

SUSAN
MALLERY

*Wife In
Disguise*

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«HarperCollins»

Mallery S.

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Josie Fitzgerald Scott was athletic, competitive and stubborn as sin—until an accident changed her life. Now she simply sought closure with unforgettable Del Scott—the man she'd once lovingly wed, passionately bedded, then contrarily fled.... Amazingly, Del didn't recognize Josie's reconstructed contours. Yet her sexy ex-husband seemed oddly, instantly drawn to this soft, delicate "stranger," despite her new curves. Which gave Josie—as "Rose"—a second chance: to woo and win back Del's fierce male passion. But would limping, less than honestly, down memory lane unleash a landslide of trouble? Or—miraculously—lead Josie home to love?

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Josie had been wrong about being prepared to see Del again.

Especially after three long years and her endless, agonizing reconstructive surgeries and rehabilitation.

Recognition slammed into her. Her chest went tight, and her legs shook as she stared at the man who'd once been her husband.

Del was tall, broad shouldered, his muscles earned through years of construction work. His dark hair gleamed in the overhead lights, and his eyes were still chocolate-brown and glinting with humor. He was good-looking, charming and, she knew from experience, very attentive in bed.

He was also staring at her with the polite expression he would offer any stranger.

“I’m Delaney Scott,” he said, holding out his hand. “How can I help you?”

Josie blinked in surprise. Del didn’t recognize her.

While seeing him again had rocked her to her soul. . . .

Wife in Disguise

Susan Mallery



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To those who have survived the trials of life,
while coming through the fire
with grace and humor intact.

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Prologue

The accident occurred in slow motion.

One minute Josie Fitzgerald Scott was driving home for lunch as she did most days, the next, her life changed forever. There was no warning, no premonition that this Tuesday at 11:45 a.m. was going to be different from any other. She entered the West Los Angeles intersection without a second thought. And then a truck plowed into her.

It was at that moment, when she glanced to her left and saw the grill—taller than her compact car—that she knew she was going to die. Time came to a halt. She had a chance to look up and see that yes, her light was green so she hadn't accidentally run a red by mistake. She briefly thought about accelerating or braking, to lessen the impact of the impending collision. But before she could decide, the truck was on her and the first sickening sound of metal on metal filled her ears.

Mercifully, she felt nothing. Not pressure, not pain, not even panic. As she was thrust to her right by the force of the truck slamming into her car, she wondered what she would regret as she breathed her last. Would it be her tacit estrangement from her family or her solitary existence? Would it be...

The sound increased until it filled her head. She had an odd sensation of being disconnected from her body, of not actually being a part of the destruction. She heard screams and vaguely wondered if they were her own.

Then the darkness beckoned. But before she could step into the waiting oblivion, she felt her first and only regret. Del. That she would never see him again or tell him that she was sorry for everything that had gone wrong between them.

As her car was crushed like a soda can, breaking her body and ravaging her face, she slipped into the blackness. With her last conscious thought, she breathed the name of the man who had once wanted her for his own.

Chapter One

One year later

The old Miller place was for sale. Josie Scott parked her Volvo in front of the old Victorian mansion and stared at the gabled roof line. She'd been fighting nothing but memories since she'd driven into Beachside Bay, California, earlier that morning, and seeing the old house only made the problem worse. She'd returned to town for closure, but what she was getting instead was a quick course in how to survive a brutal trip down memory lane.

"I'm on a mission," she reminded herself. A mission that should take two, maybe three days at most. Then she would leave the land of her past and return to...

Actually she didn't have anything to return to, but this wasn't the time to remember that. Better to focus on the past and why she was here. So she looked at the Miller house and remembered when she and Del had visited it, one of the many times it had been on the market.

"We could rip out the entire third floor and make it into a master suite," he'd said one Saturday long ago. They'd been standing at the top of the narrow staircase leading to the unused third floor of the mansion. "New bathroom, sitting area, even a study."

Josie had planted her hands on her jeans-clad hips and stubbornly shaken her head. "It'll be too hot."

Del turned to her, his dark eyes glinting with laughter. "There's this new invention. Maybe you've heard of it. Air-conditioning? The master suite could have its own unit."

She hadn't been convinced. "I want the master on the second floor."

"Where will the kids sleep?"

She'd rolled her eyes, then turned away, tucking a strand of short blond hair behind her ear. She hadn't been about to get trapped in that discussion again. Del wanted kids; she wasn't ready. He wanted the master up, she wanted it down. He wanted her home and cooking dinner and she wanted a career. They hadn't agreed on the Miller house, nor on anything else of importance.

Josie leaned back in the front seat of her car and closed her eyes. "Oh, Del, what were we thinking?" Their three-year marriage had been one long argument punctuated by great sex. In fact, they'd currently been divorced as long as they'd been married. So what on earth was she doing in Beachside Bay?

"Closure," she murmured to herself, opening her eyes and starting her car engine.

Yes, she and Del were divorced. From what she'd heard, while he hadn't remarried he'd certainly moved on with his life. She had, too, or so she'd thought until her accident a year before. Del had been her last thought before she'd slipped into unconsciousness and her first thought upon waking in the hospital. He'd been on her mind on and off through the past twelve months of surgery, physical therapy and more surgery. Obviously, she wasn't as over him as she'd thought.

So here she was, back where the trouble had begun. All she wanted was a couple of quick conversations with her ex so that she could put her past behind her. A simple plan, but one that wasn't going to work if she didn't have the courage to go talk to him.

"So do it now," she ordered herself as she slipped the car into gear, checked the mirrors and road ahead before pulling out onto the quiet side street.

She drove the scant three miles to the offices of Scott Construction. As she did she was assaulted by memories of living in the sleepy seaside town. Beachside Bay was directly west of San Jose but light years from anything remotely resembling a burgeoning economy. The main residents were college kids and retirees who actually existed in peaceful acceptance. Funky restaurants and elegant bed and breakfasts pulled in the vacation crowd, but there wasn't enough industry to keep the tourists longer than a weekend or two a year.

She turned the corner and pulled into the parking lot of Scott Construction. The low one-story building still looked more like a beach house than an office. Flowers, mostly roses, bloomed along the edges of the parking lot and up the long walkway.

Memories assaulted her. She remembered how the place had looked when she'd been all of nineteen and looking for a part-time job. The twenty-five hours a week of light office work had been more than enough to supplement her athletic scholarship. The fact that the Scotts' son was three years her senior, good-looking enough to have his own beefcake calendar and a charmer to boot had simply been a bonus.

But all the memories weren't so fun, Josie admitted to herself. She could also recall the times when she and Del had been fighting. He'd left for work, but she hadn't been content to let things rest. Instead she'd followed him to the office to continue screaming at him, not caring who heard or what they thought of her.

She gripped the steering wheel, squeezing tightly and trying to erase that part of her past. She had many things to atone for. She'd been unprepared for marriage, with the sensibilities of a spoiled teenager rather than a grown woman. Would Del be interested in listening to her say that now, or had he put her so far behind him that it didn't matter anymore? There was only one way to find out.

Gathering her courage, Josie turned off the engine and carefully put the keys into her purse. As she opened the door of her sedan, she shifted her weight so that she could turn to face out. She swung her legs slowly and painfully around until her feet touched the ground. When she was ready, she braced one hand on the specially installed handle by the back of her seat and pushed into a standing position. Her leg muscles—especially those in her left leg—quivered and threatened to give way. She forced herself to remain completely still until she'd achieved her balance. Only then did she turn and bend down so she could pull out her purse and her cane.

For one brief moment in time she allowed herself to remember what it had been like when she'd taken her body for granted. She'd been a born athlete and her world had consisted of running and bounding and achieving. Over the past year she'd learned to measure her progress in single steps... sometimes in mere inches.

She draped her purse over her right shoulder and braced the cane with her left hand. The path up to the building seemed endlessly long, with three shallow steps in the ten or so feet of concrete. There was a time when she would have raced to the door without a second thought. Now she had to consciously move her damaged left leg, lifting with still-healing muscles and ignoring the burning pain that was her constant companion. She paused at the halfway point to catch her breath and to admire Catherine's exquisite roses.

Del's mother had a gift for making things grow. The mild temperatures had brought the fragrant blooms out early, and Josie lingered to inhale their sweetness. When she was relaxed and rested enough to continue, she started for the glass door.

As she moved, she could see herself reflected in the glass. The tall, awkwardly gaited woman was a stranger. Not just the long hair and the soft flowing dress, but the face. The side impact of the truck had caused glass to slice her face. In the first six months after the accident, a gifted plastic surgeon had restored the damage, making her into a pretty young woman. But the slightly more prominent cheekbones and rounded chin had little in common with the features of her birth. Except for her eyes and the shape of her mouth, she was a stranger to herself. She smiled as she thought of Del's shock as he would try to figure out who she was, then his reaction when he did. Her smile faded. Would he be happy or annoyed that she'd walked back into his life?

She reached the glass door and managed to maneuver her way into the waiting area of the office. The spacious entry had been filled with large windows and comfortable furniture. Oversize photos of recent restorations hung on the wall. A rectangular table in the center offered a place to study blueprints.

Josie turned to the receptionist, sitting behind a big cherry-wood desk. The dark-haired woman in her late forties didn't look familiar. She offered Josie a pleasant smile.

"May I help you?"

Josie had to brush her suddenly damp palms against her skirt. She could feel her stomach tightening as she fought against the need to flee. She'd been crazy to come back. Del wasn't going to want to talk to her. They'd been divorced for three years; they had nothing to say to each other.

"I, um..." She cleared her throat. The accident had damaged her vocal cords so that her normally high-pitched voice had become low and husky. "I'd like to see Del Scott, please. I don't have an appointment."

The woman nodded. "He just happens to be in. Let me buzz him." She paused. "I'm sorry. I didn't get your name."

Before Josie could respond, the phone rang. The woman excused herself and took the call. Three more followed in rapid succession. When there was a lull, she quickly buzzed Del and told him he had a visitor.

Josie limped over to a sofa and studied the floral print. She was more concerned about the softness of the padding than the fabric used. If she sat down, she wanted to be sure that she could stand up again. Getting trapped in a chair wasn't her idea of making a good impression on her ex.

The door leading to the back swung open. Josie turned quickly—too quickly. Her weight shifted before her legs were ready and she nearly stumbled. Only by putting most of her weight on her cane was she able to stay upright. She forced herself to get control and balance before she allowed herself to look at the newcomer.

She'd been wrong about being prepared to see him again.

Recognition slammed into her. Her chest went tight and her leg muscles shook the way they did after a ninety-minute therapy session. Sound seemed to fade, then get too loud as she stared at the man who'd once been her husband.

Del was tall—six foot two—which made him about a half foot taller than her. He was broad shouldered with muscles earned through years of construction work. Close-cropped dark hair gleamed in the overhead lights and his eyes were still chocolate-brown and glinting with humor. He was good-looking, charming and attentive in bed.

He was also staring at her with the polite expression he would offer any stranger.

"I'm Delaney Scott," he said, holding out his hand. "Please call me Del. How can I help you?"

He didn't recognize her. Josie blinked in surprise. She'd thought it might take him a minute, but she'd never considered the fact that he wouldn't even have a flicker of recognition.

"I, um..."

Her voice trailed off as she struggled to figure out what she was supposed to say. Seeing him had rocked her to her soul. As she continued to stare at his familiar features, she realized that she didn't know what she was feeling. Confusion, a draw to the past, a strong desire to run. What on earth had she been thinking when she'd come here? Was she going to say, "Gee, Del, I'm Josie. Can we talk about what went wrong in our marriage?" She needed time. The trick was how to get some.

Finally she realized he was still holding out his hand. She offered hers and they shook. The feel of his skin against hers was too familiar. She shivered as she remembered all the wonderful things that hand could do to her.

As she released him, she was conscious of his questioning silence and the stare of the receptionist. Josie wasn't talking, she wasn't doing anything but acting like an idiot. If she wasn't careful they were going to call for the men with the straitjackets.

Del motioned to the sofa she'd been studying. "Would you like a seat?"

She tapped her cane lightly on the hardwood floor. "I'm a little concerned about being able to get up if I do."

As she spoke the words, she kept her gaze on his face, wanting to see any revulsion or pity in his expression. Neither appeared. Instead he glanced at the couch, then nodded. “Why don’t you risk it? If there’s a problem when we’re done, I’ll help you up. Or Jan will.” He nodded at the receptionist.

“All right.”

Josie shifted until she was standing in front of the sofa, then slowly lowered herself into a sitting position. She hated that she had to think the process through—keeping her weight evenly distributed and using her cane to slow her descent. Nothing physical was easy for her anymore.

Del settled at the far end of the couch and angled toward her. His expression was pleasant, if slightly confused. He still had no clue who she was.

“Do you want to tell me why you stopped by?” he asked, with the patience of someone dealing with a very shy person. “I assume it has something to do with a house. Are you interested in restoration?”

Just being this close to him made her feel safe. Josie realized that she’d spent the past twelve months fighting fear. The relief of being able to let it go—even for a few minutes—made her feel giddy enough to float.

As she looked into his dark eyes, she realized that she’d been insane to expect Del to simply take a meeting with her and discuss their marriage. It had been three years. They were strangers. He wouldn’t care that she needed closure.

But she also wasn’t willing to walk away. The last year of their marriage had been hell. One fight after another, punctuated by periods of rage. Which meant she should have been over him. Yet ever since the accident, she hadn’t been able to get Del out of her mind. She needed time to figure out why. There seemed to be only one way to get that respite.

“I’m interested in the Miller place,” she said, surprising both him and herself.

He raised his dark eyebrows. “It’s a beautiful home, but it will require extensive remodeling. We’re talking about a lot of time and money.”

Thanks to her injuries and a settlement from the company that owned the truck that hit her, she had plenty of both. “I’m not an expert on old houses,” she said, “but I don’t expect it to be easy. Is this the sort of project you’d be willing to take on?”

Interest brightened his eyes, and he grinned. “I’ve been admiring that old place for years. In fact I have some plans that I drew up a long time ago.”

He spoke the words casually, as if they had no meaning. But they made Josie want to run away. She knew exactly when he’d drawn up the plans. It had been during the last year of their marriage, when they had almost had enough money to buy the old place. But it had quickly become obvious to both of them that they didn’t have a prayer of agreeing on anything about the project.

“If you’re interested, I can show them to you,” he told her. “It would be easier at the house where I can show you what I’m talking about.”

She nodded her agreement. “That sounds lovely. I, um, suppose we should make an appointment.”

He rose and walked over to the receptionist’s desk. After grabbing her scheduling calendar, he flipped the page to glance at the rest of the week. “I have some time tomorrow. Does that suit you?”

Josie swallowed. Did she really plan to go through with this? Was she going to buy the old Miller place and have Del renovate it for her? Shouldn’t she just tell him who she was so they could talk and then she could go about her business?

Except she didn’t have any business, personal or otherwise. Until her next surgery, her entire life consisted of healing from the last one. She didn’t have a permanent home anymore or a job. Restoring the house would give her something to look forward to and be a part of. If nothing else, she could consider it an investment. When she was finished, she could always sell at a profit. Old restored Victorians were all the rage, even in Beachside Bay.

“Tomorrow is fine.”

They settled on a time. Suddenly eager to escape, she braced her weight on her cane and slowly stood. With Del solicitously holding open the door, she made her painful way to the exit.

When she was about to step outside, she paused to look at him. She knew every inch of his face and body, but he hadn't recognized her. Not that she blamed him. Not only was her face completely different, but her shape had changed as well. Gone were the lean lines from her aggressive exercise program. She'd gained weight in the past year, filling out in her breasts and hips. Her legs bore scars, especially the left one. If he could see under the flowing folds of her floral print dress, he would be shocked...and repulsed.

"Thanks, Del," she said in her throaty voice. "I'm looking forward to hearing what you think you can do with the house."

"Me, too." He smiled, then his mouth straightened and he stiffened. "I'm sorry. I just realized I never caught your name."

She opened her mouth to tell him the truth, then pressed her lips together. She wasn't ready to make explanations. She needed more time. A light breeze stirred her hair. It brought with it the scent of the beautiful flowers blooming in the warm spring afternoon. She glanced at his mother's garden and then returned her attention to him.

"I'm Rose."

The statement came from nowhere, but she didn't take it back. Instead she started walking before he could ask her for a last name. She would have to come up with one tonight.

"See you tomorrow," he called after her.

She waved without looking back. She didn't want to know that he was watching her, studying her slow steps, probably wondering what was wrong with her. She made it to her car without incident and sank onto the firm seat. With him still looking on, she backed out of the parking lot.

As she drove away, she was both desperate to know what he'd thought of her and grateful she couldn't begin to guess. She was nothing like the woman he remembered as Josie Fitzgerald Scott. On the one hand, he'd divorced that Josie, so he couldn't have cared about her too much. Of course he'd also married her, so there had been some kind of attraction and affection between them.

Josie turned left at the stop sign, then headed for the real estate office. If she was going to have her ex-husband restore the Miller Victorian house, then she'd better see about buying it. At least the old place had been vacant for years. That, combined with her ability to pay cash for the place, would mean that she could have a quick escrow.

Had she done the right thing, she wondered as she drove, or was she crazy? Pretending to be someone else sure wasn't smart. Maybe she should have just told Del the truth about herself. But she hated the thought of seeing the pity and shock in his eyes. Better for him to think of her as a stranger. All she needed was a little time to get to know him again. Once they were friends, she would confess all and then convince him to talk about their marriage enough to give her closure. After that, she would be free to get on with her life. Free to figure out who she was and what she was going to do, now that everything she'd loved about herself was gone.

Chapter Two

Del Scott climbed the front steps of the old Miller place. It was nearly eleven in the morning on the kind of day designed to make every person not living in Beachside Bay want to sell their house, pack up their belongings and move to the oceanside town. The sky was a perfect California blue, the temperatures promised to reach into the mid-seventies and a faint tang of salt scented the sweet breeze.

Del paused to study the porch and front door of the old place. Both were in need of repainting, but the structure was fundamentally sound. He'd been through the house enough times to be able to picture every room and imagine the possibilities. At one time he'd even thought he might live here. The plans he'd brought along with him were proof of that. That dream had disappeared along with his wife. Although he could regret losing the house he could honestly say that he didn't have the same feelings about Josie. She was out of his life forever, and he was glad.

As he raised his hand to knock on the front door, he frowned. He hadn't thought about his ex-wife in months. Maybe not in the past year. Why had she turned up in his mind now? Was it being back at the Miller place? After all, they'd often talked about buying it. But every time they'd toured it, they'd ended up arguing about remodeling, just like they'd argued about everything else.

Forget it, he told himself firmly as he knocked.

As he waited for a response, he listened for the slow step of the soon-to-be owner. Rose. He frowned as he realized she hadn't given him a last name. She'd intrigued him, which was strange. They'd exchanged only a handful of words. Maybe it had been the way the light had caught her pale-blond hair. Josie's hair had been that color, but she'd always worn it as short as a boy, while Rose had soft, feminine waves that slipped down to her shoulders. With her big blue eyes and full mouth, she reminded him of a 1940s movie star. Curvy, sultry and a dozen kinds of trouble.

Before he could tell himself that sexual attraction to a client was a serious mistake, the front door opened. If he'd been hoping that seeing his potential new customer in person would erase the image he had of her as a temptress, he'd been mistaken.

Yesterday she'd worn a light-green dress. Today's was pink. Short sleeves in a gauzy material flirted with her upper arms. The floral print fabric skimmed over full breasts and hips before falling gently to her calves. Makeup accentuated her big eyes and full mouth, and the fact that she was leaning heavily on a cane did nothing to stem his male interest.

"Good morning," he said, forcing his voice to sound professional rather than husky with yearning. What on earth was wrong with him? He'd given up unrealized crushes on women about the time he'd turned seventeen and Betty Jo Lancaster had let him go all the way in the backseat of his Mustang.

"Mr. Scott." She gave him a brief nod and a quick smile. "You're very prompt. I appreciate that."

"Just part of the Scott family service. We're on time and we come prepared to do work. The same applies to my crew. If I tell you they'll be starting at eight, they'll all be here then. And please, call me Del."

"All right. Del." She stepped back to let him into the vacant house.

A beautiful chandelier hung in the foyer. He knew that it and the marble tiles underfoot had been shipped over from Italy in the early 1920s.

"I've been reacquainting myself with the house," Rose said, closing the door behind him and turning slowly toward the main living area, keeping her cane close to her side. "I'd forgotten how much work the house needs."

He was surprised to experience a stab of disappointment. He told himself his feelings came from having wanted to fix the old place for the past ten years, not from the realization that Rose might drift out of his life as easily as she'd drifted into it.

"Have you changed your mind about the remodeling?"

"Not at all. I'm prepared to see her looking as lovely as she did when she was first built."

Her comment surprised him. "Have you seen pictures?"

"A long time ago."

Before he could ask when, she started through the foyer, pointing to the front parlor. "I thought that room could be a combination living room and library. What do you think about bookshelves on a couple of the walls?"

He tapped the large case he carried. "You read my mind. I already have that design drawn up. Which leaves this as the main living area."

They stepped into an oversize room about twenty-five by thirty. The ten-foot ceilings and crown molding added to the grandeur of the room. The hardwood floors were in need of refinishing but otherwise in good shape. On the right, bay windows let in morning light. To the left was the entry to the kitchen and dining room. A huge fireplace dominated the north wall.

Del pointed at the bricked opening. "That was imported from a castle in England. The stained glass in the dining room came from a chateau in France. There are bits and pieces of the world all over the house."

"That's one of the things that intrigues me about the place," Rose told him. She paused in the center of the room, leaning heavily on her cane. "I don't agree with the current construction philosophy that if it's new it must be better. Sometimes what's old has a unique charm that can't be duplicated."

"I agree."

He noticed that her movements were slow and deliberate, the way they'd been the day before. He wondered if her disability was new—the result of an accident—or if she'd been born with it.

He grabbed a couple of straight-back chairs tucked in a corner of the room. There was also a folding table, flattened and leaning against the wall opposite the fireplace.

"Have a seat," he said, putting the chairs in the center of the room, then retrieving the table. "Let me show you my plans."

She settled into the chair and smiled at him. "You noticed me weaving. I'm a little tired, which always affects my balance."

"Actually I didn't," he said, and it was almost the truth. "My mom raised me to offer a lady a seat. This is the best I can do under the circumstances."

He straightened the table legs and locked them into place. After placing it in front of the two chairs, he opened his large briefcase.

"What do you know about the house?" he asked. "Any of the history?"

She shook her head. As she moved, the long, blond strands swayed back and forth, the gentle wave causing a curve of her hair to brush her cheek. He was once again reminded of a forties movie star...and his ex-wife, which was a strange combination. It was the hair color, he told himself. And the eye color. They were startlingly similar. But Rose and Josie had little else in common. Rose was quiet, elegant and feminine. Josie had been an argumentative whirlwind. Not exactly restful.

He opened his case and slid out the large sheets of paper, then set them on the table. But instead of showing them to her, he took the spare chair and sat down facing her.

"This house was built by a San Francisco shipping tycoon in 1910. It was a wedding gift for his second wife, whom he married shortly after the death of his first wife. Apparently, the first time he married for money and connections, and the second time he married for love. Local legend says they were very happy together, as were the next three couples who owned the place. The Millers were the last. Mr. and Mrs. Miller lived here for fifty wonderful years until they died within a few days of each

other. Eventually their heirs decided to sell the house. There have been several interested parties, but no one has been serious about buying it until you.”

Rose raised her pale eyebrows. A slight smile teased at the corners of her full lips. “So if I buy the house, I’m joining a long line of happy marriages?”

“Something like that.”

“I guess I need to start dating,” she teased.

“Absolutely. It doesn’t pay to mess with a legend.”

A legend that explained why he and Josie hadn’t bought the place. By the time they could afford to purchase the Miller place, their marriage had been in trouble. There were many things they had, but “being in love” wasn’t one of them.

“I have great respect for tradition,” she said, then sighed. “I must remember to put ‘get married’ on my to-do list.”

He chuckled even as he tried to ignore the sense of relief at finding out there wasn’t a husband in the picture. Not that it would make any difference to him. He didn’t get involved with clients. Besides, he was seeing someone. Sort of. Actually the relationship was going nowhere. Jasmine was a nice woman but she was too young. They’d reached the awkward stage where she wanted to talk commitment and he wanted to move on.

“But I’ll wait until Mr. Right comes along,” she said, leaning toward the table. “Tell me about your plans for my house.”

He shifted his chair closer to hers and pointed to a drawing of the front elevation of the house. “I think it’s important to maintain the integrity of the original design. The house was built by master craftsmen brought in from all over the country. The stair banister itself is a work of art. There are carved moldings, hand-fitted wood floors, and three exquisite chandeliers. My goal would be to work with everything that can be salvaged and saved, while making the house more modern and convenient.”

She gazed at him while he spoke, her expression intent, as if she hung on every word. “Would you be deeply offended if I said I wanted to remodel the kitchen and bathrooms?”

“Not at all.” He flipped through his papers and put a kitchen design on top. “That’s completely possible while working within the existing measurements of the room.”

He leaned toward the page. “I would suggest ripping out all the existing cabinets. They’ve been replaced twice before, so they have no connection with the original construction. I can make custom cabinets myself, combining a slightly old-fashioned design to match the feel of the house, while giving you modern conveniences such as pull-outs, granite countertops and new appliances.”

“Sounds terrific.”

A faint, sweet, floral scent drifted to him. He inhaled sharply, savoring the feminine fragrance. He wasn’t much of a perfume kind of guy, but like everything else about her, this suited Rose. A knot of tension formed low in his belly—that had nothing to do with his desire to get the job and everything to do with his need to get to know this woman better. He wanted to slip his fingers through her sleek blond hair and feel it slide against his skin like cool silk. He wanted to taste her and touch her and—

He resurfaced to find her staring at him expectantly.

“What?” he asked, knowing he sounded like an idiot. “I mean, sorry. What were you saying?”

“I asked about plumbing and electrical. Will fixing them break the bank?”

“Ah, no. Not at all. Both have been completely redone in the past twenty years.”

“Good.”

She tapped a finger on the plan of the second floor. Her nails were oval and painted a light pink. Josie had never painted her nails. She hadn’t had time. Between her job as a PE teacher, her exercise program and her coaching, she’d been on the run literally and figuratively. She had considered things like long hair, makeup and nail polish a waste of time. When he’d asked her to make time on special

occasions, she'd rolled her eyes and told him if makeup was so darned important to him, he could wear it himself. She was what she was. Why did he want to make her over?

He hadn't been able to answer that before, and he still couldn't. He didn't expect a woman to be perfectly groomed at every moment of the day, but he also enjoyed knowing that she'd taken a little extra time for him.

"Now about this second floor."

Rose stared at the plans. There were three bedrooms and two baths. One of the bedrooms was larger than the other—obviously the old master suite.

She looked at him. "Why do the rooms seem smaller upstairs?"

"Because of the balcony." He showed her the front elevation again and pointed out the balcony encircling the entire second floor. "It looks terrific from the outside, but it eats up square footage." He hesitated, not sure he should butt in, but she had agreed to look at his plans. "There is a solution. The attic."

Rose glanced back at the front elevation, then ran her finger along the windows on the third floor. "What's there now?"

"Nothing. But it's plenty big." He flipped through pages and set the one he wanted on top. "I had this drawn up about four years ago."

"Why?"

It took him a second to figure out what she meant. Why did he have plans for a house he'd never owned? "At one time I thought of buying this place, but it didn't work out.

"Any regrets...about not owning the house?"

"Not even one," he said honestly. He and Josie would have killed each other during the remodeling. "This design turns the third floor into a master suite with a sitting area and another smaller bedroom." He shrugged. "It could be used for an office or a nursery for the baby's first couple of years. Until he was old enough to go to the second floor."

Rose nodded. "It could be a girl."

"Excuse me?"

"You said until 'he' was old enough to go to the second floor. I'm assuming a female child would get the same treatment. Or would you make her sleep out back with the dog?"

"No. Of course not. Any child. Or you could use the room for something else."

"No. I like the idea of a baby."

She looked at him as she spoke, her expression serious. But he saw the humor twinkling in her deep blue eyes. She liked the idea of a baby. Josie never had. They'd fought about that the last time they'd come to see this old house. He'd wanted to turn the third floor into the master suite. She'd wanted to use it as an exercise room. Kids hadn't been a part of her plan. They'd—

He rose to his feet so quickly, the chair tipped back and slammed into the floor. Del barely noticed. He rubbed his forehead, as if he could erase thought of his ex-wife from his mind. Why was he thinking about her so much? Damn. She'd been gone nearly three years, and he was happier without her. He wouldn't want her back on a bet. So why was she suddenly haunting him?

"Are you all right?"

He turned and saw Rose had pushed herself to her feet. She leaned on her cane. Concern pulled at the corners of her mouth. She looked like an angel standing there. Blond and beautiful. He supposed with her having a cane, some people might think she was also broken, but not him. She looked delightfully approachable and human. He'd had physical perfection once and it came at too high a price.

"I'm fine," he told her, forcing all thoughts of Josie out of his brain. He swore he wouldn't think about her again. His ex was gone and Rose was right here—apparently single. A good-looking, personable woman who liked old houses and wanted kids. Talk about perfect.

“Let me show you the kitchen,” he said, crossing to the open area that housed painted cabinets and av-cado-colored appliances. “We’d rip out everything and start from the bare walls.”

He moved as he spoke, using his arms and hands to paint word pictures of wood cabinets, a double oven with a microwave and a center island cooktop. There was room for a pantry and even a desk work area.

“I like the window,” she said, moving over to stand next to him. The greenhouse window had been added somewhere along the way, but it suited the graciousness of the house. “I’d like to grow fresh herbs and pretty flowers. I adore flowers.”

He pictured her standing in a field full of wildflowers, which was crazy. Equally insane was the heat he felt in his blood. Blood that was thickening and moving distinctly south. If he didn’t watch it, he was going to end up with a physical manifestation of his wayward thoughts. Not the polite thing when bidding on a remodeling job.

“The bathrooms upstairs will have to be redone, too, won’t they?” she asked.

“They’re about as ugly as the kitchen. The guest bath has dark and light pink tile.”

She laughed. “Sounds attractive but not worth climbing a flight of stairs to see.” She moved back to the table and touched the design for the third-floor master suite. “I want you to do this for me. All of it.”

He stared at her. Just like that? “Don’t you want an estimate?”

She tilted her head in a way that was so familiar, he had to take a step away from her. What was going on? He had the oddest sensation of being caught in both past and present.

“I heard you were honest, Del. Isn’t that true?”

“Sure, but you don’t want to take my word for it.”

“Why not? I’ve heard you’re good and that your prices are fair. So you’re the one that I want. When can your crew start?”

He did some quick calculations. “I had a big job postponed, so next Monday. Does that work for you?”

“Absolutely. However I do have a request.”

“Name it.”

“I’d like the guest bath and one of the guest bedrooms to be done first and finished as quickly as possible. I’m living in a hotel and I don’t want to stay there any longer than necessary. I’d prefer to be settled. If I won’t be in the way, then the remodeling won’t bother me at all.”

Involuntarily his gaze drifted to her legs, hidden by the skirt of her dress. She hadn’t wanted to climb the stairs today. Would next week be any different? But he didn’t ask. Because it wasn’t his business and he didn’t want to embarrass her.

“I could have those two rooms ready by the end of the week. I’ll put standard cabinets in the bathroom for now and replace them with custom later, when the third floor is done.”

“Good idea. Escrow will close in ten days. I have their permission to go ahead with the remodeling, probably because I’m paying cash for the house and they already have all my money.”

She smiled as she spoke. A feminine smile that hinted at a shared joke. He felt as if he’d taken an unexpected hit to the gut. All his air rushed out, but that was the least of it. Even more powerful than the need to breathe was the need to haul her close and kiss her. He knew if he didn’t taste her mouth and feel her curvy body against his he would just up and die. Simple as that.

The urge, the desire that had plagued him since he’d arrived a half hour before, bothered him. Women were a welcome part of his life, but they didn’t usually take over. He wanted to ask Rose to tell him every detail of her past. He wanted to find any other man who had dared to touch her and beat the crap out of him. He wanted—

He was crazy, he told himself. She was a client. They weren’t going to have a close and personal relationship. Besides, he’d already had one based on mutual physical attraction. That had gotten him married and then divorced. He didn’t plan to repeat either experience. He didn’t object to long-term

relationships as long as they were grounded in compatibility and complementing personalities...not his gonads. Unfortunately, his body wasn't listening to logic just now.

He forced his attention back to the job. "I'll have to pull permits for the upstairs remodel," he said. "I'll work on the paperwork and get it all filed when escrow closes. In the meantime I'll have the office draw up a contract along with an estimate of the work. Where should I have the papers delivered?"

She named a local hotel.

"Does someone else need to look at any of this?" he asked.

"Like my dad?"

"No. But a significant other, a lawyer?"

"Ah. Actually, I'm making this decision all on my own."

He was more pleased than he had a right to be. Figuring that his attempts for control were already shot, he gathered his papers and stuffed them back in his briefcase, then headed for the front door. She followed, walking more slowly. When he remembered the cane and her halting step, he slowed his so she could catch up. She opened the front door.

"I'm looking forward to this, Del."

"Me, too."

They shook hands. He ignored the way the feel of her skin against his made him want to rub his palm over all of her. He was disgusting. Worse, he was acting like a teenager. She waved, then closed the door behind him.

As he started down the path, he paused to glance over his shoulder and study the old house. At one time he'd imagined himself living here. Now there was going to be a different owner. He probed his heart and found that he didn't mind as much as he would have thought. To be honest, he couldn't imagine Josie and himself living together. His feelings for her were well and truly dead. Which meant he had to stop thinking about her and instead focus on the very appealing Rose. Hardly a difficult job. In fact, he was looking forward to spending a lot of time with her.

Two days later Josie sat in her hotel room studying the contracts Del's office had sent over. She read through the estimate of charges and a schedule of what would be completed when. Her pen hovered over the line for her signature.

Jan, from his office, had called to get her last name for the contract and Josie had been forced to come up with a fake one. Which was the name she was expected to sign on the contracts. There were probably dozens of legal implications to her lie, she thought glumly. Not that she intended to run out on the bill. It would probably be easier for everyone if she just came clean and told Del who she was. Except she didn't want to.

Their conversation at the Miller place had been the first pleasant one she could remember. They'd been able to talk to each other like normal people, without screaming or accusing or either walking away. She'd found herself liking Del and enjoying teasing him. She'd liked the freedom of starting over as someone new. As Rose she could explore her relationship with Del from a safe distance, getting to know him again, finding out what she liked and didn't like. He was still too good-looking, with an amazing body. She'd always thought he was sexy, and that hadn't changed. But what did he think about her?

Josie leaned back in the club chair in her suite and sighed. She'd seen the spark of interest in Del's eyes. She knew her ex-husband well enough to know that he'd been attracted to the woman he thought of as Rose. After setting the contract on her lap, she pressed her fingertips to her face. She looked so different, but she thought her new face was pretty—albeit in a different way from her old one. She wasn't surprised that Del appreciated the more prominent cheekbones and smooth skin. He'd always liked her eyes and probably still did. So that interest made sense. What she didn't understand was how he could find anything appealing about her body.

She pressed her hands to her legs, feeling the tired muscles quiver slightly. She was broken—nothing like she'd been before. How could he not be repelled by her weakness, her need for a cane? And yet he hadn't been. He'd been friendly, solicitous and charming. With completely twisted logic, she liked that he found her attractive, despite her disability, and she hated that he was over her enough to be interested in other women. Even if that woman was her.

She wasn't over him. Just spending an hour or so in his presence had been enough to convince her of that. She hadn't dated much since the divorce, telling herself she was busy figuring out her new life. But now she thought the truth might be very different. She'd never given herself the time or space to recover from losing Del. Instead she'd put her feelings in a box and ignored them. Being around him every day during the remodeling was going to force her into coming to terms with her past. She didn't look forward to the process, but she knew she would be stronger for having endured it.

Like physical therapy, her emotional recovery would be slow and painful, with plenty of setbacks. But it was the only way to be free of the man who used to be her husband.

Chapter Three

“I have the permits ready to go,” Del told her from his seat behind his desk. “As soon as escrow closes I’ll take care of it.”

It was Monday morning and Josie had just spent a long weekend alone with way too much time to think. One of the things that had been on her mind was the reality that the name she’d given Del didn’t match the name on the escrow papers. She’d never been a good liar and she still wasn’t. Too much energy was required to keep everything straight. But she was in too deep now and she wasn’t about to back out by telling Del the truth.

“Actually I’ve spoken with the escrow people,” she said, forcing herself to stare into his dark eyes and pretend that everything was completely normal. “When I explained what I was doing, they offered to file the papers when they change the title. I’m heading over there this morning. I can take them with me.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he said easily, as if nothing was wrong. Of course, for him nothing was.

“Good.” She opened the oversize envelope on her lap and drew out the signed contracts. She set them on his desk, along with a cashier’s check for one-third of the total amount required for the remodeling. “I signed them and initialed the changes.”

“I like an efficient woman,” he said, flashing her a smile.

She steeled herself against the crinkles by his eyes and the way his white teeth contrasted with his tanned skin. To distract herself from the overpowering maleness that was Delaney Scott, she looked around at his office.

He’d moved into a larger room since their divorce. Probably when his dad officially retired, she thought. The view was better—a big window overlooked the street. His old office had been in the back, next to the parking lot. As in the reception area, photos of restorations covered the walls. The cabinets and drafting table looked new, but the old wood desk was the same one he’d had for years. She recognized the gouge in the left-front corner—the result of a dropped circular saw. She knew that the middle drawer stuck, that he kept a stash of red licorice in the bottom drawer and that they’d made love on the desk at least a half dozen times. The last had been on a Sunday morning when he’d come into work to escape their latest fight, and she’d followed him, determined to have the last word. They’d been screaming at each other when the atmosphere had suddenly changed. One second they’d been saying how much they hated each other and the next they’d been tearing at clothes and kissing frantically.

Josie shifted uncomfortably as she tried to push the memory away. She wasn’t sure which bothered her more—the wild-animal sex that required a flexibility she no longer had or the ugly things she and Del had said to each other.

“I’ve gone over the plans,” Del was saying, drawing her attention to the present. “There shouldn’t be a problem with getting an upstairs bedroom and the guest bath ready by Friday.”

“I appreciate that. I don’t like living in hotels.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Let me see. Maids clean the room and make the bed, and room service delivers meals. What’s not to like?”

“I guess when you put it that way, it doesn’t make sense. But personally, I’d rather be in my own house.”

What she didn’t tell him was that having someone deliver meals and change her bed was too much of a reminder of all her months in the hospital and rehab center. She would rather be on her own and responsible for herself any day.

Del leaned back in his old leather chair. It creaked with the movement. He wore worn jeans and an old blue work shirt, both faded nearly white with age. The soft fabric molded to his body in a way that made her mouth water. Ironically, while she couldn’t remember the last time she’d been

with a man, she could remember the last time she and Del had made love. For once they hadn't been angry. Instead they'd both been sad—as if they'd known their relationship was ending.

“What about paint?” Del said. “You're going to have to pick colors for the whole house eventually, but first I'll need suggestions for the bedroom and bath you want done this week. Also if you're interested in wallpaper, I have a couple dozen sample books you can look through. It's generally easier to take them home and look at them leisurely.”

She hadn't thought through all the details of remodeling a house. There were going to be a lot of decisions to make. “Could we go neutral, say an off-white temporarily?”

“Not a problem.” He made a note on a pad of paper.

She thought about wrestling all the wallpaper sample books from her car to the hotel room. It would take her hours to get them inside.

“As far as picking out wallpaper, what about bringing the sample books to the house? I'll be living there in a few days, anyway.”

“And checking up on me.” His voice was teasing. “Figures.”

“I'll admit I'm interested to see how it all comes together. It's difficult for me to look at a drawing and then imagine how the change is going to look in real life.”

He leaned forward. “Spend as much time as you want watching. Seriously, Rose, this is going to be your home. You have every right to make sure you're getting exactly what you want. I hire skilled craftspeople who do excellent work. I have nothing to hide. In fact I would encourage you to check out the quality. I'm proud of my crew.”

“You also like what you do.”

He nodded. “I'm lucky that way. I knew what I wanted from the time I was about eight and my dad started letting me tag along on jobs. For a while my folks tried to push me to become an architect, but I'd rather be building than drawing.”

There was an eagerness and excitement in his voice. She remembered all the times he'd wanted to talk about his work, and she'd told him that hearing about it was as interesting as watching paint dry. Had she been crazy? Del wasn't boring, he was a good, honest man. She sure had been a witch. The question was why? What had she been so angry about?

“I promise I won't get in the way,” she said, forcing herself to relax and even smile. “At least I'll try not to. I don't move all that quickly.”

Questions darkened his eyes, but he was too polite to ask. Josie found herself torn between wanting to share the details of her accident and knowing that it was too soon for those confessions. They might lead to others she wasn't ready to deal with. But she had a strong urge to tell him that she'd hadn't always been so broken. That there had been a time when she could walk and run just like a normal person.

Instead she rose to her feet and steadied herself with her cane. “I'll leave you to get started, then,” she said.

He stood and came around to her side of the desk. “I'm looking forward to the project. Call me if you have any questions.”

Instead of offering to shake her hand, he lightly touched her arm. She felt the brush of his fingers and the resulting heat all the way down to the soles of her feet. It was as if he'd set fire to her blood. Talk about a complication. Being attracted to her ex-husband was a huge mistake.

She wanted to tell him that she was sorry she'd been so difficult. After only a couple of conversations with Del, she'd remembered enough of the past to realize why they were divorced. It was one of the reasons she avoided dealing with the breakup. She hadn't wanted to know how much of the fault was hers. She didn't have a choice anymore. She was back where it had all started and she was here to get answers. Apparently from herself as well as Del.

She gave him a quick smile and hurried from the room, which for her meant an awkward hobble. Once in the safety of her car, she vowed that she would figure out what she needed from Del and tell him the truth as soon as possible. Just not today.

Wednesday morning she arrived at the house only to find the driveway filled with construction trucks. The familiar blue vehicles with the Scott Construction sign painted on the doors made her hesitate before climbing out of her Volvo. She'd been gone for three years, but most of Del's crew had worked for him much longer than that. Which meant she would know a good number of them. Del hadn't recognized her. Would they?

Josie thought about running away but knew she would have to face them all eventually. After all, by the end of the week she would be living in the house. She consoled herself with the fact that if her husband hadn't recognized her, no one else would, either. It wasn't much comfort but it was the best she could come up with under the circumstances. She sucked in a deep breath for courage, then began the laborious process of walking up to the front door and entering the Victorian mansion.

The sound of conversation and power tools filled the old place. She stood just inside the foyer and breathed in the scent of wood, dust and change. Above her the old chandelier glittered in the bright morning light, while rays of sunshine illuminated floating clouds of dust.

Huge, heavy squares of canvas protected the hardwood floors from footsteps and spills. There were ladders leaning against walls, piles of tools and supplies in various corners and plans pinned up on walls. As she walked into the main room she saw a ratty old brown sofa and three recliners. She recognized the threadbare pieces of furniture. The crew carried them from job to job and sprawled on them during breaks, lunches and meetings.

Josie turned in a slow circle taking in the differences brought by only two days of work. Already the kitchen was gutted. Someone had chipped the tiles out of the guest bath on the first floor and a breeze cut through the house from an opening left by a removed window.

A tall, lanky man with bright-red hair walked by. He balanced several boards on one of his broad shoulders.

"Ma'am," he said, giving her a polite nod as he passed.

She smiled and reminded herself that calling Jerry or any of the men by name would be a mistake. She couldn't know them until they were introduced.

She followed his progress, noting that he didn't break stride or turn for a second look. She was a stranger to him. Which was good. She hadn't come this far to have her cover blown. She consoled herself with the thought that if this was a year ago, when she was still wrapped in bandages and could have easily doubled for a mummy woman, she would have sent the entire crew screaming for sanctuary.

"What's so funny?"

She hadn't realized she'd been smiling until she felt her lips straighten. She glanced up and saw Del standing in the entrance to the kitchen. He leaned against the door frame, looking as strong and handsome as ever, darn the man. Today he wore a navy T-shirt tucked into jeans. The soft fabric of the T-shirt clung to his chest, outlining every inch of muscle. Just to make her situation worse, she knew what he would look like without his clothes and that image was even better.

Her breath caught in her throat when he pushed off the support and walked toward her. Or maybe her breathing problem came from the fact that he actually sauntered. A slow, male movement that reminded her of a tiger staking out territory. Is that what he was doing with her? She desperately wanted to believe it was true.

"You were chuckling about something," he said when he came to a halt less than a foot in front of her. "Are you afraid we'll never get your house back together?"

"Not at all. I was thinking about some surgery I had a while back. How I would have frightened everyone if I'd come in wrapped in bandages."

“I think we would have survived.”

He touched a hand to the small of her back, urging her to take a step to the side. As she did, a man of medium height but built like a fullback came through carrying armfuls of tools. She recognized Mark right away, but again didn't say anything to the man. Like Jerry, Mark gave her a polite nod.

She saw his gaze slide to the cane and then to her legs. Self-consciousness flooded her. Today was one of her bad days, when getting out of bed and forcing herself to stand had taken nearly all her reserves. She was stiff and suffering from muscle cramps and fatigue. The result of missing too many therapy sessions. But that couldn't be helped. Once she got settled in the house on Friday, she would find a therapist close by and get back to her treatments. Until then she would survive—on sheer will if necessary.

“Come see what we've done,” Del said, pointing to the kitchen. “It's empty.”

“I noticed. I guess I'm going to learn the phone number of every nearby takeout place, huh?”

He pointed to a list on the wall by a battered black phone. “Already done. Just part of the excellent Scott family service. I recommend the Chinese place. It's the best. So's the Mexican, but that's better at the restaurant because they have terrific margaritas.”

He stepped back and touched a small refrigerator tucked under a makeshift counter made of sawhorses topped by plywood. “It won't hold a week's worth of shopping but it will get you by for now.”

She pointed at a microwave sitting on top of the counter. “A loaner?”

“Exactly. We want you to be comfortable during the construction. Dust and noise can't be avoided but we try to make everything else as pleasant as possible.” He slapped one hand against a bare wall. “As you can see the old cabinets are down. I've already taken measurements for the new ones and I'll get started on them this week. In the parlor you'll find an assortment of paint samples and wallpaper sample books for you to peruse in your free time. And in the main room you probably noticed our luxurious seating accommodations.”

She glanced over her shoulder at the ratty sofa. “I thought that was the trash pile,” she teased.

He stepped back, obviously outraged. “It's an antique.”

“Uh-huh. Del, it's junk. I can see through patches of the fabric and there are springs poking out all over.”

“Having it around is kind of a tradition. Is it too offensive?”

“Not as long as it leaves when the job is over.”

“Deal. We have clean sheets we toss over the sofa and the recliners at the end of the day. So you'll have something clean to sit on.” He paused and frowned. “I never thought to ask. How much furniture are you going to be moving in?”

“Less than you'd think. I have a bedroom set being delivered Friday morning. Otherwise, just what I can fit in my car.”

“You travel light.”

“I've learned to.”

She'd spent the past year in three different hospitals and multiple rehab centers. Furniture hadn't been much of a priority. She still had a few things in the Los Angeles apartment she'd shared with her stepsister, Dallas, but saw no need to tell that to Del. Besides, she wasn't sure if she would be moving anything up to Beachside Bay. That sort of depended on whether or not she decided to stay here.

She remembered the contents of her car trunk. “Did you already get paint for the guest bedroom and bath?” she asked.

“No. Why?”

“I did some shopping this weekend and ended up buying paint and wallpaper.”

His dark eyes brightened with laughter. “Let me guess. Pink and lavender. And the wallpaper had flowers on it.”

“How very sexist.”

“Am I wrong?”

She reached in her skirt pocket for her car keys. “Why don’t you see for yourself. Everything is in the trunk.”

He grabbed the keys, then called for one of the guys to get the supplies. “Want to show me what goes where?” he asked.

Del led the way to the stairs and waited for Rose to follow. She hesitated a moment before nodding her head in agreement and coming after him. He watched her walk, noticing that her movements were slower than usual, as if every step caused her pain.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Sure. Some days are easier than others. Today’s turning out to be one of the hard ones.”

As she spoke, he noticed the lines of tension and hurt around her eyes and mouth. She’d pulled her long blond hair back into a sleek ponytail that left her slender neck bare. A white T-shirt hugged her top half while a crinkly white and teal skirt fell to mid calf. He tried to concentrate on anything but the full curves outlined by her shirt. She was big enough to fill a man’s hand and while he’d never considered himself much of a breast man, Rose made him rethink his position.

She started up the stairs. Her movements were slow and awkward, with her taking each step individually. She raised her right foot and set it firmly on the next level. The cane followed. She then braced herself on the cane and raised her left foot. He didn’t know if she was in pain from what she was doing, but it sure hurt him to watch. He had to force himself not to hover behind her.

“Were you in an accident of some kind?” he asked before he could stop himself.

“Yes. A truck hit my car.”

She spoke between sharp gasps of breath.

Del told himself not to watch, that if he had a brain in his head he would talk about something unrelated so that she wouldn’t know he was itching to help in some way. Except she hadn’t asked for help and he didn’t know how to offer. But before he could think of a single thing to say, her left leg gave way and she started to go down.

She was less than a quarter of the way up the staircase. He was at her side, grabbing her arm and holding her upright before she even came close to falling. He wrapped one arm around her waist so she could lean on him.

They were close enough for him to inhale her floral scented perfume...and something else. Some female essence that was both attractive and oddly familiar. But before he could place it, she turned to look at him.

All thoughts fled his mind as he saw the pain and bleakness in her eyes. The blue irises darkened with a thousand emotions he couldn’t begin to identify. He had no idea what she was going through or what she’d endured. He only knew that she didn’t utter a word of complaint.

She trembled slightly, making him aware of their close proximity. His thumb was just under the curve of her right breast, and he was six kinds of an idiot for noticing. He also ignored the fact that her curvy rear rested against his thigh. All men were slime, he told himself, and he was the slime king.

“Do me a favor,” he said as he bent down and slid his arm under her knees. “Don’t scream too loud. You can yell at me when we get to the second floor.”

Then he lifted her up into his arms and carried her the rest of the way up the stairs.

She fit him perfectly. Not like Josie, who had been bony and too muscular. Rose was soft curves and yielding femininity. He wanted to keep on walking with her like this, taking them both to a quiet spot where they could get to know each other better. He wanted to bend down and kiss her until... hell, he didn’t want to stop kissing her.

Unfortunately, neither was an option so when they reached the landing, he set her on her feet and prepared to be castigated.

“I know,” he said, holding up a hand to try to slow her down. “I violated every code in the cane users handbook. I shouldn’t have picked you up and carried you. If you’d wanted my help you would have asked. I’m insensitive and a jerk. I just couldn’t stand to watch you in pain and I was afraid you’d fall. For all I know you’d break your neck and die right here and I know you haven’t had time to put the house into your will. What if your estate defaulted on the contract? So it was really about money. I wasn’t trying to insult you.”

Her mouth twitched up slightly at the corners. “Well, if you were just being mercenary and looking out for your self-interest, I guess I understand. But if you were trying to be nice, I’d have to be mad.”

She was laughing at him. “Are you mad?”

“That you were nice and caring and a gentleman? Not at all. Just don’t tell me I need to lose a few pounds.”

He allowed himself to give her body the once-over, lingering a tiny bit on her breasts. “From here you look great.”

She laughed, although the sound had a slightly strangled quality. “Thank you. For the compliment and for carrying me. I don’t think we should make a habit of it, but under the circumstances, it was very nice.”

He almost added “for me, too” but caught himself at the last minute.

“I do have a question, though,” she said in her low, husky voice. The sound definitely rubbed him the right way. He could listen to her for hours.

“Shoot.”

“Would you have done it if I’d been a man?”

It took him a second to realize what she meant. Would he have carried her up the stairs if she’d been male? He hesitated, knowing the right answer and not sure he could actually say it.

“Politically correct battles with gut truth.” She leaned close. “Don’t try to pretend otherwise. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Yeah, yeah, so I wouldn’t have carried a guy up the stairs. I still would have helped.”

“Hey, boss. Where do you want these?”

Gary came up the stairs with a perfectly timed interruption. He held a couple of cans of paint in each hand and had rolls of wallpaper tucked under his left arm.

“Just leave them here,” Del said, pointing to a corner of the landing. “The rooms aren’t ready for them yet.”

Gary deposited the supplies and left.

Del crouched to check the colors of the cans. The paint was a sunny shade of yellow. There was a border print of ivory tea roses accented in green. A matching pattern of smaller flowers filled the full-size wallpaper rolls.

“Just what I thought,” he muttered. “Girl stuff.”

“These rooms are for me,” Rose said lightly. “What did you expect? Monster trucks or half-naked women?”

“I’ve never seen half-naked-woman wallpaper, but it’s a thought.”

“Yes, especially if they’re young, perfect women.”

“It’s a plus, but not necessary.”

As he spoke he wondered if she felt she wasn’t perfect anymore. Yeah, she used a cane and probably had some scars, but that didn’t really matter. At least not to him. Had some male moron hurt her by making her feel she wasn’t enough?

He didn’t know how to ask and it wasn’t his business, so instead he stood and motioned to the guest bathroom.

“Want to check out what we’ve done so far?”

“Sure.” She turned and led the way. “I’m guessing it’s gutted and not much else.”

“You have to use your imagination.”

He showed her that they were going to turn the tub/shower combination which would allow them to fit in a vanity with a double sink.

Rose nodded slowly, then looked at him. “But what about the toilet? Moving things around will be awkward to get in and out of the room.”

“Not if we move the door hinge to the other side, so it opens to the left and not the right.”

She studied the door and nodded. “Very clever. This would be one of the many reasons why I’m not trying to do this myself. I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

“It’s why we get the big bucks. Now, in the bedroom itself we’re replacing the window, doing some patching, then painting on Wednesday. That will give us forty-eight hours to clear out the paint smell.”

“Which isn’t going to happen.”

“No, but it will be better than if we painted it Friday morning. The bathroom gets patched this afternoon, painted tomorrow. Tub, sink and toilet go in on Thursday.”

“Which is a good thing. My alternative is to use the hose out back for a shower.”

“While that would entertain the neighbors, it’s still a little cool in the morning, so I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Oh, gee, thanks. And here I’d been looking forward to some al fresco bathing.”

He didn’t want to think about that. Actually he did want to think about it in great detail, but that would be a big mistake. “Are you going to be all right here by yourself? It’s a big house, and you’re not even going to have a kitchen.”

She leaned against the wall, bracing herself. He wondered if her leg was bothering her.

“I’m having a phone line run in tomorrow,” she said. “That means I won’t be cut off from the world. As for the kitchen, between the microwave and your list of takeout, I’ll be fine.”

“You don’t cook?”

She hesitated. “Not much. I didn’t used to at all, but I’ve been slowly teaching myself.”

Josie didn’t cook, either, but with her it was a matter of principle. They’d never gotten far enough past the fighting for him to know if she’d even known how. He shook his head as if to clear it. He didn’t understand his sudden obsession with his ex-wife.

She looked at him and smiled. “I don’t want to keep you, Del. Thanks for the tour. I’ll let you get back to work.”

The problem was he didn’t want to be anywhere but with her. In fact, he could think of several ways for them to spend the day together and only about half of them involved getting naked.

Instead he asked if she would be all right going down the stairs on her own.

“Down is much easier than up,” she informed him.

With no brilliant excuse suddenly presenting itself, he found himself leaving, both her presence and the house. Because he had things to do at the office, then he had to start working on her kitchen cabinets. But he found himself thinking about her throughout the day. About the way she laughed and smelled and felt in his arms. And the way he’d wanted to kiss her more than he’d wanted anything in a real long time.

Chapter Four

Friday morning Josie sat curled up on the sheet-covered sofa in her new house. All around her the sound of construction and people made her feel that she was a part of something positive. She was probably in the way, but having to duck large sheets of lumber and listen to the whine of saws was far better than sitting alone in her hotel room. She'd hated the solitude and the impersonal decorations. Although she would still be by herself when she moved into this house, at least it would be hers. She could do what she liked in the way of decorating and make it a real home. Something she hadn't had in a year.

She returned her attention to the wallpaper sample book in her lap and flipped the page. Her eyes widened as she stared at a horrible print of huge bright-blue roses surrounded by gold and pink birds.

"As your contractor, I'm afraid I can't let you do that to any innocent room in this house."

At the sound of the familiar voice a shiver rippled up her spine. The hairs at the back of her neck stood and quivered and her heartbeat jumped into overdrive. She'd been back in Beachside Bay less than two weeks, and already she was acting like a teenager with her first crush around Del. Talk about trouble.

She glanced up and over her shoulder. Her ex-husband stood behind her, leaning forward, his hands braced on the back of the sofa. He pointed at the open wallpaper sample book.

"You're kidding right?" he said. "That one would win an ugly competition, no problem."

She studied the offending square of paper. "You don't like it? But the colors would give me so much to work with." She was careful to keep any sound of teasing out of her voice.

He looked at her. She was close enough to see the flecks of gold that brightened his dark irises and the lines fanning out from the corners of his eyes. Her gaze shifted so that she was staring at his mouth, remembering what it had felt like when they'd kissed all those years ago and making her wonder if it would be different now.

He straightened and came around to stand in front of her. He planted his hands on his narrow hips. "You can't be serious. Rose. Come on. I know I'm a guy and all my taste is in my mouth, but even I can see that's hideous."

She puffed out her lower lip in a slight pout. "Del, I hate to put you in your place, but you're the contractor, not the decorator. I really like this and I'm going to order it. I thought maybe for the parlor."

"No guy on the planet wants to live in a house with blue flowers on the wall."

"I know, but wouldn't cages of little white birds look charming against the blue and gold? And one of those all-white cats. The fluffy kind."

His gaze narrowed even as the corners of his mouth turned up. "Brat. You're teasing me."

She held up the book. "You deserved it. I can't believe you'd think anyone sane would buy this wallpaper."

"Hey, they put it in the sample book for a reason. Not only is it available to order, but people have."

"I hadn't thought of that." She studied the print more closely and shuddered. "Of course there is good news should I go ahead and buy this."

"Do enlighten me."

She grinned. "According to you, no man on the planet would want to live in a house with this on a wall. So I do one room in it and when I have a horrible date I want to get rid of, I simply put him in there and he'll run screaming from my life."

"You need a different plan," he said, settling next to her on the sofa and taking the book from her lap. "If the guy's that awful, you don't invite him home."

“I suppose you’re right.”

He looked at her. “How long has it been since you were on a date?”

His question made her feel self-conscious. She smoothed the skirt of her dress and cleared her throat. “Yes, well, after the accident, my social life wasn’t as full as it had been before.” Which was almost true. She’d barely dated anyone since her divorce. The accident had forced her to go from a couple of dates a year to none. Not a huge difference. But Del didn’t have to know that. “There was the male nurse who brought me ice cream that one time, but I don’t think that counts.”

He returned his attention to the sample book and began flipping pages. “Then you’re going to need a refresher course. Rule number one—no strangers in the house. Get to know the guy before you invite him over.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, figuring there was no point in telling him that the odds of her dating anytime soon were unlikely. For one thing, she was back in town because she wanted closure with Del—not because she was looking to get involved. Second, she couldn’t imagine a man being interested in her and asking her out. Not with her cane, her limp and her scars.

“What about this one?”

He pointed at a sample of ivory paper with a half-inch wide gold stripe bracketed by a burgundy pinstripe. The paper was elegant and very attractive. Josie looked at him in surprise.

“That’s nice.”

“You sound shocked.”

“Of course. You said all your taste was in your mouth.”

He surprised her even more by lightly touching her cheek.

“I lied,” he said, handing her the book and getting to his feet. “I have pretty good taste. Some of it is innate, some I learned from my mom and my ex-wife. But before you go wild on wallpaper, we need to talk about paint.”

He crossed to the far side of the room and picked up several wide rings holding dozens of paint samples. Josie was vaguely aware of the fit of his jeans, but she was also conscious of the fact that this was the first time he’d mentioned being married before. She wanted to stop him and ask him what he thought of her...of his ex-wife. Did he remember their time together with anything but annoyance? Did he have regrets, like she did?

But before she could form the question, he was back at her side, handing her several paint samples. “My suggestion is that you take advantage of the rooms that have afternoon light. Go for the warmer tones, because the sunlight has a golden cast in the afternoon. Especially during the summer. Something about being by the beach. I don’t know the physical reasons for it, but I know it exists.”

“I appreciate the input.”

They flipped through the samples together and picked out colors for the dining room and kitchen. Del was knowledgeable and easy to get along with. He made suggestions but didn’t push. Josie was surprised. What she remembered about him was that he was determined to have his way and she was just as determined to be the victor. What had changed? Had each of them grown up in their time apart or was it just her? Had she simply assumed Del wanted his way and reacted accordingly without bothering to find out the truth?

There was no way to get an answer to that question. Not without having a conversation she wasn’t ready for. Confessing the truth about herself was something she was going to have to do pretty soon, although she knew she would put it off as long as reasonably possible. She liked her new relationship with Del. It was fun and easy. He liked her. When they were married he hadn’t liked her much at all.

A knock on the open front door caught their attention. Del rose and walked over to greet two men standing in the foyer. One held a clipboard.

“We’re here to deliver some furniture.”

“My bedroom set,” Josie said.

Del nodded. “This is the place. Let me show you where it goes.”

He and the man with the clipboard climbed the stairs. The day before, Josie and Del had discussed the layout of her new bedroom. The room had been patched and painted. There was a new window in place, complete with a window shade. She would worry about curtains later. The small guest bath was finished, as well. She leaned on her cane and slowly pushed herself to her feet so she was standing when Del came down the stairs a few minutes later.

“Looks like everything is going to fit,” he said. “There’s plenty of room. They’ll put the furniture together and then you can go up and inspect their work.”

“Maybe I should start climbing the stairs now so I can be at the top when they finish.” She said the words matter-of-factly. She wasn’t feeling sorry for herself, she was simply stating the truth.

“I think you can probably wait twenty minutes or so,” he teased in reply. “Or I can carry you again.” He gave her a quick wink. “I like carrying pretty young women upstairs. It makes me feel macho.”

He was flirting with her. Josie didn’t know what to make of that. She felt herself blushing, which was crazy. She never blushed. “I, um...Thanks, but I think I’ll make it under my own steam, such as it is.”

“If you’re sure. But my services are available to you whenever you would like. Just say the word.” He leaned close to whisper in her ear. “It’s the dresses. Too many women wear jeans. I’m a sucker for a woman in a soft kind of floaty dress, like you wear all the time. I can’t resist.”

His words made her start to melt inside. At the same time she felt a swift stab of pain. She’d never been a dress person before. Jeans and sweats had allowed her to move the way she liked. Or shorts. Before the accident she’d been more concerned with being active than being feminine.

“I’m glad you approve,” she said shyly. “Probably reminds you of your mother.”

As soon as the words fell out of her mouth, she wanted to call them back. Catherine Scott was the sort of woman who wore dresses rather than slacks. It had been just one of dozens of differences between the women.

Del frowned. “How’d you know?”

“Good guess. A lot of moms are like that.”

She shrugged hoping he would accept her answer. She didn’t want to get into a conversation about his mother. Catherine had been a devoted homemaker and a brilliant cook. A couple more places where Josie hadn’t been able to measure up.

Del touched her arm. Just a light brush of his fingers, but against her bare skin it was highly erotic. She felt herself swaying toward him.

“I’ll admit that my mom wears dresses, but despite that, you don’t make me think of her at all. Just so we’re clear on that.”

“Okay.” She shifted awkwardly, not sure if she should say anything else.

Male appreciation flashed in his eyes. Male appreciation and something she wanted to think was sexual interest. She was both thrilled and cautious. He couldn’t be interested in her in that way, could he? Yes, they got along and conversation was easy between them, but being naked was something completely different. Besides, he was still supposed to be pining for, well, her.

“I’ve got to get back to work,” he said. “Kitchen cabinets are calling to me. You have my pager number if you need to get in touch with me, right?”

She nodded.

He left and some of the light seemed to go out of the room. Josie returned to the sofa and slumped onto a lumpy cushion. She was playing a dangerous game. If Del was really starting to like her as Rose, he wasn’t going to be happy to find out she’d been lying to him. Which meant she should probably tell him the truth as soon as possible. But she didn’t want to. But she had to.

She sighed. All right. She’d do it the next time she saw him. No matter what, she would explain who she was and why she’d returned. He would understand...eventually. She would explain everything

until things were all right between them again. And then they would decide what they each wanted from the other. Which meant that between now and then she had to figure that out for herself.

By five-thirty that afternoon, everyone was gone. Josie stood alone in the nearly empty house and listened to the silence. The sharp smell of paint blended with the homey scent of cut wood. She felt a little lost and lonely, but it was still better than being in a hotel—or worse, a hospital.

After the crew had left, she'd brought in her suitcases. She had four small ones, because they were more manageable for her than one large one. She'd already carried the first one up the stairs and would tackle the rest over the course of the evening. The remaining three were positioned neatly by the foot of the stairs.

Using her cane to assist her movements, she walked into the parlor that she was going to make into a living room and library. The chair rail had been removed from the two walls that would support the built-in bookshelves. White patches to repair cracks and nail holes contrasted with the light-green paint favored by the previous owner. Notations on the wall showed where the frame for the shelves would go. Del had explained they were being custom built at the company's main workshop and would be installed in pieces. Her kitchen cabinets would come in the same way.

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