

SHANE

Part two of two

SHANE & MARIAH's Story



A Horse Whisperer Novel

by

Carol Devine

copyright © 2017 Carol Devine Rusley

All rights reserved. Except for brief excerpts for review purposes as described by copyright law, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means including digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, film, lyric, video or otherwise without the prior written consent of the author at authorcaroldevine.com

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

First Edition
ISBN: 154534082X
ISBN-13: 978-1545340820

CONTENTS

| | | |
|----|-----------------|--------|
| | Acknowledgments | 6 |
| 1 | Chapter One | 7 |
| 2 | Chapter Two | Pg 35 |
| 3 | Chapter Three | Pg 77 |
| 4 | Chapter Four | Pg 110 |
| 5 | Chapter Five | Pg 147 |
| 6 | Chapter Six | Pg 169 |
| 7 | Chapter Seven | Pg 208 |
| 8 | Chapter Eight | Pg 239 |
| 9 | Chapter Nine | Pg 261 |
| 10 | Chapter Ten | Pg 271 |

DEDICATION

To Shadow

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you find errors in my work, please let me know by contacting me at:
authorcaroldevine@gmail.com.

I thank the creators of the British TV Series, Doc Martin, which inspired me to create the fictional town of Grizzly Springs and populate it with characters both quirky and sublime. Beta-readers of this book include Steve Rusley, Barbara Trexler, Angela Keane of Story Preserves, the BooksGoSocial network of Indie writers, and especially Sue Paluska, who definitely knows her copy editing stuff. Colleen Collins' HOW DO PRIVATE EYES DO THAT helped me with the heroine's character.

Janel Clarke and Facebook's *Friendly Horse Questions* helped me with the horse research and, along with Mary Clark, Nancy Cole and Lou Casteel, inspired the formation of many of the characters in this book.

authorcaroldevine.com currently sponsored by Weebly.

Cover design by Sabre, Gray & Bane Cover Design

CHAPTER ONE

Shane Youngblood steered his pickup truck onto Highway 61 and checked his side mirrors. He was hauling a one-horse trailer and the horse inside was worth more than fifty thousand dollars.

The highway had originally been built as a two lane road, connecting his small Colorado hometown to the county line, where the next county was expected to fund and build a connecting road to Aspen. But a rich real estate developer came on the scene and claimed he needed a paved, four lane highway to bring buyers to his five acre ranchettes on the far outskirts of Aspen. The far outskirts turned out to be halfway to his hometown of Grizzly Springs.

For years, the small town's Mayor had struggled to fund better feeder roads to downtown Grizzly Springs. In its heyday more than a century before, the town had been a railroad hub, part of the bustling trade resulting from Colorado's 1859 Gold Rush. The riches from mining allowed brick and stone buildings to spring up, including an Opera House turned into a four star hotel, and a General Store that was well-run enough to

SHANE

prevent encroachment from the big box stores like Walmart. Unfortunately, like many towns in rural America, attracting tourists was hit or miss once the railroad closed down. Hunters and fishermen were more commonplace since Grizzly Springs was nestled in the center of the Red River valley, surrounded by mountains and State and National Forestland.

As the founder of the town stables, Shane heard about the highway improvement and joined the cause, reasoning that a fast track to Aspen would serve his horse breeding and training operation in a number of ways, bringing trail riders and buyers in and make transporting across country considerably easier.

As an eight time winner of the World Championship of Rodeo and owner of the most profitable business in town, he'd wielded considerable juice with the local county commissioners. Strategic donations to his local representatives in the State House helped advance his quest to improve the road.

Next, he scheduled a trip to Denver, did a week's worth of his famous Horse Whisperer Clinics, and during his free hours, did the schmoozing necessary to open doors and gain access to the Governor and more influential members of the State House. A year later, the money to extend the highway thirty-five miles was appropriated. Two years later, the newly built highway connected Aspen to Grizzly Springs.

Now, Highway 61 was a seventy five mile

straight shot to Aspen, one he found not only convenient, but necessary to move his livestock from his end of the county to the rarefied atmosphere of the other. One of those five acre ranchettes was his destination today.

He'd traveled about seven miles out of town when he spotted a lone figure walking along the side of the road. It was Sunday morning and traffic was nonexistent.

His first thought was that it was the town drunk, Bird McBride. He liked to scrounge bottles and cans wherever and whenever. But as Shane drew closer, he saw waist-length brown hair, blowing in the breeze. She had long legs, too, bare legs in itty bitty shorts. Pink sneakers and an oversized sweatshirt confirmed his suspicion that *he* was definitely a *she*. A young she.

He slowed down, hoping to recognize her. For fifteen years, he'd been giving riding lessons and trail rides to lots of kids in town. His rodeo star status and the fact that he was a Grizzly Springs native guaranteed a certain infamy. Most people around here knew him on sight.

She must have heard his rig chugging behind her. She swerved to the road's far edge, where pavement gave way to weeds. She ducked as he passed, hiding her face. No purse, no backpack, nothing that would lead to an ID.

It wasn't safe for a lone woman to be out here,

much less a teen-aged girl. Her hips hadn't filled out yet. She had breasts but they were barely starting to show. Her sweatshirt was several sizes too big and the sleeves flapped past her hands.

He pulled over, mindful of the trailer, the rig ending up about a hundred feet ahead of her. She stopped, cocked her head in his direction, looking unsure. Wherever she was going, he was offering her a ride. He didn't want to alarm her, though, make her think he was a pervert looking to take advantage.

He removed his hat, raked a hand through his unruly hair. The black felt Stetson was kinda intimidating when worn by a six foot two cowboy who weighed over 200 pounds.

He checked her status one more time. She stuck her hands inside the front pockets of her sweatshirt in a protective way, poised on her toes, watchfulness bleeding into clear distrust. Already he'd scared her, merely sitting in his truck. If he made a wrong move, she'd run. There was no place to go, with empty fenced pasture on both sides of the highway.

He stabbed his cell phone, connecting with the PI office of his girlfriend, Mariah McBride. He needed backup just in case the young lady in question decided he was a kidnapper or something. Mariah would know whether the Sheriff should be involved, too. She was former FBI with a masters degree in criminal justice and a PhD in Psychology, wise and wonderful, the opposite

of her dad, drunken Bird McBride. If the girl needed calming, Doc was the one who could provide it. She'd be able to call the Sheriff's office, too.

She picked up on the third ring, her tone brisk.

"Sorry, Shane, but I'm in a bit of a situation. Can I call you back?"

"Don't hang up. I'm in a situation myself. There's a girl walking down 61 by her lonesome. She's too young to be out here by herself."

"You found a... what? A girl?"

"I'm guessing she's about the same age as Ana's oldest. Thirteen, maybe fourteen. Skinny as a rail but tall like you."

"Describe what she's wearing."

"Really short shorts. Too short, if you catch my drift."

"Purple sweatshirt?"

Shane stuck his head out the truck to be certain. The sweatshirt had a logo he recognized and block letters in front. Minnesota Vikings. "How did you know?"

"Believe it or not, I have her father in my office with me. He's desperate to find her. Long story. Where are you, exactly?"

He told her, then started asking what the hell was going on. She hung up.

"Dammit, Mariah."

She hadn't given him the girl's name. He started

to call back, then decided, *fuck it*, he didn't need her name. He needed to keep her occupied until Mariah arrived.

Shane exited the truck. The girl stutter-stepped in alarm and looked over her shoulder at the road behind her. Like a doe-eyed deer scenting trouble, ready to spring the fence. A barbed wire fence.

Not good for her. Him, either.

He left the cab door hanging open in case Mariah called, buttoned his shirt to his neck, trying to look respectable, and strolled towards her. His horse, Jukebox, stomped his hooves and neighed. The gelding wasn't named Jukebox for nothing.

"Hey," he called. "You need a ride?"

"Don't call the police!" she screamed.

Her overreaction told him two things. One, this was Sheriff country, so she probably came from somewhere else. Secondly, her voice was shrill, scared. Scared of him, or maybe scared of being found. If she recognized him, she didn't show it. World Rodeo Champion and Horse Whisperer of the Rockies came in handy sometimes.

"No reason to call anybody," he said. "Where're you headed? I can give you a ride. I'm going both directions today."

She retreated, heading back the way she'd come, swiveling every few feet to keep an eye on him. Shane checked his watch. Five minutes since he talked to

Mariah. She needed fifteen minutes to get here. He had to keep the girl within sight for ten more minutes.

Shane jogged, closing the gap. "I'm doing the neighborly thing here. I'll give you a ride home, see that you get there safe, no questions asked."

She raised her hand, palm flattened and facing him in the universal stop sign. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

He halted about ten feet away. "My name is Kellen Shane Youngblood. I go by Shane. Own the Grizzly Springs Stables. Got my initials on the side of my truck and trailer if you want proof."

Her eyes flickered, unsure whether to believe him or not.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I can't talk to strangers. I told you already."

"No strangers here. You know who I am. KSY Stables. Shane Youngblood. Grizzly Springs. Small town up the road?"

She toed the pavement, uncertain.

Where was his giant championship belt buckle when he needed it? Shane jerked his thumb toward his trailer. "My horse, Jukebox. You want to say hello?"

"Jukebox?"

"I'll show you," he said.

Shane sprinted to the trailer, unlocked it, opened the door and pulled the ramp. Jukebox bunched his powerful hindquarters, neighing and jerking his head, but

Shane had trained the horse well. Jukebox backed out and Shane seized his halter, unbuckled his blanket, pulled it off and wheeled him around.

The girl's mouth dropped open in what could only be described as a combination of shock and amazement. Jukebox was impressive. A full-blooded Quarter Horse chestnut gelding with a goldish mane, he stood 17 hands tall and competed in reining competitions across the nation.

Shane led him forward. "Meet Jukebox. He thinks he's a lover, a singer, and a performer, in that order."

She hesitated, squinting in the sun. Yep, he'd gone and done something flat out nuts. Better than being a rapist or serial killer, though.

Shane halted about five feet away. "Say hello to the young lady."

Jukebox obeyed, whinnying and bobbing his head.

Her eyes widened. "Did you teach him that?"

"Among other things. Comes natural to him if you want to know the truth. He likes making all kinds of noises. He likes people, too. He likes them to rub the star on his forehead."

Shane demonstrated, brushing the forelock aside. He knuckled the round white star between the horse's ears, going with the spiral grain of Jukebox's coat, focusing on the horse rather than the girl.

She sidled closer.

"Go ahead," Shane invited. "I'll hold him steady."

She fisted her hands inside the sleeves of her sweat-shirt and shook her head.

Shane scratched Jukebox's long nose, acting casual. "You a Vikings fan?"

She didn't answer.

He kept on talking, figuring it was one way to kill time. Juvenile stuff, nothing that might spook her.

"I've done horsemanship clinics in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Lot of Appaloosas in that part of the country. Appys originated west of Minnesota, courtesy of the Nez Perce. Every heard of the Nez Perce?"

She shook her head.

"Native American tribe, out of Montana. Famous for breeding spotted horses. Good-lookers, good for all-around riding. Made in America. Native American. Get it?"

In the face of her silence, he shrugged.

"Bad joke."

She studied Jukebox. "He doesn't have spots."

"That's cause he's chestnut. Red color, white stockings. Only spot he has is the one on his forehead. Horse people call it a star." He paused, hoping she'd reach out, pet the damn horse. She didn't. "Is your dad the Vikings fan?"

"Mom."

"Bet your dad is a Broncos fan."

She nodded, balling her fists in her sweatshirt like she was cold.

"It's warm in the cab of my truck, if you need it."

"I'm fine."

"Suit yourself." Shane groped for another subject. "Can't blame anybody for being a Broncos fan. Playoff contenders every year, seems like. Your family live in Colorado?"

"Lakewood."

"Near Denver. You like the Broncos?"

"Me and Dad make bets with Mom."

Jukebox nickered and pawed his front hoof, tired of being shut out of the conversation. The girl pushed one of her sleeves up and reached out. Her first touch was tentative, on the horse's shoulder. The gleaming arched neck drew her higher. She stroked.

"That's his second favorite spot."

"He's like a huge photograph," she said, tone reverent. "Shiny and beautiful... like a new penny." She riffled along the edges of his mane. "And gold."

"He's usually picky about who pets him." Shane figured a white lie was permissible under the circumstances. Jukebox was the opposite of picky. He lived for affection. Even rookie horseback rider Mariah groomed him, tickled by his soft nickers and snorts that he serenaded everyone with. "He must like you."

The girl moved closer. Jukebox lifted his head, pricked his ears and switched his attention to the long

ribbon of road behind them. The highway rose straight into the horizon. Mariah's SUV came into view. From the speed and engine roar, Shane estimated she was going close to 100 miles an hour.

She braked once she spotted them, swerved sideways a hundred yards out, coming to a squealing halt perpendicular to the double yellow line dividing the road. Both front doors of her SUV opened and a man jumped out from the passenger side.

"Caitlyn!" He raced toward them.

Surprise lit the girl's face. "Dad? Dad!"

She sprinted and jumped into the man's arms. He whirled her, toes off the ground. Relief crumpled his face.

Spooked by the commotion, Jukebox danced sideways, neighing and carrying on like a god-damned nincompoop. Mariah came over to help calm him, her blonde ponytail catching sunlight. Shane winked at her as she stroked the horse. "Hey, partner. Nice work."

"Nice work," Mariah said at the exact same time.

They both chuckled. 'Nice' was a word that had special meaning to them, dating to when Shane first visited her fledgling business in Grizzly Springs.

Recalling the moment, Shane upped the wattage and grinned. "Thanks for getting here so fast. I got me one magnificent girlfriend if I do say so myself."

She raised her sunglasses, treating him to a view of her teasing greenish blue eyes. "You fishing for

compliments? You want me to say you're magnificent, too?"

"That's me, always fishing for compliments." He eyed the reunion between father and daughter. It appeared to be going well. "Her name's Caitlyn, huh?"

"Yes. Her dad is Roger Cahill. They're from Denver but spent last night in Grizzly Springs. Caitlyn ran away this morning. He called the Sheriff and Wilma took his info, then told him to call me."

"She got her deputies searching town?"

"Yes. She wanted me to interview him in case she needed to widen the search. I was trying to get a feel about where Caitlyn most likely would go when you called. I contacted Wilma on the way, told her you found Caitlyn."

"She wasn't about to trust me. Jukebox saved the day, though."

Mariah rubbed Jukebox's star. "Such a pretty boy, aren't you?"

"Since when do you like petting horses?"

"Well, my boyfriend happens to breed and train them. I'm trying to impress him with my enthusiasm."

"It's working." He kissed her but she pressed her finger against his mouth.

"No PDA in front of our new friends."

Ever the jokester, he pretended to bite her finger, then turned his attention to the aforementioned friends.

"Is she going to be in trouble with the law?"

"She's been missing only a few hours. Wilma knows better than to put out an Amber Alert before she's heard the whole story."

"Speaking of Wilma, she gave you a *nice* recommendation, bringing you in to help. Told you those promo magnets were a *nice* idea. Best advertising there is."

Mariah fake-punched him in the arm.

"Jus' saying," he said. He tilted his head toward Caitlyn, "She in trouble with Dad, you think?"

Mariah studied the reunion between father and daughter. Roger had his arm around Caitlyn's shoulders and she was patting his chest in a non-sexual manner, as if to reassure him. They were murmuring to each other, neither one angry nor drama-laden.

"According to Roger, Caitlyn's never run away before. But something's up. Yesterday, he was supposed to drop her off at Camp Bristlecone for three weeks. She balked at the last minute, wouldn't get back in the car after they stopped for lunch. They ended up spending the night at the Frontier Hotel. When Roger woke up this morning, she was gone."

"Most kids love Bristlecone."

"I know. Roger says she chose the camp herself for the Alpine Science Program, and was excited to go when they left Denver."

"Why run away then?"

"Good question. She never has before, according

to him, so he doesn't have a clue. Neither do I, for that matter. Look at them. They're getting along fine."

"Maybe she's shy, afraid she won't make friends."

"It's a possibility. She's thirteen which could explain the rash decision-making. Did she say anything to you?"

"Not much. She told me she wasn't allowed to talk to strangers."

Mariah's eyes twinkled. "Yet, when I got here, she was talking to you. Why am I not surprised?"

"Jukebox has a reputation with the ladies."

"He's not the only one." Mariah scratched Jukebox's nose, pondering Caitlyn's behavior. "Shane, do me a favor? Let Caitlyn say goodbye to Jukebox. I want to see her interaction with the horse and how Roger handles it."

Shane waved at Caitlyn. "You want to say goodbye to my horse? It's loading time."

Caitlyn grabbed her father's hand and tugged. "You have to meet Jukebox, Dad. He likes me. He's amazing."

Roger extended his other hand to Shane. "Thank you for finding my girl. I was worried sick."

Shane shook the hand. "No problem. I'm Shane Youngblood."

"Roger Cahill."

Caitlyn stroked Jukebox's neck. Mariah noted the oversized sweatshirt and too long sleeves, like Caitlyn

was trying to hide her body. Maybe she was self-conscious. Not unusual at her age. On the other hand, maybe she was simply making a fashion statement. Oversized shirts and teeny shorts or micro skirts were the height of teenage girl couture.

"See, Dad? Isn't he beautiful? He's the best horse ever."

Mariah watched and listened critically as Roger joined in stroking Jukebox.

"Camp Bristlecone has horses, remember?" he said.

"It doesn't mean I want to go there."

"You wanted to when we left Denver."

She grew tearful. "Why won't you listen? I changed my mind."

"We've been through this, Caitlyn. It costs thousands of dollars. We can't get our money back. It's only for three weeks. You chose it, remember? You begged us. Now you have to honor your decision."

Caitlyn buried her face in Jukebox's mane. "Don't make me go, Dad. Please."

"Caitlyn--"

"I'll do chores, get baby-sitting jobs to pay for it..."

"You made a commitment, sweetheart. That's our rule. You have to try it for at least a week. If you still feel the same way then as you do now..."

"Stop!" Hands to her face, she stumbled away,

sobbing. Roger corralled her, bringing her close to his chest. She rested her forehead against him, agitated, crying, forlorn yet defiant.

"Why can't you understand?" she cried.

Roger looked at Mariah over Caitlyn's head. "Can you help her?"

Caitlyn reared back, shaking her head. "You need to help *him*," she said, indicating her dad. "Tell *him* to take me home."

Mariah laid her hand on Caitlyn's shoulder. "Let's drive back to Grizzly Springs. We'll get this sorted out, come to a decision everybody can live with."

"No, I want to go home!" Caitlyn stomped off, heading for the SUV.

"Sorry," Roger said, rubbing his neck in frustration. "She's not usually like this. Of all my daughters, she's the steady one, the smart one. Doesn't sweat the small stuff. I don't understand what's wrong."

Mariah pursed her lips, intent on problem-solving. "Can we get her mother involved?"

"Lisa talked to Caitlyn last night. It's the same thing, over and over. '*I don't wanna go. I don't wanna go.*' She won't listen."

Mariah considered Jukebox. "She likes the horse. Shane's established a rapport with her. Maybe he can get through, get her to at least *look* at the camp. She may find it's worth checking out."

Shane scratched his head. "I'm not a miracle

worker. Isn't this what thirteen year-old girls do?"

Roger agreed. "I'm about ready to hog-tie her myself, drag her to camp and let the people there deal with her."

"Does she have friends there?" Mariah asked.

"No, she's a first timer. I was so proud of her, wanting to come here and participate in this science program, even though she doesn't know a soul."

"Has she done that before?" asked Mariah. "Gone places far from home and done things on her own?"

"Sure she has. She likes to challenge herself. We've always encouraged it. Caitlyn's been through some tough times in her life. She's strong, stronger than most girls her age."

"Tough times? Explain."

"She was in a car accident when she was three. Oil tanker jackknifed, creamed our car. We got out okay but a fire broke out. Took just a few extra seconds to unbuckle her car seat but she got burned, one of her arms, especially bad."

"She was hospitalized?"

"Two months. We thought we might lose her from smoke inhalation. Then it was the burns, infection from the skin grafts. Seven operations since then, five on her hand alone. Doctors saved it but it took some doing."

"Having a disfigured hand doesn't bother her?"

"Not at all. She'll show you. She doesn't mind. We've treated her normal, like she's the same as everybody else. No excuses, no coddling. She's not some poor handicapped girl who can't live the life she was meant for. We didn't even mention it on the camp application. All it does is give people pre-conceived notions. They think they have to treat her differently but they don't. Her arm might look bad, but she can make what's left of it work any way she needs to. Never complains, even if kids at school tease her. She knows how to handle herself."

"You must be very proud of her."

"You bet. She's our superstar. I don't call her that in front of our other kids, but I've told her privately. She understands how special she is."

"Yes, I'm sure she does." Too special, maybe, Mariah thought. She shared a significant glance with Shane. "You're the one with the best relationship with her at the moment. I'm going to need your help. How long before we can expect you home?"

"Two hours at most."

"Call or text me when you're on your way. Meanwhile, Roger, you and I are going to hang out with Caitlyn, calm her down, get her to focus on something else. No more discussions about camp for the time being."

"You're the expert," said Roger. "I sure as shit don't know what to do." He didn't look happy as he

headed for the SUV.

Shane kissed Mariah goodbye. "I hope you know what you're doing," he said.

"I was a teen-aged girl once. It certainly gives me an edge over the two of you."

Mariah took the time to comb his hair with her fingers, relishing the feel of the sun on the top of his head. Usually, in public, she kept her hands to herself. Usually he had his hat on. "Let's plan on an interlude today, after we're done with the Cahills."

"Interlude?"

She winked. "X-rated. Need I say more?"

He drew her close. "Hell, no. You're speaking my language. But how long will it take to fix this thing between Caitlyn and her dad?"

"Whatever this mysterious condition of hers is, I'll get to the bottom of it. I may invite them into the house. It's private and would be more conducive to getting her to talk. Would that be okay with you?"

"I don't give a damn either way, Miz Scarlett. Long as I have an interlude coming, Rhett Butler will agree to anything."

* * * * *

After Shane left, Mariah approached her SUV. Roger had stationed himself outside while Caitlyn was inside, sitting in the backseat, hunched over her phone

while appearing no worse for wear. Her resiliency was a good sign, but it made her decision to take off all the more confusing

Mariah motioned for Roger to get in. She slid into the driver's seat and used her peripheral vision to scope out Caitlyn. The storm clouds of emotions had cleared. She was texting, half smiling, her good hand poised over the keyboard, typing lightning fast with all five fingers. Mariah could see the thumb and forefinger of the other hand, hooked around the phone like a two-pronged claw. The rest of her fingers were missing, showing nothing but a knob of flesh that led into a stick-like wrist. The rest of the arm was covered by her sleeve but it was clear the damage was extensive.

Her two fingers had retained full dexterity, though. It was probably why they'd saved the hand rather than amputate and have her use a prosthetic. Her functionality was good, better than what could be achieved artificially.

Roger fastened his seatbelt. "Caitlyn, show Mariah your arm, will you?"

Caitlyn dropped the phone in her lap and rolled up the sleeve of her sweatshirt. She thrust her damaged hand and bared arm in front of Mariah, revealing a normal bicep and elbow but a withered forearm with ripples of red scars amid old white ones, deformed by missing muscle, as narrow as her wrist. "Can we get something to eat? I'm starved."

Roger snorted. "If you had stayed in the hotel, you could have had free breakfast. Me, too."

Mariah started the engine and steered the SUV eastward, heading for Grizzly Springs. "How about a trip to the ice cream parlor? There's a great one called the Sweet Shoppe off of Main Street."

Caitlyn withdrew her arm and went back to her phone, scowling. "We went there yesterday. Dad tried to bribe me to go to camp with ice cream. Like I was a *baby*."

He side-whispered to Mariah. "Ice cream is out. I don't want to reward bad behavior."

"Da-ad! I'm sitting right here! You're embarrassing me!"

Roger muttered under his breath while Mariah drummed the steering wheel. "How about Mexican food? It makes for a quick lunch. Then we can meet Shane at the stables and he'll give you a tour. He's owns more horses like Jukebox. If you want to ride..."

"*You* can't bribe me, either. I like Mexican food, then it will be time for me to go home."

Fortunately, Roger got the hint.

"Mexican food it is."

Caitlyn looked smugly out the window. Mariah switched on the radio to ameliorate the tension and fill the silence between them.

* * * * *

By the time Shane drove his empty rig into the KSY Stables parking lot, Mariah had formed a plan in her mind. Problem was, she had three people she had to convince to go along with it: Shane, Caitlyn and Roger, in that order.

They were standing with Mariah at the end of the stable block, where Shane shared an office with his business manager, Ana Garcia, who ran the virtual and accounting side of Shane's KSY ranch and stable, trail rides, and breeding and training operation.

"Ana, I have to speak to Shane for a minute. Could you show Caitlyn the foaling barn? Show her what a pregnant mare looks like."

As a mother of two teen-aged girls and Mariah's best friend, Ana knew what to say to pique Caitlyn's interest. "Jukebox has a sister. Would you like to see her?"

Caitlyn could be very agreeable when properly motivated.

Mariah met Shane at the door of the snack room that adjoined his office. He was crunching on a handful of trail mix. "Well, Doc? What's the diagnosis?"

"She's not suffering from a disorder, if that's what you're asking. It's more a combination of factors; a girl coming of age, learning who she is. It's hard to put into words but I have an idea and your help is definitely what's needed."

SHANE

"Sounds like a tall order. I'll do what I can."

"You know those wrappings that you put on your horses' forelegs? What are they for?"

Shane rubbed his jaw. That came from out of nowhere. "Protects from injuries mostly. Supports ligaments. What are you thinking?"

"Some wrappers look like the protective casts that are used to mobilize a broken arm. Do you think you have the right materials to create a similar look for Caitlyn? I want it to look like she's wearing a regular cast on her arm, like you'd see on someone who's broken a wrist or a bone on her forearm. The cast needs to wrap around her hand and cover her wrist up to the elbow, without interfering with her ability to use her fingers."

Shane considered Mariah for a moment before his eyes gleamed with understanding. "I think I get where you're going with this. You want her to look as normal as possible. No scars, just a regular arm that's temporarily out of commission, nothing that folks will see and feel sorry about. Not sure if I can make it work, though. You want an arm cast that will last for the time she's at camp: three weeks. It has to withstand her participation in various group activities. I can mix some stiffeners and binding agents in the layers of wrap but if she gets it wet over and over again..."

"I'll make sure she understands she has to treat it like any other cast. People at the camp will support that if the cast looks real."

"It will look real. I'll make sure of it. But I'm still worried. What if something unforeseen happens? What if it gets ruined? I don't want Caitlyn upset like she was today. She might run away again."

"I think I can get around that. Roger can make me his local contact for minor medical problems. Caitlyn can phone me if the cast starts falling apart. I'll drive her here and we'll go through making another cast again. To her camp counselors, it will look like I took her to the doctor to get it fixed."

Shane rocked back on his boot heels as if blown away, gazing at Mariah in wonder. "Sherlock Holmes, I think you've thought of everything."

"I'm simply a master of disguise, a homegrown PI doing her job."

"You're a heckuva psychologist is what I'm thinking. But what if Caitlyn won't go for it?"

"She'll be no worse off than she is now. It really is up to her. I'll speak to her privately, see if I can get her to agree. If she does, Roger will agree, too. What he wants is to get her to the camp. Once she realizes she'll be seen as a girl with a broken arm rather than one with a permanent disability, I think she'll start feeling more comfortable. What she wants is people to see her as she really is, not feel sorry for her or think she's a saint because she manages life well. It's three weeks of being with other girls her age, who will see her the way she sees herself, no better or worse than anybody else. Plus

there's the simple pleasure of being on vacation for awhile, getting away from those pesky parents. Teenagers need that experience as well."

* * * * *

The entrance to Camp Bristlecone was at the end of a mile long, winding, bumpy dirt road. It looked like it led to the middle of nowhere. But as the camp buildings and layout came into view, Mariah could understand why it had such a good reputation. It was rustic, yes, but the small log cabins looked well-kept. There was a main house overlooking the cabins and throughout the grounds, there were gaggles of girls in small groups, girls Caitlyn's age, interacting easily with each other. All were involved in various activities, four or five girls for every uniformed counselor.

Kayaks lined the shore of the lake. A water instructor sat in one, demonstrating paddling technique. There was an open air pavilion where two real-live bald eagles roosted on pedestals. A uniformed Forest Ranger was speaking on a mic, detailing facts about endangered species. A woman wearing several cameras around her neck was pointing at enlarged photographs on easels, picturing animals in the wild.

"What do you think, Caitlyn?" Mariah asked, rolling down the windows of the SUV.

"Am I the last one to arrive?" Her voice sounded anxious.

"No, I checked," Mariah said. "There's one other girl who can't get here until tonight. I called ahead to let your counselors know we were on the way."

Roger exited the SUV and opened Caitlyn's door. "I think I see a couple of counselors in Bristlecone uniforms waving at us."

Mariah stayed in the car with Caitlyn. "I bet those are your resident leaders. There's two for each cabin."

Caitlyn set her jaw and spoke quietly. "If this thing is going to work, I want to try it on them first."

"That's my girl." Roger opened her car door wider. "You're about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime."

Caitlyn rolled her eyes but scrambled out like she'd gathered her courage. Mariah joined her and raised the rear hatch where Caitlyn's gear was stored. A silver-haired woman in khakis was trotting towards them, waving a clipboard and sheaf of papers.

Mariah signaled Roger, nodding in the woman's direction. "Time to sign the medical release, Roger."

He cocked a speculative eye at Caitlyn. "Well? What do you think? You're not going to run away again, are you?"

"Da-ad! They'll hear you! Of course not! Sheesh."

Mariah bit her lip to maintain her composure. She felt like she was watching the sitcom *Daddy Dearest*

or *Father Knows Best*. "Caitlyn," she said blandly. "Would you help me and your dad unload your luggage?"

Caitlyn shook her head, focused on the two college-aged women in their camp uniforms. "Let me meet the counselors first."

Roger started unloading, muttering about bossy females. Meanwhile, as the counselors approached, Caitlyn tentatively waved her cast-covered arm in greeting.

Shane had chosen a vivid fluorescent yellow for the final outside wrapping. Caitlyn had declared it the perfect color. Everyone would know her as the girl with the cast on her arm, not the girl with a withered and disfigured hand that could, especially among sensitive teens, cause revulsion and pitying stares.

"You must be Caitlyn," one counselor said. "I'm Bridget. This is Stacy. Welcome to Camp Bristlecone. We call it C.C., short for Camp Cone. Your group is the one that's learning about wild life photography. We'll take you over once you get settled into our cabin."

"I need to say bye to my dad."

Caitlyn surprised Roger with a grateful hug. Mariah was next. "Thank you." Using her good hand, she saluted her dad. "I'll see you and Mom in three weeks," she said confidently.

Mariah knocked her knuckles on the cast. "Call if you need me, Caitlyn."

"I will. But I think it's going to be good." She

snagged her backpack with the two fingers extending from her cast.

"How'd you hurt your arm?" asked Stacy as she and Bridget scooped Caitlyn's sleeping bag and duffel bag off the ground.

"Car accident," Caitlyn said. "I have to wear the cast the whole time I'm here."

"Did you break your arm or your wrist? It doesn't look that bad."

Caitlyn nodded. "You're right, it's not a bad break. I got lucky. Two fingers sticking out to do stuff with. The other ones had to be covered up to heal."

One of the counselors peered closely at it. "I don't see this keeping you from doing much. We can wrap plastic around it for water sports. In fact some of the girls might be jealous. That cast looks like it glows in the dark. When we tell ghost stories, you can scare people with it. Like the story *The Man with the Golden Arm*."

Caitlyn skipped sideways, brightening. "I know that one! I've heard it at sleepovers. I almost crapped my pants."

Laughing, Stacy juggled Caitlyn's belongings and tucked the sleeping bag under her arm. She put her other arm around Caitlyn. "I think you're going to like it here."

That was Mariah's last view of Caitlyn, coltish with her long legs and swinging braids, ambling away arm-and-arm with her counselor. The fluorescent yellow

SHANE

cast created a bright stripe against the back of Stacy's uniform.

For Mariah, the most satisfying part was that Caitlyn never looked back.

CHAPTER TWO

Mariah waited for Shane in the fenced backyard of his home. It was one of her favorite places to relax now that they were living together again. The half acre of space felt very private to her despite the fact that his main horse barns, corrals and indoor arena were but a stone's throw away, beyond the fence but convenient to the back door of his house. He prized the freedom of being able to walk between his home and business, coming and going as he pleased.

When he built the house, he hired a landscape designer who'd created a series of grassy outdoor rooms, perfect for socializing and the big parties he was known for. A open-air gazebo centered the space and surrounding it were groups of redwood chairs and tables, which also were used in conjunction to a state-of-the-art outdoor kitchen and a gas-fueled fireplace. Benches curved around a circular firepit. To enhance the feeling of privacy, 15 foot junipers lined the inside of the fence, creating a windbreak and pockets of shade reliable enough that she was actually able to do computer work there in summer.

Today it was plenty warm enough. After Caitlyn's successful launch at camp, Mariah had plenty of other work to finish and she was the type of disciplined person who stayed at the office until the job was done. But lately she'd built more flexibility into her schedule in order to make Shane the priority in her life, rather than the career that had provided her with financial security, but had also been hellish at times

and betrayed her in many ways.

The gate that led from the backyard to the parking lot opened and Shane poked his head inside. He grinned when he saw her. "Is it interlude time?"

"You betcha." Mariah met him at the gate, kissed his cheek, and once he crossed the threshold, made sure the gate was locked.

Noticing, Shane was glad he'd spent the bulk of the day either inside a pleasant-smelling truck or a leather-smelling tack room where he'd created a human arm cast with horse wraps and fluorescent gauze.

He also noticed that Mariah had set up a small ice chest full of soft drinks and beer, and there was a bowl of pretzels nearby. He helped himself to a fistful. "Caitlyn's drop off go okay?"

"Very well. I'll be surprised if we hear from her. She was a little nervous at first but she played it cool, told the staff that she was lucky to sustain a break that left her with two good fingers to use. Everybody there thinks it's the real deal. I heard them say they'd prevent it from getting exposed to the elements."

"I layered a lot more hardeners in her wraps than I do with my horses. It should last."

Mariah slipped her arms around his waist and propped her chin on his chest. "Shane, you did good today. Caitlyn could have been seriously hurt walking that highway. A truck or car could have side-swiped her. It's the beginning of bear season and mountain lion are on the hunt. Not to mention the worst predators of all. Sexual offenders are everywhere, even Grizzly Springs."

"I had that in mind when I pulled over. Took off my hat, buttoned my shirt. Didn't want to get her thinking I might be a pervert or kidnapper."

"Nope, you're definitely more the serial killer type."

He frowned, half offended, half believing she had to be pulling his leg. With Mariah's poker detective face, it was hard to tell sometimes. "Hey, I resent that. Take that back."

She hung her head, acting super sorry. "My apologies. I should have said serial *charmer*. You're a charming, rather roguish cowboy who is ripped as an Olympian, of superior intelligence and beautiful beyond belief."

That mollified him. He flexed his biceps in a show of strength. "I could have been an Olympian if they'd had rodeo events. But beautiful? I'm good-looking as all git out, but beautiful I ain't."

Her smile teased. "Your male ego cannot be contained."

He played the this-ole-country-boy role to the max. "Aw, shucks, Mariah. Tell me my head's not too big. You're a doctor. I'll believe you. You're the holder of my heart."

"Holder of your heart? Where do you find this corny stuff?"

"Cowboys are poets, too. There's Slim Kite, Waddie Mitchell, Apache Adams, Chuck Milner and Hallie, Bob Campbell, Three Hands High, Audrey Hankins..."

Mariah covered her ears with her hands until his square jaw stopped moving. "Okay, okay. I'll concede the truth. You're the Jedi knight of poetry. A nonsensical John Wayne master."

"Yep, my grandma used to say so, too. Incurrigible was another one. Now there's a word you don't hear anymore. And fring-frong. And nincompoop. I was that when I was a little kid, definitely. Couldn't sit still. Knocked over her collection of Hummels."

"What are Hummels?"

"Heck if I know. Collectibles. Little statues. Kids mostly. Cute ones. The tables in her house were covered with them. I broke one and was banished outside, laughing my head off."

"Laughing?"

"She scolded me, called me nincompoop. Do you know what that sounds like to a five year-old boy? Poop jokes. What's funnier to a five year-old than poop?"

Since it was a rhetorical question, Mariah busied herself elsewhere, focusing on more important matters. She boldly removed his

hat and played with his hair like she had earlier in the day. Except now she did it as freely and wantonly as possible, ready to get to the interlude she'd planned. "Sometimes I want to pop inside your mind and experience what it's like to be you," she said.

He played with her hair in return, clearly distracted, guiding her long blonde ponytail over her shoulder, sifting the ends through his fingers. "Experiment on me?"

"No, experience you in your purest form."

He wrapped the length of her hair around his fist, tugging firmly, drawing her close, murmuring in her ear. "You're talking dirty, Mariah. My purest form is making love to you. It's what I think about. All. The. Time."

"You *are* incorrigible."

He let her hair go, cascading from his fingers like a waterfall. "No doubt about it. Whatever the subject. Hell, I tell poop jokes in some of my riding classes, the young ones, especially. Kids love poop jokes. It's an ice-breaker."

"It won't break ice with me. Getting a former FBI Agent like me to laugh is a real challenge. It takes action, not jokes."

"Like tickling?" He fluttered his fingers in front of her face.

She leapt away, giggling like a schoolgirl. That was her signal, the invitation he needed. He chased her around the yard like the nincompoop he was.

She darted among the patio furniture, chair to table to chair. She was fast but he was faster. He caught her waist and tickled her underarms but good. She squealed, jumped and attacked him, tickling between his shoulder blades, the most vulnerable spot he had.

He guffawed like a jackass. She jumped on his back. He caught her wrists and spun in a circle, making her laugh deep in her belly. He loved that sound.

Her hair swung free, flying from the broken rubber band. Blinded by blonde, he took no chances and dropped to the grass on his

knees, tackled by the tickling monster named Mariah.

He soon gave up and she straddled him, triumphant. He adored her like this, wildly mussed and proudly female, lording over him. Talk about a turn-on. His cock was like an iron bar. She wiggled her butt and sat on his hard-on. It hurt, hurt good. He'd take her right here if she let him, outside in front of God and country.

He hooked her blouse at the hem, pulling it free from her waistband. Before she drew another breath, he'd unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans.

She pinned his wrists on either side of his head and used her weight to keep him still, like that was possible. "Not so fast, cowboy."

Her hair fell straight down, surrounded them like a curtain. It was long and tickled his ears. She rocked her hips and his breath caught in agony. Ecstasy, too.

He relaxed his biceps, pretended he couldn't break her hold. She leaned in, brushed her breasts across his chest. She kissed him with plump lips, soft like their very first kiss but, this time, unhesitating.

He copied her sweetness, gentle-like, exploring minutely. She mewled, kittenish, high at the back of her throat. His noises were low and growly. She released his wrists and groped behind her back, under her blouse, frantically trying to unhook her bra, but she was in too much of a hurry. Giving up, she ripped off her blouse, instead. Buttons flew.

He rolled her then, flat on her back, and straddled her. He kept his weight on his knees to prevent crushing her. It was his turn to leash her wrists, one hand pinning them over her head. Her low-cut bra barely contained her heaving breasts. She panted, quick and shallow, the glitter of challenge in her eyes.

He used his free hand to pleasure her, stroking from neck to navel. She bucked her body, writhing and wicked. He unleashed her hands but hovered over her, unbuttoned his jeans, freeing his cock.

Underneath him, her panties were being discarded along with her jeans. She shoved them down, freeing one leg, kicking and shaking the

bunched fabric off. In her frenzy, he unhooked her bra, tossing it aside, intent on thrusting his way inside her.

He widened her thighs, holding them open, gauging her readiness. Her skin was velvet smooth, sunlit from above, centered by peeks of pink amid glinting gold hair. Restless, she twisted at the waist, made mute by her hurried need, seeking intimate contact.

His palmed her bared flesh and pressed the heel of his hand into her heat. She moaned erotically, wanting more. He delivered the pressure she craved. Her upper teeth cut into her bottom lip, worrying it, sexy, inciting him to attack. He nibbled her there, tasting her corners, slipped his tongue inside, inviting a rhythm of what was to come. She answered, trading breaths. Hot, hot breaths.

His kisses traveled down her body to her breasts. They tasted perfect, nipples like tiny candies, the texture pebbled and salty sweet. She groaned this time, vibrating sound along nerves endings, thrumming against his skin, entering his chest, spearing his heart. A spear that opened chambers and filled them with light.

He reached between her legs, parted her folds with purpose, his fingers skimming, dipping, singling out tender places that needed special care.

"Now," she said.

He tested her with his thumb, found her slick and swollen, ready for him. He primed himself, milking his length, poised at her entrance.

She locked gazes with him.

Muscles taut, he plunged deep, pure power, seeking her depths. Wetness slickened his most sensitive skin. She was tight, taking his breath, squeezing his length. He strained to feel where he ended and she began but it was hopeless. She surrounded him with fire that burned from within. Sex was in the air they breathed, the scent created in the sweat between them.

He plunged again and again. Her hips cradled him, rising to meet him. Their bodies were one and the same, retreating and plunging in

rhythm, building momentum. Anticipation rose, hurried his lungs, his pounding heart, every throbbing inch he possessed.

She bit his shoulder and licked the wound. His cock reacted like she was licking it, too. He thrust deeper, fiery sun baking his back. She melted underneath him, grasping his arms, panting in need, inciting him to move fast, hard, and free.

He put his hands on her breasts, tanned skin against pale, hers tipped by nipples that tightened in the sun and air. It stunned him, how gorgeous she was, how gorgeous she felt, her breasts ripe and firm and full. She stretched her entire body, showing off, her grin like the Cheshire cat out of Alice in Wonderland.

She was his Wonderland, the reason he was on this earth. He needed her so badly, terribly badly. How he'd convinced her to come back to him was still a mystery.

She had finally confessed that she loved him. Straight out confessed. But for a long time before, she held back, and he needed to hear it again, needed to know she was here in this place with him. He paused the rhythm, zeroing in on the expressive ocean depths in her eyes.

"Mariah?"

"Yes, my love?"

It was enough, more than enough. He kissed her, thrust again. Enough was in her glazing gaze, in the pliant body she offered, centering him in her core. He lost himself there, overcome by a rush of glorious sensation. Groin to brain and back again, coming in wave after orgasmic wave. He buried his grunts and groans in the curve of her neck but her fragrance heightened his senses. He swore he passed out for a second, she smelled so fine.

He crashed at the end, became dead weight, and she let him, cradling both his hips and his head, wrapping her legs and arms around him. He recovered slow, back to earth. When he finally levered himself off her and rolled on his back, he inwardly chided himself for weighing

her down, crushing her.

She snuggled against his side and dug her fingers in the swirls of hair on his chest. "Know this, Shane," she whispered. "You are loved."

Overwhelmed, he couldn't speak. He couldn't get past the huge clutching inside his gut. He opened his mouth, closed it. He wondered if she even knew what she'd done to him. The smooth talking horse whisperer made speechless.

He snuggled her close, letting his actions speak for him, wishing he could burrow under her skin, grasp her heart in his hands. He stroked her hair, damp near her forehead. He fingered her cheeks, jaw, chin, the bone structure he had come to love. He skimmed her neck and her chest, found her breasts, palmed and played, listening to her breath become bated.

"Now," she said.

He traced circles around her navel, then traveled to her clit. He watched her face as he made her come, saw her diffused with color, reddened by the great outdoors. He memorized her details, feminine details, the way she finally relaxed in pleasure and opened her sleepy eyes.

"Wow," she said.

Chuckling, he gathered her in. She was a cuddler and he spooned around her, keeping her warm on the grass. He nosed her nape, letting his breath get lost in her hair.

"I love you," he said. When she didn't answer he checked her face. She'd fallen asleep.

After all they'd been through together, his best hope was her love was just as big and overwhelming as his.

* * * * *

Four weeks later

Mariah dragged herself out of bed. The alarm had gone off a half

hour before, sending Shane into the bathroom at the speed of light. By the time she rolled around their bed for awhile, forced her eyelids open and sat up, he'd taken his shower, shaved and dressed, and pelted downstairs to make breakfast. She vaguely recalled him saying the farrier was due at the barn at 7 a.m. to start shoeing horses.

She put on her robe and shuffled into the bathroom. She sat on the toilet, felt awful, and vomited in the toilet rather than pee. She brushed her teeth, was able to use the bathroom in normal fashion, then padded down the stairs, still in her robe, the braid over her shoulder frizzed and her hand pressed to her stomach.

Shane was seated at the table, polishing off his usual four eggs and four slices of whole wheat toast.

"You don't look too good," he said.

Mariah shuffled to a kitchen cabinet and withdrew a water glass. "Gee, how about a 'good morning' before you start laying it on thick." She filled the glass with water.

"Sorry. Good morning. How are you today?"

"Thanks for asking. I feel like crap. Must be something I ate because I threw up. How do you feel? You're not coming down with something are you?"

"I feel fine."

"We both ate the same thing for dinner last night, which is why I'm asking."

"I have some stomach medicine in the bathroom. Feel free to use it if you think it will help. Would you like some eggs and toast?"

Mariah eased herself down at the table. "The smell alone will send me right back to the bathroom. I can barely tolerate the leftover smell of your eggs. Do you know if we have any crackers?"

He set his empty plate in the sink and started checking cabinets. "Crackers coming up. How about some tea? I think we have something herbal somewhere."

"Don't know if I can handle the smell of tea, either. How about a

mug of hot water?"

"If you're feeling this bad, you should see a doctor."

"I'll have to drive to Aspen for that."

"I'll drive you if you don't feel up to it."

"No, you have too much to do. I'm the one who's between clients. I may go but I'm not convinced I need a doctor. What I need is rest."

"You have been working a lot lately. I barely saw hide nor hair of you the past few days."

"I know it's getting bad when I'm logging 60 or 70 hours a week. I'm thinking about hiring a secretary, maybe even a part-time investigator. I have the money. There's so much administrative work, it makes me tired just thinking about it."

"Ana could probably help you find somebody good."

"I'll give her a call after I eat my crackers and take my nap."

"Good plan." He picked up his hat. "I'm heading out." He kissed her cheek.

"Don't do that. You might get sick."

He kissed the top of her head. "I love you, Mariah."

"I love you, Shane." She ruffled his hair then pushed him away.

"Don't let those horseshoe nails get stuck in your boots today, okay?"

"It's a deal." He tipped his hat to her and slipped out the door.

Mariah laid her forehead on the table, too tired to straighten. She ate her crackers sideways, then rose, taking her mug of water upstairs.

Back to bed, she thought. Back to bed.

* * * * *

Mariah was waiting in a booth at the Tavern when Ana slid into the opposite side of the table and handed her a piece of paper. "Here's a list of some people I know who are looking to do office work."

Taking the list, Mariah stifled a yawn. "Thanks, Ana. Now all I

have to do is scrape up the energy to call them."

"You do look a little sleepy-eyed. Up all night with the boss? He seemed rather chipper this morning."

"I wish. No, it's more like I've been hit by a Mack truck. Sometimes it's my stomach but most of the time what I want to do is take a nap."

"Are you coming down with something?"

"I think I'm simply rundown. Too many hours on the job. I started taking more iron and vitamins. Jury's still out, but I like to think it's helping. Either that, or the double espressos I've been downing at Sam's are having some positive effect. I can't seem to feel awake otherwise."

"If you're drinking that much caffeine, no wonder your stomach is bothering you. How long has this been going on?"

Mariah flung her ponytail back in a gesture of impatience. "I don't know. It's been building, maybe a few weeks. Thing is, I don't feel sick. Most of the time, I'm functioning fine. But lately I have to go to bed before ten p.m."

"Oh, my goodness. Before ten? You must be getting what, a full eight hours of sleep?"

"I can get by on less. Five or six hours is usual. Same with Shane. Me sleeping so much hasn't done much for our sex life."

"Please, no details. He's my boss for heaven's sake. It's like he's my brother or something."

"Who am I going to tell if not you? You're my best friend."

"Is he complaining?"

"Why should he complain? If I need to go to bed early, we can always do it in the morning. That's his favorite time."

Ana covered her ears. "Nooooo ..."

"Thing is, I feel crappy in the mornings. He's very understanding but this can't go on forever without some kind of explanation. Maybe I should eat more at dinnertime. Or I should eat later, so my blood sugar

is higher when I first wake up. Then I wouldn't feel so nauseous."

"Nauseous? Have you been vomiting?"

"Sometimes."

"And this happens in the mornings?"

"Yes, but--"

"Mariah, when was your last period?"

Mariah stared at Ana. "It's impossible."

"Why?"

"Once Shane and I got back together, I started on the Pill again. I usually don't have much bleeding."

"It takes awhile for the hormones to build up in your system. You know that, right?"

"What are you saying?"

"You should have been using a backup method of birth control for the first week after you started again. Did you?"

"But the Pill's always worked fine for me. I can't be pregnant."

"I would get checked out right away if I were you. You shouldn't keep taking birth control pills if you're pregnant."

"I'll stop right now."

"Does that mean you want the baby?"

"I've never thought about having a baby."

"Oh, come on."

"Well, maybe a few times when I was pre-menstrual and imagined hearing my biological clock ticking. But since my job at the FBI was all-consuming and I never found the right guy..."

"Have you found the right guy now?"

"Shane and I barely got back together. It's been what? A little more than a couple of months."

"But you've known him for quite a while now. Have you talked about kids at all?"

"Not in regards to us. He talked about it after what happened with the Travers boy. Shane felt pretty bad about how he ended things

SHANE

but I thought he handled himself real well. He'd be a great father. There's no doubt in my mind."

"I agree. If you want this baby, tell him straight, tell him your period is late. Buy one of those pregnancy tests and have him help you take it. Believe me, it's much easier to tell them that way, than you finding out ahead of time, deciding what you're going to do about it, then informing him of your decision."

"I don't know. He's liable to freak out if I come home with a pregnancy test."

"Shane isn't the type who freaks out."

"I'm not sure how to tell you this, but Shane is human, capable of freak outs like the rest of us. I'm freaking out right now and I'm an psychologist. How do I present the pregnancy test to him? Buy it and put it on his dinner plate?"

"Sounds romantic to me."

"Gag me with a thousand spoons."

"He has a sense of humor. Take my word for it, he'll think it's funny."

"I guess I'm about to see how funny it really is."

* * * * *

That night after dinner, when Mariah and Shane retired to the living room as they usually did to catch up on work, listen to music or read, she made a great show of yawning, shutting down her screen and stretching her entire body. "I'm pretty sleepy, Shane. Can we go to bed early tonight?"

Shane looked up from his reading and checked his watch. "It's barely nine thirty. I think you need to go to the doctor and find out why you feel tired all the time."

"I have a theory, but you need to come upstairs so I can show you."

"Show me?" That raised him from his chair. He put aside his reading, and lassoed her around the waist. "Last time we tried this, you fell asleep on me. Literally."

"I was on top, doing most of the work. Then I rested for awhile."

"You fell asleep for awhile. It wasn't bad in the beginning, but then you started snoring."

"I don't snore."

"Lately you've been snoring. Maybe you have a weird kind of cold that shows up at night and makes you sleepy and snory."

"Your surprise is in the bathroom."

"A surprise, huh?"

"I know you don't like surprises but I saved part of the surprise for both of us so we could share it."

"Sounds perfectly logical. Sexy even. Is it in the bathtub or the shower?"

"On the counter. Call me when you're ready."

"Aren't you coming with me?"

"I'd rather wait for you to call me after the initial reaction is over."

He shrugged and headed upstairs.

Apprehensive, she darted after him, feeling like a 10 year-old on the apex of a roller-coaster, doomed to go down screaming. Even Special Agents had weak moments. "Wait! I'll come with you."

She shoved him up the stairs and tugged him into the bathroom.

"This better be good," he said. "All this pulling and pushing is making me feel like a rank bull ready to buck his way out of the shoot."

She dropped her hold on him, too scared to seek the full-on expression on his face. She watched him in the mirror as he saw the box and picked it up. Frowning, he faced her.

"Is this a joke?"

"Why would you think that?"

"Because it's a pregnancy test and you're on the Pill. How could you get pregnant?"

"Why don't I take the test? That would answer the most important question."

He opened the box and spilled the contents out on the counter. "Have you ever used one of these before?"

"No. Pass me the directions."

"I better read them, too." Holding the instructions together, they silently read, standing side by side. "Sounds simple enough," he said. "All you have to do is pee."

"And hold the stick."

"Do you want me to hold the stick?"

"Would you do that?"

"That's a trick question, right? If I say yes, I get pee on me and earn your respect. If I say no, I'll stay clean, but you'll be mad for reasons I won't understand."

"Where did you pick up that little nugget of wisdom?"

"I've done this before."

Shocked, Mariah dropped the stick as she was taking it out of the plastic wrapping.

"With who?"

"You don't know her."

"Thank God for small favors. And the verdict?"

"False alarm."

"How did you feel about that?"

"I was seventeen. I have to admit, it was a big relief. And I've done this with Ana."

"Ana! No, she would have told me."

"It was a long time ago. Maybe she forgot. It was her first baby with Chuck. They had gotten married but were both real young. She didn't want to tell him unless she was sure she wanted to keep it. That's why she wanted me there and not him."

SHANE

"He wasn't the world's most supportive husband, was he?"

"Chuck's not bad. He needed to grow up. Doing that while you're newly married and having two kids by the time you're 23 is rough."

"Since you're the experienced one, tell me what to do and I'll perform the physical part as instructed." Calmer now, Mariah assumed the position on the toilet. Shane read the instructions and she followed them to the letter, then laid the stick on the bathroom counter while they waited for the result.

Shane settled against the counter, his expression unreadable. "I should ask what you're hoping for?"

"I hate to admit it, but my emotions are all over the place. Maybe you should tell me what you're hoping for."

End of Free sample... For more of Mariah and Shane, read the Free excerpt **MARIAH** on my freebies page. Stay tuned for the release of the two part series in June by filling out the contact form on this website or following me on Facebook at Author Carol Devine.