



the
two of
us

Victoria Bylin



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To Alan F. Scheibel
A fallen soldier in the war against Alzheimer's disease

And to the army that fought at his side
Dorothy Scheibel
Mike Scheibel
Peggy Scheibel
Patti Scheibel
Kathy Neal

The staff at Homestead Nursing Center

God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the
prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a
sun-scorched land.

—Psalm 68:6

Mia Robinson couldn't take her eyes off the man in a cowboy hat working a claw-machine game, the kind where a child—or a boyfriend or father—put in a dollar and tried to grab a toy in thirty seconds or less.

The machine was about fifteen feet from her in a coffee shop across from the Las Vegas hotel she had checked into late last night. The breakfast crowd was gone and the lunch crowd was just beginning to arrive on a Thursday that promised to swelter in the June heat.

The angle of her booth, a small one for just two people, gave her a clear view of the cowboy's profile. Tall and lean, dressed in Wrangler jeans and a black T-shirt that hugged his biceps, he worked the levers with the skill of a fighter pilot. His long legs ended in worn boots, a tan Stetson crowned his head, and dark scruff lined his jaw. His beard scruff matched the brown of the shaggy hair showing just below the hat. She guessed him to be in his early thirties, confident, and stubborn.

No one ever really grabbed the toy, did they? The thrill was in the chase, the gamble, the chance of beating the odds.

Mia settled back against the brown vinyl booth and stifled a yawn. As tired as she'd been after a full day of work and a

late flight, she had tossed and turned while rehearsing what she planned to say to her sister. Technically Mia couldn't stop Lucy from marrying Sam Waters at the Happy Daze Wedding Chapel that afternoon. Lucy was almost nineteen and pregnant, but in Mia's opinion, getting married so young wouldn't solve the problem. It would only add another layer of difficulty.

Fighting another jaw-cracking yawn, she focused back on the man at the claw machine. With his hands loose on the controls, he swung the claw to the right and dropped the metal tongs into the pile of stuffed animals. To her amazement, he lifted out a white duck, swung it to the side, and deposited it in a metal chute. She expected him to take the toy to his table and give it to a child or girlfriend, or maybe just leave with it, but he put more money in the machine and went back to work.

Maybe he had two kids.

Glad for the distraction, she watched him work while she ate her omelet. Without missing a beat, he snagged an elephant, a giraffe, and a turtle. By the time she pushed her plate away, he had won several more toys. Mesmerized, she sipped a third cup of coffee while he liberated a brown hen with a floppy red comb.

Mr. Claw Machine didn't miss a single time. How many hours had he practiced? Probably thousands. Some men never grew up, and apparently he was one of them.

Mia's phone vibrated with a message. Hoping it was Lucy, she rummaged through the gum wrappers and receipts in her sack of a purse until her fingers curled around her phone. When she swiped the screen, instead of Lucy's smiling face, she saw the professional logo for Women's Health Associates, the medical office where she worked as a nurse practitioner.

The text read *Ann B in L&D*.

L&D stood for *Labor and Delivery*, and Ann B—they never used last names because of HIPAA privacy laws—was one of

Mia's patients. Mia didn't deliver babies. Not yet. That fell to Dr. Karen Moore. But Mia was interested in midwifery and had planned to be present for the potentially complicated delivery.

Sighing, she texted back, *Wish I could be there. Am out of town.*

"I will not resent Lucy," Mia murmured as she put the phone back with the gum wrappers. She loved her sister fiercely, and sometimes love required sacrifice. But she had to admit to being disappointed.

Sighing, she glanced at her watch. Three hours until the wedding. Rather than pace in her room, she signaled the waitress for more coffee and settled her eyes on Mr. Claw Machine as he scooped the stuffed animals off the bench.

When he made a clicking sound with his tongue, a big dog with golden fur lumbered to its feet and gave a shake to straighten the red vest it wore, displaying the words *Service Dog*. A row of skulls-and-crossbones lined the hem, but whatever diabolical message the skulls implied was negated by the fact that the bones were shaped like dog biscuits.

Mr. Claw Machine had a sense of humor. Great shoulders too. And arms long enough to cradle an entire menagerie of stuffed animals. When he turned, his light-colored eyes met her gaze across the aisle. She told herself to look away, but the toys in his arms tugged a smile out of her. His mouth formed a smile in return, his lips a soft contrast to the bony contours of his high cheekbones and straight nose, both ruddy from hours in the sun.

Arms bulging with toys, Mr. Claw Machine strode with his dog to the back of the coffee shop. Too curious to be polite, Mia craned her neck and watched as he went from table to table, giving toys to children and chatting with their parents. He didn't allow anyone to pet the dog, but at his command, the dog sat and offered handshakes.

He was headed her way with three toys and two tables between them. At a booth with a mom and a little girl, he gave the child a pink elephant. Next he handed a giraffe to an elderly woman seated with her husband. With one animal left, he looked Mia full in the face.

What she saw stole her breath far more than his good looks. Behind the tan and the laugh lines, his expression betrayed a weariness that made him seem older than she had guessed him to be. She knew that look well. People wore it in the days after major surgery, when they were in pain and muddled with anesthesia, making jokes and insisting they were fine when they weren't fine at all.

Their gazes danced in the way of curious strangers, a man and a woman who noticed each other and felt the mysterious searching of a human heart. Dishes clattered. A child laughed. Another one cried. Life exploded all around them in colors and sounds as ordinary and spectacular as a sunset.

Look away, Mia told herself. She unconsciously covered her bare ring finger. She'd been hurt enough by two broken engagements, one years ago in college and the other recent and still painful to the touch. No way would she risk her heart only to be dumped again.

She had prayed long and hard after the last breakup. Without a husband or children, she was free to go wherever God called her. It was time to make a change, so last week she had applied for a job with Mission Medical, an international aid organization that provided medical care in Third World countries. If she beat out the stiff competition, she'd be based in Dallas but would travel the world, working to set up clinics for women and children. She'd be out of the country for six months at a time, maybe longer.

But what did she do about Lucy and the unplanned pregnancy? Her sweet, head-in-the-clouds sister needed her too.

Mr. Claw Machine approached Mia's table. "Good morning."
"Good morning."

He held out the last stuffed animal. "This one must be for you."

The brown hen. It figured. With her thirtieth birthday on the horizon, Mia felt like a carton of eggs with a best-by date that was still reasonable but a lot closer than the dates on all the other cartons. Anyone who checked the dates left the old carton and picked up a newer one. That was what Brad had done when he dumped her last month for that MRI tech.

She didn't think her life ended at the age of thirty. Far from it. Professionally, she was just getting started. But personally, she was worried. If she wanted to get married and have children, now was the time. Some women had no problem conceiving as late as their mid-forties, but others did. Hormone treatments and IVF worked sometimes, but not always. Working for an OB-GYN, Mia saw the struggle more often than most people, and she was acutely aware of the risks—even a little paranoid, maybe.

The fat hen dangled in front of her face, its stick-on eyes going in two directions, the red comb flopping, and the orange beak as crooked as a beckoning finger. Mia's gaze rose to the man's face. The pain she'd glimpsed earlier was gone now, or at least buried behind a self-deprecating smile.

"Thank you." She took the gift from his hand. "I've always wanted a brown hen."

His brows collided. "Really?"

"No." She laughed. "But this one is charming."

Instead of moving on, he studied her face as if he recognized her. That happened occasionally. Patients came and went in the big hospital where she had worked before joining Women's Health Associates. But Denver was seven hundred miles away, and she was certain she'd never seen this man before. She would

have remembered his eyes. They were the color of a grassy meadow on a spring day, fringed with dark lashes, and as piercing as needles pricking skin.

Some people looked away as the needle did its job. Others watched with calm intensity. Mia was a watcher.

So was Mr. Claw Machine, it seemed, until he focused on the dog at his feet. "Pirate."

The dog locked eyes with him.

"Say hi to the lady."

Pirate raised a paw and gave her a slobbery smile.

Mia gripped the dog's paw. "It's nice to meet you, Pirate." The dog looked so intelligent that she half expected him to answer back in full sentences. "I wish I had some bacon for you."

"So does Pirate," the man replied. "But he's working right now."

"I see the vest." Mr. Claw Machine had brought up the dog, so Mia felt comfortable asking questions. "What breed is he?"

"Mostly golden retriever, maybe some shepherd. Strays often make the best hearing dogs."

Her eyes flicked to the side of Mr. Claw Machine's head. Now that she was looking, she could see a small in-ear device. The way he had studied her face earlier took on new significance. He didn't seem to be reading her lips, but she imagined it helped to watch people form words.

Behind him, an elderly woman was coming down the aisle with a walker. Pirate nudged him, and he turned. When he spotted the woman, he started to say good-bye to Mia. At the same moment, a waitress arrived with an armload of plates for the family seated across the aisle. Another family bailed out of the corner booth and crowded the aisle even more.

"Look, Mommy! A dog!"

A little girl charged toward Pirate. Her mom clasped a firm hand on her shoulder, but the woman with the walker kept

coming, and the waitress played musical plates with meals for three kids. The aisle was completely blocked.

“Excuse me!” The woman with the walker squeezed closer to the tables. “Excuse me, please!” Judging by the pinched look on her face, she was headed to the bathroom and in a hurry—the kind that led to a person falling.

With nowhere to go, Mr. Claw Machine indicated the empty seat across from Mia. “May I? Just until the crowd clears.”

“Of course.”

He signaled Pirate to slip under the table. As the dog squeezed against her feet, the man folded his lean body into the booth. It was too small for his long legs and wide shoulders. Too small for all three of them, but especially too small for Pirate, who hit the table with his head, tilted it, and sent the contents of Mia’s water glass straight into her lap.



Jake Tanner hadn’t planned to say more than a few words to the woman seated across from him. He certainly hadn’t planned to sit down with her. As for the spilled water, that was what happened when Pirate decided it was time to climb into Jake’s lap.

It wasn’t a casual decision on the dog’s part. He’d been trained to be Jake’s hearing dog, but their bond went deeper. If Jake seemed nervous or on edge, Pirate stuck to him like glue. Women didn’t make Jake nervous in the least, but apparently this one set off that inner twang, because Pirate was poking Jake in the belly with his nose.

While reassuring Pirate with a word and a scratch, Jake looked sheepishly at the woman. “Sorry about that.”

“No harm done.” She blotted her lap with a napkin. “It’s just water, and there wasn’t much of it.”

“Still—”

“It’s no problem at all.” Her tone told him she meant it. “I’m a nurse. Water is nothing compared to the stuff I’ve dealt with.”

Jake believed her. Thanks to the bomb blast that ended his career with the Denver Police Department, he had spent more time in hospitals than he cared to remember.

When Nurse Girl tipped her head, the motion reminded him of the sparrows that perched on the deck of his parents’ home an hour west of Colorado Springs. Her hair, medium brown with blond highlights, also brought to mind those ordinary birds, which up close weren’t ordinary at all.

Her blue eyes were riveted to his, studying him, waiting for him to say something.

Recovering, he asked an easy question. “Where are you from?”

“Denver.”

“Small world. I used to live there.”

Her eyes lit up. “That’s a coincidence. Then again, it’s a big city. Did you move from there to here?” She fluttered her hand to indicate Las Vegas.

“No. I still live in Colorado. Echo Falls, to be precise.”

“I’ve heard of it. It’s a tourist town, isn’t it?”

“Mostly.”

“What do you do?” she asked politely.

Three years ago he would have told her he was a police officer. Two years ago he would have said he *used to be* a police officer. Now he skipped the glory days. “My dad owns a vending-machine business. I help him run it.”

She stroked the hen perched on the seat next to her. “That explains why you’re so good at the claw machine. You’ve been practicing.”

“All my life. My dad has a barn full of old games.”

Hotels and bowling alleys no longer wanted Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, and old-style pinball, but they were perfect for the camp Jake wanted to start for kids who had lost a parent in

the line of duty. Kids like Sam Waters, the son of Jake's partner, Connie Waters, who had been killed in the bomb blast that left Jake partially deaf. Starting the camp meant everything to him. Unfortunately, a local opposition group called Stop the Camp, or STC for short, was battling tooth and nail to stop him.

Pirate pressed against Jake's knee. The aisle was clear now, and if he was going to get a haircut before the wedding, he needed to leave. He wouldn't have chosen a hasty marriage for Sam or any young couple, but he was certain that under the circumstances, Connie would have supported her son's decision to take responsibility and marry Lucy Robinson.

Taking responsibility was Connie's strength, and Jake had admired her for it, though the commitment she demanded from *him* would haunt him forever. Lying prone with her head in a puddle of blood, smoke thick in the ringing silence, she had mouthed, *Help Sam*.

Deafened by the explosion, Jake had spoken a reply he couldn't hear. *I will, Connie. I promise.*

She had died minutes later, and Jake and Sam had become a family born of that promise. Sam, eighteen at the time, had returned to college and his ROTC scholarship. Without other family, he called and texted Jake a lot. They were brothers, friends, and a little bit father and son.

Nurse Girl didn't seem to be in a hurry, so Jake risked a question. "What brings you to Vegas?"

"A wedding."

"Me too." Not surprising. Weddings were a dime a dozen in Las Vegas.

"Weddings aren't my favorite thing." She placed her napkin on the table, revealing her bare ring finger as she let out a sigh. "I especially don't like weddings that are spur-of-the-moment. The one I'm going to today . . ." She shook her head. "I'm worried sick."

“Why?”

“My sister’s a little crazy.”

“Or in love.”

“Or both.” Her mouth settled into a worried line. “She’s a wonderful person, but I’m afraid she’s being impulsive. She has a tendency to act first and think later.”

“What about the guy?”

“I haven’t met him, but so far I’m not impressed. A quickie Vegas wedding isn’t the way to start a life together.”

Jake thought of last night’s dinner with Sam and Lucy. Sam was only twenty-one, but he’d grown up fast when his mother died, and his faith had grown too. Jake was determined to support the young couple a thousand percent. Too bad Nurse Girl didn’t have that same peace of mind.

“Maybe it’ll work out,” he said.

“I hope so.”

He heard what she didn’t say. “But?”

“But I doubt it.” She rolled her eyes in a cute way that seemed to make fun of herself. “Sorry for the gloom and doom. I’m not usually a pessimist.”

Neither was Jake. “You’re worried.”

“Yes.” Nurse Girl sipped her coffee. When she looked at him, her blue eyes were calm again. “Who’s getting married in your life?”

“A friend.” That was the easiest way to explain his relationship with Sam. “I’m the best man. It’s a happy day for them.”

“I wish them all the best.” Envy whispered in her voice, but he didn’t hear even a trace of bitterness. She glanced at her watch, a practical style she probably wore on the job. “I need to leave.”

“Me too.” Jake rubbed his jaw. The ceremony wasn’t for two hours, but he wanted a haircut and a straight-razor shave, like a slick detective in an old Hollywood movie. Las Vegas brought out his inner Robert De Niro, the part of him that

enjoyed gangster movies like *Casino* and *Heat*. The good guys won, but at a tremendous cost.

At his urging, Pirate wiggled out from under the table. Nurse Girl left a generous tip, picked up the check, and tucked the brown hen under her arm.

They paused in the aisle, standing face-to-face with Jake looking down and Nurse Girl looking up. Her head would have fit nicely against his shoulder. She was pretty in an outdoorsy way with a trim figure, tanned skin, and that sun-streaked hair, but what most stood out to Jake were her eyes. They were the color of the pool at the base of Echo Falls, and they invited a person to dive right in.

They walked together to the register. She paid, and they left through the double doors.

“Thanks for the hen,” she said.

“My pleasure.”

He tipped his hat, and they went their separate ways. Ten paces later, Jake turned and looked back. So did Nurse Girl. The desert sun blazed straight above, rendering her almost shadowless on the white concrete. She seemed terribly alone in the harsh light. And definitely flustered to be caught looking back at him.

“Tomorrow,” he called to her, raising his voice over the traffic noise. “Pirate and I will be here for breakfast at eight o’clock. Why don’t you join us?”

He approached her, reaching into his shirt pocket as he walked. When he reached her, he handed her two business cards. One for Tanner Vending with his name on it, and the second from Love-A-Dog Rescue. The dog rescue was his mom’s mission in life.

“My name is Jake Tanner.”

Nurse Girl read both cards, smiled at the cartoon on the dog rescue card, but didn’t say yes or no to breakfast. Neither did she give him her name. Smart woman. What happened in

Vegas stayed in Vegas, unless a story about a missing woman ended up on CNN.

When she peered at him with those jump-in-the-water eyes, he saw the smoke and flames of a battle he knew well. To leap or retreat? To plunge ahead with the courage of a soldier, or to hold back with the wisdom of a judge?

“It’s your choice,” he said, meaning it. “Either way, it’s been a pleasure.”

“For me too.” A smile tugged at her lips, but she didn’t say anything else.

Jake replied with a dip of his chin, then turned and headed for the barbershop. At the entrance, he ran his hand along his bristled jaw, anticipating a close shave and maybe breakfast with Nurse Girl. His heart gave a strong beat of anticipation—something he hadn’t felt in a while—and it wasn’t because of the shave.