

little big heart

ONE MORE MOMENT

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As she looked up at the big, blue Montana sky, Cassie Lucas relished the warmth of the bright sunlight on her face. She couldn't have asked for better weather to celebrate Independence Day with friends and family. Nor could she ask for any more love and happiness. Her heart held enough to last her another lifetime.

Relaxing for just a few short moments on a bench in the middle of her flower garden, Cassie had already made a final check to be sure everything was perfect for when the first guests arrived. White, paper cloths topped several tables, and Mason jars served as vases for red, white, and blue carnations and miniature American flags, which flapped gently in the warm breeze.

Yellow and orange marigolds lined the brick pathway leading from the house to where Cassie sat. She watched a few bees buzz around the flowers and only briefly thought of another bed of marigolds that had, over a century ago, covered the final resting place of a man named Bobby Lee Riley. Cassie didn't allow those thoughts to rest in her mind more than a few seconds. That had happened in another life.

Just a year ago, Cassie had endured a savage beating by her now deceased husband. It had taken almost a year for her to completely heal. He had wanted her dead, but in the end it was he who lost his life. God help her, she was sorry he had to die, but she had no regrets that he was out of her life.

As the wife of Dr. Daniel Lucas and the stepmother of six-year-old Joey Lucas, Cassie felt her life had become more than she'd ever dreamed it could be. Living there on land that had been in Daniel's family for over one hundred twenty-five years had been heaven to her. The three of them also shared their home with Daniel's mother, Aggie.

The house had been built to replace the old farmhouse that had burned a few years before. Daniel's deceased first wife, Joey's mother, had decorated the inside of the house with the perfect attention to details. When Daniel and Cassie married shortly after her release from the hospital, he gave her full rein to redecorate to suit her own taste, but she loved the house exactly the way it was. She changed nothing except to move an old rocker from the guest room to their bedroom. The chair had been her source of comfort when she'd first come to stay in the house with Daniel, Joey, and Aggie. Even now, a year later, she sat in it at least a few minutes each day and felt a warmth in her heart that let her know she was where she belonged.

Although Cassie had made no changes to the inside

of the house, when the last of the spring snow melted away, she asked Daniel if they could tear down the old barn sitting a short distance from the house. For one thing, it was an eyesore next to the beautiful stand of cottonwood trees and the crystal clear stream that flowed nearby. It had been part of the original homestead and hadn't been a safe structure for a long time. In the past few years, Daniel had used it to store only a few items, such as tools and the lawn mower.

The old barn's dignity had long been lost to the cold, harsh winter winds and threatened to cave in at any moment. More than that, the structure reminded her how near she and Daniel had both come to losing their lives. Although Daniel had saved her, the barn stood as a vivid memory of that terrible day.

With no qualms at all, Daniel had the barn torn down. From her place in the garden surrounded by the beautiful array of flowers, Cassie watched the sunlight dance on the copper rooster weather vane on the metal roof of the newly raised red barn. Later in the day, Cassie had a surprise for Daniel, and she hoped they'd be able to steal away from their guests and go to the barn long enough for her to give it to him.

"Mom," Joey called to Cassie from the back door. "Nurse Carole and Shelly are here."

Joey moved aside, and the beautiful woman and her daughter stepped onto the stoop and into the bright sunshine. Halfway up the path, Cassie met them with a

welcoming hug. Joey trailed behind, sticking closely to Shelly. They were in the same class at school, and it was obvious that Joey was mesmerized by the cute girl with blond curls and big, green eyes.

“Come on, Shelly. Let’s go to the creek.”

Joey had already taken off on a dead run, leaving Shelly behind. It only took a few seconds for the long-legged girl to catch up with him.

Carole shaded her eyes and, as her daughter passed Joey, she chuckled. “It’s so nice out here. Looks like you all have really worked hard.”

Cassie appreciated her friend’s assessment of the festively decorated backyard. “Thanks. Aggie is so good at this kind of thing. I couldn’t have put this together without her.”

Carole had been Cassie’s nurse during the time she’d been in a coma in the hospital. When Cassie finally woke up, the two women had become instant friends. Carole had served as Cassie’s maid of honor at the small ceremony held in the hospital chapel. Over the last year, that friendship had grown stronger. Carole had quickly become one of Cassie’s best friends.

Just then, Cassie’s mother-in-law emerged from the house. She hurried to Aggie and relieved her of a huge, heavy platter of fried chicken. Placing it on the serving table, Cassie followed Aggie back into the house to carry out the rest of the food. Before long, the backyard was filled with more guests, children’s squeals of delight, and

voices of adults as they greeted others they hadn't seen in a while.

Cassie had met most of them at the open house she and Daniel had held to celebrate their first Christmas as a family. Many were Daniel's aunts, uncles, his cousins and their children. Also in attendance were doctors, nurses, and other hospital staff.

Daniel's best friend and associate, Dr. Leo Weiss, and his wife, Betsy, arrived just as the food line was forming.

"Sorry we're late," Leo said to Daniel.

"Had an emergency." Leo and Daniel said in unison and then laughed.

"Come on and get in line." Leo took Betsy's arm and led her to the table.

Once he was sure his friends were taken care of, Daniel searched the crowd for Cassie. He saw her in the center of the flower garden, surrounded by blooming roses, and smiled as he wondered which was more beautiful. Cassie definitely took the prize for the beauty among the roses.

With Cassie in the garden were her brother, Stuart, and Carole. Stuart had only recently returned from a major rodeo event, where he had won a large purse. Unfortunately, as he had climbed to the stage where he was to receive his check and championship belt buckle, the six foot two, burly bronc rider had taken a nosedive to the ground and broken his collarbone.

Since Stuart had just arrived, Daniel hadn't greeted him yet. He made his way in their direction but stopped when he saw his new nurse come around the corner of the house.

"Hi there," he called to her. "I'm glad you could make it." Daniel had been the first to interview the petite woman. She'd moved to Billings to be with her husband, who was interning at Billings Regional Medical Center, where Daniel's office was located. After going over her impressive résumé, he'd hired her on the spot.

"It certainly is a great day for a picnic. I just talked to my mother in Florida, and they are having a torrential downpour." The woman smiled up at Daniel.

"I want to introduce you to my wife." He led her to where Cassie was talking to Stuart and Carole.

"Of course. I'd love to meet her."

"Hi, sweetheart," Cassie said. "I was just telling Stuart I hadn't seen you for a little while."

Since Stuart's right arm was in a sling, Daniel shook his left hand. "Well, our television personality has come home." The few people standing nearby chuckled.

"Ha-ha." Stuart mocked.

"How's the arm?" Daniel asked.

"Hurts like hell, but my pride took the brunt of the pain."

Again, everyone chuckled. Cassie forced her expression into one of mock seriousness. "Can you sue CNN for showing the clip of you falling over and over again?"

Stuart shook his head. “Very funny, but don’t think I haven’t thought about it. The worst part is that someone put it on YouTube, and they run it forward and then backwards. That’s the one I’d like to get ahold of.”

For the first time, Cassie noticed the pretty brunette standing next to Daniel. She had the distinct feeling she had some connection to the woman, but she couldn’t put her finger on who she was. Perhaps Cassie had met her when she was in the hospital. Many things were fuzzy from that time.

She reached out to the woman. “Hi. I’m Daniel’s wife, Cassie.”

“Oh.” Daniel eased the woman out in front of him. “Where are my manners? This is my new nurse, Lucy.”

Lucy. The name tugged sharply at Cassie’s heart and evoked happiness and, at the same time, sadness. She scanned the woman’s face in an effort to recognize her, but she couldn’t. Yet, when Lucy shook Cassie’s hand, she felt a bond that lay beyond a sensible explanation.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Lucy’s smile burned a hole in Cassie’s soul.

“Yes, it is a pleasure.” Cassie tried to move past the strange feeling but had trouble doing that.

One by one, Daniel introduced to Lucy those standing nearby.

Mentally, Cassie repeated the name over and over again. *Lucy. Lucy.* She turned her gaze toward the new red barn and the cottonwood trees. It was then that she

remembered reading the journal written by a woman who had died on the ground where she now stood. Her name had been Cassie, too, and her best friend had been Lucy. Daniel's great-grandfather had married Lucy's sister. That's why the name evoked such strong feelings: happiness for the strong friendship that Cassie and Lucy had and sadness for the tragic way Cassie had died. She was killed at the hands of a man who had tried to take her land from her—the land where now the voices of playful children and adults celebrating our nation's independence could be heard.

Cassie's thoughts drifted back to her guests and to her husband, who had saved her life, and her heart was filled with joy. She put her arm around Lucy's shoulder. "I'm glad you are going to be working with Daniel. I have a feeling you and I are going to be good friends."

Lucy nodded. "I'd like that very much."

Cassie then turned to Stuart. "Okay, you said you have a big announcement. I'm dying to hear it."

Daniel pulled his wife next to him. "I'd like to hear that, too."

"Well." Stuart cleared his throat. "Taking that fall made me look hard at what I want to do with the rest of my life. My bones aren't as young as they used to be." He grinned. "Anyway, I've decided I'd like to stay in one place instead of chasing all over the country, following the rodeo circuit. As most of you know, Carole and I have been a serious thing since we met when Cassie was

in the hospital. Well . . .” He looked deeply into Carole’s eyes. “I’ve put a down payment on a ranch south of Billings, and I hope to settle down there.”

Like something out of a fairy tale, Stuart stuck his hand inside his sling and pulled out a small, velvet box. He dropped to his knee in front of Carole and then opened the box, revealing a beautiful diamond ring that sparkled in the sunlight.

“Carole, you already know I love you and Shelly, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

Cassie wasn’t sure whose gasp was louder—Carole’s or hers.

Carole blinked back tears of joy. “I’d like nothing better than to be your wife.” She held out her left hand, and Daniel slipped the ring on her finger.

Shelly ran to Stuart and gently put her small arms around his neck. “You’re going to be my daddy.” Cassie heard her brother choke back a ball of pride.

“You bet,” he finally managed to say.

Cheers of congratulations wrapped Stuart and Carole and Shelly in hope and joy. Cassie wanted those she loved to be as happy as she and Daniel were. She was positive Carole and Stuart’s union would be that way.

As the heat of the day cooled slightly and the sun began its descent to the horizon, Cassie found Daniel talking with several of his co-workers. She waited patiently for him to notice her, and then she motioned for

him to follow her.

Cassie spoke softly. “Do you think it would be rude if we walked over to the barn for a few minutes? I have something for you.”

“Of course it’ll be fine. I think that is so funny. I have something to show you, too.”

Excitement moved Cassie across the yard. Her heart beat loudly with anticipation for what Daniel wanted to show her and for what she had to show him. He swung the door open, allowing the late-afternoon light to spill into the barn. Inside, Cassie started toward a tool table, but Daniel caught her arm.

“Me first.” Daniel reached behind a cabinet, pulled out a brightly wrapped present, and handed it to Cassie.

She took it and ripped the ribbon and paper from a square, narrow box. When she lifted the lid, her heart soared and tears filled her eyes. Inside, she found a newly bound version of the journal Cassie Riley had written back in 1876. It told the whole story of her life and death and carried all the details of what Daniel, Cassie, and Aggie believed was the beginning of a love that had transcended time and brought them to the place in their lives they were living at that very moment.

After flipping through several pages of photocopies of the original in a sturdy binding, Cassie knew this journal would hold up to her numerous readings of the love story she and Daniel carried in their hearts. The pages held the essence of the love that would hold them

together until death parted them.

Cassie clutched the book to her chest and rose on tiptoes to kiss the love of her life—both lives.

“You know how much this means to me. I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you, too. Now what do you have for me?” Daniel smiled widely.

Carefully, Cassie placed the journal back in the box and put the lid back on. She pulled open a drawer in the tool table. She fished in the back of the drawer, withdrew a piece of felt, and then unwrapped a knife. Carefully, she handed it to Daniel, who took it and turned it in his hand several times.

Cassie gave him a few minutes to examine it, and then she explained. “When the workers were tearing down the old barn, they found this knife behind a support beam. It probably had fallen out of sight and wasn’t found again until the demolition team started taking down the old boards. One of the men asked if I’d like to keep it. I’ve done some research and found it is very old—probably from the mid-1800s—and made from steel in the Black Hills area.” She ran her finger along the handle. “This is elk horn.”

Suddenly she grabbed his arm. “Come with me.” He followed her out the door and to the stream. They crossed the small footbridge that had been built by the same men who built the new barn. On the other side of the stream, they stopped at the base of a large tree. She

couldn't reach far enough, so she pointed up into the tree to the place where Daniel's great-grandfather had carved his son's name, *Joey*.

Years had distorted the letters, but they were still legible. "I would be willing to bet that the knife you are holding was used to carve a little boy's name into this tree." *My little boy's name* floated somewhere in the back of her mind, but she left that thought unsaid. She could see Daniel was touched by the thought.

He looked at her with tears brimming at the corners of his eyes. "You are probably very right. I can't find the words to tell you how much this means to me."

"You don't have to. It means the same as the journal does to me. We know each other's heart, and we live in each other's soul."

Daniel cleared his throat. Maybe we better get back to our guests. It will be dark soon and time for the fireworks to start.

"Wait. One more thing." Cassie looked into her loving husband's beautiful eyes. "In January, I would like you to sharpen this knife."

Puzzled, Daniel stared at her. "Okay . . . but why?"

"Because in January we will want to carve a new name into this tree. The name of our own baby."

It took a second for the words to register in Daniel's brain. When they did, he yelled at the top of his lungs. "Hey, everybody! We're going to have a baby!"

A cheer rang up from the group of their family and

friends. Joey sprinted from the crowd, his feet pounding against the ground. When he reached Cassie and his dad, he was out of breath, but he managed to say, “You mean I’m going to be a big brother?”

Cassie kneeled in front of him. “You bet you are and, with your big heart, you’ll be the best brother ever.”

Joey’s beamed from ear to ear. “Yeah, my big heart will take care of the baby’s little heart.”

