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**THE MAN SHE'LL
MARRY**

Susan Fox



Susan Fox
The Man She'll Marry

Аннотация

Tracey couldn't believe she'd written off Ty Cameron's car, nor that he was insisting she pay for it—by working for him! And that meant living with Ty, who seemed determined to get to know her... But Tracey had learned to be wary of men—especially handsome, sexy ones. Only, Ty was different. He didn't just want to get Tracey into bed, he was strong, funny and he was becoming a rock to lean on. In fact, Ty was showing definite signs of husband potential!

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“I don’t want this wayward rich girl to give up on me and leave.”

The words made Tracey’s eyes sting and she couldn’t look at Ty.

This was too wonderful, too special. She couldn’t believe they were talking to each other like this, that Ty was hinting that her approval of him might be as important to him as his approval was to her.

If this was a dream, she didn’t want to wake up. She didn’t let herself think of the things about her that he could never approve of, because she needed this moment too much; her soul was starved for it....

What kind of man makes the perfect husband?

A man with a big heart and strong arms—someone tough but tender, powerful yet passionate....

And where can such a man be found?



Marriages made on the ranch...

Susan Fox lives with her youngest son, Patrick, in Des Moines, Iowa, U.S.A. A lifelong fan of Westerns and cowboys, she tends to think of romantic heroes in terms of Stetsons and boots! In what spare time she has, Susan is an unabashed couch potato and movie fan. She particularly enjoys romantic movies, and also reads a variety of romance novels—with guaranteed happy endings—and plans to write many more of her own.

The Man She'll Marry

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CHAPTER ONE

THE San Antonio nightspot was crowded and loud. The dance floor was a veritable sea of bodies. Colored lights flickered and flashed and bounced rapidly over the dancers.

Tracy LeDeux watched it all through jaded eyes. Somehow everyone seemed to be trying too hard to have a good time. Their movements were too enthusiastic, their laughter too loud, their high spirits too forced.

Just like hers.

She glanced across the table at her date and saw the predatory gleam in his eyes. Gregory Parker III was movie star handsome. Unfortunately, he knew it. His fine Southern manners had turned out to be a thin veneer. No wasn't a word he'd heard often in his life of privilege and he was unhappy about her refusal to go home with him. He'd spent a small fortune on her that evening and it was clear that he expected a return on his investment.

Whether she felt like giving it to him or not. Why hadn't she seen what he was like before she'd agreed to go out with him?

Because she hadn't wanted to see it. She knew almost no one in San Antonio, and she'd been bored and lonely. One more solitary night in her penthouse might have sent her over the edge. Gregory III had provided a welcome distraction. But five minutes after they'd sat down to a fine dinner she'd realized she might have done better to go over the edge.

She had to resist the urge to lean away when Greg surged close to her, his whiskey breath strong in her face.

“It’s late, Tracy. Let’s go to my place, have a drink.” Greg smiled at her the way vain, handsome men smiled when they were determined to get something. This was a man who’d got by on his looks and his family’s money, a man too spoiled to be truly interested in pleasing anyone but himself. Which was why he’d ignored both of her earlier refusals to the same suggestion.

Tracy made herself smile at him, a playful, chiding smile she hoped would appease him. “It’s not that late, Greg. I need to go to the ladies’ room.”

Just that quickly, she escaped him. She managed it so swiftly that she’d caught only the start of another of his spoiled little boy frowns. There was a telephone in the ladies’ lounge. She would call a cab and go home. Later she could claim sudden illness. It was the coward’s way out, but she’d seen the hint of anger in Greg’s gaze, and he’d been drinking heavily. Some scrap of self-preservation warned her that the moment they were away from other people he would drop any pretense of gentlemanly behavior.

The tall cowboy who collided with her in the crowd was dressed no differently than half the men in the nightclub. But he was tall—huge—his six foot plus height making her feel as small as a child. Her impact against his hard body sent a flash of heat through her and she glanced up in surprise. But the moment she saw who it was beneath that white dress Stetson, her heart

shriveled.

Ty Cameron was one of the most ruggedly handsome millionaire oilman/ranchers in Texas. His blond hair was a bright mix of bronze and wheat and white from the sun, and when combined with his sun-darkened skin and the deep vivid blue of his eyes, he was striking.

Tracy had never felt so petite and feminine as in that unexpected moment of impact. But the instant she saw the cold light of recognition in his gaze, she felt sick. The world took a sudden dip. If he hadn't taken hold of her arms to steady her, the shock of seeing him—of him seeing her— might have made her faint. She was so profoundly ashamed of what he knew about her—of what he must think—that she wanted to disappear.

Her ever-present guilt spiked high on a fresh tide of regret. She'd hoped to never see him again. She should have known she'd have to leave Texas to ensure that.

Her shaky, "Pardon me," acknowledged nothing more than their accidental collision. She pulled away from him, relieved beyond words when his hands fell away and the low-voltage current of his touch was no longer sending tiny shocks over her skin.

She would have run from him if she could, but the crowd was too dense for her to accomplish more than a slow retreat as she wove between bodies to put as much space between her and Ty Cameron as possible. At last she reached the ladies' lounge and made her call. But the news that she might be in for a forty-five

minute wait upset her even more.

What were her chances of leaving the nightclub and finding a cab on her own? She'd hardly ever waited for a cab. But then, she'd rarely called for one after midnight. She dreaded the thought of standing on the street at this time of night waiting to flag down a taxi.

If she was gone too long, Greg might come looking for her. The last thing she wanted was for him to find her standing alone outside. She'd have to go back to the table, wait a few minutes, then excuse herself to go back to the ladies' room. Then she could slip out. A second trip might lend credence to her later plea of illness.

The new complication was Ty Cameron. If she went back to the table, she might see him again. The idea made her nerves crackle with anxiety. Hopefully the place was too crowded for a second encounter. Perhaps now that he knew she was around, he would avoid her. She was certain he wanted to see her even less than she wanted to see him.

Resigned to the perils in her plan to escape, Tracy checked her hair and makeup. The sight of her pale face in the mirror gave her another shock. Her eyes were puffy, her complexion unnaturally flushed and blotchy. She'd been drinking too much lately, and it was beginning to show.

It had started with a nerve-calming glass of wine on nights when insomnia plagued her. Now she couldn't sleep without it. She was terrified she was becoming an alcoholic, but she didn't

seem to have the strength to do anything about it. She wasn't certain anymore that she was worth the effort. The sick feeling of doom panicked her and drove her to exit the lounge to lose herself in the noise of the nightclub.

It was almost a relief to reach her table. She'd not caught so much as a glimpse of Ty Cameron. Perhaps he'd been on his way out of the nightspot. She'd been too rattled to notice if he'd been with anyone.

Ty Cameron watched the petite blonde. Tracy looked thinner than when he'd last seen her. She was all huge blue eyes and blond hair. And legs. Perfect legs. She still looked as vulnerable as a child, still carried that lost look. He'd heard she'd parted ways with her poison-pill mother, so maybe Tracy had wised up. Maybe the huge inheritance she'd come into had given her a choice.

Though she'd made up for the terrible things she'd done, the fact that she'd done them in the first place indicated a character flaw he couldn't abide. He figured she was as wicked and worthless as her mother. Or soon would be.

Nevertheless, as he watched her return to her table and saw that she was with Parker, he felt a glimmer of sympathy. He could read her blue eyes as if they were flashing neon letters a foot tall, and what he read in them was worry.

She ought to worry. Parker fancied himself a ladies' man and he preferred fragile blondes. Tracy LeDeux was in for a night of sex-capades, though if she was as much like her soulless mother

as he thought, she was promiscuous enough to handle it.

He was about to look away from Tracy and dismiss her presence altogether when he noticed her drink slip from her fingers. The glass tumbled to the table, but Tracy stared at it numbly. Her lashes fell shut heavily, then opened.

She turned her head to glance at her date, but she swayed with the movement. Parker reached over suddenly to steady her. Ty couldn't have missed the gleam of anticipation in Parker's smile. Or the woozy distress on Tracy's face.

The dizziness had come over her suddenly. She was so weak, so horribly uncoordinated. The narrow tunnel that had shrunk the room grew darker and narrower with every hard beat of her heart. The terror she felt was overwhelming as the world swam away in a gray haze.

Tracy's first coherent thought was that she felt safe. Cocooned. In spite of a faint headache, she felt an odd peace.

It was that strange sense of safety and peace that made her rouse herself. She rarely felt safe, and peace was a foreign sensation. The heavy guilt that had weighted her heart for so long had banished any sense of ease or genuine self-worth.

Was she truly awake or was she dreaming? She rolled to her back in the big bed and forced her eyes open, struggling to cling to the warm feelings. But the moment she got her eyes to focus, that rare sense of safety and peace vanished. This was not her bedroom.

The events of the night before came roaring back. Greg

Parker's face swam in her memory like a ghoul. The last thing she remembered was him advancing on her, picking her up, then... nothing. Nothing!

The mad whirl of terror made her stomach churn. She started to fling off the sheet and comforter to race for the bathroom, then froze as a second traumatic revelation pounded into her brain: she wasn't wearing her dress!

The horror she felt burst out of her in a panicked sound of distress and she clutched the bedclothes to herself.

The rough male voice that sounded from the foot of the bed made her jump.

"Here."

She barely had time to glance in the direction of the voice before a thick white terry-cloth robe came sailing through the air at her.

"Put that on and get cleaned up. Your dress is on a hook in the bathroom."

Ty Cameron stood at the foot of the bed like an Old West lawman who'd tracked down an outlaw he meant to lynch. Contempt glinted in his cold gaze. The shock of his presence was quickly swallowed up by overwhelming mortification.

Shame made her voice a raspy little croak. "Wh-where am I?" Ty's harsh mouth quirked. "Sober up and figure it out."

The words were a slap that sent scorching heat into her face. She felt the hurt to her soul when the look in his eyes suddenly switched to indifference. It was a look that let her know she'd

been judged and found so in want that she wasn't worth another second of his attention.

As if to underscore the impression, he turned from her and walked to the door. He closed it behind him with a finality that shook her.

The chill that descended sliced into her heart like a shard of ice. She was contemptible, unredeemable. With one look and a few terse words, Ty Cameron had somehow confirmed her secret fears about herself and her dark terrors about how her life would go.

She was wealthy, close to obscenely wealthy. At almost twenty-three, she was young and she still had her looks, but her life was worth nothing. She had no one. She had no real stability, no ambition, and no place to belong. There was no point to her life, no compelling reason to exist.

If she died at that moment, she wasn't certain anyone but her mother would care. Even then, the only thing Ramona would want to know when she found out her only child was dead was whether Tracy had made a will and left her money.

Somehow, Tracy managed to mute her despairing thoughts. She had to pull herself together. Solving the mystery of what had happened to her and how she'd ended up with Ty Cameron was a distant second to the frantic need to get away from him.

Once she'd showered, brushed her teeth with the new toothbrush laid out, and tried to do something with her hair, Tracy hurried silently through the huge, single-story ranch house.

She reached the large red-tiled entry hall and came to a shaky halt.

She knew she was at Cameron Ranch, but that also meant she was miles from San Antonio. She had no car and no way to leave.

Unless she could call a car rental agency and have a car delivered. Her heart sank. She'd need a credit card number for that, and all she had in her small evening bag was her driver's license, a few cosmetics, and the key to her penthouse.

The deep voice that carried from the direction of the dining room sent her panic higher.

“Come in and get something to eat.”

The invitation was nothing more than basic good manners. Ty Cameron was the kind of man who'd at least feed a ratty stray before he chased it off or sent it to the pound. A touch of compassion, but an unwavering determination to do nothing more than was humane. And for all her money, Tracy LeDeux was the ratty stray.

Tracy started toward the sound of his voice on reluctant feet. Oh God, she'd hate to see his harsh face, to see the condemnation in his eyes. He despised her. Then again, she despised herself, so at least they agreed on something.

More of the events of the night before had come back to her, though she still didn't recall anything after she'd felt the dizziness and Greg had zoomed close and picked her up.

What was clear was that whatever had happened next, Ty Cameron had brought her to his ranch and put her to bed.

Somehow he'd cut Gregory III out of the equation.

She hoped it had been before Greg had succeeded at anything. Logic told her that although her head pounded, she felt queasy, and her nerves were on edge, there were no other physical aftereffects of the night before. No permanent consequences, no sexual shame to endure. At least not from last night.

But her terror of being that vulnerable undermined logical thought. Since it was clear to her now that Greg had drugged her, how much more had he done to rob her of choice? Black memories stirred and she felt their poison rise.

A wave of dizzy fear made her falter at the wide doorway into the large, formal dining room.

If Greg had violated her, he must have discarded her in some public place, which accounted for Ty's rescue. And Ty was a man of the world. He'd know at a glance what had been done to her. Oh God...

"You should see a doctor."

Ty's grim words were somehow a veiled confirmation of her worst fears. Tracy put out a hand to the door frame, her knees trembling almost too much to hold her up.

"D-did he..." She couldn't put her worst fear into words. She struggled to make herself look at Ty's stern face and braced herself for his answer.

Ty sat at the head of the polished table that was set for lunch. He wore the usual cowboy clothes, denim and chambray, and by now he'd probably put in a half day's work. His hard gaze took

her in, then settled on her pale face and sharpened. He knew what she was asking.

“Did he what? Take what you offered?”

Emotion stung her eyes but she held it back. “I didn’t.”

Cynicism flashed over his handsome face. “What did you think would happen when you got drunk with someone like Parker? No one’s that naïve.”

Tracy’s heart quivered with hurt. She swallowed convulsively and fought for a scrap of dignity.

“I need to get back to San Antonio. C-can I use your phone?” She hated that she’d stuttered. Hated that she’d shown him anything of the shamed horror in her soul.

“You can borrow a car. I’ll have it picked up later.” He nodded toward the place that had been set for her at the table. “Come in and have something to eat.”

Tracy knew absolutely that she wouldn’t be able to swallow a bite of food. Not Ty Cameron’s food, not at his table, and certainly not under his condemning gaze. At the mercy of whatever devastating remark he’d make next.

“I need to go home now. I have to be somewhere.”

The lie made everything so much worse. It was another grim weight on a conscience already too heavily burdened.

And Ty could tell it was a lie. The way he looked at her said so. The fact that he didn’t challenge it or remark on it let her know that honesty wasn’t a reasonable expectation where she was concerned.

Ty leaned back in his chair and slid a hand into his jeans pocket. He held up the keys he pulled out.

“The silver Cadillac at this end of the garage,” he said, then tossed her the keys. Tracy caught them, amazed she’d been able to do it.

Ty’s eyes sharpened on her again. “Good. You’ve got decent reflexes and coordination. People on the roads will be safe.”

That’s when she understood that tossing her the keys had been a test rather than a careless demonstration of disrespect.

“Park it in a good spot where it won’t get hit,” he went on. “Put the keys under the seat, lock them in, then call and leave a message where to pick it up.”

Which meant that he didn’t want to see her again, didn’t care to speak to her personally, hence the precise instructions. Because he meant to drive home the notion that he couldn’t stand her, that she was dirt under his boots.

Her soft, “Thank you,” was brittle. His vivid gaze held hers ruthlessly and she couldn’t seem to look away. He was searching deep, and probably seeing too much. It was a cinch he didn’t detect anything of value.

Tracy turned and walked away with as much outward dignity as she could summon. It was faked, of course. Just like almost everything she showed the world.

She let herself out the front door of the big ranch house, then winced. The noon sun was brutally bright. And hot. Hot enough to make her stomach pitch and the world go blurry. Her knees felt

rubbery by the time she walked to the big garage and let herself in the side door. The dimness inside relieved only a little of the pain in her head.

Once inside the Cadillac, she adjusted the seat then couldn't get the key in the ignition. Frustration made her fumbling worse. She was a wreck. Was she in any condition to drive back to town?

The alternative—that she'd have to face Ty again and seek his help—made her struggle to steady her hand and match the key to the ignition. This time, she succeeded. The big engine purred to life and she gave a relieved sigh. She could do this.

Tracy found the garage door remote on the visor and pressed the button. The big door motored open and she pushed the visor up.

But the visor dropped back down. The remote clipped to it fell into her lap. Tracy dutifully picked it up and clipped it on the visor before she turned to look over her shoulder to back the big car out of the garage. The sudden movement made her dizzy, but she ignored the feeling. The car rolled only a yard or so before the visor again tipped down and the remote again fell into her lap.

She should have left the remote where it fell or tossed it to the dash. Instead, she clipped it to the visor, pushed the visor up, then turned dizzily to continue slowly backing the car.

It moved only a couple of feet before she sensed the visor begin to tip down. Still turned to watch where she was going, she threw up her hand to keep it in place. Impatience made her hit the visor with more force than she'd intended.

And she must have triggered the button on the remote because the big door started down, though Tracy didn't realize that until she saw the bottom edge of the door lower into sight.

Everything went weirdly wrong then. Still turned to back out, Tracy pressed down on the brake. At the same time, she felt for the remote on the visor and pressed the button, thinking the door would reverse and go up.

But the door didn't stop. Alarmed, Tracy shoved down on the brake, but her foot slipped off the edge and the heel strap of her shoe caught. She jerked her shoe free and jabbed desperately for the brake.

She was too dizzy and uncoordinated to locate the brake pedal, but panic helped her manage it. Or so she thought. She'd expected to stop the car, so it was a shock when the big vehicle lurched backward. The massive door scraped heavily onto the trunk as it pressed relentlessly downward. The squawk of metal heightened her hysteria as the door scraped deeper along the trunk then hit the back glass of the car.

Car and door strained against each other, defying her effort to stop the nightmare as she made a last jab for the brake pedal. Suddenly the big car engine roared and the garage door popped out of its tracks.

In that next split second, Tracy realized she'd been pressing the accelerator. Horrified, she turned to face the windshield, pulled her foot off the gas and made a new try for the brake. The loud crash of the big door collapsing on the car roof was as loud as

an explosion.

And then came the silence, that awful silence as the car idled peacefully and Tracy fought to understand what had happened. The wild staccato that pounded her ears was the sound of a heart gone crazy with terror.

Park it where it won't get hit.

Ty's grim instruction came back to her like a klaxon alarm of imminent doom.

CHAPTER TWO

THE hard rocking of the big car penetrated her shock. Dazed, Tracy turned her head to see a blur of blue outside the window.

Ty was yanking powerfully on the handle to open the jammed car door. Another half-dozen pulls and it gave. The door squealed open. Ty surged toward her and Tracy shrank back. Alarmed, she reflexively threw up her arm to protect herself. The back of her hand hit Ty's jaw, but the brutal strike she'd hysterically imagined coming her way didn't happen.

It took a second to register that Ty had been grabbing for the ignition to switch off the idling car. In the sudden silence of the engine, Tracy's horrified gaze met his furious one in the close confines.

She saw the instant he understood her protective move and took offense. Now the furious blue of his eyes went livid and a dark flush deepened his tan. His voice was gritty with control.

"I've never struck a woman in my life, Tracy, however tempting it might be."

Tracy shivered at his low tone. And then she noticed the nick on his jaw and watched in fresh horror as blood welled into the small wound. Her ring had done that, she realized, sickened. Oh God!

The quick snap of the seat belt release was her only warning before she found herself hauled out of the car and deposited on

her feet out of the way. Her legs felt too weak when Ty released her. She swayed, in danger of falling to the concrete floor before she braced her hand against the wall behind her.

Tracy watched Ty's grim inspection of the disaster and prayed to die, but God ignored this fervent petition just as steadfastly as He'd ignored those other times she'd prayed it. She cringed at the low, rumbling sound of Ty's voice as he muttered a series of swear words.

Tracy couldn't fault him for his fury. His beautiful silver Cadillac was ruined. The big door had scraped heavily the length of the trunk and smashed the back glass before the door had slipped the track and collapsed full-length on the car, pushing down the roof. The hood was dented almost as ruinously as the trunk. The windshield hadn't shattered, but the glass was a mass of cracks.

"I'll b-buy you a new car," she croaked rawly, but Ty continued to circle the car as if he hadn't heard a word. "I'm s-so sorry..."

And still he didn't hear. The air around him seemed to thunder with muted violence.

Tracy was profoundly sick. Bad temper had always terrified her. She'd been bullied and manipulated by it all her life. She thought she'd escaped it forever when she'd escaped her mother, but watching Ty now, hearing his low swear words, seeing the evidence of his barely controlled anger, brought back the debilitating fear.

She'd rarely deserved her mother's tantrums. She'd been a

good child, an obedient and submissive daughter, pitifully eager to please. But this wasn't her hateful, volatile mother. This was Ty Cameron, and this time, Tracy deserved to be the focus of someone's fury.

The guilt that had strangled the color and energy and hope from her life was twisting her insides with fresh vengeance. Ty had overcome his natural revulsion to help her last night and take her to safety. However much he despised her, he'd rescued her and given her the loan of his car.

Then she'd repaid him by wrecking it and demolishing his garage door before she'd driven the vehicle much more than a dozen feet. She couldn't seem to stop the disastrous course her life was on, and now it looked as if anyone who became involved with her, however casually, would get sucked into her downward spiral.

Despair made her eyes burn. God, she couldn't cry! Ty would surely accuse her of using tears to get sympathy and avoid being held responsible for her mistake. Her mother was an expert at that and Tracy would die before she'd allow anyone to think she'd do the same.

"So what is it, Tracy?" Ty said then as he glanced across the wreck at her. "Withdrawal from a drug habit or DT's from alcoholism?"

The shocking question conveyed the notion that only an addict or a drunk could have fouled up so completely. That was when Tracy realized she was still shaking wildly. She knew she looked

ill and had for weeks. And she couldn't entirely blame Ty for his suspicion. After all, she was secretly terrified she was becoming a drunk.

Since she couldn't truthfully deny a part of his question, she didn't answer, though she took advantage of his attention.

"I—I'm so sorry. I'm not sure how—" She cut herself off and tried to steady the tremor in her soft voice as she fought to withstand the laser sharpness of his gaze. "I'll pay for all the damage—I'll even buy you another car. I'll send a contractor to replace the door, and I'll pay you any amount you set for the trouble and inconvenience this ca-auses."

Ty was as angry with himself as he was with Tracy. All he could think about was that he'd handed his keys and his car to someone incapable of safely operating a motor vehicle. Innocent people could have been seriously injured or killed, and he would have been just as responsible as the woman he'd put behind the wheel.

Ty studied the "woman" who looked as frail and vulnerable as a child. Tracy was shaking, and gray shadows hung heavily beneath huge eyes that were red-rimmed but dry. He saw her mortification and dismay.

And shame. The impression was there again. That and the persistent sense that Tracy was lost.

She'd gotten herself into a colossal mess. First by getting drunk with a rich lowlife like Parker last night, now with this. He'd made some calls this morning and asked around about her.

Life wasn't going too well for Tracy LeDeux, however much money she had.

Ty was suddenly certain that if he drove her to town, dropped her at her penthouse and never had another thing to do with her, she'd fall even farther than she already had.

Her softly repeated, "I'm s-sorry. I'll pay for the damage, buy you a new car, whatever amount you say," deepened the eerie sense that he was looking at a woman on the precipice of a swift, devastating, and possibly fatal fall. He wasn't a man who put stock in premonitions, so he couldn't account for the foreboding he felt. On the other hand, it didn't take a crystal ball to see that Tracy was in peril.

Why was that any of his business? She meant nothing to him. If she wanted to throw her life away, it was her decision. It wasn't his place to intervene.

And yet the compulsion was there. His anger surged up another few notches, then went cosmic when she spoke again, more nervous and anxious than ever.

"I'll pay any amount, Mr. Cameron. Whatever you name, I just want to make it right."

Her desperation seemed pitiful to him suddenly. Then he thought about her wicked, manipulative mother and wondered if this was an act. If it was, he'd soon know.

He held his silence another white-hot moment until she said, "I'll pay anything. Whatever you say."

"You're damned right you'll pay," he growled, hardening his

heart as she stared fearfully at him.

Tracy nodded jerkily. “N-name the amount. I don’t care how much.”

Tracy tried to endure the narrow look he gave her then. She struggled for some scrap of courage, but the stillness about him registered on her as the silence before a blowup.

His tough, “You want to make it right, huh?” made her flinch. He hadn’t raised his voice, but her nerves were so ragged that any sound registered like a shout.

She nodded emphatically. “Yes, whatever it takes.”

Ty tipped his head back slightly as if to study her from a more precise angle. “Are you a little rich girl who thinks she can just write out a check and fix things when she’s careless with someone else’s property? And what’s the offer of extra payment for, Tracy? What are you really trying to buy?”

Tracy stared at him and felt her horror deepen. “I’ve apologized. Or tried to. I’m really very sorry...” Her voice drifted away as his expression went even harder. “I never dreamed this would happen, but I wasn’t careless. I can’t explain it, it doesn’t make sense. I thought garage doors had that safety feature—” She cut herself off again. Every word she spoke seemed to displease him even more. She was helpless in the face of such unshakable resistance. How he must hate her! “I—I don’t know what to say, what to do, I—”

“I know exactly what you can do to make it right with me,” he said grimly.

It should have been some relief that Ty was about to tell her how she could fix things with him. It should have been a relief that he was about to spell out a specific course of action that would satisfy him and mollify his anger. Maybe even lessen his hatred of her.

But there was something in his voice and in the arctic blue of his gaze that kept her on guard.

“What do you want from me?”

And still he made her wait. Though it couldn't have been more than a sparse scattering of seconds, it felt like an eternity. When he finally answered, she couldn't comprehend his words at first.

“You work for me, at hourly wages, until the dollar value of the damage is met. The time it takes you to earn enough hourly wages to cover the damage, will be your personal compensation to me for my trouble and inconvenience.”

Tracy stared at him as she replayed the words in her mind. He couldn't mean that. He wanted her to work for him at an hourly wage until the damage amount was met?

The terror she felt suddenly was overpowering. How many hours would it take to pay off what had to be thousands of dollars worth of damage? And Ty despised her. It didn't take a genius to figure out that he could use every minute of those hundreds of hours to make her life a far deeper hell than it already was. Perhaps doing that to her was what he meant by personal compensation.

Whatever her life had been, whatever it had become, Ty

Cameron could finish her off. She couldn't imagine surviving hour upon hour of his animosity and disapproval. And what kind of job was he offering? She had no particular skills or talents, not that a rancher or businessman would value.

A truly sickening and perverse thought came to her then. The memory of Greg Parker—and what he'd wanted to do to her last night—surged back. Surely Ty couldn't be thinking...

No, it wasn't possible. Ty hated her, and surely the loathing he felt for her kept her safe. Besides, he wasn't the kind of man who'd demand anything sexual of her. The thought had only come into her mind because the old fears were preying on her now. Fears that had been stirred up by the events of last night and the terrible reminder of how vulnerable she'd been to a predator like Greg Parker.

Ty's humorless quirk of lips reclaimed her attention. "Have you ever had a job, Tracy? Have you ever learned the value of a dollar?"

Have you ever learned the value of a dollar?

The question stung and brought a swell of black emotion. She absolutely had learned the value of a dollar, but not in any way that Ty Cameron would consider decent or honest. It was her deepest, most devastating secret. If Ty ever found out, he'd look down on her even more than he did already.

But maybe there was a chance—just an infinitesimal chance—that she could make up for one awful thing she'd done. Maybe she could make up for the damage to his car and his garage. If she

agreed to work for him and could do a good enough job, maybe he would think a little more highly of her than he did now. Maybe she could redeem herself in his eyes, at least for this one thing.

She didn't let herself think too hard about why it was so important that Ty Cameron stop hating her.

It was a novel idea, this chance to pay for something she'd done wrong with time and hard work. She almost fell for it before common sense squelched the fantasy. Ty Cameron's standards would be impossibly high, probably on purpose. The only thing that was certain was that she'd never be able to meet them, though she'd probably break her heart trying. And when she couldn't please him, he'd break it for her with his scorn and contempt.

That was why she had to refuse. Far better to suffer his scorn now than risk her heart on a hopeless cause that was doomed to fail because Ty Cameron would plan for it to. She tried to sound firm.

“Notify me when you have a dollar amount.”

He came right back with, “Does that mean you agree to work for me?”

Tracy could tell nothing from his harsh expression. Cowardice made it hard to speak. It would be so much easier to put him off until she was safely locked at home in San Antonio. She could call him later with her answer. If he reacted badly, she could hang up before he said anything too devastating. Then she could hire a lawyer to intercede for her and persuade Ty to accept her check.

Tracy's gaze faltered as the silence stretched. Terror made her

voice small as she struggled for candor. She began to shake again as she dared to make an effort to explain her reason before she officially turned him down.

“What kind of fool would I be to work for a man who can barely stand the sight of me? Whatever you think I am, I haven’t quite sunk to the level of asking to be abused.”

A bitter slant came to his hard mouth. Tracy could tell she’d offended him. Again. He retaliated, his voice low and quiet, his words painfully on target.

“Sure. Why ask to be abused when you do such a good job of abusing yourself?”

Her heart thudded heavily with the weight of that. Ty nodded toward the Suburban parked in the next space of the four-car garage.

“I’ll drive you to San Antonio.”

It was that simple. The ordeal was over. Tracy walked shakily to the other vehicle, got in the passenger side, then sat rigidly as Ty got in and started the engine.

The ride to San Antonio was smotheringly silent. By the time they got there, every muscle in her body had knotted painfully with tension.

Ty pulled to the curb in front of her building and she got out. She briefly clung to the door until her legs steadied, then fled to the entrance. The doorman ushered her through and once inside, she hurried to the elevators.

Tracy should have been able to sleep away the rest of the day.

Her body ached, her head throbbed, and she couldn't manage more than a couple of crackers on her queasy stomach. She was so exhausted she could barely walk straight, but she was too worked up to sleep. Every moment of the afternoon and early evening passed like hours, until finally she was in her kitchen, facing the small wine rack on the counter.

She'd done everything wrong with Ty Cameron. The memory of those hard blue eyes that had cut and probed and judged wouldn't leave her alone. She should never have borrowed his car, she'd had no business getting behind the wheel. But she'd been so desperate to get away from him that she would have taken any means of escape.

Then she'd compounded all her other "sins" by refusing to work off the damages. It would have been more prudent for her to at least give Ty a chance. Had she judged him too harshly?

That's a laugh, she thought bitterly. The notion that someone like her would have the nerve to judge Ty Cameron was the very definition of hubris.

It had been a last bit of self-preservation that had made her turn him down. Under the circumstances, she'd made the right choice. Hadn't she? The terrible guilt she felt over the car confused it all and the troubling details of her moral dilemma began another tortuous circuit in her brain.

Tracy began to pace. Again. Wobbly, aching, she wandered the penthouse. If she could make her brain stop replaying it all and analyzing every second of what had happened, maybe she

could sleep. If she could sleep and wake rested, maybe she could see it all from a fresh angle. Maybe she'd have some new insight, maybe it all wouldn't seem so terrible. And maybe she wouldn't feel so horribly guilty.

Tracy stopped pacing when she found herself back in the kitchen facing the wine rack. If she could stop torturing herself, if she could fall asleep...

In the end, she knew there was no hope for her. She reached for a bottle and gave in to the inevitable.

Tracy's bathroom was as large as some bedrooms she'd slept in. She loved the large, raised marble platform of the bathtub/Jacuzzi that sat beneath the high wall of windows overlooking the lights of San Antonio. Lush potted plants—some in bloom—rested on the marble tile that skirted the tub. Several hung from ceiling hooks overhead and gave the room the feel of outdoors, though the penthouse thermostat kept it all cozy.

She could lie in the tub of hot, churning water, look out at the lights, and drink her glass of wine. Already the churning water soothed her. The wine bottle sat within reach, the flute of wine was poured, but Tracy hadn't tasted it yet.

There was always a chance that the hot water would do it. The uncommon drowsiness she felt gave her hope, so she waited, trying not to look at the tempting glass or the bottle next to it.

The classical CD that played in the next room was on too low to hear distinctly, but it and the bubbling of the water saved her from silence. She thought she heard the soft chime of her

doorbell, but finally dismissed it as imagination.

Tracy didn't know too many people in San Antonio. She'd never invited anyone up, not even Greg, whom she'd arranged to meet in the lobby before their date last night. She'd never got around to hiring a cleaning lady, and when she ate, she went out somewhere or brought home deli food.

Alone in her private sanctuary, Tracy finally managed to focus her mind on the sound of the water and closed her eyes. Her aching body at last began to feel better as her tension eased. Not even the small distant sounds somewhere in the penthouse made much of an impression. Until the muffled sound of what could only be footfalls alerted her.

Someone was walking down the hall!

Drowsiness made her brain slow to react to the danger. Her body felt heavy and resistant as she tried to rouse herself.

The sound of boot heels on tile made her jerk and grab for a towel. Alarmed, she glanced toward the open door and her heart gave a painful jolt.

Ty Cameron stood in the doorway, his handsome face stern, his vivid blue eyes moving over her as if looking for injury. He advanced on her and Tracy fumbled to cover herself with the towel. Its saturated weight made it difficult to unfold beneath the water.

"Get out!" she shrieked as he reached the marble steps to the Jacuzzi platform.

Ty came to a halt, his gaze going to the wine bottle then to

the steam that now whited the mirrors and the lower panel of windows.

“You tryin’ to drink and drown?”

“Get out!” she cried as she shrank away from him as far as the side of the tub allowed. “H-how dare you come in here like this!”

“You might try answering your phone or the door.”

Tracy shook her head adamantly. “You can’t come up here without my permission!”

“Your doorman agreed with me. You looked sick earlier and now you don’t answer the phone or the door. You coulda been in trouble up here.”

“You can see I’m not—get out!” she gritted, so desperate for him to leave that she was on the edge of hysteria.

Ty turned as if to go, but instead pulled open the door of the linen closet and got out a dry towel. He tossed it on the tile that skirted the tub.

“Get dried off and find some clothes. I’ll be waiting in the living room.”

Tracy stared, still shocked by his intrusion. He ordered her around as if he had some right to. He was about to turn away when his gaze caught on the wine flute and bottle. She made a belated move toward both, but Ty leaned over and got them first. His gaze met hers, then dropped to the top of the soaked towel that peeped above the waterline. She could only watch with new horror as his gaze tracked the length of the towel that clung to her body to her thighs.

Tracy couldn't account for the flush of heat that went through her. Or the electric charge that chased it. Just then, she saw something change in Ty's harsh gaze. And suddenly, she was so totally petrified of him that her earlier fears about him seemed minuscule.

Ty's gaze came up to hers and pierced deep. The blue of his eyes seemed to smolder then. Lust. It was as if Ty had only this moment noticed she was female. And she was so utterly vulnerable. Naked and trapped, she had only a soaked towel to hide behind. Ty was big and male and powerful. Unstoppable!

Her racing heart pounded. Unstoppable!

Ty was too big, too strong. He could snap her fragile bones with a careless flick of his hand. He could force on her anything he wanted to. Unstoppable!

"Tracy?" The low timbre of Ty's voice was oddly gentle. It somehow penetrated her fear and made her aware that she was shaking wildly. Her eyes felt as huge as saucers.

Ty seemed to see something in her then, something that banished the smoldering heat in his eyes. She saw a glimmer of curiosity, but his expression softened so much that she doubted her eyes almost immediately. Was this a trick to put her at ease, to catch her off guard?

It gave her a new shock to realize that the familiar scorn and condemnation she usually saw when Ty looked at her were also gone. That caught her as much by surprise as his sudden lust. Was she imagining all this, especially the soft look he was giving

her now?

But oddly, her fear of him was melting. As he straightened, his gaze held hers another heartbeat or two before he turned away. He took the wine and the glass and closed the door solidly on his way out.

CHAPTER THREE

TY HELPED himself to a taste from the wine flute. While he did, he walked into Tracy's kitchen, saw the wine rack, and glanced around for the trash can. As he'd suspected, there were two empty wine bottles inside, but little trash besides. A glance into her refrigerator told him there wasn't much to eat. No wonder Tracy was so thin. He put the wine bottle on a shelf and closed the door.

He figured his intrusion might as well be total, so he picked up the kitchen phone extension to call information. He got the number he wanted right away, then punched it in and ordered a delivery. Once he hung up, he carried the wine flute back to the living room and chose a place to sit.

The generous rooms of Tracy's penthouse were immaculate. Everything was decorated in pristine white, with vivid pastel colors here and there, and tasteful wall decor to give it all life and interest. The effect was classy and feminine and more warm than he would have expected with all the white. The huge armchair he settled into was plush and comfortable.

The time it took Tracy to finish in the bathroom and dress seemed long, but Ty wasn't displeased with the wait. The nagging instinct that had brought him back to town had annoyed him until he'd walked into her bathroom and seen the wine bottle and steamed up windows. People drank too much and drowned in

hot tubs when they either passed out or fell asleep. It might be the same with Jacuzzis.

Tracy had been startled and angry those first moments, but then she'd been frightened. And because he knew she'd surely witnessed the lust that had hit him like a lightning strike, he damned well knew what had frightened her.

No, not frightened. Terrified. She'd been terrified. He couldn't have mistaken that. Maybe she was nothing like the promiscuous vamp her mother was. It surprised him to realize that he hoped Tracy was as virginal and untouched as she looked.

Tracy fretted over her hair and a light application of makeup. She didn't pay such rigid attention to those things to attract men, but to camouflage herself. Though the sleek, shoulder-length pageboy haircut and the faint enhancement of cosmetics gave her a natural look, it was somehow a veneer of concealment and a denial of what had happened all those years ago.

The khaki slacks and tailored long-sleeved yellow blouse she chose looked prim and no-nonsense, especially since she'd added a belt to the slacks and buttoned the blouse all the way to the top to help restore her almost obsessive modesty.

A glamorous prude. Her mother called her that and disparaged her for it. But more for being a prude, because whenever Ramona said the word prude, the look in her eyes said hypocrite.

The reminder almost made her lose her nerve to face Ty again. It was bad enough that he'd brashly walked in on her when she was naked in her bath. Now she had to face him with the memory

of this new shame between them.

And fear. Ty Cameron was so domineering. There were no obstacles in life for a man like him, nothing that could stop him if he didn't want to be stopped. Invading her penthouse was proof of that and now her comfortable retreat from the world no longer felt safe.

It shocked her now to remember how safe she'd felt that morning when she'd woke up in his house. The vivid memory slowed her racing heart. And now she realized that although Ty had barged in on her, he hadn't harmed her.

Despite those terrifying moments when she'd seen lust in his eyes, he'd done nothing about it. He'd ordered her around, taken her wine away, but he'd not touched her nor threatened to. She felt a glimmer of trust toward him then that calmed the agitated flutter of her heart even more.

She hadn't answered her phone that day or her door, and he'd hinted that he'd come here because he'd been concerned. Though she knew he couldn't possibly care that much what happened to her, she was deeply affected. It'd been a long time since anyone had shown a speck of concern for what happened to her. The trick would be to not take his concern seriously.

Tracy again checked her appearance in the mirror, took a steadying breath, then started for the living room to get this over with.

Ty thought Tracy looked as crisp and neatly pressed as a picture out of a fashion magazine. She held herself rigidly and

had trouble looking him in the eye when she walked into the living room. She didn't sit down. Instead, she stood behind the sofa that was on the other side of the coffee table from his chair. It was as if she was wary of coming too close and needed to keep a large piece of furniture between them for protection. And that blouse was buttoned up so tight it was a wonder she wasn't choked.

She looked a lot healthier than she had that morning. Her pale skin was flushed from the heat of her bath and maybe from embarrassment. It had been rude and disrespectful for him to walk in on her bath. He'd had reasons that satisfied him, but he doubted prim little Tracy saw it that way.

And that doubt got his attention. He'd discounted Tracy as being as worthless and immoral as her mother, but it amazed him suddenly to realize that he'd judged Tracy so harshly and written her off so completely. Tracy LeDeux was a lot more complicated than he'd expected, and the more time that passed since he'd first seen her in the nightclub last night, the more he sensed it.

"I apologize for walking in on you, Tracy," he began and frowned when her gaze shifted to his then flinched away. "Just so you know, I usually wait for an invitation before I go that far."

The mild sexual reference made her stiffen. "You had no business coming here. I'll have a lawyer contact you about the damage today." As if to underscore her words, her gaze moved to meet his as she said, "If I don't answer your calls or respond when you knock on my door, it means I don't want to see or

“speak to you.”

Tracy watched as Ty’s brows went up. “We have business to settle. You seemed eager to make restitution for the wreck, then you refused to meet my conditions. I figured you’d had time to reconsider, so I thought we should talk again.”

Tracy lifted her chin. “Is there a reason you have to blackmail people to work for you?”

He took the jibe in stride, but the stern line of his mouth softened. “People like working for me. I pay fair wages and give generous benefits. I value good workers and show my appreciation with cash bonuses from time to time.”

Ty reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a couple folded papers. “I got estimates on the car and the garage door this afternoon.”

Tracy eyed the folded papers, then walked reluctantly around the sofa to take them. The dollar amounts listed made her nauseous. Oh, God, so much money. More than she’d thought. She made herself look at him.

“Please...there’s no reason I can’t write a check to cover this and settle it today.”

Ty was already shaking his head. Now his face was stern again. “You asked—no, begged—to know what would make it right with me. I gave you my answer.”

His tenacity rattled her. It was beyond comprehension. “I was hysterical and frightened of what you’d do. I don’t know how everything got steered away from monetary compensation to—

to—indenturement.” She shook her head. “Why are you doing this?”

He gave her a searching look. “Damned if I know. Maybe one of us will figure it out as we go along.” His gaze sharpened. “What else are you doing with your life right now, Tracy?”

The question took her by surprise though she shouldn’t have been. Ty Cameron meant to have his way, so his question was a means to undermine her reasons for refusing him.

The impulse was to make something up, to make her life seem important and busy. Productive. But as she stared helplessly at him, she suddenly knew he’d sense it if she lied. It occurred to her that Ty’d had a whole day to investigate her life. For a man with his connections and money, it would be simple. And if he hadn’t done it yet, something told her he would. She tried a new tack.

“What do you get out of this? Revenge?” She’d tried to provoke him with the bold question, but he took it seriously and his voice was mild and reasonable as he answered.

“Maybe nothing if you refuse to work for me. But if you agree, maybe I’ll get a temporary worker to fill in doing small jobs not worth hiring a permanent employee to do.”

“It will take months to pay off the damage this way,” she argued cautiously, certain he’d given her a way to talk him out of this. “Long enough for you to hire a full-time employee.”

Once again, Ty’s calm answer was proof of his single-mindedness. “I’m not looking for someone permanent. When the damage amount is met, the job’s over. I won’t be obliged to keep

someone employed, and you can get back to your...life.”

Tracy turned away and paced across the room, frustrated. He hadn't said, You owe me because you took advantage of my trust and goodwill and wrecked my car. She might have been able to refute that accusation.

But Ty was more crafty than that. He didn't say those words because he could probably tell that guilt was already eating her up. Instead, he made it sound as if her working for him solved a problem for him. She was concentrating so hard on finding a way to counter the subtle tactic that she jumped a little when he spoke.

“You asked me about revenge. Does that mean you think I'll mistreat you if you work for me?”

Tracy hesitated, then turned to look over at him. “You've made no secret of your feelings toward me. How do I know this isn't just a huge opportunity for you to belittle and embarrass me?” She swallowed thickly as his expression started to harden, but she forced herself to go on and verbally acknowledge the thing that was on both their minds.

“I know you despise me because of what I did to Rio and Kane. You probably think I didn't do enough to make it up to them or that I wasn't punished enough, but it might surprise you to know that I agree with you. They let me off easy.”

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