



MILLS & BOON

Vintage Cherish

**Home
Again**

JOAN ELLIOTT PICKART

Joan Elliott Pickart

Home Again

Аннотация

Mom Required Before Joey, his culinary repertoire was comprised of bad scrambled eggs, his spare bedrooms gathered dust and the master bedroom seemed destined to remain mistress-less. But when his nephew became his 24/7 responsibility literally overnight, Mark Chandler knew things had to change. And he needed help. Cedar Kennedy cured troubled kids, a reputation that prompted Mark to seek out the psychologist. Ordinarily their paths never would have crossed, she the silk-and-suits-wearing doctor, he the dusty-jeans-wearing construction-company owner. But Mark knew Cedar was the one. The one to help Joey face his fears. The one to make their house a home—if only he could get the good doctor to break her rules...and battle her own demons.

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“Don’t you need to trust me?”

Mark looked at her for a long moment.

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“You’re going to be coming to my home, plus you said we’d be going on outings with Joey. We’ll also have private meetings such as this one to discuss progress. I’m referring to you trusting me as a man, not just as Joey’s guardian. Do you trust me as a man?”

“I...” Cedar stopped speaking.

Why was Mark doing this? She didn’t intend to view him as a man. No, he was Joey’s guardian, his uncle, the person who was now that little boy’s father. Their relationship had nothing to do with Cedar, the woman, trusting Mark, the man.

Mark Chandler unsettled her, made her acutely aware of her femininity and his incredible masculinity. She had no idea if she trusted him.

She was having enough trouble trusting herself whenever she was near him.

Dear Reader,

Well, it’s September, which always sounds like a fresh start to me, no matter how old I get. And evidently we have six women this month who agree. In *Home Again* by Joan Elliott Pickart, a woman who can’t have children has decided to work with them in a professional capacity—but when she is assigned an orphaned little boy, she fears she’s in over her head. Then she meets his

gorgeous guardian—and she's sure of it!

In the next installment of **MOST LIKELY TO...**, *The Measure of a Man* by Marie Ferrarella, a single mother attempting to help her beloved former professor joins forces with a former campus golden boy, now the college...custodian. What could have happened? Allison Leigh's *The Tycoon's Marriage Bid* pits a pregnant secretary against her ex-boss who, unbeknownst to him, has a real connection to her baby's father. In *The Other Side of Paradise* by Laurie Paige, next up in her **SEVEN DEVILS** miniseries, a mysterious woman seeking refuge as a ranch hand learns that she may have more ties to the community than she could have ever suspected. When a beautiful nurse is assigned to care for a devastatingly handsome, if cantankerous, cowboy, the results are...well, you get the picture—but you can have it spelled out for you in Stella Bagwell's next **MEN OF THE WEST** book, *Taming a Dark Horse*. And in *Undercover Nanny* by Wendy Warren, a domestically challenged female detective decides it's necessary to penetrate the lair of single father and heir to a grocery fortune by pretending to be...his nanny. Hmm. It could work....

So enjoy, and snuggle up. Fall weather is just around the corner....

Happy reading!

Gail Chasan

Senior Editor

Home Again

Joan Elliott Pickart



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Janet Elliott and Pat Elliott Hunt.

My sisters, my friends.

JOAN ELLIOTT PICKART

is the author of over ninety-five novels. When she isn't writing, she enjoys reading, needlework, gardening and attending craft shows on the town square. Joan has three all-grown-up daughters as well as a young daughter, Autumn, who is in elementary school. Joan, Autumn, and a three-pound poodle named Willow live in a charming small town in the high pine country of Arizona.

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Dear Puncho:

I wish I could smile whole bunches like you do 'cause you look happy all the time. I don't feel too happy 'cause my mom and dad went in the car and now they are angels and I miss them whole lots. My uncle Mark is sort of okay when he's not grumpy and Cedar is way cool and I think they would be a good family for me but I don't know if they want to be my family or not. Could you try real hard to make them be my family so I won't be lonely?

Your friend,

Joey

Chapter One

Cedar Kennedy glanced at her watch and frowned. Her new client was ten minutes late for his five-o'clock appointment. Remembering that her secretary had left early for a dreaded trip to the dentist, Cedar picked up the files she'd been updating and walked to the outer office, where she placed the folders in Bethany's in-box.

She sat down in the chair behind the desk and flipped the page in the leather-bound appointment book to see what was on the agenda for tomorrow. Just as she closed the book, the door to the suite opened and a man entered, shoving the door closed behind him.

In one quick perusal Cedar observed that her visitor was tall, with broad shoulders that stretched the material of a faded plaid shirt to the maximum, long legs clad in dusty jeans, and he was wearing heavy work boots. His features...goodness gracious...were rugged and blatantly masculine, his square jaw covered in an obvious five-o'clock shadow. He had thick black hair badly in need of a trim and extremely dark eyes that swept over the reception area before meeting her gaze as he approached the desk.

This was one very earthy, handsome man, Cedar decided. Very handsome. And, if she were correct, he was also late for his appointment, and she fully intended to make clear that being on

time was of the utmost importance.

“Mr. Chandler?” Cedar asked, getting to her feet.

“Yeah, I’m Mark Chandler,” he said.

Perfect voice, Cedar thought. Deep, sort of rumbly, befitting a man of his size and physique.

Mark Chandler glanced at the open door leading to her office and lowered his voice. “I’m a little late for my appointment,” he said. “Is this doc a real stickler about people being on time?” He looked at the nameplate on the desk. “I’d hate to start out on the wrong foot, Bethany...you know what I mean? I’m a desperate man and I need this doc’s help. Big-time.”

He swiped the front of one thigh, then the other. “How does she feel about construction-site dust? I didn’t have a spare second to go home to shower and change clothes.”

Cedar snapped her head back up to meet Mark Chandler’s gaze. She’d been watching the fascinating motion of his large hand on those muscled thighs and...oh, good grief...now he was dragging that hand through his thick hair in a gesture so incredibly male it was enough to make a woman weep.

“I...” She stopped to clear her throat when she heard the strange little squeak that used to be her voice.

“I’ve never talked to a shrink before,” Mark continued. “Is she all stuffy? Does she just nod a lot and say ‘mmm’? Man, I’m so out of my league being here, but I’m at the end of my rope. What’s the best way to get on the good side of this Dr. Kennedy, make her forget I blew it by being late?”

“Mmm,” Cedar said, because she couldn’t resist, then frowned thoughtfully for good measure. “I personally don’t think that Dr. Kennedy is stuffy at all, Mr. Chandler. I’d suggest that you apologize for your tardiness and make it clear that you’ll be on time for future appointments.”

“Yeah, okay, I can handle that. Well, go for it. Tell the shrinky-dink that I’m here.”

“The shrinky-dink?” Cedar said, her eyes widening. “Dr. Kennedy is a psychologist, Mr. Chandler.”

“Whatever.” Mark sighed. “Man, I’m beat. It was a long, rough day on the job. I’m tired, hungry and need a shower, so let’s get this show on the road.”

“By all means,” Cedar said, rising from the chair. “Heaven forbid that you should be kept waiting now that you’ve graced us with your presence. Promptness is a virtue, Mr. Chandler. You’d do well to remember that.”

“You had a long day, too, huh? I mean, you’re not exactly Miss Sunshine, Bethany. You’re a very attractive woman, but I bet you’d be even prettier if you smiled.”

“Follow me, please,” Cedar said, walking past Mark toward her office.

“Anywhere,” Mark said, then cringed when the receptionist glared at him over her shoulder.

Nice, Mark thought, his gaze sweeping over Bethany as he trudged slowly behind. She had short, wavy blond hair, delicate features, and sensational blue eyes. Her navy slacks and pale-blue

sweater revealed she had curves in all the right places. Oh, yeah, very nice. Except for the fact that she was a tad grumpy.

They entered the doctor's large, comfortably furnished office and Bethany motioned for him to sit in one of the two easy chairs fronting a mahogany desk. Mark sank into one of the chairs and propped the ankle of one leg on the knee of the other.

She stared at him for a long moment, then walked slowly behind the desk to settle into a high-backed leather chair.

"Mr. Chandler," she said, folding her hands atop a file on the desk. "I'm Dr. Cedar Kennedy. Please be on time for your appointments in the future, and if that sounds stuffy, tough."

"Oh-h-h, hell," Mark said, closing his eyes for a moment, before looking at her again. "You're not the receptionist?"

"No."

"You might have said something before I made a total jerk of myself," he said.

"But you were doing such a terrific job of it, I hated to interrupt."

"Okay, okay," Mark said, raising both hands in a gesture of peace. "Could we start over? I'm sorry I was late. It won't happen again. I'm sorry I'm getting your plushy office dusty. That will probably happen again. Look, I need your help and Dr. Gibson, my personal doctor, said you're the best in the business for dealing with my kind of problem. Will you help me? Please?"

Cedar sank back into her chair and smiled at Mark Chandler. "I'll certainly try," she said. "Now then, why don't you tell me why

you're here. Just let the words flow and I'll take some notes as you speak. That way I can... Is something wrong? You're looking at me so...so intently as though I suddenly grew a second nose or something."

"What? Oh, sorry. I didn't realize I was doing that, but...I said earlier you'd be even prettier if you smiled, but that doesn't even begin to cut it. Your face just lit up and your eyes actually sparkled. I've never seen eyes sparkle before. Are you wearing contact lenses?"

"No, I'm not," Cedar said, feeling a warm flush stain her cheeks as she digested Mark's compliments.

This will never do, she admonished herself. This rough-hewn hunk was throwing her totally off-kilter and that wasn't like her at all, not one little bit. She had to regain control of this situation... right now. She was reacting to Mark on a personal level rather than a professional one, and that would never do.

"Mr. Chandler," she said coolly, "the clock is running and we're wasting valuable time here. Shall we get down to business?"

"You're ticked," he said. "Is there a rule that says a guy isn't supposed to tell the shrink she's a beautiful woman? Like I said, I've never talked to a shrink—ah, excuse me—a psychologist before. Could you give me a little slack on the protocol thing?"

"Agreed," Cedar said. "Now, tell me, why are you here?"

He sighed. It was a defeated-sounding sigh that seemed to come from the very depths of his soul. Cedar leaned forward, encouraging Mark to talk.

“I’m here because of Joey,” he said quietly. “He’s so damn sad and I can’t reach him no matter what I do. He’s got walls built around himself and he won’t let me get close to him. We can’t go on like this.”

Cedar opened the file on her desk and wrote Joey on the paper inside.

Who was Joey? she wondered, waiting for Mark to continue. From the pain in his voice it was obvious that Joey was very important to him. Dr. Gibson knew her specialty, so Cedar could hazard one guess as to who Joey was.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Chandler,” she said. “I’m afraid I’m at a bit of a disadvantage. If she were here, Bethany would have had you fill out a form as a new client but I failed to do that. Normally, I would know who Joey is by reading that information. I’ll remember to give you the form after our session. Right now, why don’t we just talk? Are you married? Is Joey your son?”

“No, I’m not married. Never have been. Joey is my nephew.”

Hooray, Mark Chandler isn’t married, Cedar thought, then swallowed heavily. Where on earth had that reaction come from? Talk about unprofessional. And talk about out of character for her to be so focused on the physical attributes and marital status of a man she’d just met. This was absurd. She was just tired, that’s all. It had been a very long, busy day. Fine. She was okay now.

“Your nephew,” she repeated, writing the fact on the sheet. “How old is he?”

“Seven.”

“Why don’t you tell me about Joey?”

Mark sighed again. “He’s my sister Mary’s son. Mary and her husband, John, were killed in an automobile accident two months ago. Joey wasn’t in the car because he was spending the night at a friend’s house.”

Cedar nodded and made more notes on the paper.

“I flew to New York for the funeral and was there about three weeks taking care of legal matters. Joey spent a lot of time at the neighbor’s house during those weeks because I was very busy. Finally, though, I was able to bring him back here to Phoenix. I’m Joey’s legal guardian, you see.”

“How did he feel about all that?”

Mark shrugged. “He didn’t really react at all. He’s like a zombie. He hardly talks to me, spends most of his time alone in his bedroom, and just seems to be operating in his own little world where no one is allowed to enter. I enrolled him in school and his teacher called me in and said Joey doesn’t participate in class. He just sits there doing nothing, she said. I took him to Dr. Gibson to be sure he wasn’t sick or something and that’s how I ended up here.”

“How well does Joey know you, Mr. Chandler?” Cedar asked.

“Call me Mark. My sister and I were close, talked on the phone at least once a week, but I couldn’t get to New York much because of work. I visited for a couple of days last Christmas, but...Joey recognizes me when he sees me, but know me? I guess I’d have to say he doesn’t really know me if that means feeling

comfortable with me, or trusting me. I'm just Uncle Mark who showed up once in a while."

"Do you feel comfortable with him?"

Mark uncrossed his legs and shifted in his chair.

"Not...really," he said, a deep frown knitting his brow. "I don't have a clue what to say to him about his parents, or even about something as simple as how his day went. Dinner conversation is something like 'So, Joey, how'd school go today?' and he'll say 'kay' and that's it for the entire meal. Then he asks to be excused and spends the rest of the evening in his room until I tell him it's time for a bath and bed."

"It sounds as though Joey has his emotions under lock and key," Cedar said.

"That's a good way to put it," Mark said, producing a small smile. "I'm doing a lousy job with him and I realize that. I need help here. It is November already and if Joey doesn't start doing some work at school, he's liable to flunk second grade. Plus there's so much tension in our house, you could cut it with a knife."

"All right," Cedar said. "I have the basic information I need to start working with Joey. I do need you to fill out this form for his file, though. I'd like to see him three times a week to start. Is he available after school?"

"Well, no, not exactly. A van takes him up from school to a day-care center, where I pick him up just before six when they close."

“That’s a long day for a little boy,” Cedar said.

“Yeah, well, I have a lot to do running Chandler Construction.”

“We’ll get into that later,” Cedar said. “There will be times, Mr. . . . Mark, when I’ll want to see you alone, sessions when I want to see you and Joey together and, of course, sessions with Joey on his own. I also do things a bit differently than most child psychologists.

“I feel an office setting can be intimidating for my young clients, so I’ll come to your home, or go on an outing with Joey, perhaps join you and Joey for dinner at a pizza parlor. We’ll decide on those things further down the line.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Now about Joey’s appointments. To have you bring him here after you pick him up at day care isn’t workable. He’ll be tired, hungry. . . . no, I need you to get him here three times a week right after school.”

“Man,” Mark said, running one hand over the back of his neck. “Okay, yeah, I’ll figure something out.”

“Good.” Cedar got to her feet holding the information form. “Let’s go look at the appointment book and set up some of those sessions.”

“There’s one other thing I feel you should know,” Mark said, rising.

“Yes?”

“Joey hasn’t cried.”

“What?”

“He hasn’t cried through any of this.”

“Are you certain of that?” Cedar said, joining him in front of her desk. “What about when he was at the neighbor’s while you were tending to the estate?”

He shook his head. “Maggie, the neighbor, made a point of telling me that Joey didn’t want to talk about his parents, nor did he cry if she or her kids brought up the subject. He didn’t cry at the funeral, or when I brought him here or...no, Dr. Kennedy, Joey hasn’t cried.”

“Cedar is fine. I like to keep things casual, but goodness, Joey must address his pain, let his emotions out instead of bottling them up. For a seven year old to not have cried when his very world was destroyed is saying a great deal about his mental state.”

“You sound...I don’t know...like you really care about Joey and you haven’t even met him yet.”

“He’s a child in crisis, Mark. Of course, I care.”

“Do you have kids of your own?”

“No,” Cedar said quietly. “I don’t. My clients are my family. Oh, and my very spoiled cat Oreo.”

“You don’t have a husband or children, and you devote yourself to other people’s kids who are messed up. That’s admirable, but don’t you get lonely at times?”

“Do you?” Cedar said, starting toward the office door.

“Ah-ha,” Mark said, following her. “Now that was a slam-dunk shrinky-dink maneuver. You answered a question with a

question.”

“Of course,” Cedar said, laughing. “We’re taught that the very first week of classes in college.”

“Whoa,” Mark said, as they entered the reception area. “I thought your smile was something else, but your laughter is... is...okay, I’m going for corny here. Your laughter is like wind chimes. Nice, very nice.”

“Thank you,” Cedar mumbled, then glanced at her watch. “We’d better hurry. You fill out this form while I set up some appointments for Joey. You don’t want to be late picking him up at the day-care center. Do you cook dinner for Joey?”

“Sort of. We eat a lot of scrambled eggs which is about it as far as my culinary skills go. We do the fast-food circuit and order in.”

“Mmm,” Cedar said, shaking her head. “We’ll discuss that later, too.”

Cedar scheduled appointments for Joey over the next two weeks while Mark filled out the form. She gave him a paper with the session dates and times, then offered him her hand.

“It was a pleasure to meet you,” she said. “I’m looking forward to speaking with Joey.”

Mark took her hand. “I appreciate your being willing to take him on.”

Was that heat slithering up her arm and across her breasts? Cedar thought. Good heavens, it was. Mark’s hand was strong and callused, yet so gentle. His touch had caused a strange and

disturbing feeling—

“May I have my hand back now?” she said.

“Oh. Sure,” Mark said, releasing her hand very slowly.

“Thanks again...Cedar.”

“You’re welcome...Mark.”

When the door to the suite closed behind Mark Chandler, Cedar sank into Bethany’s chair, propped her elbows on the desk and pressed her hands to her warm cheeks.

That man was dangerous. He radiated sensuality by merely entering a room with that loose-hipped walk of his. Add to that his height and build and chiseled features...gracious, he must have to beat off women with a stick.

Well, she was on guard now against the potent Mr. Chandler. He wouldn’t fluster her again. She wouldn’t allow that to happen. She’d just be more alert than she usually was against men.

The focus had to be Joey.

Poor, sad, devastated little Joey, who really, really needed to cry.

Chapter Two

As Cedar entered her house, she realized she had thought about Mark Chandler and Joey during the entire drive home. That was understandable, she decided, because Mark had been the last client she'd seen that day.

She'd read the form Mark had filled out and learned there were no other relatives on either side of Joey's family. It was just the two of them, uncle and nephew, and that combination was definitely not going well at the moment.

Cedar closed the door behind her and told herself to leave her two new clients, Mark and Joey, on the porch that swept across the front of the house.

Over a year before she had purchased the old, two-story Victorian house. It had the charm and grace of a past era and she'd been captivated, imagining the marvelous stories the stately structure would tell if its walls could whisper.

In the year since signing the mortgage papers the charm of her home had greatly diminished. Although it had passed the initial inspection and was declared to be in excellent condition, she had spent the past fourteen months tending to one repair after another.

She was seriously considering selling the savings-draining house and buying something newer. However, since her reputation as a child psychologist was growing in Phoenix and

more and more clients came under her care, there didn't seem to be a spare moment in her schedule to explore the market for something else.

Plus, the thought of packing and moving again was more than she could bear. For now she would stay put, but she had mental fingers crossed that the rash of repairs was at an end for a while.

“Oreo, I'm home. Come do your I'm-so-glad-to-see-you thing.”

A large, black-and-white cat strolled into the room, then wove around her legs, meowing loudly.

Was this pathetic? Cedar thought. Was she becoming a classic spinster at thirty-two, coming home to a house that held nothing more than a fat cat to greet her?

Don't you get lonely at times?

The words Mark Chandler had spoken suddenly echoed in Cedar's mind and a shiver coursed through her. She reached down and picked up Oreo.

“Hello, pretty girl,” Cedar said. “We're a good team, aren't we? We don't need anyone else living here with us and, no, we don't get lonely at times.”

Oreo wiggled in Cedar's arms, then jumped to the floor and ran toward the kitchen.

“But the question remains,” Cedar said, pointing a finger in the air, “as to whether you love me for me, Ms. Oreo, or because I'm the one who feeds you? Do I want to know the answer to that? No, I do not.” She shook her head. “Isn't this super? Now

I'm talking to myself, for Pete's sake."

Cedar went upstairs to change into soft, faded jeans and an equally worn Arizona State University sweatshirt. Returning to the main floor, she went into the kitchen, fed a complaining Oreo, then opened the refrigerator to see what might tempt her for dinner.

Mark could only make scrambled eggs, she thought. Why were men so quick to decide that their gender made it acceptable to be helpless in the kitchen? It was no longer politically correct to assume the attitude that cooking was woman's work. Mark should buy a cookbook and prepare nourishing, well-balanced meals for growing Joey. Cooking, in fact, was something the pair could tackle together, use as a bonding tool. She'd have to speak to Mark about that and—

"That's it, Mark Chandler," Cedar said aloud, as she took lettuce and a tomato from a shelf. "Go back to the front porch where I left you. Right now."

But Mark refused to budge.

He seemed to hover while Cedar prepared her meal of pasta with spicy sauce, a tossed salad and two slices of garlic bread.

He was at the table while Cedar consumed her dinner, then cleaned the kitchen. When she settled into her favorite easy chair that was big enough for two, he somehow managed to perch on the rounded arm of the chair.

Cedar snatched up the book on the table next to the chair, turned on the light and opened the book to where she'd left off

the night before. After reading three paragraphs and realizing she hadn't understood one word, she snapped the book closed and frowned.

What on earth was going on here? she thought. She'd had a date with a dentist a month ago and had forgotten he existed by the time he'd backed out of her driveway after bringing her home.

Why was Mark Chandler, who was a client and automatically not eligible for anything other than professional meetings, consuming her thoughts and managing to have such an intense affect on her? His presence was so palpable, she felt as though she could reach out and actually touch him right there in her living room.

Now there was an enticing image, Cedar mused. Touching Mark Chandler. She had a feeling the chest beneath that faded shirt was rock-solid, as were his arms and those long, long legs. His thick hair just called to feminine fingers to sift through it, then watch it glide back into place. His lips—

“Aakk,” Cedar yelled, as Oreo jumped into the chair and startled her back to reality. “Oh, good grief, Oreo, you scared the bejeebers out of me. But I deserve it because I had no business thinking what I was and...Oreo, give it to me straight. Am I losing it?”

“Nothing like this has ever happened to me before and it's disconcerting to say the least. I mean, really, Mark Chandler isn't even my type, you know what I mean? I go for the suit-and-tie guys, not dust-covered construction...dudes. So why is Mark

capable of consuming my brain and..."

Oreo leaped over the arm of the chair and left the room.

Cedar sighed. "That went well. This whole situation is so ridiculous, my own cat decided it wasn't worth listening to.

"Okay, I'm on my own. This is Thursday. I see Mark again on Monday when he brings Joey for his appointment. Between now and then I'll get it together and knock off this nonsense. Yes, I will, because I am woman...in charge, in control."

Cedar opened the book to the proper page and began to read, extremely glad there wouldn't be a test later on what she was supposedly comprehending.

Mark straightened the blanket over a sleeping Joey, then left the toy-strewn bedroom. He wandered down the hall to the large living room and slouched into a well-worn chair he refused to have reupholstered. Picking up the remote from the end table, he clicked on the television, only to be greeted by canned laughter. He shut it off again.

It had been another silent evening in the Chandler household, he thought dismally. No matter how hard he'd tried, he couldn't get Joey to respond to his chatty questions with more than one-word answers. Joey had just stared at him with those big, dark and so damn sad eyes of his and Mark had finally given up and allowed the kid to finish his scrambled eggs in a silence that seemed to weigh a ton.

"Ah, hell." Mark dragged his hands down his face, then laced them on his chest.

Mary had trusted him with her son, Mark thought dismally. He and Mary had been so close, and he missed her. At times he caught himself reaching for the phone to call her and hear her cheerful voice. She'd be devastated if she knew how unhappy Joey was in his new home with his Uncle Mark, and disappointed in her brother for being such a lousy father.

"Ah, hell," he said again.

He'd spent more than one evening sitting here mentally beating himself up because he couldn't break through the walls that sad little boy had built around himself. Well, now things were different. He'd taken a positive step toward getting help for Joey by seeing Cedar Kennedy.

Cedar.

He liked her name. It was unique and had a nice ring to it. And he liked her smile and her dynamite wind-chime laughter. Her hair was pretty, framing her delicate features with soft blond waves and... Why wasn't a woman like that married? How stupid and blind were the men in Phoenix, for crying out loud?

Maybe she hated men. Why would she hate men? Had she been badly hurt in the past by some jerk? That was a disturbing thought. He'd like to pop that guy right in the chops for...no, he was getting carried away here. He didn't have a clue why Cedar Kennedy wasn't married.

Maybe she'd been too busy establishing her career, just as he had been, to become involved in a serious relationship. That made sense. He'd come right out and asked her if she ever got

lonely and she'd thrown that question right back in his lap.

Did he get lonely?

What difference did that make anyway? He didn't have enough hours in the day to do all that needed tending at Chandler Construction and now he had become an instant father of a little boy who was so miserable, it was enough to break a person's heart.

Well, come Monday, things were going to be different once he placed Joey in Cedar's care. He'd do whatever Cedar recommended.

Except what had she meant by saying they'd talk later about his lack of cooking skills? Hey, eggs were good for a kid and there was nothing wrong with hamburgers and pizza.

Cedar. He was definitely looking forward to seeing her again on Monday. She was, he hoped, the solution to Joey's unhappiness, and he was eager to get this show on the road. His anticipation didn't really have anything to do with Cedar the woman, no matter how attractive she was. Or how her smile lit up her face, or her laughter.

"Enough," Mark said, pressing the remote to bring the television to life. "Watch the news, Chandler, and quit thinking."

"I suppose you want me to give up my baby for adoption just like everyone else. Well, I won't. I don't care what you say, I won't."

Cedar looked at the sullen fifteen year old who sat opposite her desk. "I didn't suggest that at all," she said gently. "I simply

asked how you planned to provide for your child, Cindy.”

“I’ll manage,” Cindy said, then began to nibble on one of her fingernails.

“How do you feel about the baby’s father leaving town when you told him you were pregnant?”

“I don’t need him,” Cindy said, dropping her hand to her rounded stomach. “I made a mistake by thinking he loved me, but it’s no big deal. He’d be a crummy father anyway.”

“But you’re not making a mistake by insisting that you can manage to raise a child on your own, without a high-school education?” Cedar said.

“No. I’ll get a job. I can wait tables, or whatever. Waitresses make good tips if they’re nice to the customers. And I’ll get a cute little apartment and fix it up really nice. I’ve done a lot of babysitting, you know, so I can take care of my baby just fine. It’s not as though I haven’t thought this through. I know what I’m doing.”

Cedar nodded. “Okay. I’m going to give you an assignment I’d like you to complete before we meet again next Monday.”

“Oh, bogus,” Cindy said, rolling her eyes heavenward. “What is it?”

“I want you to look in the newspaper for apartments, then enquire about how much money you’ll need to move into a place of your own...such as first and last month’s rent, security deposit, the whole nine yards. Then I want you to find out what waitress jobs are paying these days. Also, call several day-care centers

and ask about their rates.

“You do that much, then we’ll work together to figure out the additional cost of diapers, formula, utilities, transportation and on the list goes. Now, before you start to argue with me about this, remember you signed a contract stating that you would cooperate with me one hundred percent.”

“Yeah, right, okay,” Cindy mumbled.

“Good. I’m sure your foster mother is in the waiting room because our time is up,” Cedar said, getting to her feet. “I’ll see you in a week. We’ll meet here again, then in the future let’s consider getting together in a park or a cozy café.”

“Whatever,” Cindy said, then rose and stomped across the office, closing the door behind her with a resounding thud.

“Oh, Cindy,” Cedar said, sinking back into her chair. “I’m sorry, sweetie, but I’m going to burst your bubble.”

Cedar opened Cindy Swanson’s file and wrote notes from the session with the pregnant teenager.

Cindy’s divorced mother had four younger children at home. When Cindy had announced that she was pregnant, the mother couldn’t deal with it. She’d called Child Protective Services and had Cindy placed in foster care. CPS had then made arrangements for Cindy to become one of Cedar’s clients. Beyond the many cases the social service organization had directed to her, she also got referrals from schools and private physicians...like the one who had recommended her to Mark Chandler.

Mark Chandler, who was no doubt sitting in the waiting room right now with Joey.

Mark Chandler, who hadn't strayed far from her thoughts the entire weekend, the rotten bum.

Cedar placed Cindy's file in the out basket for Bethany to file, then reached in another basket for Joey's file and placed it on her desk. She stood, tugged on the hem of the navy blazer she wore with a red blouse over winter-white slacks, then walked slowly across the room. She drew a steadying breath before opening the door.

Cedar felt, and tried to ignore the immediate increased tempo of her heart as she looked at Mark sitting on a sofa against the far wall. When she shifted her gaze to the small boy next to him, her heart did a funny little two-step.

Joey. He looked enough like Mark to be his son, with his tousled black hair and big, dark eyes. He appeared small for his age, his feet not reaching the floor.

Even with the distance between them she could sense Joey's vulnerability and wanted to scoop him up, hug him and tell him everything was going to be just fine.

Objectivity, Dr. Kennedy, Cedar told herself, then crossed the room to stand in front of the pair.

"Hello, Mark," she said, smiling. "And you must be Joey. I've been eager to meet you."

Joey glanced up at her, then quickly directed his attention to his hands that were clutched tightly in his lap.

“Say hello, Joey,” Mark said.

“Lo,” Joey mumbled.

“I’d like to chat with you a bit, Joey,” Cedar said, extending one hand toward the little boy. “Shall we go into my office? We’ll let your Uncle Mark stay out here and finish reading his magazine.”

“No,” Joey said.

“Hey, buddy, we talked about this,” Mark said. “I’ll be right here waiting for you, I promise. You go with Dr. Kennedy.”

“Call me Cedar, Joey,” she said.

Joey frowned and looked up at her. “That’s a weird name.”

“Oh, cripe,” Mark said, shaking his head. “Joey, you don’t tell someone that their name is weird.”

“Well, it is,” Joey said.

Cedar laughed. “It’s different, that’s for sure. It was my mother’s last name before she got married. She thought by sharing it with me, it would connect us in a special way.”

“Is your mom dead?” Joey asked.

“No, she isn’t,” Cedar said. “She and my father live in Florida now. I miss them very much.”

Joey folded his thin little arms over his chest. “You’d miss them more if they were dead people ’cause you couldn’t talk to them on the phone or nothing. Nothing.”

“I never thought of that,” Cedar said. “Let’s go into my office and you can explain it to me further.”

Joey slid off the sofa, but ignored Cedar’s outstretched hand.

Cedar smiled at Mark, but he just shook his head again, a frown on his face.

“Did Joey get a snack, Bethany?” Cedar said. “Busy boys are hungry after school.”

“He certainly did,” Bethany said. “He had a juice box and a granola bar.” Her secretary was a plump woman in her early fifties, who was in the process of consuming her own box of juice and a granola bar.

“Good,” Cedar said, then placed her hand lightly on Joey’s back and guided him into her office, shutting the door behind them.

In the office Cedar patted the seat of one of the chairs fronting her desk, then sat down in the other one once Joey was settled.

“How come you’re not sitting behind your desk like the principal or something?” Joey said.

“I like to sit here when I’m getting to know a new friend.” Cedar paused. “Joey, would you like to talk some more about how you can’t speak with your parents on the telephone?”

“No,” he said, drumming his fingers on his thighs and watching the repeated motion.

“Okay. So, tell me, do you like your teacher at school?”

Joey shrugged.

“Have you made some new friends?”

Joey shrugged.

“Are you getting along all right with your Uncle Mark?”

Joey shrugged.

“Are you tired of eating scrambled eggs?”

Joey’s head snapped up. “Those eggs are so gross. They’re never good. Sometimes they run all over my plate and sometimes they’re hard as a rock and...I hate scrambled eggs the way Uncle Mark cooks them. Totally, totally gross.”

Cedar nodded. “They do sound gross. Have you told Uncle Mark you’d rather not have scrambled eggs anymore?”

“No. No, ’cause he...he might get mad at me or something and tell me I can’t live with him, and I don’t have anywhere else to live because...because I don’t.”

“Because your parents were killed in the accident?” Cedar said gently.

“That’s none of your business,” Joey yelled.

“Okay. Let’s go back to discussing those gross scrambled eggs. I’ll make a deal with you.”

Joey narrowed his eyes. “Like what?”

“I’ll be the one to tell your Uncle Mark you’d rather not have scrambled eggs again. I guarantee that he won’t get angry about it.”

“Bet he will. He’s grumpy.”

“We’ll see,” Cedar said. “I’ll do that for you, but you have to do something for me. That’s how this deal works.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Well, if you don’t want gross eggs, we have to decide what you do want, then teach Uncle Mark how to make it. You invite me to your house and we’ll give him a cooking lesson. That’s

your part of the deal. You invite me over and we, together, show Uncle Mark how to make your choice and tell him it can't be gross when he does it. How's that? What would you like to eat instead of scrambled eggs?"

Joey shrugged.

"Well, I guess you're stuck with gross eggs then."

"No, wait," Joey said. "I'd rather have chicken with barbecue sauce. I really like that. But Uncle Mark can't ever learn how to make it. No way. He got a big fat chicken one time and stuck it in a pan without barbecue sauce on it or nothing, just a fat naked chicken and we waited for it to cook and stuff, you know? I was really hungry and hours went by and then Uncle Mark figured out he didn't turn on the stove right and the stupid chicken was just sitting there. Cold. I mean, that is so dumb."

Cedar laughed. "So what did you have for dinner? No, let me guess. Gross scrambled eggs."

A hint of a smile appeared on Joey's face, then disappeared in the next instant.

"Yeah," he said. "Eggs again."

"Okay, my new friend. We're in business. I'll buy what we need to make barbecue chicken, bring it to your house, and you and I will show Uncle Mark how to fix it."

"He'll never go for this," Joey said, rolling his eyes.

"Let's find out," Cedar said, getting to her feet. "I'll go get him."

"He's going to be really, really grumpy," Joey said, then

sighed.

Cedar opened the office door. “Mark? Would you come in please?”

“Yeah. Sure,” he said, getting to his feet and hurrying across the room. “How’s it going?”

“Joey and I have something of great importance to discuss with you.”

“Already?” Mark said, raising his eyebrows. “Hey, that’s terrific.”

“Mark, you take the chair opposite Joey and I’ll sit behind my desk now,” Cedar said.

Mark settled onto the chair and looked at Cedar, an expression of anticipation on his face.

“Joey and I have talked at length,” she said, “and I have agreed to be the spokesperson here.”

“I’m listening, believe me,” Mark said, leaning forward.

“Mark,” Cedar said seriously, “you make extremely gross scrambled eggs.”

“I...what?”

“Yes. Totally gross,” Cedar said. “Joey would prefer not to eat the scrambled eggs you prepare. Ever again.”

“What?” Mark repeated.

“So, Joey and I are going to teach you how to make what he would like to eat. Barbecue chicken.”

“This is the matter of great importance that you wanted to discuss with me?” Mark said, none too quietly.

“I told you, I told you,” Joey said, stiffening in his chair. “He’s getting grumpy right now. See? He is.”

“I am not grumpy,” Mark said, then cleared his throat. “I’m... I’m just a bit surprised about the subject, that’s all. My eggs are gross, Joey?”

“The worst,” Joey said. “Totally.”

“I didn’t think they were that bad,” Mark said, frowning. “They wouldn’t win first place in an egg-cooking contest, but... you want barbecue chicken? I didn’t have much luck with that other chicken, remember?”

“Yeah, well, this time Cedar and me are going to show you how to do barbecue chicken right,” Joey said. “Then you’ll know how to do barbecue chicken and gross eggs will be history.”

“Got it,” Mark said, a bemused expression on his face.

“What evening this week would be good for you?” Cedar asked. She flipped through her engagement calendar. “We’ll cancel our Wednesday afternoon appointment. I’m free Thursday or Friday.”

“Pick one,” Mark said, throwing up his hands.

“Friday night?” Cedar said, then recorded it. “I’ll be at your house by five-thirty.”

“But I work until...” Mark hesitated. “Five-thirty, it is.”

“Good,” she said. “Joey, it was wonderful to meet you and I am really looking forward to cooking with you and enjoying that chicken. I’ll see you Friday night. Why don’t you go see Bethany now and tell her I said you could pick a piece of candy from the

jar. I want to speak to your Uncle Mark for a second.”

“Kay,” Joey said, then slid off the chair and ran out of the office.

Cedar leaned forward and folded her hands on her desk. “Mark, I am so pleased with the progress made today with Joey,” she said, smiling.

“You are?” he said. “Pardon my confusion, but I thought you two were coming in here to discuss Joey’s parents. But the topic was my crummy eggs? Why are we thrilled?”

“Because Joey and I are establishing a rapport. He was comfortable enough with me to tell me that he wished he didn’t have to eat those scrambled eggs.”

Mark got to his feet. “Why didn’t he just tell me?”

“Mark, you have to understand where Joey is coming from. He is a bright little boy who realizes that you are the only person available to provide a home for him. He’s lost his parents. He’s now terrified that if he upsets you, you won’t want him to live with you.”

“That’s nuts,” Mark said, nearly shouting.

“Shh,” Cedar said, rising to round the desk. “I don’t want Joey to hear any of this. He used me as a buffer to deliver the message about the eggs and to inform you what he does like to eat. It’s a marvelous start. Our Friday session will also give me a chance to see his bedroom, the possessions that are important to him, and to watch the interaction between you and Joey.”

“Joey’s problems are not going to be solved overnight. It will

be a slow process. He did not want to discuss his parents with me, and I didn't push him on the subject. I have to establish a level of trust with Joey first. And...well, I need you to trust me, too."

Mark looked at Cedar for a long moment.

"Doesn't that work both ways?" he said finally. "Don't you need to trust me?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

"You're going to be coming to my home, plus you said we'd be going on outings together with Joey at times. We'll also have private meetings such as this one right now to discuss progress. I'm referring to you trusting me as a man, not just as Joey's guardian. Do you trust me as a man?"

"I..." Cedar stopped speaking.

Why was Mark doing this? she thought frantically. She didn't intend to view him as a man. No, he was Joey's guardian, his uncle, the person who was now that little boy's father. Their relationship had nothing to do with Cedar, the woman, trusting Mark, the man.

Mark Chandler unsettled her, made her acutely aware of her own femininity and his incredible masculinity. She had no idea if she trusted him. She was having enough trouble trusting herself not to overreact to his blatant sensuality whenever she was near him, for heaven's sake.

"Your question is immaterial, Mark," she said, tearing her gaze from his.

"I don't believe it is," he said. "How is Joey going to relax

around me if he senses tension between you and me? How will he come to trust me if he feels that you don't? Think about it.”

“I...”

“You have my address on that form I filled out. Joey and I will be waiting for your arrival Friday night. We'll all cook dinner together, just like a family. Right? Right.” Mark nodded. “See ya.”

Mark strode from the room. Cedar sank into one of the chairs in front of her desk when she realized her trembling legs were not going to support her for one second longer.

This was not going well, she thought, pressing her hands to her flushed cheeks. Mark had made a legitimate point. Joey would be aware of any tension between her and Mark and might very well hold back because of it.

She had to somehow gain control of her raging emotions before Friday night. She was a professional. She'd taken part in in-home therapy a multitude of times and found it to be very effective and informative. She would concentrate on Joey and the chicken, and view Mark as the client that he was. Not a man... a client.

She could do that.

Couldn't she?

Chapter Three

On Friday evening before Cedar arrived, Mark stood in the middle of his living room and nodded in approval. He had made a fire in the hearth that was now crackling with leaping flames. The cleaning lady, who came three times a week, had done her usual expert job.

Mark had built the large house in Fountain Valley, an affluent area at the north edge of Phoenix. The split floor plan featured a master bedroom on one side of the house and three more bedrooms on the opposite side. There were also a sunken living room with a flagstone fireplace, a formal dining room, a big kitchen with an eating area, and a library with built-in shelves.

The backyard boasted a swimming pool, plus a separate Jacuzzi beyond a good-size covered patio.

Mark had hired a decorator who had chosen large, comfortable furniture in tones of gray and light-to-dark burgundy. The overall effect was one of simple elegance.

He had known when he designed and built the house that it was much too big for a single man, but he'd had hopes of having a wife and children someday and wanted to be prepared. He'd also intended to establish a sizable investment portfolio that would provide not only for his retirement, but for college educations for his children. He wanted available funds for any emergencies that might arise.

One had.

Until Joey's arrival, the three spare bedrooms had been empty. Together, they had shopped for Joey's furniture, which had proven to be a study in frustration, as Joey offered no opinions and answered most questions with his ever-familiar shrug.

Wanting Joey to have his own possessions with him, Mark had his nephew's clothes, toys, and books shipped from New York. He had even purchased a Game Boy as a gift for Joey, but had yet to see the little boy play with it.

Cedar would see that Joey had a nice home.

Joey's new bedroom was large and had its own bathroom. It contained a double bed, dresser, desk, and bookshelves to hold his belongings. Everything that a little boy could possibly want was available under this roof.

Yeah, right, Mark thought, shaking his head. It all sounded great except for the fact that Joey was a very unhappy kid. The easy way out would be to blame Joey's emotional state entirely on the loss of his parents. That might very well be true, but Cedar would need to make that determination.

"No, part of it is me," Mark said, frowning.

He was doing a lousy job of being a father, no doubt about it. He should be able to get Joey to smile, for Pete's sake, to talk to him, to spend just one evening with his Uncle Mark.

Hell, what did he know about being a dad? Not a damn thing. He sure hadn't had any kind of role model. Not even close. Should he tell Cedar that? Explain his own childhood to her so

she could understand why he was doing such a crummy job of —no. He wasn't about to pour out his heart and soul to a woman he hardly knew. No way.

The doorbell rang, jerking Mark from his rambling thoughts. As he started across the room, Joey came running down the hall and entered the living room.

“Cedar's here,” Joey said, zooming to the door. He flung it open just as Mark reached him.

“Hi, Cedar,” Joey said. “Did you bring the chicken and stuff?”

“I certainly did,” Cedar said, smiling. “Are you ready to be a chef?”

“Yeah,” Joey said. “Cool.”

“Joey,” Mark said, “why don't you invite Cedar in?”

“Huh?” Joey said. “Oh. You wanna come in now?”

Cedar laughed. “Yes, thank you.” She stepped into the living room and swept her gaze over the large expanse. “What a lovely home,” she said. “Oh, and a fire in the hearth. Perfect.” She looked at Joey again. “Would you take one of these grocery sacks, please?”

“Sure,” Joey said, slamming the door closed, then accepting one of the bags.

Cedar hadn't acknowledged his presence or even glanced in his direction, Mark thought. So, okay, she was here in her role as Joey's psychologist, but still—

Man, listen to him. He was reacting like a bratty little kid who was jealous because the new baby was getting all the attention.

But, criepe, the woman could at least say hello.

“Hello, Cedar,” he said.

Cedar slowly, very slowly, shifted her gaze to meet Mark’s.

“Hello, Mark,” she said.

“Let me take that other sack,” he said, reaching toward it.

“Oh, it’s fine,” Cedar said.

“I insist,” he said, then grasped the bag, the back of his right hand brushing her breast lightly. “Oh, excuse me. I didn’t mean to...sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” Cedar said. “On to the kitchen, gentlemen.”

Providing that her legs would carry her that far, she thought frantically, which was doubtful because her bones were dissolving from the incredible heat that was consuming her. That one-second flicker of Mark’s hand on her breast was wreaking total havoc on her body.

There was a flush on her cheeks, too, she just knew there was, darn it. This evening was not starting out well at all.

“Are you coming?” Joey said from across the room.

“What?” Cedar said. “Oh, yes, of course. Lead the way, sir.”

In the kitchen, Cedar offered the appropriate compliments on the state-of-the-art appliances and the generous size of the room, finally deciding that she was babbling like an idiot.

“Okay,” she said, then drew a steadying breath. “First thing we do is wash our hands.”

As they all turned toward the double sink, Cedar was acutely

aware that Mark was behind her...very, very close behind her.

"I'll go first and get out of the way," she said quickly.

Oh, Cedar, she admonished herself, as she dried her hands on a towel. Would you please get it together before you make a complete fool of yourself?

She reached into one of the sacks now sitting on the counter and removed a bright blue square of material.

"This is your chef's apron, Joey," she said. "All famous chefs wear aprons, you know." She shook it out to reveal the bright orange Garfield the Cat on the front. "How's this?"

"Cool," Joey said.

Cedar slipped the apron over Joey's head and tied it in the back.

"I don't want to get stuff on it," Joey said.

"That's what aprons are for, sweetie," Cedar said. "It doesn't matter if it gets messy."

"Yes, it does," he said, nearly shouting. "'Cause then it will be yucky, and you might tell me to throw it away or something, and I won't have it anymore, and it will be gone forever."

"Hey, buddy," Mark said, "calm down. You can keep the apron even if it gets stained."

"Promise?" Joey said.

"Promise," Mark said.

"Well...okay then," Joey said.

He's so fragile, Cedar thought, her heart seeming to melt as she looked at Joey, who was smoothing the front of the apron.

It will be gone forever. He'd lost his parents and couldn't bear the idea of losing anything else, not even a gaudy little apron. Oh, Joey.

Cedar looked at Mark over the top of Joey's head and their gazes met, his expression telling her that he'd understood the meaning of Joey's outburst.

"There's a lot of work to be done here," Cedar said, still looking directly at Mark.

"No joke," Mark said, frowning.

"Yeah, we gotta cook a big ol' dinner," Joey said. "Are you gonna write stuff down, Uncle Mark?"

"What?" Mark said. "Oh, sure, you bet."

The project began.

With Joey kneeling on a chair next to Cedar, the chicken was rinsed, placed on a baking sheet, then coated with barbecue sauce that Joey spread with a butter knife with exacting care.

Potatoes were scrubbed, punctured with a fork, then wrapped in foil and placed on the second shelf of the oven below the tray of chicken.

As delicious aromas began to waft through the air, a tossed salad was prepared and sprinkled with Italian dressing.

Mark made a big production of writing down the directions for all that was being done as Cedar chatted with Joey. She learned the name of his teacher, that he liked science but hated math, that lunch in the cafeteria was sorta gross but not too bad some days, and that girls were weird but there was a boy named Benny

who might be his friend but maybe not.

“Benny has a mom, but not a dad,” Joey said, as he folded paper napkins, “’cause last year his dad said he liked a different lady better than Benny’s mom and they live far away now and stuff. He sent Benny a card with five dollars in it once.”

“Is Benny sad because his dad isn’t with him anymore?” Cedar said, as she carried silverware to the table.

Joey shrugged. “Sometimes, I guess. But I told him that having his dad far away was better than having his dad be dead forever.”

Oh, man, listen to him, Mark thought, as he placed glasses on the table. A seven year old shouldn’t be thinking about things like that, but at least he was talking. Joey had said more to Cedar during the preparation of this meal than he had during all the weeks he’d lived here. Cedar Kennedy was obviously very good at what she did.

She was also very good at pushing his sexual buttons by doing nothing more than being in the same room with him. She looked sensational in her snug jeans and bright red sweater. And when she smiled, or laughed, he could feel the heat coil low in his body, driving him right up the wall. She wasn’t trying to get a reaction from him, he knew that. It was just happening because...well, because she was Cedar.

“I think you’re being a very good friend to Benny,” Cedar said.

“He might be my friend,” Joey said. “Friends should be friends forever, you know? I don’t want to ask Benny to promise that ’cause...I just don’t.”

“Why don’t you just be friends one day at a time?” Cedar said. “Don’t worry about forever, just have fun with Benny each day as it comes for now.”

“Maybe.”

“Let’s check the chicken, sir chef,” Cedar said, ruffling Joey’s hair.

Dinner was delicious and praise was directed to the little chef who beamed.

“Do you have a kid?” Joey asked Cedar as they ate.

“Hey, buddy,” Mark said, “that’s kind of a personal question to ask someone.”

“It’s fine, Mark,” she said, then took a bite of fluffy potato. “No, Joey. I don’t have a child. I was married once, but I’m not married now.”

“How come?” Joey said.

Mark realized he was waiting for Cedar’s answer as intently as Joey was.

“Because sometimes, even though we want things to be forever, it just doesn’t work out that way,” she said quietly. “It makes us very sad when that happens, but we have to learn to smile again and look forward to all the adventures yet to come. Understand?”

Joey shrugged.

“I really cried a lot when I knew I wasn’t going to be married forever,” Cedar continued. “It may sound strange, Joey, but crying when you’re sad can actually make you feel better.”

Joey shrugged.

“Do you have room in your tummy for another piece of chicken, Joey?” Cedar said. “Yes? No? Maybe you’ll want to leave room for the chocolate chip ice cream I brought.”

“Do you like being in your house all by yourself?” Joey said.

“Oh, I’m not alone,” Cedar said, smiling. “I have a cat named Oreo. I named her that because she’s black and white.”

“Cats are cool,” Joey said, nodding in approval.

“I sure like being in this house better since you came to live with me, Joey,” Mark said. “Having you here beats being all by myself.”

“Really?” Joey said, his eyes widening.

“Yep,” Mark said. “I wish you’d talk to me more, though.”

“Well, I might be able to do that,” Joey said. “Maybe.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Mark said.

“Cedar could live here with us and bring her cat Oreo,” Joey said, “in case I don’t want to talk to you too much, Uncle Mark.”

Interesting thought, Mark mused, stifling a chuckle. How was Cedar going to respond to that one?

“Do you have room for that ice cream, Joey?” Cedar said.

Mark laughed. “There’s more than one kind of chicken at this table, Dr. Kennedy.”

“Huh?” Joey said.

Cedar glared at Mark.

After they’d consumed ice cream and cleaned the kitchen, Cedar asked Joey if he’d like to show her his room.

“It’s just a room, with a bed and stuff,” Joey said. “There’s nothing much to see or anything.”

“But you have—” Mark started.

“Well, maybe another time,” Cedar interrupted.

“Yeah...maybe,” Joey said. “I need to take my chef’s apron off now. I hardly got anything messy on it.”

Cedar helped him to remove the apron.

“Yep, you kept it pretty clean, Joey,” she said, holding it up for view, “but I think it still needs to be washed.”

“No,” he said, snatching the apron out of Cedar’s hands.

“Hey, that was rude,” Mark said. “You shouldn’t grab things from people, Joey.”

Joey hugged the apron tightly. “But I don’t want it washed. I’m going to go put it in a special place in my room and nobody can touch it but me. It’s mine. Mine.”

“That’s fine,” Cedar said. “Off you go to select that special place. I’m headed for the living room to enjoy that lovely fire.”

Joey ran from the kitchen and Cedar walked slowly to the living room, Mark following behind her. She sank onto a love seat facing the fireplace while Mark put another log on the glowing embers. He straightened, rested one arm on the mantel and looked at her.

“I don’t have a clue whether this evening is going well or not,” he said, frowning. “Joey said more to you than he’s ever said to me, but...are we thrilled or discouraged?”

Cedar smiled up at him. “Neither, really. I’m just gathering

information.”

“You approached some heavy topics, then backed off right away.”

“It’s like planting seeds, Mark. Now we wait to see if Joey thinks about any of those topics we touched on. He did to a point, when he broached the subject of my being alone. You did very well with that, by the way, by telling him you liked having him here.” Cedar sighed. “Joey is a very frightened boy. He’s even afraid to be friends with Benny because, to him, friendship is supposed to be forever, and Joey has no trust in forever anymore. We’ve got a long way to go with that little sweetheart.”

“What about you, Cedar?” Mark said. “You didn’t get happily ever after in your marriage. Have you learned to trust forever again?”

“I’m focused on my career now,” she said, shifting her gaze to the flames in the hearth. “I really don’t have time for a relationship. You should be able to relate to that. You obviously put in very long hours at your construction company.”

“True, but someday, when I’ve reached my goals, I want to have a wife and family. That won’t be for quite a while yet, though.” The wife part, at least. “I have a son, family, even if Joey isn’t exactly thrilled about it.”

“Well, I hope those goals are clearly defined in your mind,” Cedar said, looking at Mark again, “so you know when you’re there. Me? I’m centered totally on my career so I don’t have to worry about when to shift gears.”

“In other words, you don’t trust in forever anymore,” Mark said.

“I didn’t say that,” she said, lifting her chin. “I’ve chosen what I want to do with my life and I’m very content with my decision.”

“Mmm,” Mark said, then looked toward a hallway. “I don’t think Joey is going to come back out of his room. I’m going to go get him. It’s one thing to ignore me every evening, but you’re company, and he’s not being polite.”

Cedar got to her feet. “No, let him do what feels right. I’ll go say goodbye to him, but I won’t attempt to enter his room because he doesn’t want to share his private space yet.”

“You’re leaving?” Mark said, pushing away from the mantel. “There’s no reason for you to go so soon. I mean, hey, shouldn’t you be here in case Joey decides to be sociable? Anyway, just because Joey’s had enough of our company for tonight doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy ourselves. I have a lot of DVDs if you’d like to watch a movie. I’ve even got some girl flicks that belonged to my sister. You know, like *Sleepless in Seattle* and *While You Were Sleeping* and *Casablanca*.”

“Girl flicks?” Cedar said, with a burst of laughter. “Oh, that is such a politically incorrect term, Mr. Chandler. Shame on you.”

Mark grinned. “Well, what would you call those movies? I can’t picture myself rushing out and buying any of them.” He placed one hand over his heart. “However, nice guy that I am, I’ll watch one with you.”

“Thank you, but no,” Cedar said, still smiling. “It’s been a long

day. I'd probably doze off halfway through a movie."

"No problem," Mark said, matching her smile. "That would mean you'd still be here in the morning and you could sample some of my world-famous scrambled eggs."

"Oh, I'm definitely going home now," Cedar said, laughing again.

The smile on Mark's face vanished.

"I told you how much I like hearing your laughter," he said, "but it bears repeating. Wind chimes." He stopped speaking, stared down at the floor for a long moment, then looked directly into Cedar's eyes. "You know, I realize you're here tonight for Joey, but I want to tell you that I enjoyed your company very much."

"Thank you, Mark," Cedar said. "I...I had a nice time, too, even though I was working, per se. But...well, I'm going to say good night to Joey and be on my way. I want to get home and make some notes on what took place with Joey while everything is fresh in my mind and add them to his file on Monday. My professional duties aren't over yet for today."

"You put in longer hours than I do, and I've been called a workaholic."

"I love what I do."

"But is it enough to fulfill the woman as well as the psychologist?" Mark said, raising his eyebrows.

"We've been over this ground, Mark," Cedar said. "I'm centered on my career. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll go see Joey."

Cedar hurried across the room and went down the hall, stopping at a closed door with a sliver of light visible at the bottom. She knocked. A moment later, Joey opened the door.

“I just wanted to say good night, Joey,” Cedar said, smiling. “Thank you for a lovely evening and for cooking such a delicious dinner. I enjoyed being with you very much.”

“Kay,” Joey said. “Did you like being with Uncle Mark, too?”

“Sure. He’s a nice man. You might consider spending more time with him, instead of being alone in your room. Think about that. Okay?”

“Kay. Bye. Thank you for my chef’s apron, Cedar. I’m going to keep it...keep it...forever.”

“I’m glad you like it. I’ll see you at my office on Monday.”

Joey nodded, then stepped back and closed the door.

Cedar stood in the hallway for a long moment, sending mental messages to Joey just to let go and cry, to bury his sad little face in his pillow and weep until he had no more tears to shed.

She sighed, then walked slowly to the living room to retrieve her purse from the chair where she’d placed it. She’d been so deeply in thought, she hadn’t been aware that Mark had moved to stand close beside her.

“Mark,” she said, “I’d like to ask you a personal question which you don’t have to answer if you prefer not to.”

“That sounds ominous, but ask away.”

“When your sister and brother-in-law died in that accident, did you cry?”

Mark frowned. "Why would you want to know that?"

"Because if you did, and if the opportunity presented itself, you could tell Joey that there's nothing wrong with men crying when they're sad and that you're not ashamed about your tears. Maybe Joey's father preached the old philosophy 'real men don't cry' and that is playing a major role in Joey's refusal to shed those very important tears."

"Oh." Mark shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans, yanked them out again, then stared at the ceiling, his shoes, anywhere but at Cedar. "Well, I...well, yeah... I cried because I was really busted up about what had happened, but...I don't think my telling Joey that would be helpful at all."

Cedar placed one hand on Mark's upper arm. "Oh, but it would be helpful," she said. "And it would mean far more than me, a woman, telling him that crying when you're sad is perfectly fine."

"No, Cedar, you don't get it. It was not easy to let go like that. I guess I made up my mind when I was a kid that tears sure as hell weren't going to change the crummy stuff that I was dealing with, so what was the point?"

"Crummy stuff?"

Mark waved one hand in the air in a dismissive gesture, causing Cedar to drop her hand back to her side.

"That's not important now," Mark said. "It's old news best forgotten. We're talking about Joey's baggage, not mine. What I'm trying to say is that the only way I could cry for Mary and

John was to...was to get drunk as a skunk. I really don't think you want me to give Joey a shot of whiskey and tell him to wail his little heart out."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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