

Lane Walker drew a deep breath, wondering at the rapid thud of his heart. Although he had spent the past twenty-four hours trying to prepare for this moment, he knew it was an impossible task. The drive from Nashville had been the easy part. The past fifteen minutes, spent contemplating the neat E. A. Kellson printed on the mailbox in the driveway, had been sheer hell.

Why was he here?

He pressed the doorbell for the third time, feeling like a nervous schoolboy about to face a room full of principals. He tried to ignore the quiver in his fingertip as well as the queasiness in his stomach, concentrating on what he would say when she opened the door.

His racing thoughts were stilled by the soft clicking sounds of someone unlocking the front door. He stepped backward, seeking support from one of the pillars that braced the roof of the roomy porch. He drew a deep breath as the door opened.

Then only the mesh of a screen door separated him and Ellie. Her coppery red hair, which had attracted him from the first with its curly, wayward refusal to behave, had been pulled back into a ponytail. The attempt at control failed miserably and escaped tendrils framed her face.

He watched her face, as her honey brown eyes widened in surprise when she recognized him.

Was there a blazing flicker of pleasure, a spontaneous surge toward him, a heartfelt welcome killed in the instance of its birth?

Or had he imagined her reaction? Because by the time his heart beat again, her body had drawn inward, putting up an emotional shield more effective than the flimsy screen door between them.

The faint scent of cinnamon drifted into his nose, telling him what he feared.

Ellie knew about Robyn.