
The Daddy Trap

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CHAPTER ONE

It was the first really nice afternoon of spring, and Lindsay Gardner had propped the door of her gift shop open to let the warm breeze flow through. The fresh air added a new tang to the spicy aroma of potpourri which gave the shop its name, and it beckoned to Lindsay with almost irresistible force. Spring had always been her favorite time of year. She loved to walk barefoot through new green grass that was still tinglingly cold against her toes...

But she was alone in the gift shop today, and much as she'd like to hang a CLOSED sign in the door and go play hooky in the park, she had a shipment of china to unpack and inspect before she called the bride who'd ordered it. Then she needed to rearrange the display window, and on her desk was a stack of catalogs to look through to select the lines of merchandise she'd feature next Christmas. So she'd have to settle for the breeze and the sounds of traffic which wafted in from the courthouse square through the open door, and let the park and the new green grass wait till Sunday, when Potpourri would be closed.

The bell which alerted the staff each time a customer entered didn't work when the door was open, and Lindsay was so absorbed in checking each piece of china for defects that she didn't hear a thing till the woman who stood beside the cash register cleared her throat. "Excuse me."

Lindsay jumped and turned around. "Oh, I'm sorry. Mrs. Harrison, isn't it? May I help you?"

The woman looked flattered that Lindsay remembered her name. "I hope so." She set a bulky shopping bag on the counter. "Someone told me that you take craft items to sell."

"Once in a while," Lindsay said cautiously. "When I have space." The qualification was correct, as far as it went, and it was far more tactful than the truth – which was that most of the crafts she was offered weren't the kind of quality she insisted on. "What sort of work do you do?"

"Oh, it's not me, it's my daughter. She works for your father over at the battery plant, and just does this for fun." Mrs. Harrison pulled a bulky afghan from the shopping bag and spread it over the counter. "Up till now, that is. She thought maybe with the factory closing she'd better find something to help tide her over till another job comes along."

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Lindsay blinked in surprise. So the rumor was flying that the Armentrout factory was closing. It was the first she'd heard of it, and it left an unpleasant emptiness in the pit of her stomach. There *were* difficulties at the plant just now, but her father had tried hard to be both honest and upbeat with his employees, in order to keep any such fear from spreading. Apparently he'd been less successful than he'd thought.

"The factory isn't closing," Lindsay said. "There will probably have to be some reorganization, but –"

"That's what they say now," Mrs. Harrison interrupted firmly. "But whenever outsiders come in and decide what to do with a factory, you can just bet the news isn't going to be good. Not that I blame your daddy – I'm sure he's done the best he can with the economy the way it is, and I can understand why he'd rather let these efficiency experts he's brought in be the bad guys instead of doing it himself."

Lindsay concluded she didn't have a hope of countering that argument; Mrs. Harrison had made up her mind. "Well, I expect you'll be pleasantly surprised when the consultants' work is done," she said mildly, and put out a hand to touch the afghan. It was a garish thing – broad stripes of lime green and royal purple ran the full length of the throw – but the yarn was soft enough even for a baby, and the workmanship was superb. "What's this called? It's not crocheted, is it?"

"Nope, it's hairpin lace. Taffy said to tell you she can make all you can use."

One, in this color scheme, would probably be a lifetime supply, Lindsay thought wryly. "If she'd do commissions – I mean, let people choose colors to coordinate with their rooms, and work to order..."

"I don't see why not. She doesn't care what color they are."

That, Lindsay thought, was obvious. Perhaps the young woman was color-blind? "Then ask her to stop and see me. We'll have to talk about price and some other details."

Mrs. Harrison beamed. "That's just great. You can keep this one in the meantime, and start taking orders."

"That's very thoughtful of you." Lindsay waited till Mrs. Harrison was out of sight, then folded the afghan and put it on a shelf in the storeroom at the back of the shop. She couldn't put it on display till the agreement was firm – and in any case she'd have to think about how to show it to best advantage. It was certainly eye-catching; in fact, it would

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overwhelm any other merchandise in the vicinity.

But the afghan occupied only a corner of her mind. The rumor of the Armentrout plant closing was far more worrisome.

Lindsay had half a mind to call her father to warn him, but a glance at the clock stopped her. It was just mid-afternoon, and it was also the first day on the job for the consultants Ben Armentrout had brought in to survey his business. For the next few days at least, until they were completely familiar with the entire plant, her father would have his hands full.

And – since Lindsay knew quite well that Ben had given his secretary orders that his daughter’s calls were to reach him, no matter what he was involved in – she wasn’t about to interfere. She’d catch Ben at home this evening. A few hours wouldn’t make any difference anyway; the rumor had probably been circulating for days already.

She finished repacking the china shipment and called the bride, then took the window display apart. St. Patrick’s Day was over, so the Belleek china with its shamrock pattern would go back on its regular shelf, and the leprechaun figurines and the green satin which she’d used as a background would be put away in the storeroom till next year, to be replaced in the window by the pastels of springtime.

It had been a fairly quiet day up till that point – typical for the middle of the week – but as soon as Lindsay started trying to concentrate on the new window display, people began appearing in an unsteady stream, and she was continually having to climb out of the window to wait on customers.

“Not that I’m complaining,” she told the big black cat who’d wandered down from the upstairs apartment during a momentary lull. “Every one of them bought something, which means I can afford your food next week. Aren’t you pleased to hear that, Spats?”

The cat yawned and washed his already-immaculate white paws.

Lindsay laughed, climbed into the window once more, and began arranging two elegant porcelain dolls at a tiny table draped in pink and topped with a delicate china tea service. She was fluffing a dainty satin costume when the bride came in to claim her china.

Lindsay leaned out of the window. “Hi, Kathy. Is school out already?”

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“I didn’t see you in there,” Kathy Russell said. “And what do you mean *already*? Today was about three years long.”

“I suppose with the weather so nice, all the kids had spring fever.”

“Not only the kids – I couldn’t wait to get away from my twenty-two eight-year-olds. And I see you had an attack, too.” Kathy pointed at the open door with a smile.

“If I wasn’t a grown-up, I’d challenge you to a few rounds of hopscotch.” Lindsay started to climb out of the window once more.

“Since when did being a grown-up discourage you? Finish your decorating, Lindsay – I have to look for a retirement gift for one of the aides, anyway.”

“Take your time.” Lindsay turned back toward the tea party. One of the dolls needed her hair combed...

From the corner of her eye, Lindsay caught a glimpse of a man crossing the wide street in front of the shop at an angle which suggested he had parked a car near Potpourri and was heading for the courthouse in the center of the square. She could see only his back – broad shoulders, slim hips, long legs, dark hair – but the sight made her gasp, and her heart gave a painful jerk.

How odd it was, she thought, that after nearly nine years, she still reacted with such intensity to the fleeting sight of a man who vaguely resembled her ex-husband, or one who walked with the same kind of loose ground-eating stride that Gibbson Gardner had...

Kathy came toward the window, an ornate music box in her hand. “Are you all right, Lindsay? I thought you were choking.”

“Oh – I’m fine.” She was a bit breathless, though, and Kathy didn’t look convinced. Lindsay tried to laugh it off. “It was nothing, really. I just saw a guy in the square who looked a bit like Gibb, and for a split second I thought I was going to have a heart attack.”

As soon as the words were out, she regretted them. She never mentioned Gibb any more, and no one else ever brought up his name, either – at least not in Lindsay’s presence. It was almost as if he’d never existed, and that was just fine with her. The last thing she wanted to do was leave the impression, even with her best friend, that she still had Gibbson Gardner on her mind.

“Anyway,” Lindsay added easily, “my momentary hallucination is now past.” She

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gestured at the delicate filigree box Kathy held. “That plays a Mozart piece. I’ll wind it up if you like.”

She climbed out of the window. It had been warmer than she realized in the confined space, with the sun bathing the plate glass; the cool breeze felt good on her flushed face.

Kathy handed over the box, listened patiently through the tinkling melody, and nodded. “I’ll take it. And my china, of course – I’m glad it arrived in time for my party Saturday night. You’re coming, aren’t you?”

“Of course.” Lindsay started writing up the sale. “But I’d have thought that will be a paper-plate kind of crowd.”

“Maybe you’re right. I’ll just stop at the supermarket for a steak and we’ll initiate the china tonight.”

Lindsay smiled. “Sounds like a great idea. If you’ve got a minute, I’ll look for the original carton for the music box.”

She dug through the neat stack of boxes under the stairs which led from the storeroom to her apartment above, and found the carton. She was carefully packing the music box when Kathy asked, “Did you have a chance to ask your father about bringing my class out to tour the plant? Now that we’ve finished our unit on electricity, I think they’d enjoy seeing batteries being made.”

Lindsay nodded. “He said it was fine with him, but the end of next week would be a better time. With the consultants starting to work –”

“Twenty-two third-graders underfoot is the last thing Ben needs. I can understand that. We’ll make it Friday afternoon, then. Will you be able to help?”

“Sure – I’ll be there. And I’ll tell Daddy, so he can arrange a guide.” She hesitated. “Kathy, have you heard any rumors about the plant closing?”

“No. Why?”

Lindsay told her about Mrs. Harrison. “I hate to upset Daddy about it if it’s only a bee in the bonnet of one worker’s mother. And she was wrong about other things, like calling the consultants efficiency experts. But...”

“If the rumor’s floating around town, Ben needs to know,” Kathy agreed. “I’ll see

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what I can find out. I can ask without getting the attention you would.”

Lindsay helped carry the boxes of china out to Kathy’s car. She took her time walking back to the shop; she’d clipped her cordless phone to the belt of her tailored taupe slacks, and she was close enough to see if anyone walked through the door.

Besides, she thought, she hadn’t even taken time out for lunch today, so she deserved a short break.

Winter’s leftovers were still in evidence around the square. Sand coated the sidewalks, even though the ice underneath had melted. Across the street there were still a few stubborn humps of snow where the plows had pushed drifts out of the way after the last storm. But another day or two of pleasant warmth, followed by a nice spring rain, and Elmwood would be washed fresh and clean once more.

Across the street, in the center of the grassy square, the ornate county courthouse stretched three stories tall, topped with a wedding-cake tower which held Elmwood’s largest clock. Facing the square, lined up with precision on all four sides, was perhaps the best collection of mid-Victorian commercial buildings to be found anywhere in the Midwest.

Lindsay thought the whole business district looked like a movie set, now that it had been expensively restored to its original appearance, with shops and offices downstairs and apartments above. She had never regretted her decision to locate Potpourri there, instead of in one of the new strip malls on the outskirts of town.

She paused in front of the window to study the display, and decided the table needed to be turned slightly to present the tea service to best advantage. There was an empty spot in the corner, too, where she’d been standing – perhaps a nice display of picnic ware would fit in that awkward space...

The telephone clipped to her belt rang shrilly, and she answered it while she was still on the sidewalk. “Potpourri. This is Lindsay.”

“Honey—”

“Oh, hi, Daddy. How’s it going?”

“Do you have any customers?”

“Not at the moment.” Lindsay frowned. She could hear tension in Ben Armentrout’s

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voice, and she wondered if the rumor she'd heard had gotten back to her father as well. Or perhaps he was already frustrated by the consulting team.

"I tried to call you earlier but the line was busy," Ben said. "I need to talk to you, honey. Have you heard anything about Gibb?"

That was odd. Lindsay frowned and glanced over her shoulder. There were at least a dozen people in the courthouse square, but none of them were the man she'd seen earlier. He'd be long gone by now, of course – and he probably wasn't at all like Gibb, really. Perhaps she'd been having sort of a psychic flash – it wouldn't be the first time that she and her father had found themselves thinking about the same thing, at the same time.

But why Gibb?

Daddy's heard some news, she thought. It had never happened before, but it wasn't unreasonable that someone who'd known both Ben and Gibb from the old days might have called Ben Armentrout to tell him that his former son-in-law had been promoted, or married, or seriously injured...

The sudden frozen fear Lindsay felt took her by surprise. She and Gibb had parted nine years ago with harsh words and harsher feelings, and there hadn't been a single contact since. It made no sense at all for her to feel panicky over the possibility of bad news about him – though she supposed that the mere fact he had once been important in her life was enough to explain the breathless sensation; she'd feel the same if she got bad news about any of her friends.

"I haven't heard anything. What's going on, Daddy?"

Ben Armentrout sighed. "He's here, Lindsay."

She was stepping across the threshold as he spoke, and the shock turned her knees to rubber. She caught herself with a hand on the edge of the door; that was the only thing that kept her from falling.

Gibbson Gardner was in Elmwood...

Lindsay's head was spinning, and she seemed to be hot and cold all at the same time – her face felt flushed, but she was shivering. She swallowed hard and sank down on the window ledge, clutching the telephone in a death grip.

For the first year after their divorce, she'd worried about him coming back. She'd

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even had nightmares now and then about what she'd do if he reappeared. But long ago she'd concluded that Gibb would never be coming back, because whatever it was he'd felt for her had been destroyed in the fires of that last argument – in the same way that her love for him had been blasted into oblivion.

On the strength of that certainty, Lindsay had finally found peace. She'd rebuilt her life. She'd even forgiven him, though she knew she would never understand.

But to have him turn up now, after nine years –

“*Here?*” Her voice was drenched with fear. “Are you sure?”

“I’ve seen him, Lindsay.”

“He came to the plant? What does he want? Why is he here?”

“We can go into the details later,” Ben Armentrout said firmly. “The reason I’m calling is that he asked if you were still here in town. I don’t know if he was just asking or if he intends to seek you out, but I had to be honest, so...”

She interrupted. “Daddy, surely you didn’t tell him about –”

A sudden fierce prickle on the back of her neck stopped her cold, and she jumped up from the window ledge and wheeled around.

Gibson Gardner was standing just inside the open door, one hand in the pocket of his khaki-colored trousers. A navy sports coat was slung over one shoulder, and the top button of his white shirt was unfastened. His pose was as casual and easy as a dancer at rest, and he was watching her through half-hooded hazel eyes.

Lindsay wet her lips. “It *was* you,” she whispered, hardly aware that she had spoken.

His eyebrows lifted a fraction of an inch. “Did your father tell me about what?” His voice was low, but there was a hard edge to it that she well remembered. He’d sounded just the same way on the evening of their last, most bitter quarrel.

Lindsay remembered she was still holding the phone. “I have to go, Daddy,” she said. Her voice was tight with strain. “I’ll talk to you later.” She pushed the button which broke the connection and laid the phone down in the window as carefully as if it were made of spun sugar.

“What is it you don’t want me to know, Lindsay?” Gibb asked.

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For one split second, Lindsay contemplated making a run for it. If she could dash through the store and up the stairs to her apartment—

But she couldn't, of course. She knew that despite the indolence of his pose, Gibb was as alert as a runner at the starting blocks. And what would she gain by running, anyway? It would be far better to stay and face him down. Nothing she did was his business any more. He'd given up that right nine years ago, when he'd turned his back on her.

She squared her shoulders and put up her chin. "Hello, Gibb. You haven't changed a bit, have you? You're still nasty and suspicious."

But he had changed. He was almost thirty-five now, and though he was every bit as lean and muscular as she remembered, there were fine lines around his eyes and threads of silver at his temples. The seriousness which had sat so uncomfortably on the young man she had known had settled into confidence – as if he had tested himself and was comfortable with the results, and no longer felt he had anything to prove.

"You haven't answered my question," he said.

"I don't owe you any answers. Remember? – or shall I go and dig out the divorce decree to remind you?" Lindsay went on the offensive. "Why are you here, anyway?"

"Your father told me where to find you."

"So you came running right over? Well, it's very thoughtful of you to stop in to say hello," she said with mock sincerity. "Though after nine years, I can't think why you'd believe I was interested in where you go or what you do."

She hadn't thought it was possible for his eyes to grow harder.

"There's no reason you should be interested." His voice was cold. "I'm not here to make a stab at a joyous reunion."

"You relieve my mind. What do you want, Gibb? Or have you already discussed your needs with Daddy, and you just stopped to say goodbye as you leave town again?"

"*My needs* being money, I suppose you mean?"

She'd half-expected that he'd take offense at the implication, but his tone was smooth. Lindsay shrugged. "I didn't say that."

"You sound very matter-of-fact about it, though. Is Ben still buying your way out of

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all your mistakes, Lindsay?”

She gritted her teeth and kept her voice level. “I wouldn’t throw stones if I were you. He may have paid you to get out of my life – but you took the money.”

“And therefore I must be blackmailing him – or you – for more, now. Is that what you think?”

“You haven’t given me any other reason for bothering me.”

“I stopped because I thought it only polite to tell you myself that I was here, instead of letting you hear it through the grapevine.”

Elmwood’s oh-so-efficient grapevine, Lindsay thought bitterly. Oh, the gossips would have a wonderful time with this – if he stayed in town long enough for the word to get around.

“Well, now that you’ve done what you set out to do...” She made no effort to hide her glance at her wristwatch.

His hazel eyes didn’t leave her face; she knew it, even though she wasn’t looking at him. His voice was lower, quieter, but not a whit softer. “What are you trying to hide, Lindsay?”

“I don’t have anything to hide.”

“Being defensive is no way to convince me of that.”

And it was no way to get rid of him, either, she thought belatedly. He was mulish enough to stay right there till he got some sort of answer.

That was another thing that had changed, she reflected. Not his stubbornness – determination, she was convinced, had been a congenital condition with Gibbson Gardner – but the way he exercised his will. He was much smoother now, much less dramatic... and even more inexorable.

“What didn’t you want your father to tell me?”

She wished she knew exactly what Ben had said. But it was too late for that, so she looked Gibb straight in the eye and lied. “Where I was. I just didn’t care to see you. But now that you’re here, I suppose we might as well catch up on the news... How have you been?” she said, with mock heartiness. “Have you been well? Are you happy? Tell me

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about the last nine years.”

“Fine, yes, moderately, and I’ll be happy to – if you really have enough time. But of course you do. The sign on the door says your shop will be open for another hour, and it’s not as if customers are knocking each other down to get in.”

Lindsay bit her tongue, hard. She hadn’t stopped to think about the consequences of flippancy, and she was caught in her own trap. “Great,” she said curtly, and moved toward the cash register. She could at least keep her hands busy, and then she wouldn’t have to look at him. Maybe she could even keep from listening to him.

He followed her, looking around. “This is quite a nice shop.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Oh, no. Whatever you did, Lindsay, I’d expect it to be the very best.” There was an infinitesimal edge to the words which robbed them of any compliment. “You always had a taste for the highest quality.”

Except in husbands, she almost said. “And this way I can buy my own trinkets wholesale,” she agreed, with a tinge of irony. “It saves me an incredible amount of money.”

“And it gives you something to do with your time.”

If he really thought she had no better reason for running a business than to fill her idle hours, Lindsay wasn’t going to waste her time trying to convince him otherwise. “Oh, yes. The store makes a lovely hobby. It’s so much more entertaining than needlepoint.” She pulled a stack of bills out of the register and began counting them.

Gibb moved away to look at a display of crystal. “I’m surprised you don’t have a few employees to do the actual work.”

“As a matter of fact, I have several. Aren’t you lucky to catch me here myself?”

Directly in front of Potpourri a car door slammed, and the bang resounded through the store. Lindsay looked up, and her heart sank.

The child who had gotten out of the car crossed the sidewalk in three steps and came through the door in a rush. His golden-blond hair was ruffled, and his jacket was only half-buttoned, crookedly. He skidded to a stop in front of the register and tugged a book

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bag off his shoulder. “Mom, can I go roller-blading with Josh and then have supper at his house? His mother says it’s okay, and she’ll bring me back in time to go to choir practice. She’s waiting for me outside, so can I go? Please?”

Lindsay said quietly, “I have a customer, Beep.”

The child drew himself up straight and looked around till he spotted Gibb. “Oh, I’m sorry. Excuse me, sir.”

Lindsay nodded approval. “Thank you, dear.”

Gibb came around the corner of the display shelves and stood with a crystal goblet in one hand, looking from one of them to the other.

If his eyes had been cold before, now they were frozen. “So that’s what you didn’t want me to know, Lindsay – that you have a son.”

She wet her lips. “I have a son, yes, and it’s not a subject I care to discuss with you. Beep is no concern of yours.”

The little boy was looking back and forth between them, his forehead wrinkled.

“Did you call him *Beep*?” Gibb said. “What kind of a name is that?”

Beep looked a bit disgusted, but he answered politely. “It’s a nickname. I’m really Benjamin Patrick, but I couldn’t say it when I was little, and it came out Beep. Now everybody’s in the habit.” He looked Gibb up and down. “What’s your name?”

Lindsay held her breath while Gibb seemed to think it over. The fact that he was hesitating didn’t really mean anything, she tried to tell herself. He was probably debating whether to bother answering at all. Gibb disliked children, and he’d no doubt never encountered any quite like Beep. Of course, she had to admit, no one on earth was quite like Beep...

“I’m Gibb Gardner,” he said, and Lindsay released her breath in a long and very quiet sigh.

Beep held out his hand for a formal shake. “It’s nice to meet you, sir.” Then he grinned. “That’s pretty neat – we’ve all three got the same last name!”

Gibb’s jaw set, and his eyes narrowed. So the news that his ex-wife was still using his name, and had passed it on to her son, had come as a shock, Lindsay concluded.

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Beep wheeled back to face Lindsay. “What about it, Mom? Can I go?”

She nodded. Somewhere, she’d seemed to lose the power of speech.

Beep dropped his book bag behind the register and dashed out to the waiting car, oblivious to the tension he left behind. He seemed to have taken all the air in the shop with him, for Lindsay was having trouble breathing, and when she looked at Gibb, his face seemed a bit gray.

It was a full minute before he broke the silence. “Why did you keep my name, Lindsay?”

She shrugged. “Isn’t it obvious? I liked it better than Armentrout. Wouldn’t anybody? And as long as I didn’t have to put up with you...” She riffled a stack of twenty-dollar bills and tucked them into the bank bag. “I assumed you knew I had.”

“Your father didn’t mention it.”

“I expect there are a number of things about me that my father felt were none of your business.”

“Like your son.”

“Beep certainly fits in that category.”

“How old is he?”

She hesitated before she told the truth. “He’s eight.”

“That’s interesting. I suppose you’re going to tell me he’s my son, too?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. He just turned eight.” Lindsay could almost see the calculation going on in his head. “Remember, Gibb? I divorced you because you were so opposed to the idea of having a child that you wouldn’t even discuss the subject. Why would I waste my time trying to convince you that Beep’s yours? For the sake of child support, maybe?” The sarcasm in her tone made it obvious that she thought the chances of collecting any would be nil.

The silence drew out for a long moment, and when he spoke Lindsay was surprised that there was neither anger nor relief in his voice, only matter-of-fact calm. “It didn’t take you long to find another man after you got rid of me.”

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She nodded. “And it didn’t take much of a man, either.”

“That’s obvious – since he didn’t even stick around long enough to marry you.”

“I didn’t want him to. After my experience with you, I had no taste left for marriage.”

“That makes two of us. We don’t seem to be cut out for it, somehow – either you or me. And I suppose once you had what you wanted, a husband didn’t matter much.”

“I was happy to have my child, yes.”

“A toy to play with. Your very own life-sized doll.”

“I certainly have no need to defend my decisions to you, Gibb.”

He moved around the corner of the display shelves and put the crystal goblet carefully back into place. “Did I know him? Your son’s father, I mean.”

He sounded no more than idly curious, but Lindsay was not deceived. “Not very well, as I recall. And that’s absolutely the last question I’m going to answer. Any say you had in how I live my life ended with our divorce, Gibb.” She zipped the bank bag. “Now if you don’t mind, I have work to do before I can go home. It’s been very interesting, but I doubt we need to repeat this conversation – so don’t feel you have to come back before you leave town.”

He leaned against the counter. “Where did you get the idea I was just passing through?”

“I assumed, from what Daddy said...”

He raised one eyebrow and quoted her, dryly. “I expect there are a number of things about me that your father felt were none of your business.”

She didn’t want to ask. She didn’t want to know. But the question escaped nevertheless. “Like what?”

Gibb looked her over slowly, and then said, with deliberation, “Like the fact that I’ll be in town for a good while. A month or two, at least. Perhaps longer.”

The bank bag slipped from Lindsay’s suddenly nerveless fingers.

“You see, Lindsay,” he went on quietly, “I’m the consultant who’s going to be sorting out the problems at the Armentrout plant. So you’d better get used to seeing me around.”