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ROMANCE

The Ballad of Dixon Bell

LYNNETTE KENT

Lynnette Kent

The Ballad of Dixon Bell

«HarperCollins»

Kent L.

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He's always loved her. Dixon Bell has loved Kate Bowdrey for as long as he can remember. Everybody in town knew him as the shy kid who carried around a guitar—and as the guy who disappeared after high school graduation. After thirteen years away—spent nursing a broken heart and becoming a successful songwriter—he's discovered that Kate is available again, so he's coming home to New Skye to make all his dreams come true. But L. T. LaRue—Kate's soon-to-be ex-husband and one of the most powerful men in town—has other plans for Dixon. Dixon just happens to own a beautiful old plantation house, and L.T. wants to use that property for high-priced condos. And he wants Dixon to stay the hell away from Kate. But Dixon's not selling—he has big plans for that house, plans that include Kate and her kids. And he's certainly not giving up the woman he loves. Not again. Not without a fight.

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“There are a lot of people in this town who have a grudge against you, L.T.”

“Yeah, your boyfriend’s one of them. And ol’ Mano’s working for him. I’d say there’s a pretty strong link between Bell and Torres and my ruined houses.”

“Dixon Bell wouldn’t stoop to vandalism. He’ll deal with you face-to-face.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

“So open your eyes.” Dixon spoke from the entry hall. “And say what’s on your mind.”

“This is family business. You don’t belong.”

Kate couldn’t let that comment pass unchallenged. “You’re the one who doesn’t belong, L.T. By your own choice.”

L.T. swung back to her. “Listen, bitch—”

Dixon snaked an arm around his throat from behind. Dragging the other man backward, he strode to the front door and launched him down the steps.

Kate held her breath, hoping and praying L.T. would simply leave.

Instead, he charged.

Dear Reader,

When I was a teenager I fell in love with The South—a mythical place where wide, lazy rivers reflected the moon’s glow and sultry evenings seduced lovers with the perfume of gardenia blossoms and honeysuckle vines. Add a plantation house standing ghost-white amidst moss-draped live oak trees, and you have the perfect recipe for romance.

Dixon Bell and Kate LaRue are two people who see that side of the South in their hometown of New Skye, North Carolina. Dixon’s been wandering the world for thirteen years and has yet to find a place he’d rather live. When he learns that Kate—the first and only woman he’s ever loved—will soon be free, he knows it’s finally time for him to go back. He doesn’t anticipate the complications he encounters in wooing Kate. Maybe coming home isn’t supposed to be easy.

Kate barely noticed Dixon when they were in high school together. She can’t help noticing him now, however, and she can’t ignore the longings he awakens in her love-starved soul. But she’s imprisoned by the unwritten rules and expectations of the society she grew up in. Being an adult in your own hometown is never as easy as you’d expect.

The Ballad of Dixon Bell is the second book in my new series for Superromance, AT THE CAROLINA DINER. If this is your first visit, welcome to a world where you run into somebody you know whenever you step out your door, where the family’s always aware of what’s going on in your life and can usually track you down if they want to, where friends are tried and true. A world where romance is still very much alive—just ask Dixon and Kate.

And watch for The Last Honest Man, coming in August!

Lynnette Kent

P.S. I’d love to hear from you. Write me at PMB 304, Westwood Shopping Center, Fayetteville, NC 28314. Or visit my Web page, www.lynnettekent.com.

The Ballad of Dixon Bell

Lynnette Kent



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To the Southern Gentlemen I know best:
Frank, Barry and Ed.
And, as always, for Martin.
Love you, guys.

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CHAPTER ONE

March

Boswell, Colorado

“YOU MAKING TIME with your sweetheart again, Dixie?”

“That ain’t his sweetheart. That’s his baby girl. Right, Dixie?”

Dixon Bell just grinned at the cowboys’ teasing and kept walking at a slow, easy pace toward the three unbroken horses poised along one curve of the corral. The buckskin and the pinto danced away as he got close. The black quarter horse mare knew him, though, and had come to trust him a little. Ears twitching, tail flicking, she watched him approach. She was nervous, sure. But willing to give him a chance.

“Hey, there, gorgeous,” he crooned, coming to a stop by her shoulder. He put a hand on the smooth, warm skin of her neck. “Thanks for waiting for me. How’s it going?”

She turned her head toward him, nosed his arm and chest, then jerked away as the buckskin came near again. Ears drawn flat against her head, eyes wide, the mare warned the other horse off.

“No need to be jealous, sweetheart.” Dixon chuckled as he stroked his palm along her back. “I’ve only got eyes for you.”

Talking quietly, he ran his hands over her ribs, her flanks, her chest, combed his fingers through her jet-black mane. As she calmed, he bent to stroke her legs, lifting each foot in turn, all the time praising her for standing still, for letting him have his way.

Then he straightened up and allowed the halter he’d hooked over his shoulder to drop down to his hand. “Remember this?” He held it under her nose, watched her sniff. “We got this on yesterday. Let’s try again.”

She wasn’t happy about it, but did finally let him slip the soft halter over her nose and ears. Left to run wild in the Colorado hills since her birth two years ago, she hadn’t been trained to accept human restraints. Though she balked when he hooked the lead rope to the halter, the mare eventually consented to be led around the corral without too much fuss...as long as the buckskin kept her distance. This quarter horse wasn’t interested in sharing her man with anybody else.

“She’ll make a good mount,” the ranch foreman commented when Dixon left the corral. “You’re sure taking your time, though. There’s easier, quicker ways to break a horse.”

“I’m not interested in easier and quicker,” Dixon told him. “Usually that means some kind of pain for the animal. I’m content to take things slow, exercise a little patience.”

“Next thing we know, you’ll be hugging trees.” The foreman gave him a friendly punch in the arm as they parted ways. Dixon returned the halter to the barn and headed to the bunkhouse to wash up for dinner. The aroma of grilled meat hung in the dry mountain air, teasing him with visions of steak and potatoes. He’d been up at dawn, heading out to round up cows and calves, and the only food he’d managed all day was a quick sandwich at lunch. Hungry wasn’t a big enough word for the emptiness inside him tonight.

A stop at the mailbox on his way in rewarded him with a letter from home. Dixon delayed the pleasure until he’d changed into a clean shirt and jeans and washed his hands. Then he sat on his bunk to read what his grandmother, Miss Daisy Crawford, had to say.

She wrote, on lavender-scented paper in an old-fashioned, flowing script, of her friends, her neighbors, the civic meetings she went to, the goings-on at church. One of her cats had been sick, some kind of kidney problem, but the vet prescribed a new diet which seemed to be working. The weather had been strange this year—variably cold and hot—so she never knew what to wear when she went out.

Finally, I thought you might want to know that we’ve had something of a scandal here recently. L.T. LaRue—whom I would designate a scalawag, if there were still such a thing—up and left his

family a few weeks ago. Moved out of their house and into a love nest with his office secretary, declaring to the world his intention to get a divorce and marry this girl young enough to be his daughter. I taught her in Sunday School just a few years ago; I can't imagine what could have happened to bring her to such a state.

This domestic tragedy leaves Kate LaRue—she was Kate Bowdrey, as I'm sure you recall—alone to take care of two teenagers. Poor Kate, she's struggled to put up with that man these ten years, even adopted his children, and look what he's gone and done to her. Some men just are not to be relied upon.

Dixon read those next-to-last paragraphs several times, then sat staring at his grandmother's pale-blue stationery without seeing the words written there. His brain had latched onto one important point—Kate Bowdrey LaRue was getting a divorce. That meant she wouldn't be married anymore. As in single. Unattached. Available.

And that meant the time had come for him to go home.

July

New Skye, North Carolina

WITH A CLAP OF THUNDER, the sky broke open. Raindrops pelted the pavement and windows like bullets. Caught unprotected as she locked her car door, Kate LaRue shrieked and dashed for the nearest cover, which happened to be the green-and-white striped awning of Drew's Coffee Shop.

She was drenched when she got there, of course, her thin linen top practically transparent, her skirt hanging heavy around her waist. Water squished between her sandals and the soles of her feet.

"What a mess," she muttered as she pulled her shirt away from her bra, only to have it stick again. Around her, the smell of wet pavement blended with the pungent scent of coffee brewing inside the café. "I'll have to go back home and change."

"Beautiful day, don't you think?" The voice, strangely familiar, came from behind. "There's nothing like a southern rainstorm to clear the dust out of the air."

Kate turned to look at the tall, lean man standing with a shoulder propped against the brick wall that framed Drew's window. "You're joking, right?"

He had a wide, white grin in a tanned face. "Not at all. After a few years of eating dirt in the west Texas oil fields, I appreciate a good rain."

"You don't sound like you're from Texas." In fact, he sounded as if he'd lived right here in New Skye, North Carolina, his whole life. She should know him, Kate was sure. But good manners forbade that she just out and ask him what his name was.

"Thank goodness. I'd hate to be identified by my twang." He straightened up to his full, lanky height. "Would you like to step inside and get a drink? Something to warm you up?"

Holding out his hand, he directed her to the entrance of Drew's, where she was certain he would open the door for her. Suddenly, just from the way he looked at her, she was equally certain he knew exactly who she was. She studied him for a long moment, searching for a clue in the rich, brown waves of his hair, the glint in his dark eyes, the tilt of his head. When the answer swam up from the depths of her memory, she caught her breath at the impossible rightness of it. "Dixon? Dixon Bell?"

His grin widened. "Took you long enough." He put his hands on her shoulders and leaned in to kiss her cheek. "I was beginning to think I'd have to show you my driver's license. How are you, Kate?"

Without thinking, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. "You've been gone so long. Welcome home!"

She felt his warm hands through the wet cloth on her back, felt the wall of his chest against her breasts. His shoulders were wide and strong. He smelled of starch and soap. And man.

Another bolt of lightning struck, this one inside Kate.

“My goodness.” Drawing a shaky breath, she dropped back on her heels, letting her arms slide from his shoulders as she stepped away. “I still can’t believe it’s you. How long have you been home?” She pushed her hair off her face, registered how wet it was and knew what a mess she must look.

“Just a few days. I got here at the beginning of the week.” Dixon slipped his hands into the pockets of his slacks and glanced at the shops and businesses around them. “Seems like there have been some pretty big changes. Downtown looks great.”

“It does, doesn’t it? We’re not finished, of course. But I think the restoration and renovation projects are going really well, with no small thanks due to your grandmother. I haven’t seen her for several weeks. How is she?”

“Hard to handle, as always. She mentioned that she’s worked you to death on some of her committees.”

Kate chuckled. “Miss Daisy’s a pistol, that’s for sure. I hope I have half her energy when I’m her age. I think we celebrated her eighty-fourth birthday at the women’s club last month, didn’t we?”

“That’s right. And as far as I can tell, she keeps a cat for each year. I can’t find a chair in the whole house that isn’t occupied by at least one feline.” He hunched his shoulders. “I’m not crazy about cats.”

“She didn’t have so many when you lived with her?” Dixon’s parents had died when he was very young, so he’d grown up in his grandmother’s house.

“One or two at a time—not a whole herd. I guess when I wasn’t here, she collected cats to keep her company.”

“So where have you been all these years? We haven’t seen you since the summer after graduation.”

He shook his head. “To get that story, Ms. Bowdrey, you have to let me buy you coffee.”

She pretended to sigh in resignation, even as she smiled. “If I have to.” But as she crossed the threshold, Kate realized she’d better set things straight. “By the way, it’s LaRue.”

His forehead wrinkled as he stood holding the door open. “I beg your pardon?”

“I’m married.” She walked into the shop ahead of him. “My last name is LaRue.”

Thunder pealed again and Dixon sucked in his breath. Kate’s declaration hit him like a punch to the ribs. Miss Daisy had definitely mentioned a divorce in her letter. They hadn’t talked about Kate since he’d been home—he wasn’t prepared to let anybody in on his plans yet, not even the lady herself. But surely he hadn’t misunderstood. Miss Daisy had said that L.T. LaRue wanted a divorce. Was Kate contesting? Did she intend to stay married to the jerk?

He couldn’t ask her outright, of course. Not a mere fifteen minutes after they’d met for the first time in thirteen years.

Not even though he’d thought of Kate Bowdrey LaRue every single day since their high school graduation.

But today, at last, he could do more than just think about her. He followed her into the shop, taking great pleasure in the sight of her slim figure, a little more revealed than she probably would have liked in those damp clothes. Her long, coffee-dark hair lay heavy on her shoulders with almost too much weight, it seemed, for her graceful neck to support. She appeared fragile, in need of protection. And yet she’d held her family together in the face of her husband’s desertion. His Kate was much stronger than she looked. The thought gave Dixon tremendous satisfaction.

As they sat down at one of the tiny tables with icecream-parlor chairs, he glanced around and took in their surroundings. “Drew’s Coffee Shop is a real change from the newspaper and cigarette stand holding this space when I left. New Skye must be getting seriously up-scale.”

“We like to think we’re coming into our own,” Kate said earnestly, her hazel eyes wide and serious. With her face washed by the rain and her rich curls springing to life around her face, she looked very young, as young as his memories of her. But she was even lovelier than he remembered,

which seemed almost impossible. “This hasn’t ever really been the hick town it looked like. We’re trying to adjust the image to reality.”

“I don’t know...I recall going to class with some real yokel types. Remember that guy Elmer? He wore overalls and plaid shirts and bright-yellow work boots to school every day?”

“Elmer Halliday.” Kate nodded. “He sold his daddy’s tobacco farm about ten years ago and bought a chain of convenience stores. He’s one of the richest men in town these days.”

“But does he still wear yellow work boots?”

“No, he wears Italian-knit shirts and custom leather loafers and spends a lot of time on the golf course at the country club.”

Mouth agape, Dixon dropped back against his chair. “They let Elmer into the country club?”

“Well, his family can trace their roots in the area to the War Between the States. And all that money...” She shrugged. “There’s a lot of new blood coming into town. Nobody can afford to be a snob these days.”

“Hey, Kate, how are you?” As if to prove the truth of her words, a woman with blue, buzz-cut hair and a row of silver rings curling around the rim of each ear stood beside them. “Nasty storm, isn’t it? What can I get you two?”

“Hi, Daphne.” Kate tucked the laminated menu into its metal holder. “I’ll have a mocha latte with whipped cream and cinnamon.”

The waitress didn’t have to switch her attention to Dixon—she’d been staring at him since she arrived at the table. “And for you, gorgeous?”

Dixon grinned and gave her a wink. “How about a double regular coffee?”

“I knew you were the strong silent type. Coming up.”

When Daphne was out of earshot, he turned to Kate. “Definitely new blood.”

Smiling, she shook her head. “So what have you been doing all this time, Mr. Bell? Where did you go when you left home?”

“Well, let’s see...I hitched a ride out of town on an empty livestock truck and spent the first night on a picnic table in a state park in Greensboro.”

Her jaw dropped. “You’re not serious.”

“The second day, I rode to Knoxville on an oil truck.”

“And where did you sleep that night?” When he hesitated, she gave him a stern look. “I don’t want the censored version.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He sketched a salute, though he was a little surprised at her forthrightness. The Kate Bowdrey he remembered had been vitally concerned with appearances and propriety. “A very nice woman took pity on me as I stood on a downtown corner in the pouring rain and she let me sleep on the couch in her apartment.”

“A very nice woman?” Does that mean prostitute?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“You must have been so excited.”

Dixon gave a hoot of laughter. “How would you know that?”

“I have a teenage son. I can imagine how he and his friends would react.” She grinned mischievously. “How long did you stay in Knoxville?”

There would be no fooling Mrs. LaRue, would there? “A few months. I got a job playing guitar in a bar, but the bar changed management, and music styles. Then my...roommate...and I had a disagreement and I decided to move on. At least this time I had a car, so I headed west on I-40 toward Nashville.”

Daphne brought their drinks. She stood close enough that her hip brushed Dixon’s shoulder as she set down the mugs. “Anything else?” There was no mistaking the message underlying her simple question.

“Don’t think so,” Dixon said without emphasis. Daphne pouted all the way back to the serving counter.

Kate’s eyes twinkled as she sipped her latte. “That was quite adept of you.”

Dixon shrugged. “She’s nice enough, but my hair’s longer than hers. I couldn’t handle it.”

“So what happened in Nashville?”

He took a long draw from his coffee. “Didn’t get there. At least, not right away.”

“Why not?”

“Well, this was a used car, see, and I was a dumb kid. ’Bout as soon as I got it up to seventy miles an hour on the interstate, parts started popping off. I left a fender in Knoxville and a couple of springs in Dobbin, about eight miles west. The muffler dropped off in Timothyville.”

Kate shielded her face with her hand. Her shoulders were shaking.

“Things got loud, then, but I was bound and determined to make Nashville. When the transmission dropped, though, I knew I was done for.”

“Oh, goodness.” She gasped with laughter. “I imagine you might. What did you do?”

“I walked to the nearest town—’bout five miles, I guess. The first gas station I came to had a Help Wanted sign in the window. I didn’t have much money and I had this seriously broken automobile. So—”

“Kate LaRue, I haven’t seen you in weeks!” A willowy blonde wove through the tables, approaching like a ship at full sail. “Where have you been keeping yourself?”

Kate got to her feet to return an enthusiastic hug. “The kids and I spent some time at the beach after Mary Rose’s wedding. How are you, Jessica?”

“I’m just fine, except for being a bit damp.” Her glance took in Kate’s wrinkled clothes. “You must have gotten caught in the downpour, too.” Dixon thought her smile looked a little spiteful. Then her gaze turned to him and all the spite smoothed away into frank interest. “Hello there. I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Oh, but you have.” Kate put a hand on the blonde’s arm. “Jessica, this is Dixon Bell. Dixon, you remember Jessica Allen? She married Jimmy Hyde, who’s now the district attorney.”

Dixon put out his hand. “Sure, I remember. Good to see you again, Jessica.”

“Dixon Bell?” Her voice went high with surprise, and then she was clutching him around the neck—not nearly the enjoyable experience Kate’s hug had been. Though she was a lovely lady, he felt absolutely no desire to hold Jessica Hyde in return, and he drew back as soon as possible.

“Dixon Bell.” Jessica shook her head, resting her hands on his chest. “I would never have believed it. We wondered about you for simply years. You sit right down and tell me where you’ve been all this time.” She grabbed his wrist with one hand and turned a chair from a nearby table around with the other, then sat down, forcing him to sit, too. As an afterthought, she looked up at Kate. “Sit with us, Kate. I know you must be dying to hear about what Dixon’s been doing.”

Kate stayed standing, and Dixon knew he was doomed. “I most certainly am. But I have a couple of errands I can’t put off any longer. So I’ll let you two talk and I’ll catch up later.”

As she pulled the strap of her purse over her shoulder, Dixon rose to his feet again and moved so that he blocked Kate’s exit. He put a hand on her elbow. “It was great to run into you.” Leaning close, he brushed her soft cheek with his lips and got a whiff of the rose and spice scent that was her perfume. “I’m going to call you,” he promised in a whisper. “Soon.”

When he straightened up, she was staring at him like a startled rabbit. “I—I...” She took a deep breath. “Thank you for the coffee.” As soon as he stepped out of her way, she hurried past him to the door of the shop. Dixon watched through the window as she braved the rain to unlock the door of the green Volvo she’d arrived in. In another second, she was gone.

He took a deep breath of his own and prepared to face the ordeal ahead. “So, Jessica, you and Jimmy are married. Kids?”

She put a hand on his arm as he sat down. “Well, of course. Three boys, all of them playing ball just like you and Jimmy did. But I’m not the one who disappeared for so long. Where have you been?”

“Here and there.” The story lost a lot of its pizzazz with the wrong audience. “Spent some time in Texas...”

KATE SHIVERED in her wet clothes as she came into the air-conditioned house from the steamy warmth outside. The absolute quiet reminded her that she only had an hour before she had to pick Kelsey and Trace up at summer school. In that hour she needed to get to the dry cleaner’s and the hardware and grocery stores. She gasped as she realized she’d completely forgotten to collect the historical society programs from the printer’s next door to Drew’s Coffee Shop, which was why she’d gone downtown to begin with. What had happened to her mind? At two o’clock this afternoon, she’d been sure of completing all her errands on time.

And then Dixon Bell had stepped back into her life.

She couldn’t quite believe he’d reappeared so suddenly, after thirteen years away. But he’d left with the same abruptness. Just a few days after graduation, while the members of their class were still celebrating by staying up late and sleeping until noon, Dixon had stopped showing up for the parties, picnics and get-togethers they’d thrown that summer before college.

No one in town had mentioned him since, not even his grandmother. Kate couldn’t remember anyone who was particularly upset by his absence—he hadn’t dated, had come to the prom by himself, she recalled. If he had been good friends with one or more of the boys, she didn’t know who it would have been. Dixon was just...Dixon. A little weird, a lot unfocused, apt to go off by himself with the guitar he’d always carried to make music only he really listened to.

And now he was back, not at all the vague, blurred teenager she remembered, but a vital and incredibly attractive man. That moment when he’d held her against him still sang in her veins.

She caught sight of her reflection in the black door of the microwave—hair flat and tangled, makeup washed off by the rain, clothes barely decent—and groaned. Not exactly the picture to inspire a man to romance.

Embarrassed and, to be honest, disappointed, she hurried up to her bedroom to repair the damage. Chances were slim she would encounter Dixon Bell again today, or ever again, but she did try to look her best when she went out. People tended to think better of you when you presented yourself well.

As she smoothed her damp hair into a ponytail, the phone rang. She should have let the machine answer it—she wasn’t going to get to the cleaner’s or the hardware and grocery stores at this rate—but she never could let a phone ring if she was there to answer.

“Hello?”

“You believed me when I said I’d call, right?”

Heart pounding, she sat on the side of the bed. “Dixon?”

“I just escaped from Jessica. I wish you hadn’t let her run you off. She always did want to be the center of attention.”

Kate smiled, because he was so right. “I—I didn’t run off. I do have things to do.”

“I’m sure of that. Can I see you when you get them all finished?”

“See me?”

“Yeah. Dinner, maybe?”

Her heart slammed to a stop, then started pounding again. “That sounds like...a date.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

“But, Dixon...”

“Mmm?”

“I told you that I’m married.”

“Well, according to Jessica, that’s kind of a technicality. I understand you’re well and truly separated and on the way to a divorce.” Kate drew a deep breath, embarrassed all over again at the

idea of being talked about. “And before you get too upset, I didn’t ask. Didn’t mention your name. She volunteered the information. Better be careful what you tell Jessica Hyde.”

“I am.” But the separation and pending divorce were pretty common knowledge, she supposed. “Still, I don’t think I should be dating.”

“Okay. We won’t call it a date. Just dinner for old friends.”

He made her want to laugh. “It’s not that simple. I have two teenagers to think about.”

“Oh, yeah.” That actually seemed to slow him down. “I’d say bring ’em along. But I kinda hoped to have you all to myself, the first time, anyway. How about tomorrow night? You could make arrangements for them and then we could get together.”

Oh, how tempting. Kate blinked back tears as she realized how much she would love to have dinner with Dixon, just the two of them. “It sounds wonderful. But...” She drew a deep breath. “I can’t.”

“That’s too bad. I was looking forward to catching up.” He didn’t sound angry, or even particularly disappointed. “You take care of yourself, okay? I’ll talk to you again soon.” Almost before she could say goodbye, he’d hung up on his end. That quickness gave her a little hope that he’d cared one way or the other that she’d turned him down. But really, why should he?

Kate glanced at the clock and realized she had missed the window of opportunity to get groceries before picking up the kids. That would mean taking them along, with the resulting sulks and sighs. As children, they’d loved to join her in the adventure of shopping. These days, they seemed to expect the food to appear on the shelf or on the table, ready for consumption. Providing for them was part of her role as parent, Kate realized, a role she cherished with all her heart. Sometimes, though, she wished the decisions and responsibilities could rest with somebody else. Or at least be shared. But her ex-husband-to-be didn’t feel much like sharing anything with her these days. Least of all responsibilities.

Waiting in the school parking lot a few minutes later, Kate tried to balance her checkbook in an attempt to keep her mind off Dixon Bell. Not a very successful effort, she had to admit. Instead of focusing on the numbers in her register, she kept staring off into space, thinking about his smile, picturing him sleeping on a picnic table one warm summer night so long ago. What courage it must have taken to strike out on his own. She couldn’t imagine being completely free of other people’s expectations and regulations.

So deep in reverie was she that she didn’t realize Kelsey had come out of the school building until the car door swung open.

“Hey.” Her daughter dropped into the front seat of the Volvo, her blond hair gleaming in the sunlight, her brown eyes and heart-shaped face enhanced by makeup as perfect as only a teenage girl’s could be at this hour of the day. She’d obviously just renewed her cologne, and the latest fashion scent filled the car.

Kate smiled in greeting. “Hey, yourself. Where’s your brother?”

“He’ll be here in a minute. He had to get a book out of the library for his homework.”

“How was class today?”

Kelsey rolled her eyes. “Booorring. As usual.” A genius when it came to putting together the right clothes, she wasn’t a terribly focused student.

Without warning, Trace appeared in the passenger-side window and opened the door his older sister was leaning against. “You get the back seat. You had the front this morning.”

Kelsey gave an unfeminine snort. “Like I’m going to get out and get in again?”

“Yeah, you are.” Trace was a replica of his father, with the same athletic build, the same handsome face, the same dark-blond hair and bright-blue eyes. When he got angry, as now, the resemblance was even more striking.

“No, I’m not.” In an instant, their voices were strained, their faces heated. “You can have the front seat both ways tomorrow.”

“Oh, sure, that’ll happen. Get out, Kelsey.” He reached in and took hold of her arm, trying to pull her out of the car. Where once brother and sister had been staunch allies, in the last few months they had become adversaries, if not downright enemies.

But Kate drew the line at physical conflict. “Trace, that’s enough.”

He didn’t seem to hear her as Kelsey kicked out with a foot aimed at his knee. “Get lost.”

“You get lost.” The brawl intensified, with more pushing and shoving. A pair of kids crossing the parking lot had stopped to watch, and an approaching teacher stood gazing, openmouthed, as Kelsey and Trace pummeled each other.

Kate didn’t try to be heard over the yelling. Gritting her teeth, she planted the heel of her hand on the car horn and pressed down. Hard.

Trace jerked back at the blare of sound, which gave Kelsey a chance to get in the last blow. The boy staggered back against the car parked next to them, arms clutched over his stomach. “I’ll get you for that,” he panted. “I swear I’ll get you.”

Kelsey swung her legs into the car and closed the door without deigning to answer. After a minute, Trace fumbled his way into the back seat, where he curled into a ball, his head on his knees.

They rode home without speaking. Once inside the house, Kate didn’t have to tell the kids to go to their rooms— isolation was intentional and immediate on both their parts. She sank into a chair at the kitchen table and put her head down on her arms, too numb to think about how to deal with Kelsey and Trace.

And she still didn’t have anything in the house to cook for dinner.

THE ONLY PHONE CONNECTION in all the fifteen rooms of Magnolia Cottage was in the front hall, which didn’t allow for much private conversation. Miss Daisy came down the stairs just as Dixon hung up from his call to Kate.

She paused on the last step. “I gather from the frown on your handsome face that your dinner plans fell through.”

“Yes, ma’am, they did.” He tried to erase the frown. “That’s okay—there’ll be another night.”

At the mirror beside the front door, his grandmother checked the smooth sweep of her silver hair, always worn in a knot on the crown of her head, dabbed a little powder over her fine skin and checked the set of her lavender suit jacket. Convinced she was perfect—as, indeed, Dixon thought she was—she turned and put a hand on his arm.

“Why don’t you come with us, then? We’d love to have a good-looking male at our table to pass the time with. LuAnne Taylor just loves to flirt with younger men.”

Dixon lifted her hand and kissed the cool fingers, feeling them tremble just a bit in his hold. She smelled like his childhood—lavender water and talc and Dove soap. “You’re sweet, Miss Daisy. But I think I’ll let you go on without me. I might not be the best of company tonight.” He wanted to treat Kate’s refusal lightly, but the disappointment harkened back to the old days, when getting turned down by Kate Bowdrey had changed the course of his life. At seventeen, a boy was permitted to take love so seriously. By the time he’d reached thirty, he really ought to have gained a little perspective.

“If you say so, dear.” Miss Daisy patted his cheek with her free hand. “I’m just grateful to have you home again.” Outside, a car horn beeped. “Don’t wait up—sometimes we go to LuAnne’s and play bridge until the wee hours.”

Dixon opened the front door. “Miss Daisy, you’re a hell-raiser.”

She flashed him the smile that had captivated most of the men in New Skye at one time or another. “Of course. At my age, what else do I have left to do?”

Chuckling, Dixon escorted her down the house steps so she wouldn’t have to depend on the rickety railing, and held her arm as they went toward the twenty-year-old Cadillac waiting at the end of the walk. The crumbling brick pavers made the footing shaky, at best, but the grass on either side was too high and too weed-grown to walk through. He was surprised one of the older ladies who visited his grandmother hadn’t fallen and hurt herself before now.

As Miss Daisy settled herself in the Caddy, Dixon spoke with Miss Taylor. “Don’t y’all get too rowdy tonight. I want to be able to hold my head up in town tomorrow.”

“The very idea.” Miss Taylor pretended to be embarrassed. “Just four old friends having dinner together. What could be more refined?”

Dixon shook his head. “Four wild women is more like it, I’d say.”

“LuAnne, Alice is waiting for us,” Miss Daisy commented. “And you know how she fusses when she has to wait.”

With the ladies inside and the windows rolled up against the humid evening, the Caddy followed the curve of the driveway and headed down the quarter-mile gravel lane toward the street. Dixon turned toward the front porch, hands in his pockets, wondering what he would do for dinner.

But then he caught sight of the house, gleaming white in the twilight, and forgot his train of thought. An antebellum relic built by his many-times great-grandfather, Magnolia Cottage had been a plantation house before a bad economy and an ugly war stripped away most of the land, leaving only a few acres of gardens around the main building. The Crawfords and Bells had never been very lucky with money, so the gardens had eventually fallen into a state of disrepair, followed soon enough by the house itself. Growing up, Dixon hadn’t recognized the problems, but after so long away, he was appalled at the conditions in which his grandmother continued to live.

Not dirty, no...Miss Daisy had a woman in twice a week to keep the place clean. But the plaster walls and ceilings were crumbling as badly as the brick walk. Floorboards were loose all over the house. Miss Daisy had learned to avoid certain steps and particular danger spots, but Dixon had banged a shin with an exploding board in the bedroom floor on his first night at home. In addition to a hell of a bruise, he’d gotten a blistering lecture from his grandmother for his “uncivil” language.

There was no central air-conditioning, of course, only window units in the rooms Miss Daisy used. The kitchen was old, the appliances barely functional, the bathrooms—two of them for the whole house—archaic. Magnolia Cottage needed a serious renovation before it could serve as a home to raise a family in. Which he hoped to do, if only Kate Bowdrey LaRue would cooperate.

While he was pondering the possibilities, enjoying the way the humid air held the scent of leaves and grass and pine, a dark-blue SUV pulled around the curve of the driveway and stopped in front of the house. Dixon didn’t recognize the man who got out and came to join him.

The stranger nodded toward the house. “A wreck, ain’t it?”

Dixon ignored a flare of temper provoked by the insult to his home. The guy was a clod, but that was no reason to get mad. “Needs some work, definitely.”

“You Dixon Bell?” He wore mirrored sunglasses and a pink knit shirt and had “let’s make a deal” written all over him.

“I am.”

“Well, you’re just the man I’m looking for, then.” Turning, he stuck out his hand. “I’m L.T. LaRue. And I’ll pay you three hundred thousand cash to let me take this disaster off your hands.”

CHAPTER TWO

DIXON KEPT HIS FISTS in his pockets. “Thanks, but no thanks.” This was the bastard who had left Kate—and his own kids, for God’s sake—to be with another woman. No way was he going to dignify the man’s existence with a handshake.

LaRue waited a few seconds, then let his arm drop. The grin stayed on his face, considerably stiffer than before. “We can deal on the price. I just wanted you to know I’m interested.”

“No, we won’t deal. I’m not selling.”

“Aw, come on, Dixon. The place is falling down around your ears. Your grandmother needs a decent place to live out her old age. Let me build you a new house and get you out from under this white elephant.”

Dixon imagined the pleasure of planting his knuckles directly under the bridge of those shiny shades, but decided not to start a brawl on his own front lawn, weedy though it might be. “Like I said, Mr. LaRue, I’m not selling. Have a good evening.” He headed up the walk, leaving LaRue behind.

But Kate’s husband did not, apparently, get the message. “I’ll give you four hundred grand,” he called as Dixon climbed the semicircular steps that had been built with bricks made on the property more than one hundred fifty years ago.

“No, thanks.”

“Four-fifty’s my top offer!”

Gritting his teeth, Dixon shut the hand-carved mahogany front door between himself and L.T. LaRue. He would have liked to punch a wall, but there were enough holes in the plaster already. Out in Colorado, he could have saddled up and galloped his horse through the sagebrush until they were both tired enough to sleep.

But he’d left his horses—Brady, the bay gelding, and Cristal, the quarter horse mare he had yet to break to saddle—at the ranch until he could find the right place to board them in North Carolina.

Meanwhile, the evening was wearing on and he hadn’t had his dinner. Maybe some good food would take the edge off his temper, mitigate his urge to murder L.T. LaRue. And since he doubted Miss Daisy’s cats would be willing to cook for him, Dixon grabbed the keys to his truck and headed for the one place in town he could be sure of getting a decent meal and friendly company.

If he couldn’t be with Kate, the folks at Charlie’s Carolina Diner were the next best thing.

KATE FELL ASLEEP at the kitchen table and woke to find Kelsey staring down at her. “What are you doing?”

She sat up, wincing at the stiffness in her back. “I’m not sure. What time is it?”

“Almost eight.”

“It’s not!” But, of course, it was. Kate braced her palms against the table and pushed herself to her feet. “Um...let me see what I can find to make for dinner.” Standing at the door to the pantry, with her mind still fogged by the wisps of a dream, she couldn’t seem to find much inspiration. “We’re down to the bare bones here. Mushroom soup, anyone?” Kelsey stuck her tongue out. “Refried beans?”

“We could have burritos.”

“Except there’s no cheese, no salsa and no tortillas. Just beans.”

Trace came into the kitchen. “Gross.”

Kate agreed. “No eggs, no butter, no pasta or sauce.”

Kelsey crossed her arms. “So let’s go out somewhere.”

For once, Trace agreed with his sister. “Sounds good.”

Kate shook her head. “I don’t have enough cash for fast food.” And she really didn’t like eating out of a paper bag.

“So we can go someplace that takes plastic.”

“Possibly.” She looked at her kids. Trace wore the oversize T-shirt and hugely sagging pants that comprised the required uniform among his friends. Both pieces had been ironed at the beginning of the day, for all the good it had done. Kelsey’s shorts were just that—barely conforming to the dress code that required them to reach her fingertips. Once home, she had changed the relatively modest shirt she’d worn to school for a clinging tank top that left a strip of midriff showing and almost nothing to the imagination.

As for herself...well, she was decent, in shorts and a T-shirt, but not really dressed. “Where could we go at this hour, without changing clothes?”

Kelsey snapped her fingers. “I saw a sign at the diner. Charlie takes plastic now.”

“Really? I haven’t eaten there in years.” Kate wasn’t sure why, but the suggestion seemed like the perfect solution for her dilemma tonight. “So, here’s the deal. Kelsey, you put some kind of shirt over that tank top.”

“Why?”

Kate ignored the question. “And the two of you agree not to fight, not even to insult each other for the next two hours. If you get into an argument while we’re eating in public, I will drag you out by your ears and you’ll be grounded for the rest of the summer. And that’s a promise.”

The two teenagers glanced at each other out of the corners of their eyes, a kind of mutual commitment. Kelsey looked at Kate again. “Do I really have to wear a shirt?”

“Only if you want to drive the car.”

Fifteen minutes later, Kelsey stopped the Volvo in front of the diner. Kate let out a long, relieved breath. “That was good. You’re getting to be a very smooth driver.”

The girl’s increasing confidence did not, however, serve to ease Kate’s anxiety about being responsible for teaching her daughter to drive. And in just two years, she would have to start all over with Trace.

He walked a step behind as she and Kelsey crossed the parking lot, past a couple of pickups parked next to each other near the front door. “Next time, Kelse, maybe you could park in a regular space.”

Kelsey turned and stuck her tongue out at him. “There aren’t any spaces, you jerk. It’s all gravel.”

“But people usually line up at the same angle, in a row, more or less. You aren’t anywhere close to these trucks. Talk about dumb.”

Kate gave him a quelling glance. “Talk about this anymore and we’re going home without dinner.”

Since Trace ate almost constantly, in order to support his still-growing frame, the threat worked beautifully. The three of them got inside the diner without another cross word being exchanged.

The bell on the door jingled as they came through, drawing the attention of the four people talking at the counter. Kate was aware of Abby Brannon and her dad, Charlie, the owners of the diner, and Adam DeVries, one of her classmates from high school...familiar faces she might have expected to find here any night she chose to come. But the fourth person was, again, totally unexpected.

“Dixon?” She whispered his name, feeling as if she’d conjured him up from her dream in the kitchen.

But he heard her and got to his feet, looking just as good as he had this afternoon—tall and cool in khaki slacks and a light-blue dress shirt with the sleeves rolled back. “Hey, Kate. Two accidental meetings in one day—I’d say I’ve got a lot of good luck going for me. And it’s not raining this time.”

“No...no, it’s not.” Thank goodness she had combed her hair and put on some lipstick before she left the house. “It’s a lovely evening.” She recovered her manners and pulled away from his deep-brown gaze. “Hi, Abby. How are you?”

“Just fine.” The other woman came around the counter. Hands on Kate’s shoulders, Abby kissed her on both cheeks. “I’m so glad you’re here. The kids come in all the time, of course, but I only get

to see you out in the car, waiting to take them home. Have a seat.” She led them to a booth on the wall. “What can I get y’all to drink?”

The kids ordered soft drinks and Kate asked for iced tea. Abby whisked away...and then two tall, handsome men pulled a freestanding table and a couple of chairs over to extend the booth. Adam sat down on Kate’s side of the table and Dixon sat across from him.

“It’ll be easier on Abby this way,” Dixon explained when Kate looked at him. “If you don’t mind?” His grin was apologetic and yet confident, inviting her to share a private joke.

“Of course not.” And she didn’t, except that seeing him again had seriously disrupted her ability to think. Her heart was pounding under her ribs, her breath had caught in her lungs. She didn’t think she could actually eat in this state.

Kelsey and Trace were staring at Dixon, confusion and even a little suspicion on their faces. Recalled to her responsibility, Kate made the introductions. “Dixon, these are my children. Kelsey and Trace, this is Dixon Bell. You’ve met Miss Daisy Crawford—he’s her grandson. He went to school with Abby and me, but he’s been gone for a long time and just came home. You know Mr. DeVries, of course.” She only hoped they wouldn’t comment on the fact that DeVries Construction competed with their dad’s company for business around town. “How are you, Adam?”

Adam nodded toward the kids, then gently shook the hand she extended. “J-just f-fine, Kate. I t-trust you’re the s-s-same. All r-recovered f-f-from the w-wed-ding?” Courty in manner, tall, with dark hair and a construction worker’s muscles, Adam should have been anybody’s dream husband. Kate had never understood why he was still single.

Dixon leaned forward. “Somebody’s just married?”

Kate met his gaze. She could feel herself blushing, though there was no reason to be embarrassed. “Pete Mitchell and my sister, Mary Rose, got married a few weeks ago.”

“That’s terrific. I haven’t had a chance to call Pete since I’ve been home. I’ll be sure to look him up and offer my congratulations.”

“He p-p-plays b-basketball on S-Saturday mornings,” Adam commented. “With Tommy C-Crawford, Rob Warren and m-m-me. F-find one m-more player and w-we could g-go three o-o-on three.”

Trace looked over at the suggestion, then quickly went back to staring out the window into the growing twilight. But Kate saw that Dixon had noted his interest.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said just as Abby came back with their drinks. Then he turned toward Kelsey, on his right. “I noticed you got out on the driver’s side. You’re working on getting your license?”

“Uh-huh.” Kelsey darted a glance in Dixon’s direction, but didn’t meet him eye to eye.

“I learned to drive in my grandmother’s New Yorker—this big yellow boat of a car, ’bout thirty-some years old now but it only has fifty thousand miles on it because she never goes more than a few miles outside the county line. I never did learn to parallel park that monster—the officer who gave me the test was a second cousin once removed, or something like that. He let me slide.”

“Parking is the worst,” Kelsey agreed. “Backing up is almost as bad.”

Dixon nodded. “It’s always hard to know which way to turn the wheel.”

Trace snorted, but Kelsey was captivated. She and Dixon embarked on a discussion about driving that lasted through most of dinner. Listening to their easy dialogue, Kate wondered where Dixon’s inordinate charm had come from. When had the awkward, inappropriate boy become such a lady’s man? Miss Daisy possessed more than her fair share of social skills, of course, but Kate didn’t remember a single hint in the young Dixon Bell of the charismatic skill he was using to draw Kelsey out of herself.

And then she wondered if he’d used that same skill on her this afternoon, if the flattering interest she’d basked in was just a tool Dixon plied on any woman within talking distance. Her soon-to-be ex-husband had been a zvery smooth operator fifteen years ago when she’d first known him. Still

was, if his success with various younger women around town was all that rumor reported. Recently, so she'd heard, he'd settled down with just one of those young women and was planning to marry her. Despite his image as a man about town, L.T. was a conventional soul at heart. Perhaps he'd just needed to find the right person...

A person who wasn't her. The knowledge that L.T.'s real problem with their marriage had been as simple as falling out of love with his own wife struck Kate with the force of a felled tree. Devastated all over again, she stared down at her chicken casserole and knew with complete certainty that she couldn't possibly manage another bite.

DIXON SAW a stricken look take over Kate's beautiful face, but couldn't figure out what might have caused it. He and Kelsey were getting along just fine—he'd exerted himself to reach out to her, wanting to make sure Kate knew that her kids were no barrier, as far as he was concerned. The boy would be harder to get to know. Trace had a hunger about him that Dixon had seen in runaways and abandoned teenagers, a hunger for attention, for guidance, which Dixon had no trouble at all attributing to the boy's father. L.T. LaRue had left his son at a vulnerable point in the boy's young life, with an emptiness that only a father could fill. Dixon understood that void, having grown up without his dad. At least he'd had Miss Daisy. And Trace had Kate. But even the most loving mother couldn't completely take a father's place.

"So what's everybody having for dessert?" Abby Brannon stood at his shoulder, surveying the remains of their meal. "Kate, honey, you've hardly touched your food. Is something wrong?" Kate shook her head and Abby didn't press for an answer. She moved around the table clearing plates, a woman of ample curves and ample concern for everyone she encountered. He remembered her as a shy girl, coping with her mother's terminal illness even as she got ready to leave high school and start her own adult life. While he had struck off on his own, ranging far and wide in an effort to discover who he was, Abby had stayed at home. Was she satisfied with what she knew about herself? About the rest of the world?

Then again, Dixon wasn't sure he was satisfied, after everywhere he'd been and everything he'd done. And look at Kate—valedictorian of the graduating class, voted Most Likely to Succeed, the one student among them whom everybody was sure would launch a brilliant career and make her mark on the world. As he recalled, she'd planned to be a lawyer like her dad. Thirteen years later, she was a spurned wife in the same little town she'd grown up in. Yet another of life's ironies.

She certainly didn't seem happy, didn't radiate the kind of confidence and joy he remembered adoring in her all those years ago. She was still breathtaking, with her dark hair, her pale, perfect skin and her slender figure, but muted, as if a shadow hung over her life. The shadow of L.T. LaRue.

"Who are you planning to kill?" Abby leaned over to take his plate and slide the knife out of his clenched fist. "And what do you want for dessert? Lemon meringue pie? Chocolate cake and ice cream?"

Dixon deliberately relaxed. "If I told you, I'd have to kill you, too. And just coffee, thanks. I'll save dessert for tomorrow."

"All you disciplined people." Abby sighed. "Why do I spend my time making pies for people who won't eat them?" Shaking her head, she headed toward the kitchen with a trayful of used plates and glasses balanced on one arm.

"I don't know how she does it." Kate, too, was shaking her head. "Always smiling, always ready to serve, and she works harder than anybody I know."

"A-Abby's a w-wonder." Adam leaned back in his chair. "Charlie s-s-still comes t-to w-work, but s-since his heart attack, he m-mostly v-visits with the c-customers. Abby's d-d-definitely the p-prime mover around here."

The bell on the diner's front door jingled, announcing new arrivals. Dixon glanced over out of curiosity, only to have his gut tighten with a combination of irritation and dread when a young woman wearing a mind-bending red dress stepped inside, followed by L.T. LaRue.

Beside Dixon, Kelsey gasped and stiffened. On the other side of the table, Kate and Trace and Adam couldn't see, without turning around, what was going on. But all Kate needed was her daughter's face. As she stared at Kelsey, reading the girl's reaction, what little color she had left in her cheeks drained away. She pressed her lips together for a few seconds and took a deep breath.

"Well, this has been fun." Her voice shook slightly. "But Kelsey and Trace have homework, so I think we should be getting home. Adam, if you'll excuse us—"

DeVries had taken a quick glance over his shoulder to gauge the situation. "Of c-course." He got to his feet to let Kate slide out of the booth. Dixon did the same for Kelsey, all the while keeping an eye on LaRue. Abby, bless her heart, had herded L.T. and his girlfriend to the other side of the diner. For a minute, Dixon thought disaster had been avoided.

But LaRue let his companion sit down and then strutted across the room to stand directly in Kate's path of escape.

"Well, look here. What an interesting group this is." He put his hands in the pockets of his slacks and rocked back on his heels. "Hey, Trace, Kelsey. I was looking forward to seeing y'all on Saturday for breakfast. How's school going?" He sounded genial enough, if a little distracted. And he didn't wait for an answer from the kids. "You're keeping strange company these days, Kate. Selling secrets to my biggest rival?" LaRue's laugh set Dixon's teeth on edge.

Kate shook her head. "Just visiting with old friends, L.T. Have you met Dixon Bell? He went to school with Adam and me, and has just come home after a long time away."

"I have, in fact." LaRue nodded at Dixon. "Which is why I'm really interested to see him talking with the head of DeVries Construction. Thought you'd get a better offer, did you, Dixon? I'm telling you that's not likely."

"And I'm telling you I don't care what the offer is, LaRue. Magnolia Cottage is not for sale." Dixon strived for the same calm Kate had demonstrated. LaRue had already made him mad once tonight. He didn't intend to repeat the experience. That would give the man too much importance.

"Y-you m-must have a p-p-persecution complex, LaRue." Adam shook his head and gathered up the checks Abby had left on the table. "I-I've got a-a-all the w-work I c-can handle. I d-d-don't n-need to go h-harassing p-p-people to s-sell me their a-ancestral homes." He turned to Kate, put a hand on her shoulder and leaned in to kiss her cheek. "I enjoyed s-seeing you again. Y'all, t-too," he said with a glance at Kelsey and Trace. "I'll t-take care of the b-bill."

"Oh, Adam, you don't have to do that."

He gave her a wink. "I—I know. Call me, Dixon."

"Will do."

In the silence Adam left behind, LaRue narrowed his focus to Kate. "Kinda late for my kids to be out, isn't it? Don't they have homework? Not to mention a curfew, after all that trouble they caused last spring?"

"Yes, and yes, and yes." Kate put the strap of her purse on her shoulder. "So we'll say goodbye and let you get to your dinner." She took a step that brought her within inches of LaRue, who grinned but didn't move. "You're in my way, L.T. Please let me go by."

Her husband—ex-husband?—held her in place until Dixon started around the table. Then LaRue retreated. "See you bright and early Saturday, kids. Don't be late."

Like mice caught out in the kitchen when the light was turned on at night, Trace, Kelsey and Kate scurried out of the diner while L.T. had his back turned toward them on the way to his table. Dixon stood for a minute, considering the possibility of a showdown, here and now, but decided Abby and Charlie didn't need the hassle. The time would come, though. No doubt about that. So, with a wave toward Abby behind the counter, he headed for the door.

Outside in the hot July night, Trace and Kelsey were arguing about something as they unlocked the Volvo. "Come on, Kate," Kelsey called. "Let's go."

But Kate had stopped just beside the front of Dixon's truck, as if her legs wouldn't take her any farther. When he put a hand under her elbow, he could feel her whole body tremble.

"Are you okay?"

She turned sightless eyes upon him. "Um...I don't think so. I need a minute. Which is silly, isn't it? Nothing happened. There's no reason to be so upset." She put her hand over her eyes. The deep breath she drew shook with the sound of tears.

Aware of the lighted windows behind them, Dixon pulled her around until the body of the truck stood between Kate and the diner. Then he opened the truck door, put his hands around her narrow waist and lifted her onto the passenger seat. He made himself let go quickly. She didn't need another predator stalking her tonight.

But as she sat there, elbows on her knees and head in her hands, he wrestled with the powerful urge to close his arms around her and never let go. He wanted to put himself between Kate Bowdrey and the rest of the world, make sure nothing and nobody ever hurt her again. His heart ached with the need she had always inspired in him. And he couldn't let one bit of what he was feeling show.

Someday, he would be free to tell her how much she mattered to him. Surely, someday.

But not yet. So he stood stiff and silent while Kate struggled alone with her despair.

Kate knew she was being weak, knew she shouldn't give in to the anguish L.T. provoked in her these days. When she knew she would see him, she could prepare herself and get through the encounter pretty well. But accidental meetings like this just swept under her defenses, gave her no chance to control her reaction. And so here she was, quivering like a beached jellyfish.

With Dixon Bell standing there watching.

At the realization, she jerked herself upright. She'd accepted his help, let him practically hide her from the world, then forgotten he was there. "I'm so sorry," she gasped as her cheeks heated up. "What you must be thinking..." She couldn't meet his gaze, and she couldn't get out of the truck because he was standing right in front of her.

His fingertips brushed across her cheek. "I'm thinking you'll be well rid of that bastard. And that I'm really glad I got to have dinner with you tonight after all."

Something in his rich voice encouraged her to look up. She found no pity in his eyes, only a depth of understanding she would never have expected.

"Me, too," she admitted, under the spell of his smile. And discovered that she actually felt free to smile back.

But darkness had fallen while she huddled in Dixon's truck. Loud rock music blared across the parking lot from the Volvo where Trace and Kelsey waited. Kate sighed, sat up straighter. "I'd better go."

She thought he would step back and let her hop down from the high truck seat. Instead, he placed his hands on her waist and swung her around and down, setting her gently on her feet. She felt a little dizzy, a little breathless as she stared up at him.

"Thank you. For everything."

Again, he stroked his fingers over her cheek. "My pleasure. Good night."

She lifted her hand, backed up a couple of steps and then, reluctantly, turned toward the Volvo. With great resolve, she managed not to look around again until she had the car door closed and her seat belt fastened. Dixon was still standing by his truck, watching, with his hands in his pockets and one foot crossed over the other. When she waved, he waved back. Then Kelsey turned the car onto the highway, and they left the diner behind.

Back to the real and dreary world, Kate told herself. When she thought of the expression in Dixon's eyes, however, the gentleness in his voice, his touch, she couldn't repress a surge of hope.

Or maybe not.

L.T. PRETENDED TO READ the menu, though he pretty much always ordered the same dinner when he came to Charlie's. He pretended to listen as Melanie chattered on about her mother's

new boyfriend and her sister's old boyfriend and... whatever. As long as he said something every once in a while, she was happy just to keep talking and believe he heard everything she said.

"That so?" he said when she paused.

She gave him her little-girl smile and started up again.

Charlie Brannon limped over to their table, blocking L.T.'s view of Kate and the kids as they left the diner. "What can I get y'all tonight?" The old man had been a marine drill sergeant and acted as if he still had that kind of authority.

Melanie ordered a salad plate. L.T. went for the usual. "Fried chicken, white and dark, mashed potatoes, green beans, biscuits."

Charlie nodded. "Be right back."

With Brannon out of the way, L.T. stared out the plate-glass windows on the front of the diner, trying to figure out what was going on. The Volvo was still parked at the far end of the lot, and he could see the kids inside, doors open, lights on. They'd wear down the battery if they weren't careful. Where was Kate? Why hadn't they gone home?

He finally realized that Kate was sitting in Dixon Bell's truck. The lights were on there, too, because the door was still open. L.T. could see the silhouette of her head and, beyond, the shadow of Bell's face. They appeared to be talking. About what?

Shaking his head, he picked up his iced tea and drained half the glass. Old times, probably, the ones he'd never been a part of. He'd come into this town as a stranger. Sure, he was Kate Bowdrey's husband, and that gave him some leverage. But most of her friends and their parents had looked at him as if he belonged on another planet instead of in a different town. He had never really fit in.

He'd made money, though, and that had bought him acceptance. He built their new houses, renovated their old ones, and they liked him for it. Unless something went wrong, of course. Nobody realized that you couldn't get perfect work at reasonable prices. The economics just didn't add up. L.T. gave them the prices they liked, and they just had to live with the flaws.

"Chicken salad plate and fried chicken." Charlie set down their plates and a basket of biscuits. "Abby'll be here to refill your tea in a minute. Anything else?"

L.T. shook his head and attacked his meal. But with a piece of chicken in his fingers, halfway between plate and mouth, he looked outside again to see the Volvo driving away. Dixon Bell came around the front of his truck and then he, too, was gone.

Good riddance. Crunching into Abby's crispy chicken crust, L.T. thought about Bell's attitude that afternoon at the house. Wouldn't sell. Well, they'd just see about that. It took a strong man to resist L.T. LaRue. A strong one, or a very, very rich one. He'd have to find out whether Dixon Bell fit in either category.

And then find a way to break him, anyway.

CHAPTER THREE

MISS DAISY WAS ALREADY bustling around the house when Dixon came downstairs at six-thirty on Friday morning. She stopped long enough to kiss him on the cheek.

“The housekeeper will be here at nine,” she reminded him. “We have to have everything straightened up before then.”

He followed her through the parlor as she took the cats’ towels off the furniture and bundled them up in her arms. In several cases, she had to remove a cat, too. Dixon knew he was guilty of exaggerating when he’d told Kate there were too many cats to count. In fact, there were only four—Audrey, Clark, Cary and Marlon. But they moved silently and appeared out of nowhere when he least expected it, so he felt as if he was living with at least twice that number.

“Forgive my confusion, Miss Daisy, but isn’t that what you have a housekeeper for? To straighten the house?”

“I don’t need to hire somebody to pick up your dirty socks.” She handed him the pair he’d left by the couch after falling asleep in front of the television waiting for her to come home. He’d waked up about three in the morning with the long-haired white cat—Audrey?—snoring on his chest. “I get the clutter out of her way so Consuela can do the real cleaning.”

“That’s clear as mud.” Dixon followed his grandmother into the kitchen. “Can I pour you a cup of coffee?”

“I’ve had my daily quota, thank you. I’ll be glad to fix you some breakfast, though. We still have time. Eggs and bacon? Pancakes?”

He toasted her with his coffee mug. “I’m fine. What can I do to help you?”

Miss Daisy was busy putting away the clean dishes still in the drainer from yesterday. Magnolia Cottage didn’t own a dishwasher. “Just be sure your room is neat, dear. And the bathroom upstairs. That will be sufficient.”

Coffee in hand, Dixon climbed the wide, uncarpeted staircase to the second floor, appreciating the fine woodwork. At the same time, he noted a couple of missing balusters and the desperate need for a refinishing job on the banister. In his bedroom, he picked up his shirt and slacks from last night and caught, along with a flurry of white cat hair, a whiff of Kate’s rose-washed perfume clinging to the cloth. Or imagined he did, anyway. His first waking thought, as it was on many mornings, had been of Kate. He wondered if she’d spent time thinking about him last night, or if she’d gone home and straight to sleep. He couldn’t help but notice that she looked exhausted. Beautiful, but exhausted.

In the bathroom, he hung his towel over the rack, as opposed to the shower-curtain rod, stowed his shaving gear in his bag and put it under his arm to take to his room. There was no linen closet, no storage cabinet of any kind in the tiny, white-tiled bath. The sink rested on a stainless-steel frame and the tub was the ancient, freestanding variety. Big but difficult, he was certain, to clean behind.

Dixon decided he’d better get out a notepad and start writing down all the things he wanted to fix in the house. There were too many to keep a mental list.

He spent a couple of pleasurable hours surveying the second floor, thinking about converting a small bedroom into a bath, creating a walk-in closet for Miss Daisy so she wouldn’t have to store her wardrobe in every closet but his. Just as he reached the foot of the stairs again, the front doorbell rang. He opened the door to a short, plump lady with glossy black hair and a sweet smile.

“I am Consuela Torres. You must be Mr. Dixon.”

He took her hand and drew her into the house. “I’m glad to meet you, Mrs. Torres. Miss Daisy says you’ve done a wonderful job taking care of the house, and of her. I really appreciate that.”

“She is easy to care for. And I am glad to have such steady work.” Consuela set the big shopping bag she carried on the floor by the stairs and bent over to extract cleaning cloths and bottles of various kinds. Dixon saw that she winced as she straightened up again.

“Are you okay?”

She gave him another smile. “Of course. These old bones just take some warming up in the morning. I think I will start upstairs today, if that’s all right with you.”

“That’s great.” He watched her as she went up, noted that she was breathing hard by the time she reached the middle of the staircase. She wasn’t an athletic woman, but she wasn’t really “old,” either, and it seemed to him that climbing the steps shouldn’t be that hard.

“Are you sure Consuela’s okay?” he asked Miss Daisy when he found her in the kitchen. “Is this job too much for her?”

His grandmother considered the questions with her delicate eyebrows drawn together. “She’s worked hard since she was a teenager, that I do know, mostly cleaning houses and offices. She has a number of children, several of them very young. I imagine she is tired most of the time, and feels a little older than her years. But I wouldn’t presume to pity her,” Miss Daisy warned. “And I wouldn’t think of firing her. Her husband can’t hold a job, and some weeks her housekeeping money is all they have to eat on.”

Dixon shook his head. “No, I wouldn’t fire her. I just wonder how to make things easier for her...and for you. This place is a wreck, Miss Daisy. We’ve got to get it fixed up.”

Now her bright blue eyes widened in surprise. “Fixed up? What’s wrong with this house?”

For an answer, he walked to the wall beside the back door and chipped off a piece of crumbling plaster with his fingernail. “For starters. And you need new bathrooms, a new kitchen. More phone connections. What would happen if you fell upstairs and needed help? You couldn’t even make a telephone call.”

“I seem to have managed well enough all these years.” Her tone was frosted with injured pride.

“Sure you have.” Putting an arm around her shoulders, he brought her to the table, brushed a fat calico cat—Marlon?—off the chair, and sat her down. The cat immediately jumped onto Miss Daisy’s lap. “And I don’t have any right to criticize when I stayed away for so long, leaving you to take care of everything all by yourself.”

She shrugged a thin shoulder. “You needed to go, and I gave you my blessing. Anyway, I was used to being in charge. Your grandfather died a long time ago. And then your mother and father...” Her sigh spoke of an unhealed sorrow.

“But I’m here now, Miss Daisy, and I want to make this a comfortable, easy place to live in. For you, and for me, for the family I hope to have someday.”

Daisy sat up straight. “Dixon Crawford Bell! You’re planning a family already? And just who might the lucky woman be? Or do I already know?”

He put a finger on her lips. “Don’t say anything—I don’t want to jinx it. But I do want to set things to rights around here, if you’ll let me.”

Her shoulders slumped a little. “I’m comfortable enough, Dixon, but I don’t have the money to do the kinds of things you’re talking about. How are we going to afford all this?”

Though he hadn’t really doubted that she would go along with his plans, he felt better having her permission to begin. “I’ve got the money, Miss Daisy—they’re paying me pretty well to write songs these days, remember? And I have a lot of time and energy to do at least some of the work on the house myself. Don’t you worry about anything but picking out wallpaper and paint colors and countertops. Leave the rest to me.”

By lunchtime, he’d made a survey of the downstairs and his list had grown to twelve closely written pages. More than a little daunted by the task he’d set himself, he went outside into the hot July sun, where mad dogs, Englishmen and crazy ex-cowboys belonged.

There, the grounds met him with their own demands—knee-high grass, overgrown gardens where weeds formed the primary crop, wisteria and poison ivy vines gone crazy as they climbed over pine trees that should have been pulled up as seedlings fifty years ago. The giant magnolias for which the house was named had fostered their own crop of sprouts, smaller trees which, though beautiful,

detracted from the majesty of the originals. Dixon thought he would like to transplant those sprouts rather than just cut them down. But that would entail a monumental amount of extra work.

As he stood staring, feeling his shirt stick to the sweat on his back, which was a combination of heat, humidity and sheer trepidation, a blue Taurus came down the gravel driveway and stopped at the front walk. The driver was young, and his olive skin and black hair easily identified him as Consuela's son.

“Good afternoon.” Dixon extended his hand and got a firm shake in return. “I’m Dixon Bell.”

“Sal Torres. My mother works here.” There was a certain defiance in the words and an arrogant tilt to the boy's chin indicated resentment.

“I met her for the first time this morning. I really appreciate all she's done for my grandmother—it's not easy for an eighty-four-year-old woman to manage on her own.”

Sal Torres didn't intend to be placated. “My mother always does a good job. She takes pride in her work.”

“As well she should. I've done my share of dirty jobs, chores other people turned up their noses at. Work done well is work to be respected.”

The youngster looked a little surprised, then nodded. “That's true.” His gaze moved beyond Dixon, to the wilderness around the house. “And it looks like you need a lot of work done out here.”

“Yeah. Inside, too. Your mother keeps things clean, but there's a mountain of repairs to be made.”

“I know people who do landscaping, carpentry, painting.” Before Dixon could reply, Sal gave a shrug, rueful and angry at the same time. “Of course you do, you're thinking. Hispanics are the new labor class. We've replaced the African slaves.”

“You know, that wasn't what I was thinking at all.” Dixon unclenched his jaw, got his irritation under control. “I can't help that my ancestors ran a plantation and owned slaves, and I won't apologize for that fact. But, as I believe I just said, I respect anybody who does a decent day's work and I expect to pay them a good wage when they work for me.” He turned on his heel and headed for the house. “I'll tell your mother you're here.”

Sal watched the other man go into the grand, sad old house, then went to sit in the Taurus with the air-conditioning blowing full blast. He hadn't really meant to start an argument about slavery and prejudice, especially not with his mother's employer. Something about the atmosphere surrounding the mansion, some remnants of past lives, maybe, had stirred resentment in him, and a need to take a stand. Dixon Bell had probably been more tolerant than Sal deserved. L.T. LaRue would have picked him up bodily and thrown him off the place. Or tried, anyway.

Of course, Mr. LaRue had already laid hands on Sal once, for kissing his daughter. Dixon Bell probably wouldn't be too tolerant, either, when his children wanted to date outside their own class. Kelsey's mother managed to be polite, but it was obvious she had serious doubts about Sal as somebody worthy of her little girl. All because he had dark skin and came from the south side of Boundary Street, the line dividing the haves in New Skye from the have-nots.

The heavy front door of the house shut with a thud, and Sal looked up to see his mother ease her way down the steps, the heavy shopping bag she always carried in one hand, her other hand holding tight to the rail. She looked tired, and it was only a little past noon. How would she feel at five, when she finished her second cleaning job of the day?

Sal jumped out of the car and ran around to open her door, taking the bag out of her hand. “Let me get that.”

She sank into the front seat with a sigh of relief. “Ah, the air-conditioning feels good. That house is always too hot.”

In the driver's seat again, Sal flipped the fan up a notch. “Don't they have AC?”

“Yes, but not enough. And when you're working...” She shrugged. “Did you go to class this morning?”

He cleared his throat and put the car into gear. “No.”

“Salvadore, you must go to class. You need these credits to graduate next year.”

“I know, Mama, I know. I’m going this afternoon. But I had a job this morning, unloading furniture at Joe’s. I earned fifty dollars. So this afternoon I’ll figure out how to do algebra.”

With another sigh she closed her eyes, leaning her head back against the seat. “The fifty dollars is nice. But you need a diploma to get a good job. In the long run, a diploma is worth a lot more than fifty dollars.”

He didn’t argue with her, just let her doze a little as he drove across town toward one of the brand-new subdivisions where her afternoon job was located. These big, new houses were easier to clean, she said, because they had all the modern conveniences. She didn’t work nearly as hard there.

Sal only wished she didn’t have to work at all.

They stopped for a fast-food lunch before he dropped her off at the big house on a street where all the trees were too young to make real shade. “I’ll be here at five,” he promised as she leaned in the window to give him a kiss.

“Go to class,” his mother ordered.

And because he promised her, he went. He was late, of course, which meant checking in through the office and getting a lecture from the secretary. School schedules never took into account that teenagers might have real lives. If he didn’t drive his mother to work, she couldn’t get there. If she didn’t get there, she didn’t get paid, and his brothers and sisters didn’t eat. That was a pretty simple equation, he thought. Maybe the algebra teacher could explain it to the front office.

After two hours of algebra, the teacher gave them a fifteen-minute break. Sal went in search of a cold drink and the one person who made him feel as if the future held promise for someone like him.

He found Kelsey lingering by the vending machines. The way her face lighted up when she saw him was worth all the hassle of going to summer school.

“Sal!”

“Hey, querida.” He put an arm around her waist, felt her yield to him with a surge of pride. She was gorgeous, she was sweet as candy, and she was his. “How are you?”

“Better, now. Where were you all morning?”

Sal didn’t like being questioned, but he did like it that she cared. “I had some work to do. Judging from the last two hours in class, I didn’t miss anything.”

He let go of her long enough to get a drink from the machine, then grabbed her hand and pulled her down the hall after him. “Let’s get out of here for a few minutes.”

The afternoon was hot as hell, even in the shade of the tree they had chosen as their special place. Sal leaned back against the trunk and pulled Kelsey to stand between his legs, then took a long swig of his drink. “That’s better. You and a cold soda—that’s about as good as a summer day gets.”

“You’re so sweet.” She smiled at him, her brown eyes bright, her mouth full and soft. “You deserve a kiss.”

“You’re right. I do.” He took it, meaning to keep things light, but holding onto his control with Kelsey was becoming harder and harder. At least here they were out in public, where things couldn’t go too far.

Too public, it turned out.

“Mr. Torres, Miss LaRue... must I remind you again about the school rules prohibiting public displays of affection?”

Kelsey gasped and stepped away from him as Sal opened his eyes to see the principal glaring at them from barely ten feet away.

The big man crossed his arms and tapped his foot on the asphalt. “Well?”

“No, sir.” Sal straightened up and sidled out from underneath the tree branches. “You don’t have to remind us.” They’d been caught last Friday afternoon, but that was inside the building. Sal had hoped being outside would keep them off the radar, so to speak.

“One more incident, and I will notify your parents and assign both of you detention. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“As it is, you are going to be late for class.” The bell rang to emphasize his point. “Your teachers may be assigning detention, as well.”

A glance at Kelsey as they trailed Principal Floyd into the building showed Sal her red face, her scared eyes. He understood her fear—if the principal talked to her dad about him, Kelsey would have hell to pay. Hard as it was, for her sake, he would have to keep his hands off her during school hours.

But school hours took up so damn much of the day. After class, he picked up his mother, took her to the grocery, helped her at home with the younger children. By the time he got free, Kelsey’s curfew was in effect. He’d spent a lot of evenings this summer watching movies with her at her house. At most, they found enough privacy for a good-night kiss. He wanted more...and yet more would just get them into trouble.

Couldn’t anything in life be simple?

He saw Kelsey again after class ended for the day. This time, the complications came in the form of her little brother walking down the hall beside her. Trace LaRue had inherited his dad’s redneck attitude. He hated Sal on the principle that he was Hispanic, which made them about even, because Sal hated Trace on the principle that he was a bigoted jerk.

So he made sure to demonstrate how things stood between him and Kelsey every chance he got. “Hey, beautiful,” he said as he reached her, putting an arm around her waist. “Missed you.” He bent to kiss her cheek.

“Sal!” She drew away. “Remember what Mr. Floyd said.”

“I remember.” He pushed open the door and ushered her ahead of him out of the building, then let the heavy panel swing back on Trace. “But we’re out of school now. The big man is watching the bus line in back. We’re safe.” Lifting her thick blond hair in one hand, he placed a kiss on the nape of her neck.

A hand grabbed Sal’s shoulder and jerked him around. “Take your hands off her, Spic.” Red-faced and sweating, Trace looked just like his old man when he got mad.

Sal shoved back. “Make me.”

Before either of them could move, Kelsey pushed in between them. “No, you will not. Neither of you is gonna start a fight at school over me. Do you hear? I swear, Sal, if you take this any further, I won’t see you or talk to you again for...for...for weeks. Is that what you want? Is fighting Trace worth it?”

He was tempted to take the boy on in spite of her warning. No woman told him what to do. But...

Sal knew he couldn’t live without seeing Kelsey. She kept him sane, gave him a reason to get up in the morning.

“Go,” he said through clenched teeth, with a nod across the parking lot to the Volvo where their mother sat waiting. “Just go.”

Trace grabbed Kelsey’s arm. “You heard the jerk. Let’s go.” She went with her brother, looking back over her shoulder at Sal the whole time.

Sal watched them drive off, then went to his own car and sat in the heat, fuming. The situation was impossible—he and Kelsey should have the right to see each other without so many hassles. He was beginning to think they would have to change the whole world, just to be together.

But this afternoon, changing the whole world looked like way too big a job for one Hispanic kid to handle on his own.

KATE WAS BETTER PREPARED to face L.T. when he came to get the children for breakfast on Saturday morning.

She opened the door and managed a smile as she stepped back to let him in. “Good morning.” Beyond him, she could see his girlfriend...mistress?...fiancée?...waiting in the car at the end of the walk.

“Are they ready?” He went across the hall toward the living room, but stopped on the threshold. “What happened to the furniture?”

“I’ve done some rearranging, that’s all.”

“Why the hell would you do that? You’ve got the dining-room table in the wrong place. Who wants to eat in here?”

“I thought we might enjoy our meals with a fire in the fireplace, come winter. Especially for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner. And this way, we can sit on the love seat by the big window at the other end and look out at the garden. It’s just an experiment.”

“I think it’s a disaster. Put the furniture back the way it’s supposed to be.”

She drew a deep breath. “L.T., you don’t live here anymore, so it really doesn’t matter what you think. Trace and Kelsey and I like this arrangement, so it’s going to stay this way until we want to change it.”

He faced her, his eyes narrowed, his fists clenched. “You’re turning the kids against me, aren’t you? I’ve suspected all along that was what you were doing. Brainwashing them, getting them to believe what you say is right, instead of me.”

Her knees were shaking, but she held her ground against the urge to back away from him. “No. We don’t talk about you at all, if we can help it. We’re just getting on with our lives, L.T., the same way you have. And that includes moving the furniture around.”

Footsteps on the floor above heralded the appearance of Trace and Kelsey at the top of the stairs. L.T.’s face smoothed into a welcoming smile. He was a handsome man when he wasn’t angry. “Hey there. Good to see you both. Let’s go get something to eat.”

The kids descended slowly, not sure what kind of mood their dad was in, but when they reached the bottom, L.T. was surprisingly gentle with his greeting. He put a hand on Trace’s shoulder and gave him an affectionate shake. “How’s it going, son?” For Kelsey, he had a kiss on the cheek. “You’re looking pretty this morning, sweetheart.” As he ushered them out the door, he looked back. “I’m thinking we might drive up to Raleigh to do some shopping, if they don’t have plans for the rest of the day. Any problem with that?”

Kelsey whirled to face Kate, her face alight with eagerness. “Oh, please, Kate, please? They’ve got such cool stores and a brand-new mall we’ve never been to. Please?” Even Trace conveyed an interest in spending some of his dad’s money.

In the face of such desperation, a legitimate reason would have been hard to maintain and Kate didn’t have one, anyway. “That’s great. I’m sure y’all will have a good time.” As they moved down the walk, with Kelsey practically dancing, Kate called out, “Can you give me an idea of what time to expect them home again?”

L.T. waved a careless hand in her direction. “It’ll be late.”

“Oh.” She drew back inside the threshold. “Thanks so much for the specifics.” Closing the door, she leaned against it and listened to the empty house. “Now what?”

The hours passed quickly enough, filled with her usual Saturday chores plus an impulsive trip to the garden center to buy a new planter for the terrace and a selection of herbs to plant there. About six o’clock, she finally sat down in a nearby chair with a glass of iced tea, set to enjoy the scents of earth and oregano and marjoram, the fading heat of the day radiating from the stones under her bare feet, the changing colors of the sky.

But after a few quiet moments, she found herself longing for company. She enjoyed Trace and Kelsey—except when they were fighting, of course. Their minds were lively and they always seemed to have something interesting to talk about. Tonight, L.T. would reap the benefit of their imaginations,

their curiosity. Kate had to wonder if he really appreciated the treasure he had so recklessly thrown away.

And tonight she would be alone. She could take a long bath, make herself a salad for dinner, watch one of the movies she truly enjoyed, rather than going along with the kids' choice. Most women with children would, she thought, leap at the chance to indulge themselves that way.

Kate would rather have had somebody to talk to.

Where the idea came from, she wasn't sure. But suddenly, Dixon was in her mind. She could almost see his grin as he helped her grill the steaks she had in the refrigerator, hear the rumble of his voice as it would sound in her house, picture his long legs stretched out in front of him as they sat here in the growing darkness with candles on the table and glasses of wine in their hands. The rightness of the idea took her breath. She was on her feet and standing by the phone in the kitchen before she realized she had moved.

That was when the terror hit. How could she do this? She had never in all her life called a man and asked for a date. Growing up, she'd learned that nice girls simply didn't call boys. That rule had fallen by the wayside, of course—nice girls did anything they pleased these days.

But she wasn't free to date. She was still a married woman. How would Dixon interpret an invitation to dinner? What did she really know about him? He might expect...more...if he came to her house and it was just the two of them alone. A dinner party, even supper with the kids, would be one thing. A tête-à-tête meal, with candles and wine, surely implied something else altogether.

Her sister would tell her to stop thinking and call him. Kate had no doubt at all on that score. Mary Rose was high on the euphoria of first love regained and newlywed bliss. She stood at the beginning of her marriage, certain of the inevitability of happily-ever-after.

Her sister hadn't failed, as Kate had. Hadn't managed to somehow alienate a husband of ten years so that he sought other women's company. She didn't face the daily shame of running into people who knew what had happened—friends and acquaintances, L.T.'s business associates—and trying to ignore the embarrassment of being rejected. Mary Rose didn't understand the ultimate implications of separation and divorce in a small town like New Skye.

Kate let her hand slip off the phone. Calling Dixon would be a mistake. Even if she intended only friendship, he might misinterpret the gesture. One of the neighbors might see him arrive, or leave, and draw the wrong conclusion about what they were doing together on a Saturday night.

Worst of all, Kate knew that she might, herself, mistake the nature of her relationship with Dixon. Something about him appealed to her as no man had since her high-school crushes. She found him sexy and strong and oh, so desirable.

And completely out of her reach. Even if she were free, what chance was there that she would satisfy a man like Dixon? She hadn't kept L.T. more than marginally happy during their whole marriage. Standing in her darkened kitchen, Kate could not ignore the fact that she was simply nowhere near enough woman for Dixon Bell.

She ate a turkey sandwich and a pear for dinner, then watched a series of news programs on television until L.T. brought the kids home at midnight. When they all went upstairs, she tuned the radio in her room to a country-music station and got into bed, hoping sleep would help her escape.

"And now," the announcer said, "we've reached the top of the countdown with a tune that's been at number one on the country charts for three weeks and shows no sign of giving up its slot. This song has even started showing up on pop lists, amazing, considering its classic country sound. Here you are, folks, our number one song for the week, performed by the man who does country ballads better than anybody in the business. Evan Carter, with 'My Dream.'"

Kate rolled to her side as soft guitar chords and the sweet wail of a fiddle flowed into the room. The singer's deep voice picked up the waltz.

Deep in the night, dark as your hair,
I open my eyes to find you're not there.

The dream feels so real,
I hold you so tight,
But you're a lifetime of lonesome away.
Me lovin' you—it's only a dream
And dreams are for fools, so they say.
Me lovin' you—that's all I would ask
You're the dream I won't let slip away.

What would it be like, Kate wondered, to have a man feel that way about you, think of you with such tenderness?

Before the song had ended, the gentle lyrics broke her control. Hot tears filled her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Burying her head in her pillow, she cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

KELSEY SHOWED OFF at least five hundred dollars' worth of clothes to her mother and her aunt Sunday afternoon, a fashion show that took almost an hour to complete. Trace had new clothes, too, plus new computer games and a stack of CDs to add to his collection.

"Bribery," Mary Rose Bowdrey Mitchell pronounced. "L.T. is using his money to get the kids on his side."

"So I'll change the furniture back?" Kate squeezed her tired eyes shut and took a sip of iced tea. "Pretty drastic measures, even for L.T."

"Dog in the manger' is just L.T.'s style. He doesn't want to be here, but he doesn't want anything to change. I bet he'd go ballistic if you cut your hair."

"I won't push him that far." The idea had her combing her heavy curls up off her neck, though, to feel the cool air-conditioning blow across her nape.

Mary Rose, a financial advisor, was used to looking at life's little details. She cocked her head and considered her older sister critically. "I think you'd be thrilled with a shorter cut. Sometimes your hair looks too heavy for your neck to support."

"Gee, thanks."

"Not that it isn't lovely. You never look less than your absolute best."

"Oh, yes, I do." Kate recounted last week's thunderstorm. "And who should I meet on the sidewalk, when I'm looking like a drowned rat, but Dixon Bell."

Mary Rose frowned. "Who?"

"Dixon Bell. He was in my graduating class. Daisy Crawford's grandson."

"I don't remember him."

"You will when you meet him again. He's..." She didn't have words. "Unforgettable."

"Oh, really?" Mary Rose sat up a little straighter. "That's interesting."

"Don't start." Kate went to the counter for the tea pitcher to refill their glasses. "Dixon is just an old friend. He's been gone ever since graduation—I don't even know if he's here visiting his grandmother or planning to stay in town for a while."

"I can tell you that." Pete Mitchell came into the kitchen, put his hands on his wife's shoulders and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "He ate breakfast with us yesterday morning after the game. He's planning to renovate the family mansion and take up permanent residence." Pete and some of his friends—Adam DeVries among them—had been playing basketball together on Saturday mornings since high school. The traditional game was almost always followed by a traditional breakfast at the Carolina Diner.

And now Dixon had returned to take part in the male-bonding ritual. Kate let her curiosity get the best of her. "That's a big project, restoring Magnolia Cottage. Did Dixon say..."

"Where the money would come from?" Pete grinned. "He worked in the oil business, and I gather he's made good money there with investments. Plus, he said he does some kind of freelance work he earns royalties on."

"He writes books? Articles?"

"We never got to specifics. Maybe some kind of consulting. But I definitely got the impression he's played it smart the last few years and doesn't have to worry about finding a job here in New Skye. Dixon was always a bright guy, so I wouldn't be surprised to learn he'd made himself a fortune."

Kate was, but didn't say so. Maybe she hadn't paid enough attention to Dixon Bell when she'd had the chance.

"There you are." Mary Rose put one hand over her husband's and gestured with the other. "An intelligent, unforgettable—not to mention rich—man has moved into town just when you need him." She looked up at Pete. "He's not married or engaged, is he?"

“Don’t think so.”

“I am,” Kate reminded them. “And Trace and Kelsey don’t need more upheaval in their lives.” Mary Rose stuck out her lower lip in a pout. “You always say that.”

“Because it’s always true. They’re my first responsibility, especially since L.T. can’t be bothered most of the time.”

“But you deserve a life, Katie!”

Pete squeezed his wife’s shoulders and she subsided with a sigh. “Speaking of the guy upstairs, Dixon wants to play ball with us next Saturday and wondered if Trace would join us and even out the teams.”

Had Dixon acted on that small moment so quickly? “Y’all are sure you want to play with a thirteen-year-old?”

He grinned again. “Yeah...we’re dying to prove we can outrun a kid twenty years our junior.” The grin faded. “But I’m doubtful that Trace will accept the invitation coming from me. I’m down near the bottom of his list of people to hang out with.”

In a fit of rebellion last spring, Trace and two of his friends had engineered a bomb threat during a street fair in downtown New Skye. Pete, a North Carolina State Trooper, had been the one to arrest Trace and turn him over to the police. Her son was still doing community service and going to counseling as the result of that incident.

“So Dixon said he’d call,” Pete continued. “If you don’t mind letting Trace play with us.”

“Of course not. I’m sure Trace will be thrilled.” Kate hoped she wasn’t blushing at the idea that Dixon would call, that she would get to talk to him again. “L.T. doesn’t give him that kind of time anymore.”

She fidgeted through the hours after her sister and brother-in-law left, not wanting to venture out of the house in case the phone rang. Which was silly, Kate knew, because Dixon might call any time during the week. She couldn’t hold her breath all week long.

But the July afternoon was muggy and unbearably hot, not suitable for working outside. After putting together a pasta salad for supper, she sat down at the kitchen table with her checkbook and bank statement, determined to get the balancing done this time. Trace and Kelsey were in their rooms and the house was completely quiet except for the low thud of Trace’s music vibrating through the ceiling.

And Kate did manage to concentrate, so completely that she actually jumped and gasped in surprise when the phone rang. Only one ring, though, and she sank back into her chair when she realized that Kelsey had no doubt answered. After several months of restriction, her daughter had recently regained phone privileges, which were being liberally enjoyed. The call was probably from one of her friends. Or Sal...whose very name conjured up a whole different set of problems.

But the feet pounding down the staircase a few minutes later belonged to Trace, not his sister. He burst into the kitchen, holding the cordless phone from her bedroom in one hand.

“Hey, Kate, this is Dixon Bell, that friend of yours, you know? And he wants me to play basketball with him and his friends next Saturday morning. Mr. DeVries and Mr. Crawford and—” he took a breath “—Pete. That’s okay, right? It’ll be just grown-ups except for me. I told him I thought you’d say yes. You will, right? I can go?”

Kate stared at her son for a moment, speechless. She hadn’t seen him this excited in months. Certainly not since his father had left. And maybe not for a long time before. One miracle, courtesy of Dixon Bell.

“Please, Kate?”

She shook her head to clear it. “I think it sounds great. Be sure to thank him for the invitation.” The urge to ask to speak with Dixon was almost overwhelming, but she managed to keep control as Trace put the phone to his ear.

“It’s okay,” he said, still with that Christmas-morning eagerness in his voice. “What time should I be there? Oh, okay. That’ll be good. I’ll be ready. What? Oh, sure.” He put the phone on the table beside Kate’s hand. “Dixon wants to talk to you.”

Breathless, she picked up the receiver with a shaking hand. “Hello?”

“Hey, Kate. How are you?” His warm voice seemed to release all the tension in her shoulders.

She sank back in her chair. “I’m fine, thanks. And I really appreciate that you’ve included Trace in your ball game. He’s thrilled, of course.”

“I think it’ll be fun. He’ll give us old guys a standard to strive for.”

“What time should I have him at the school Saturday?”

“Don’t worry about getting out so early. I’ll pick him up about a quarter to seven, if that’s okay.”

The conversation was coming to an end and she couldn’t think of a good reason to extend it. “If you’re sure...”

“That’s set, then. Now...” He paused for a long moment. “What about us?”

Kate wasn’t sure she’d heard correctly. “Us?”

“Yes, ma’am. That dinner I wanted to share with you. Can we set something up?”

Be careful what you wish for, she thought, because it hurts so much when you have to refuse.

“I—I don’t—”

“If dinner doesn’t work, what about lunch? I could bring Trace home after breakfast on Saturday, grab a shower and a change of clothes, then pick you up and we could have a sandwich together. Or,” he added when she still hadn’t found her voice, “you could meet me somewhere.”

Unable to resist any longer, Kate sighed. “I think we could do that. I—I would like to have lunch with you.”

“That’s a d—...that’s great.” She thought she heard him blow out a long breath. “I’ll look forward to seeing you...and Trace...on Saturday.”

Kate hung up the phone, feeling a wide smile crease her cheeks, stretch her lips. Dixon had such wonderful manners. He would “look forward” to seeing her on Saturday.

But not half as much as she would look forward to seeing him.

DIXON DIDN’T PUSH to keep Kate on the phone, though he couldn’t think of a nicer way to pass the Sunday afternoon than listening to her soft southern voice in his ear. An idea occurred to him—the possibility of writing a song about a woman’s voice, her words, her tone, and how they affected the man who loved her. The concept had potential, he decided, and went upstairs to fetch his pad of paper and make some notes. Sitting on his childhood bed in the sleepy quiet of the old house, he found it easy to think about Kate, to imagine words she might use in love, in laughter, in passion. Next weekend, he’d have hours to listen to what she had to say and how she said it. He only had to get through five long weekdays, first.

This afternoon, though, thinking too much about Kate unsettled him enough that he decided to get out of the house, despite the July heat. Miss Daisy had curled up on the sofa with the cats and the newest Tom Clancy novel, then slipped into a genteel nap, so Dixon tiptoed across the front hall and shut the door carefully behind him. On the right side of the house, where there had once been a rose bed and boxwood parterre in a knot pattern, he found shade and a weed-free spot under a tulip poplar. He checked for ant beds at the base of the trunk and settled in with his notepad on his knee to consider landscape plans.

But in only minutes his mind wandered back to Kate. Convincing her to have lunch with him had been a significant effort. She acted for all the world as if she was afraid that he would hurt her if she let him get too close. Which would make sense, Dixon thought, if he were L.T. LaRue. Did Kate believe all men were cut from the same cloth?

He looked around at the sound of a car door being shut and nearly growled aloud when he saw LaRue’s SUV parked in front of the house. Kate’s ex had brought someone else with him this time, a man Dixon didn’t recognize.

Already irritated, he got to his feet, dusted the grass and dirt off his butt and went to confront LaRue and guest before they could get more than halfway up the walk. “Can I help you gentlemen?”

L.T. grinned, as if he knew a really great secret. “Afternoon, Dixon. I thought I’d bring the mayor over and introduce the two of you. Mayor Curtis Tate, this is Dixon Bell, one of our newer residents. Miss Daisy Crawford’s grandson, of course.”

The mayor put out a thin, manicured hand. “Glad to meet you, Mr. Bell. Your grandmother is quite...uh...well known to those of us in New Skye government.” Tate was probably six foot three, gaunt and bony, with dark hair and a shifting gray gaze that Dixon immediately distrusted.

But he shook the man’s hand and even resisted the urge to wipe his palm on his slacks immediately afterward. “Good to meet you, Mr. Mayor. Miss Daisy does tend to speak her mind when she’s got something to say.”

“Yes, yes, she does.” He looked past Dixon’s shoulder at the house, then surveyed the tangled chaos of the garden. “This was a lovely place once.”

“And will be again. I’ll be doing a lot of work inside and out, but I expect to bring Magnolia Cottage back to its former glory in pretty quick order.”

L.T. put his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Gotta have inspections for this kind of work, y’know. Rewiring, heating, AC, plumbing...all that takes approval from the right departments.”

“Your point being...?”

The mayor shrugged. “You can’t always count on these things going through in a timely fashion. Or at all.”

Dixon straightened up to his full height. “I believe I hear a threat in there somewhere.”

“Just a warning.” L.T. gave him another one of those grins. “You might find that your little...um...renovation project doesn’t go as smoothly as you expect. Whereas I could take this property off your hands in a matter of days.” He snapped his fingers. “Easy as pie.”

Behind Dixon, the front door squeaked open. “Do we have visitors, Dixon?” Miss Daisy called from the porch.

“They were just leaving.” Dixon refused to budge from his place, which left Tate and LaRue no choice about approaching the house.

And when he took a step forward, the other two men backed up. “Let me explain this very slowly.” He kept his voice low. “You two are leaving this property right now and you’re not ever setting foot here again. Because if you do,” he continued as they retreated toward the SUV, “I will greet you from the porch with a shotgun. Any part of that you don’t understand?”

Safe inside his vehicle, L.T. rolled down the electric windows. “You think you’ve got this settled, don’t you, Mr. Bell? Well, I’m telling you that I’ve got connections in this town. You haven’t heard the last of this issue, believe me. And I think you’ll be surprised at how our little disagreement gets resolved.” He revved the engine, then fishtailed his way down the driveway with a spray of gravel and dust.

Dixon joined Miss Daisy on the porch. “Scalawag about covers it as far as L.T. LaRue is concerned.”

“And was that the mayor?”

“Yes, ma’am. Appearances can be deceiving, of course, but I can’t say he inspired much confidence.”

“He’s as crooked as they come,” Miss Daisy said, leading the way into the house. “He owns a lot of the downtown real estate—or co-owns it with L.T., which is why we’ve been successful at the New Skye Historical Society in getting approval for renovations in the business district. We’ve increased the property values and made them more money. I take it they’re badgering you to buy this place?” She perched on the sofa and was immediately joined by cats, one on either side and the third in her lap.

Dixon dropped into a threadbare armchair. “You’ve heard from them before?”

“Off and on for several years. I was fortunate to be able to say that the property was in your name and I didn’t have the power to sell.” Her smile was mischievous. “Passing the buck, they call it.”

“I’m glad you had an easy way out, and that I was useful for something while I was gone. What do they want to do with the land?”

“Condos.” Miss Daisy said the word as if it were not used in polite company. “L.T.’s got this grand plan to build luxury town houses up here. Even wants to keep the name—Magnolia Cottage Condominiums, or some such.” She sniffed in disdain. “Given the quality of work he delivers, the place would be falling down around people’s ears within a year or two. Why, Gladys Sykes had him build her a pool house—against my advice, of course—and it wasn’t halfway through the summer that she had nails popping through the walls and boards warping, and she had to have the stucco completely replaced...”

She continued the litany of L.T.’s failings as she fixed bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches for supper, and even as they washed dishes and straightened up the kitchen afterward.

“L.T. LaRue is cheap and mean,” she concluded. “He’ll take advantage of his clients in any way he can find. How he manages to make so much money—not to mention acquiring the influence he appears to exert over what goes on—is a complete mystery to me and every well-intentioned, thinking person in this town.”

How he’d managed to convince Kate to marry him was an even bigger mystery, Dixon thought. But at least that problem was on the way to getting solved. And with L.T. out of the way, he and Kate could finally get started on the rest of their lives.

L.T. FLIPPED the air-conditioning a notch higher as he drove through the brick pillars marking the driveway for Magnolia Cottage. “Damn Dixon Bell, anyway. The man’s been gone for thirteen years—what does he want with a crumbling disaster like that house?”

Curtis Tate shook his head. “He’d be doing the city and himself a favor to get rid of it, have us build something decent on one of the best pieces of real estate in the entire county. It’s a waste, pure and simple, letting that prime land sit there unused.” Then the mayor flashed L.T. a sideways grin. “I imagine you’ve got some ideas on how we can ‘persuade’ Mr. Bell, though, don’t you?”

“With a little cooperation from the powers that be, Mr. Mayor, I think I can guarantee that Magnolia Cottage will become a real showplace, a development that’ll do this city proud.”

His passenger laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. “Well, hell, L.T., civic pride alone demands that we in the government cooperate in such a worthwhile endeavor.”

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