. And I don't like that. You know why?" She waited a moment. "Because being afraid isn't a good enough reason to miss out on stuff. So here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to dare you to go to your first day of school. I'm going to double dare you to go and meet the other kids and the teachers and go to all the classes. What do you think of that?"

It was a gamble that the child would understand the concept of a dare, but it paid off. Clearly Ariane got it. She glared at Abby, but her face showed she was listening. Abby crouched down in front of her and took one hand, folding it into her own.

"I can't imagine someone who comes to Denver all the way from Paris can possibly be afraid of school. You have schools in Paris, don't you?"

Ariane nodded.

"And I bet some kids wear uniforms to them, too, don't they?"

Another nod.

"In fact, you're pretty experienced and school isn't such a big deal for you at all." Abby let the words drop away in the room's silence watching as Ariane's shoulders lifted in growing confidence.

Her big brown eyes studied Abby for several moments more. Finally, Ariane pulled her hand from Abby's, walked over to Donovan and put her tiny hand in his.

"So you're taking my dare?" Abby kept her face impassive as Ariane nodded. "Okay. So if you're wrong and you do like school, I win a huge ice cream cone. Butter pecan. And you have

to buy it, right?"

Ariane glanced at Donovan and rolled her eyes as if to say "Adults are so lame."

"Yep, that's the deal." Donovan winked at Ariane.

"And if I'm wrong and Ariane doesn't like the school, I'll have to buy her a different flavored ice-cream cone for the next four Saturdays. Agreed?"

Donovan nodded, but Ariane's confidence was clearly wobbling.

Abby faked a frown.

"You know, just to make sure you two don't try and pull one over on me and pretend you win, I think I better go along and see for myself. Buying so many ice creams could be costly and I don't want to work any more overtime."

"Abby, that isn't necess—"

Ariane grabbed her backpack. The thunderclouds dissipated from her face.

"I don't believe this." Donovan shook his head. "Now you're ready to go?"

She nodded, grinned.

"Never turn down a dare, huh?"

She scribbled I like choc'lat ice cream.

"Tell me something I don't know." He sighed, shook his head. "If you're sure you can spare the time, Abby, let's go. School starts soon."

No backing out now. Abby grabbed her purse and followed

them after locking her office door. On the ride to the school, she told silly jokes she'd overheard Brett and Brady regale their sister Emily with. That seemed to help Ariane forget the miles for a time.

She glowered when they pulled into the parking lot, but with one little hand firmly embedded in Donovan's and one in Abby's, she climbed the stairs, determination written all over her face.

The teacher had been well apprised of Ariane's situation and used a creative and unusual way to involve the little girl in the class activities. So engrossed did Ariane become that half an hour later, when Donovan tapped her on the shoulder to tell her he'd see her later, she simply fluttered her fingers and went back to work assembling the puzzle she'd been given, although she did spare a big smile for Abby.

"You owe me a double butter pecan." Abby brushed a hand against the glossy dark hair, then followed Donovan from the room and to the car.

"That went well. Where did you learn to deal with little girls?" he asked as he pulled out of the parking lot. He made it sound as if she inhabited Mars where children weren't allowed.

"I was one, remember?" Abby frowned. "I had second thoughts about the first day of school, too."

"What did your parents do to reassure you?"

"Told me about all the lovely science courses I could take." She deadpanned a look at him. "I chose the painting corner."

"Were you good at painting?"

"Better at getting paint all over myself. Not a good thing."

He chuckled at the image she'd created. Silence stretched until her nerves screamed a protest. She had to break it.

"How's your work going?"

"It's different than I expected." Donovan frowned for a minute. "Everyone is so used to the agency's way of handling our PR that trying to spring new ideas is hard work. But I'll get there."

"I'm sure you will. What kind of ideas?"

His face altered as if he hesitated to say what was really on his mind.

"Donovan?" Her stomach clenched. Something was up.

"Grandmother is supposed to be the one to tell you this, but I'm guessing she hasn't gotten around to it yet."

"To what?" Her forehead pleated in a frown. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. She just wants us to work together and come up with a new image for the jewelry department at Woodwards." He held his breath, hoping Abby wouldn't flatly decline.

"Work together? Us?" She frowned. "I don't know anything about marketing."

"But you know a lot about the jewelry department."

"True." Abby had been itching to make changes for ages although there'd been no opportunity to do much with Winifred out sick. "But I'm up to my ears right now. Especially with the contest. I can't fit another thing into the day."

"It doesn't have to take a lot of your time. Maybe you could

tell me what you envision and I could come up with something. I've already done a survey of our client base. Age, income, all those variables that go into a wedding. I needed the info for the national campaign I'm supposed to get rolling."

"I see." This sounded like it would entail a lot of contact with Donovan, something Abby wanted to avoid.

"The thing is," he paused to turn a corner. "In all our departments, we miss a large demographic. People think of us only as a bridal store or as wedding planners."

"And Woodwards has more to offer than that." She nodded, intrigued in spite of herself. "It's true of jewelry, too. Who would you target first?"

"Middle-aged to seniors, baby boomers, folks with disposable income who want to celebrate their past or look ahead to the future."

"Actually, the ring I'm working on now is for someone in exactly that group." Abby wasn't sure how much to tell him and whatever she did say had to be held in strictest confidence.

"Senior or baby boomer?"

"Senior. He's a wealthy man who has spent his life making money and now he realizes that the only joy it brings is in sharing it with someone he really cares about. That's what I want to show in my ring." She huffed a sigh of frustration. "That's what I thought I was showing until Ariane drew that gardenia."

"Grandmother loves gardenias," Donovan murmured.

Abby remained silent. He pulled into the parking lot, parked

the car and studied her.

"You already knew that."

"Yes." She couldn't bring herself to break a confidence.

"She's a senior. So is Art. He definitely has a lot of money. Look at his car."

Abby looked at Donovan instead. Saw understanding dawn.

"You're saying Art is going to give my grandmother a diamond ring?"

"I'm not saying anything at all."

"You don't have to." Donovan laid one arm on the steering wheel, his shock obvious. "But—they've just met!"

"Correction. You just met him. Winifred has known him for quite a while in very intense circumstances. That makes a difference."

"Does the family know?"

"Of course not. This is Art's secret. He wants to do it his way. I have no intention of spoiling that." She gathered her purse, undid her seatbelt. "And neither can you," she warned, glaring at him.

"But—marriage?" Donovan gaped. "She's been a widow for—"

"Too long. Art makes her happy." Abby avoided his stare. "Anyway, no one said anything about marriage to me. I was commissioned to make a gift and that's what I'm doing."

"Come on. A ring with a three-carat diamond?"

"Would be a very nice gift. It doesn't have to automatically mean marriage." She climbed out of his car and shut the door,

suddenly irritated by his comments. “But what if it does? Surely that’s up to them to decide? Why should you object, except that you’ll have to find your own place to live?”

His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

“Isn’t this exactly what we’ve been talking about? Figuring out the needs and wants of those who could be Woodwards’ new clients?”

Abby studied him for a moment, then walked swiftly into Woodwards. She went directly to her office and dealt with each and every matter that came up. At five o’clock she shut her door, pulled out Ariane’s sketch and went to work, forming a delicate but strong platinum gardenia that would shelter but also enhance the dazzling diamond she’d chosen. By nine-thirty Abby had a prototype that amazed even her. She dialed a number.

“Are you busy?”

“You have something?”

“A preliminary.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Ten minutes later, Art buzzed the back door.

“I hope you like it,” Abby murmured as she led him to her office. She slid a cloth off her work and showed him.

His reaction was everything she could have wanted.

“God surely does know how to direct a fellow to the right person for the job. And he certainly gave you a talent, Abby.” He bent, studied the ring from every angle.

Abby waited, nerves on tenterhooks.

This wasn't God's doing, she wanted to yell. This is me in spite of God. God hadn't been part of her life since Donovan walked out on her and their dream. At least, she'd thought it was theirs.

"Finish it." Art straightened, pulled out his checkbook and wrote in a sum that made her eyes pop. "This is your commission. Use it however you want."

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you very much."

"Don't thank me, Abby." He tilted on his heels, his face shadowed. "God has blessed you with a glorious gift that deserves to be displayed. But can I give you some advice?"

"Of course." She held herself very still, waiting for the changes she was certain he'd ask for.

"There are a couple of verses in the Bible—I think I was meant to pass them on to you."

"I see." Why didn't God give her the verses himself?

Art pulled a piece of paper from the stack on her printer and began writing in a big, ranging scrawl.

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but be a new and different person with a freshness in all you do and think —Matt 10:29–31.

"That's the NCV translation," he added as he handed the paper to her.

A freshness in all you do and think. So God approved the contest?

"Thank you." Abby stuffed the paper into a pocket. "Art, you realize you won't be able to give this ring to Winifred if I enter it

in the contest?" She had to be certain he understood he couldn't pop it on her finger right away.

"Time's not right for us yet," Art agreed quietly. "But it is right for you. Get that thing finished and on the way to New York. Then get started on the next one."

"Any ideas what that should be?" Abby tossed him a cheeky grin.

Art didn't laugh. Instead his demeanor grew quite serious.

"You're going to the wrong source. I'm not the one you should be asking."

She knew he meant God.

Abby thanked him again for his generous check, but after Art had left and she stood alone in the massive Weddings by Woodwards building, she couldn't stop his words from repeating inside her mind.

Could it really be that for five years she'd misunderstood God? That he didn't want to foil her goals but to help her achieve them? That God had actually given her the need to create jewelry?

No. If that were true, then God would have given her parents who understood her dreams, who encouraged her to reach for them and achieve them. He would have kept Donovan here so he could support her dreams.

For so long Abby had been fighting to achieve her goals. Surely God should have eased her path, helped her.

Shouldn't he?

For a tiny infinitesimal moment Abby wondered what

Donovan would say about it. But then she recalled the verse. New and different; freshness in all you do and think.

Definitely time to get rid of the old pattern of worrying about what other people would think and be who she really was.

"Grandmother, there's no need to explain. If you don't like the idea, I'll come up with another. It's not a problem."

But it was. More than two weeks and so far nothing Donovan had been able to suggest seemed to jibe with Winifred's ideas. Neither was he making much headway with Ari. She still held herself at a distance from everyone, including him. Donovan was frustrated.

"I appreciate the work you've put into this, son. It's just—not quite there yet."

"So I'll pull together some different ideas tomorrow. Right now I think I'd better go in search of Ariane. She's been waiting quite a while."

"You haven't found a place for her to spend afterschool hours yet?" Winifred's disapproval was obvious. "It's not good for her to be alone so much, Donovan."

"I know. Olivia thinks she's got a place locked down in the daycare she and Reese use when they have to work late, but the spot isn't available until the first of the month. Until then, I don't have any other choice but to have Ari brought here."

"I would have thought there would be some afterschool programs she could join in, but at least she'll soon be with other

children. She needs to open up." Winifred closed the portfolio he'd given her and handed it back. "Talk to Abby again and let me know as soon as you have something else I can look at."

"Will do, Grandmother." Donovan bent, kissed Winifred's white curls and left her office pretending nonchalance.

The truth was he was fresh out of ideas, and for an idea man that was unacceptable. Worse than that, he did not want to keep running to Abby. She'd told him the changes she envisioned. That should be enough.

Only it wasn't. He couldn't seem to translate those ideas onto paper.

"Hey, Katie, have you seen Ariane? I know she arrived, but—"

"The driver dropped her off a while ago. She was in here for a bit, but then she left. Maybe to get a drink? I wasn't paying attention. Sorry." Katie offered him a distracted look as she hurried away to solve some problem.

Fiona ushered a client out of a fitting room and through the front door before dragging a hand through her hair.

"That was a toughie. She has no clue what she wants."

"Those are your best weddings, Mom," he cheered her on with a hug. "Seen Ariane?"

"Olivia was here with her and the twins when I went in for the consult. Olivia wouldn't have just left her alone. She may have wandered off somewhere. In my experience, girls usually like the fabric room." Fiona glanced at her watch, smiled at the woman entering the building. "Hello. I'm so glad you made it."

Fiona gave him a questioning look.

"Go on with your client. I'll find her," he whispered.

"Thanks, honey. We have to check out that reception hall tonight or I'd—"

Donovan shook his head at her and pointed. "Go."

The rest of the family was equally involved in business, so Donovan didn't bother them, simply walked through the enormous building, intentionally leaving Abby's section until last. Not that he was avoiding her, exactly.

Okay, he was. But fatherhood meant he was supposed to handle whatever problems came up, not depend on someone else to solve them. Donovan couldn't help glancing toward the jewelry designer's domain. When he saw a small dark head next to Abby's toffee-toned one, he realized he'd have to face Abby sooner than he'd planned. He moved to the doorway to watch.

"I really like the way you've made that banding line accentuate the front of the bracelet, Ariane," Abby murmured. "It looks a lot neater now."

Ari smiled to herself as she threaded another bead onto a pliable string that already held a number of beads. She worked quickly, threading, twisting, tying, until she caught sight of him in the doorway. Immediately she set down her things and walked over to him as if duty called.

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