

MILLS & BOON

The Texan's Honor-Bound Promise

Peggy Moreland



Vintage Desire

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Аннотация

A few half-truths got him through the front door. A few more white lies had him living in her house. Texan Sam Forrester never planned on such subterfuge when he set out to honor a promise. His mission was to get answers from the lovely Leah Kittrell...and she wouldn't have allowed him access to her home, to her life, if she knew who he really was. But what should have been a simple business matter turned into a tumultuous affair. Sam soon found himself in Leah's bed and knew that once she discovered the truth, his treachery would prove unforgivable.

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“I Thought You Said You Were A Reformed Rake.”

Sam’s lips curved into a grin. “Even a reformed rake slips now and again.” Cupping a hand at her cheek, he touched his lips to her, withdrew with a low hum of pleasure, then returned for a second taste.

“Sweet,” he murmured, tracing his tongue along her lower lip. Angling his body more fully toward hers, he pushed his fingers through her hair and took the kiss deeper.

God help me, she thought weakly. Though every nerve in her body demanded she respond, intellectually she knew what a mistake that would be. Any kind of intimacy, no matter how innocent, could jeopardize their business relationship.

If that wasn’t reason enough for her to put an end to this foolishness, he was a virtual stranger. She didn’t know him. Not in the sense a woman needed to know a man before making love to him.

Yet in spite of the reasons pointing her away from Sam, she found herself melting against him, until every thought leaked from her mind, save one. Him.

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Peggy Moreland



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PEGGY MORELAND

published her first romance with Silhouette Books in 1989, and continues to delight readers with stories set in her home state of Texas. Winner of the National Readers' Choice Award, a nominee for Romantic Times BOOKclub Reviewer's Choice Award and a two-time finalist for the prestigious RITA[®] Award, Peggy's books frequently appear on the USA TODAY and Waldenbooks bestseller lists. When not writing, you can usually find Peggy outside, tending the cattle, goats and other critters on the ranch she shares with her husband. You may write to Peggy at P.O. Box 1099, Florence, TX 76527-1099, or e-mail her at peggy@peggymoreland.com.

This book is dedicated to all the wives, children and families of soldiers listed as Missing In Action while in the service of our country.

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Prologue

I can't promise you that I will bring you all home alive. But this I swear before you and before Almighty God: that when we go into battle, I will be the first to set foot on the field and I will be the last to step off and I will leave no one behind. Dead or alive, we will all come home together. So help me God.

—Lt. Colonel Hal Moore

(from the movie *We Were Soldiers*)

July, 1972

The mood around camp was subdued. Those soldiers who had ventured from their sleeping quarters sat in silence, their heads down, their expressions somber, their thoughts focused on the previous day's events and their chances of making it home alive. For some, this war was a joke, a part in an elaborate play they acted out each day, under the direction of their supervising officer.

Not so for Jessie Kittrell.

To Jessie—or T.J., as he was called by his friends—this war was his one chance to escape poverty, to give his family the kind of life he'd never known. With a wife and child to support and another baby on the way, enlisting in the army had seemed the only way out of the financial rut he was trapped in. Besides the training it provided, once he fulfilled his years of service, the army would pay for his college education, courtesy of the GI Bill.

If he survived this hell, he thought grimly. Like most of the men he fought alongside, before arriving in Vietnam, he hadn't given survival much thought. He'd been too caught up in the we're-gonna-whip-some-butts mentality ingrained in them all during boot camp. He'd carried that cockiness with him into his first battle...and left it there, along with the contents of his stomach.

Desperate to block the images that pushed into his mind, he reached inside his shirt pocket for the photo he kept close to his heart. Dirty and creased from frequent handling, the photo was his anchor, his reminder of what he fought for, his reason for being here, his need to survive.

Tears burned behind his eyes as he stared down at his wife and daughter. God, he missed them. Three months was a long time for a man to go without seeing his family. Leah had turned two last week, a birthday party he'd missed. Would she remember him when he returned home? Would she wrap her arms around his neck and plaster a wet kiss on his cheek when she saw him, as she had in the past? Or would she cringe away and cry for her mommy?

The dull whop-whop-whop of helicopter blades overhead had him looking up. Knowing the chopper's purpose, he slowly tucked the picture back into his pocket. He watched silently as the Huey landed and two bagged bodies were loaded onto the deck. He gulped back emotion, aware that a third soldier should have been making that ride. Buddy Crandall.

But Buddy wouldn't be making the trip back home.

A wide hand landed on his shoulder and he glanced up to find Pops—the nickname given Larry Blair by T.J. and the rest of the guys—beside him, his gaze on the helicopter as the pilot prepared to take off.

"It's not right," T.J. said, shaking his head.

"Buddy should be on that chopper."

"Yeah," Pops said quietly. "But some things just aren't meant to be."

"MIA," T.J. muttered, squinting his eyes as he watched the helicopter slowly rise into the air. "Can you imagine what getting that news is going to do to Buddy's family? Why can't the Army list him as Killed in Action rather than Missing in Action? Hell, we all know he's dead! We were there. We saw what happened. There's no way he made it out of there alive."

"You know the rules," Pops reminded him gently.

"If a soldier's body isn't recovered and his death not positively verified, he's MIA."

"I don't want my family put through that," T.J. said furiously. He glanced up at Pops. "Promise me something, Pops."

"If I can."

"If what happened to Buddy should happen to me, promise me you'll let my family know. Tell 'em I fought and died like a soldier. Tell 'em I won't be coming home."

Pops hesitated a moment, then nodded soberly. "Consider it done." He gave T.J.'s shoulder a comforting squeeze. "Check

your gear. We'll be pulling out in a couple of hours.”

T.J. sat a moment longer, then dragged a hand across the moisture in his eyes and stood. He patted his pocket and the photo he kept there, then strode for his tent and the pack that held his gear.

One

The Craftsman-style two-story house Sam parked his truck in front of was situated in an older neighborhood near Tyler, Texas's downtown area. A breezeway connected the house to a carriage-style garage and served as a pass-through to the garage's rear entrance, discreetly hidden in the backyard.

The house was owned by Leah Kittrell. Mack McGruder had provided Sam with the woman's name, as well as her address and telephone number. An Internet search had provided him with a few more details. According to the information he'd found, Ms. Kittrell owned her own business—Stylized Events—had gone through a messy divorce three years prior and currently served on the boards of several civic and charity organizations. The photos he'd found of her in the archive section on the Tyler newspaper's Web site provided an image of a woman who appeared to be in her late twenties to early thirties, with long dark hair, classic features and legs that seemed to stretch forever.

More facts than he probably needed, but Sam preferred to know as much about a person as he could before entering into negotiations.

Now all he had to do was squeeze what he wanted out of the woman and he could call it a day.

Confident that he'd be back on the road within the hour, he punched the doorbell, then stepped back, smoothing a hand over

hair the wind had ruffled earlier while he was changing a flat tire on the interstate.

The door swung open and a woman appeared. Leah Kittrell, he thought, easily recognizing her from the photos he'd found on the internet. But the pictures hadn't done her justice, he thought appreciatively. While attractive in the photographs, in person she was drop-dead gorgeous. What the pictures had revealed as dark hair was in fact a sleek raven-black. But the image of her legs had been right on target. They did seem to stretch forever.

Mesmerized by eyes the color of aged whiskey, it took him a moment to realize that she was frowning at him. He quickly extended his hand.

"Sam Forrester," he said, introducing himself.

She glanced down at the hand he offered and her frown deepened. Following her gaze, he saw the grease that stained his palm and yanked it back to drag across the seat of his jeans. "Sorry. Had a blowout on the way here. Haven't had a chance to clean up."

Her gaze met his again. "How many are you expecting for dinner?"

He blinked. Blinked again. "Excuse me?"

Rolling her eyes, she angled her head and pointed to the minuscule headset attached to her ear.

"Oh," he murmured, realizing that her question hadn't been directed to him but someone she was talking to on her cellular phone. "Sorry."

She stepped back and motioned for him to come inside. “Forty guests,” she said thoughtfully as she closed the door behind him. “To be safe, I’d suggest we plan to serve thirty-five. Some won’t bother to RSVP but will come anyway. Others will say they’re coming and not show up.”

She turned for the rear of the house, curling her finger in a signal for him to follow. With a shrug, he trailed behind her, glancing at the rooms they passed through. Neat as a pin, he noted. Not a thing out of place. Not even in the kitchen. The woman either had a full-time housekeeper or was anal as hell.

She opened a rear door, stepped out onto a patio and led the way to the garage. It’s in there, she mouthed, indicating a side door.

Wondering what “it” was, he eased past her and opened the door. Like the rest of her house, the garage was hospital-clean and neat as a pin. An SUV was parked in the slot nearest him. In the other, a vintage Ford Mustang.

He pressed a hand over his heart. “Oh, man,” he murmured and headed for it.

He walked a slow circle around the car, then stopped in front and popped the hood. Behind him he could hear Leah talking on the phone, but he was more interested in the vintage set of wheels in front of him than her discussion of food and flowers.

Bracing a hand on the radiator for support, he stuck his head beneath the hood in order to check out the engine. “Two hundred and fifty ponies,” he said with a lustful sigh.

“So? What do you think?”

He jumped at the sound of her voice and bumped his head on the hood. Muttering a curse, he straightened, rubbing a hand over his head.

She winced. “Ouch. Bet that hurt.”

Grimacing, he dropped his hand. “I’ve had worse.” He turned back to the car and lowered the hood. “Sorry for being nosy, but I couldn’t resist. Is it yours?”

“My brother’s,” she replied, then amended, “Or it was.”

He glanced back, a brow lifted in question.

“He was killed in Iraq about six months ago. He promised my nephew, Craig, he could have the car when he turned sixteen. They were going to start restoring it when my brother returned from Iraq.” She glanced at the car, drew in a steadying breath. When she faced him again, her jaw was set in determination. “I intend to see that at least part of his promise is kept, which is why I advertised for a mechanic to do the restoration.”

And she thought he was a mechanic who’d come in response to her ad, Sam deduced. Though he knew he should correct her mistake, he decided, for the moment at least, to keep the purpose of his visit to himself and said instead, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“I’m sorry he ever enlisted.”

Surprised by the bitterness in her voice, he began to circle the car again. “How long had he owned it?” he asked curiously.

“Forever.”

He shot her a glance over the roof of the car and she shrugged.

“My father was the original owner. I guess you could say Kevin inherited it from him.”

He turned his gaze back to the car and saw the Army decal on the rear window, its edges curled and brittle, and knew, by its age, her father was the one who had put it there, not her brother. Thinking this might be the opening he needed, he asked, “Your father was in the Army, too?”

She followed his gaze to the decal. “MIA, Vietnam.”

“Your family made a considerable sacrifice for our country.”

She flattened her lips. “Not by choice, I assure you.” She flapped a hand, dismissing the subject, then glanced at her watch. “My nephew should be here soon. He wants to help with the restoration. Do you have a problem with that?”

Again he felt he should correct her mistake and tell her the true purpose of his visit. But he had a feeling if he did, she’d toss him out on his ear.

“Can’t see why I would,” he replied vaguely.

She smiled, seemingly relieved by his response.

“Good. Craig really needs this.”

Before he could ask her what she meant by the statement, the door opened and a young voice called, “Aunt Leah? You in here?”

Leah turned, her smile widening. “Come on in and join us, Craig. How was school?”

Head down, a boy—somewhere between twelve and fourteen, judging by his size—shuffled toward them, one hand cinched

around the strap of a backpack he had draped over his shoulder, the other stuffed in the pocket of jeans at least a size too large for his thin frame. “Okay, I guess.”

Sam yearned for a pair of scissors so that he could whack off enough of the kid’s hair to see his face.

“Craig, I’d like you to meet—” She stopped short, then looked at Sam in embarrassment. “I’m sorry. I can’t remember your name.”

“Sam Forrester.”

Smiling, she extended her hand. “Leah Kittrell.”

He held up his palm, reminding her of the grease that stained it.

She tucked her hand behind her back. “Uh, right.” She turned to her nephew and, smiling again, wrapped an arm around his shoulders and drew him to her side. “Sam, this is my nephew, Craig. Craig, Mr. Forrester.”

“Sam will do,” Sam offered, then smiled at the kid. “Nice to meet you, Craig.”

Craig mumbled a barely audible, “Yeah. You, too.”

“Sam is here to discuss restoring the car,” she told her nephew.

He glanced up at Sam through the mass of bangs he hid behind, then dropped his gaze and turned away with a mumbled “Whatever” and headed back toward the house.

“Hey!” Leah called after him. “Where are you going?”

“Homework.”

“But don’t you want—”

The door slammed, cutting her off. Heaving a sigh, she turned and gave Sam an apologetic smile.

“He really is a nice kid. He’s just been having a tough time. Losing his father hit him pretty hard.”

“Tough blow for a kid his age.”

“Yes, it is.”

He frowned, remembering the boy’s reference to homework, as well as her mention earlier about school. “Isn’t school out for the summer?”

“For most students. Craig failed two classes, so he has to go to summer school.”

He nodded, wondering if the kid’s father’s death had anything to do with his failure.

She opened her hands. “So? What do you think? Are you interested in the job?”

You’ve really stepped in it now, Sam thought, realizing too late his mistake in allowing her to go on believing he was a mechanic. He supposed he could tell her the restoration would take more work than he’d first thought and make a fast exit.

But that would mean leaving without getting the information he’d promised Mack, which didn’t settle well with him at all. He owed Mack. Big-time. And he was determined to honor that debt.

Pursing his lips thoughtfully, he studied the car as if considering whether or not he wanted to take on the job while buying himself some time to figure out what he should do.

Getting the information for Mack wasn't going to be the easy-in-easy-out mission he'd first thought. Mack had warned him about Leah's obstinance in refusing to discuss her father, but Sam hadn't taken him seriously until he'd gotten a taste of it himself. It was going to take some time to finesse her into telling him what he wanted to know.

And restoring the car might be just the ploy he needed to gain that time.

But if he agreed to work on the car, he'd be saddling himself with a troubled teen. Sam had seen the resentment, as well as the grief, that shadowed the boy's eyes and suspected it was the loss of his father that had put them both there. Sam had lost a father, too, at a fairly young age. Not to death, but a loss just the same, and he understood what the boy was going through...and where he'd end up if someone didn't intervene.

He had a month, he reminded himself, with nothing to do but puzzle out the direction he wanted to point his future in. He could think as easily working on a car as he could lying on his back on some sun-drenched beach surrounded by bikini-clad women.

Decided, he said to Leah, "Yeah, I'm interested."

He would swear he felt her sigh of relief from five feet away.

"I have no idea what kind of payment to offer you. I know nothing about this kind of thing or how long it would take to complete the job. I guess it would simplify matters if you'd simply tell me what you'd charge for the restoration, then I could determine whether or not I can afford to hire you."

“Since you want your nephew to help with the restoration, I suppose the work will need to be done here?”

“That would be best. He comes here after school each day.”

Nodding, he began to circle the car again. “I’ve only got a month to devote to the job, but I think I could get it done in that length of time. Most of it, anyway.”

“Are you saying you’ll do it?”

Smiling, he stroked a hand over the Mustang emblem on the hood. “Hard to say no to a beauty like this.”

“We haven’t decided on a fee yet,” she reminded him.

He hitched his hands on his hips and looked up at the ceiling. “Most carriage houses like this have an apartment overhead. Does this one?”

“W-well, yes,” she stammered as if wondering why he’d ask. “Although not a full one. Just a bedroom, sitting room and bath.”

Lowering his chin, he met her gaze. “Tell you what. Provide me with room and board for the next month, and we’ll call it even.”

“Room and board?” she repeated dully.

“I’m not from around here. In order to do the work, I’d need a place to stay.”

She nervously wet her lips. “I suppose that would be okay. The apartment’s furnished. I keep it ready for relatives and friends who come to visit. But I don’t cook,” she was quick to inform him. “Not regularly, at any rate.”

“As long as I’m allowed access to your kitchen, I can see to

my own meals.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “And that’s all you want in exchange for doing the work? Room and board?”

He hid a smile. “If you’re worried I’ll demand sexual favors, I won’t.” He waited a beat, then added, “Although I wouldn’t turn them down if offered.”

She jutted her chin. “I’ll want references.”

He shrugged. “Fine with me. None will be local, though. Lampasas is where I call home.”

Her brows shot high. “How on earth did you hear about the ad I placed? Lampasas is hours from here.”

He shot her a wink. “I guess some things were just meant to be.”

As he pulled away from Leah’s house, Sam punched in Mack’s phone number. His friend answered on the first ring, obviously awaiting the call.

“Did you talk to her?” Mack asked anxiously.

“I did,” Sam replied. “And the answer to your next question is no. I haven’t gotten the information you need. But I’m working on it, which is why I called. I need a favor.”

“What?”

“Personal references.”

“Why?”

“I’ll explain later. Right now I need you to call Lenny, Pastor Nolan, Bill and Jack Phelps. Tell them that Leah Kittrell might be calling and asking questions about me. If she does, tell them

to keep whatever information they offer to a minimum and not to mention anything about me being in the Army.”

“Why not?” Mack asked in confusion. “Your service record is nothing to be ashamed of.”

“No,” Sam agreed. “But if Leah finds out I’m in the military, it’ll kill whatever chance I have of getting the information you want.”

Leah frowned in concentration as she fussed with the strands of ivy draping the tiered crystal pedestal centered on the sample table setting she had arranged. Once satisfied with the design, she would photograph the table, note the style and color of linens used, as well as the other accessories, and record them all in the client’s file to reference for the wedding reception scheduled for October.

“Looks good.”

Leah glanced over at Kate, her assistant, then back at the centerpiece and worried her lip. “You don’t think the ivy will obstruct the guests’ views?”

“You’re just obsessing because Mrs. Snotgrass is the client.”

“Snodgrass,” Leah corrected. “If you’re not careful, you’re going to slip and call her that one day.”

“It would be worth it just to see the expression on the old biddy’s face.”

“Easy for you to say. It isn’t your business she’d send down the toilet.”

Kate snorted. “As if she could.”

Leah lifted the digital camera hanging from her neck and moved around the table, clicking off shots of the table from different angles. “Though I appreciate the vote of confidence, Mrs. Snodgrass’s opinion carries a lot of weight in this town. One derogatory comment from her and my business would suffer the reverberations for months.”

Satisfied that she’d taken enough pictures to record all the accessories used in the design, she headed for her office to download the photos into the appropriate file.

Kate trailed behind. “How’s the search going for the mechanic?”

“I found one.”

Kate dropped down into the chair opposite Leah’s desk and lifted a brow. “Really? Who?”

“Sam Forrester.”

“Never heard of him.”

“He’s not from around here.”

“Then how’s he going to do the work?”

“He’s staying in the apartment over the garage.”

Kate sat bolt upright. “A complete stranger? Have you lost your mind?”

“I checked his references,” Leah said defensively.

Scowling, Kate slouched back in the chair.

“Which doesn’t mean squat. The references he gave could all be his friends.”

Leah caught her lower lip between her teeth, having thought

the same thing, then shook her head. “No. He seems like an honest guy. He even agreed to allow Craig to help with the restoration.”

“He’s probably cleaning out your house as we speak.”

“Would you stop?” Leah cried. “You haven’t even met the man.”

Kate rose. “Then introduce me.”

Leah looked up at her blankly. “Now?”

Kate shrugged. “No time like the present. We can grab some lunch on the way back.”

“And who would mind the shop while we’re gone?” Shaking her head, Leah plucked her purse from beneath her desk and headed out.

“Where are you going?” Kate asked, following her.

“I—I forgot something at home.”

Kate bit back a smile. “Liar. You’re going to check on the mechanic.”

Leah opened her mouth to deny the statement, then clamped it shut and marched out the door, her chin in the air.

Settling into the apartment above Leah’s garage took Sam all of about five seconds. All he had with him was crammed into his duffel bag, which consisted of about four changes of clothes, his toiletries and an extra pair of boots—all civilian wear, since he was on a monthlong leave from the army.

He’d just dumped his underwear and undershirts into a drawer when he heard a tap on the exterior door.

“Come on in,” he called. “It’s open.”

Just as he stepped from the bedroom and into the sitting room, Leah was bumping the front door closed with her hip. And a nice curvy set of hips at that, he noted.

She lifted her arms, indicating a stack of towels and washcloths. “Thought you might need these. My cousin and her husband were my last guests, and I forgot to restock the linen closet after doing the laundry.”

“Thanks.” He took the linens from her and set them on the antique trunk that served as a coffee table.

“And speaking of laundry...do you mind if I use your washer and dryer? I’ll supply my own detergent.”

“Help yourself. It’s off the kitchen. The controls are self-explanatory, but let me know if you have any problems.”

“I’m sure I can figure it out.”

When she didn’t make a move to leave, he looked at her curiously. “Was there something else?”

Avoiding his gaze, she picked up a pillow from the sofa. “About your references...” she began uncertainly as she plucked at its corded edge.

“Is there a problem?”

“No. No problem. In fact, they were all glowing.” Huffing a breath, she tossed the pillow to the sofa and turned to face him.

“Yes, there is a problem. Not a one of the men I spoke with mentioned anything about your past work history.”

Though he knew he was treading on dangerous ground, Sam

wasn't worried. He'd gotten himself out of tighter spots in the past. "Probably because I've never worked directly for any of them." He gestured to the sofa. "Have a seat," he invited. "I'll answer whatever questions you might have."

She hesitated a moment, then sat down at the far end of the sofa. "Just for a minute. I need to get back to the shop."

Dropping down on the opposite end, he draped his arm along the back of the sofa and opened his hand. "Fire away."

"You might start by explaining how you have a month available to devote to this project."

"That's simple enough. I'm taking what might be called a sabbatical while I consider a career change."

She looked at him curiously. "You don't like working as a mechanic?"

"Oh, I enjoy working on cars well enough," he replied, neatly avoiding a lie. "Always have. In fact, I think I was about fourteen when I rebuilt my first engine."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Fourteen? That's not even the legal age to drive a car!"

Chuckling, he shook his head. "No, but it's legal to work on one. My dad was a rancher, but his first love was cars. Especially vintage models. While most of the boys my age were playing with baseballs and bats, I was pulling engines and rebuilding carburetors." Before she could ask another question about his past, he shifted the conversation to her. "Did you have any weird hobbies when you were a kid?"

She blew out a breath. “I didn’t rebuild cars, that’s for sure. My only hobby—if you would call it that—was arranging flowers.”

“Your mother was a florist?”

She snorted a breath. “Hardly. Our neighbor was. She ran a floral business out of her home. I hung out there while growing up.”

Hoping to take advantage of this opening to learn more about her, as well as her family, he angled a leg onto the sofa and faced her. “She let you help her make floral arrangements?”

“Not at first. In the beginning I was more like a gofer. Fetching supplies, sweeping up the cuttings, that kind of thing. I eventually graduated to making my own designs, but that was years later.”

“Do you remember your first?”

Her face softened at the memory. “A baby gift for a new mother. The vase was a ceramic baby carriage. I filled it with pink carnations, baby’s breath and greenery.” She shot him a sideways glance, her expression sheepish. “Not very original, huh?”

He shrugged. “Everybody has to start somewhere.”

“Well, that was definitely my defining moment. I was hooked from then on and never looked back.”

Although he knew about the business she currently owned, she wasn’t aware he did. “So you’re a florist?”

“In a sense. I own my own company. Stylized Events. We handle all the details of a party, from invitation to cleanup and everything in between, including floral arrangements, depending

on a client's preferences.”

He shuddered. “Sounds like a lot of work to me.”

“It is,” she agreed. “But I love it.” She wrinkled her nose. “Or I do most of the time.”

“Uh-oh. Contrary clients?”

She laughed softly. “Only one, really. Mrs. Snodgrass—or Snotgrass, as my assistant refers to her.”

He laughed. “Obviously your assistant believes in calling a spade a spade.”

Grimacing, she grumbled, “Which is why I'm here.”

He lifted a brow. “And why is that?”

She dropped her gaze, obviously embarrassed that she'd let that slip. “Kate thinks I was a little...well, hasty in allowing you to move into the apartment.”

“A cautious woman,” he commended with a nod of approval. “But in this case misguided.” He slid his hand from the sofa and laid it on her shoulder, drawing her gaze to his. “I assure you you're safe with me.”

“I doubt she'd consider that assurance comforting, coming from you.”

Smiling, he drew his hand back to rest on the back of the sofa again. “Probably not, but in time I'll prove I'm trustworthy.”

“Speaking of time...” She glanced at her wristwatch and rose. “I better get back to the shop. I've been away too long as it is.”

He stood and followed her to the door. “I hope you don't mind, but I nosed around some in the garage this morning. Looks like

you have all the tools I'll need to get started on the car.”

She paused in the open doorway. “They were my brother’s. When I had his car towed over here, I had them bring his tools, too.”

With her back to him, he couldn’t see her expression, but he was sure he caught a hint of sadness in her voice.

“The two of you...” he began hesitantly. “Were you close?”

She stood there a long moment, then heaved a sigh and started down the stairs. “Yeah, we were.”

Two

Having lived in other areas of the world for the last several years, Sam had forgotten how hot Texas summers could get. In a matter of hours, the temperature in the garage rose from a slow simmer to a rolling boil, leaving him drenched in sweat and struggling for every breath.

After two days of sweltering in the garage, he decided a change of venue was necessary if he hoped to make any progress on the car. He scoped out possible locations, then raised the garage door and pushed the Mustang out onto the driveway. With the sun beating down on him like a blow-torch, he pushed and strained some more until he'd maneuvered the car beneath the shade of the breezeway.

Deciding that the new location was a bit more bearable, he fetched tools from the garage, then lay down on the creeper and pushed himself beneath the car to examine the underside.

After a careful inspection, he decided, considering its age, the undercarriage wasn't in too bad a shape. Not that it was going to be easy to repair the damage that thousands of miles and years of neglect had inflicted. He tapped a wrench against a brace and was rewarded with a shower of powdery rust. No, he thought, dragging a hand across his eyes to clear them, this wasn't going to be easy.

He used his boot heel to push the creeper along, following the

line of the exhaust pipe to the rear of the car, and noted that rust corroded the entire system from the connection at the engine all the way to the rear bumper. Pulling a pencil stub and scrap of paper from his jeans pocket, he scribbled muffler and tailpipe on the growing list of parts he would need.

He was wheeling himself from beneath the car when he heard the scrape of footsteps on the drive. Hauling himself to his feet, he glanced in that direction and saw Craig heading up the drive.

Smiling a welcome, he pulled a rag from his back pocket to wipe his hands. "Hey, Craig! How's it going?"

Craig shrugged but didn't slow down. "All right, I guess."

Sam gestured toward the car. "You're just in time to help remove the exhaust pipe."

"Got homework," Craig mumbled and passed him by.

Sam watched him in silence, surprised by the kid's refusal, as he specifically remembered Leah telling him the kid wanted to help with the restoration.

Shaking his head, he hunkered down in front of the rolling tool cart and selected a couple of wrenches from one of the drawers, then stretched out on the creeper again and wheeled himself beneath the car.

He wasn't going to push, he told himself. If the kid wanted to help, he'd let him.

And if he didn't...well, Sam would figure out a way to rope him into getting involved.

Leah braked to a stop on the drive, her eyes widening in

dismay at the mess that blocked the breezeway and her normal path to the garage. In the middle of the destruction sat the Mustang, its hood up and its doors propped wide, looking like a bird preparing for flight. Tools of every description were scattered over the drive and along the car's fenders. A muffler and a twisted tailpipe lay in the flower bed that ran along the side of the house, crushing the blooms of her geraniums.

Incensed, she leaped from her car and marched to the partially dismantled Mustang and the man whose head was hidden beneath the hood.

“What on earth do you think you're doing?” she demanded angrily.

Sam drew his head from beneath the hood only far enough to look at her. “Working on the car. What does it look like I'm doing?”

“Destroying my yard, that's what!” She flung out an arm. “Just look at this mess! You've turned my driveway into a junkyard!”

“What the hell did you expect?” he asked impatiently. “A car has to be dismantled before it can be restored.”

Pulling a rag from his hip pocket, he straightened, dragging it down his face and chest. Her jaw dropped when she saw that he wasn't wearing a shirt. Glancing quickly around to see if any of the neighbors were watching, she grabbed him by the elbow and hustled him into the backyard. “You can't parade around half-dressed,” she whispered angrily. “What will my neighbors think?”

He jerked his arm from her grasp. “I don’t give a tinker’s damn what your neighbors think. It’s hot as hell out here. Wearing a shirt makes it that much hotter.”

Flattening her lips, she folded her arms across her breasts. “I suppose I should be glad you didn’t take off your pants.”

He reached for the first button on his jeans. “Now that you mention it—”

She slapped his hand. “Don’t you dare!”

In the blink of an eye she found her hand in his grasp and her body thrust up against his, his face inches from her own.

“I’ve never struck a woman in my life,” he informed her coldly, “but slap at me again, and I might consider it.”

She gulped. “I—I just wanted to stop you from taking off your jeans.”

His scowl deepened. “Believe it or not, I have a few scruples, one of which is not bearing my ass in public. So there’s no need for you to worry that pretty little head of yours that I’ll strip naked and flash your snooty neighbors.

“And as far as the mess on your driveway goes,” he continued, “it’s too damn hot to work in the garage. I pushed the car out here, where I could get some air. But if having all this junk, as you call it, scattered around upsets your anal-retentive personality, you didn’t have to jump me about it. All you had to do was ask and I’d have moved it to the back and out of sight.”

He released her and took a step back. “Now,” he said, and used the rag to wipe his hands, “is there anything else bothering

you?”

She gulped again. Swallowed. “N-no.”

“Good.” He stuffed the rag back into his hip pocket. “So? How was your day?”

Thrown off balance by his quick mood change, it took her a moment to find her voice. “B-busy.”

“Yeah, mine, too.” He picked up the wrench he’d set aside and returned it to the tool cart. “You ought to do something about that tension in your shoulders. It’s bad for your health.”

She started to roll her shoulders, then squared them instead. “I had a stressful day.”

“I take it Mrs. Snotgrass dropped by.”

She blinked, surprised that he’d remembered her client’s name. “Snodgrass,” she corrected. “And yes, she was in the shop this afternoon.”

He rolled the tool cart closer to the car. “I noticed there’s a spa attached to your pool. You ought to put it to use. Let it work out some of the kinks in your shoulders.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“If it’s all right with you, I might use it later.” He dropped a wrench into the drawer, then flexed his arm. “I used muscles today I haven’t used in a while.”

She stared in fascination at the play of sinew beneath his sweat-slickened skin. “F-fine with me.”

“Appreciate it.” He stooped and picked up a pair of pliers, tossed them into an open drawer.

“Craig’s home.”

At the mention of her nephew, she glanced toward the house, then back at Sam and frowned. “Why isn’t he helping you?”

“Said he had homework.”

Her scowl deepened. “He pulls that card when he doesn’t want to do something.”

He glanced over his shoulder. “I thought you said he wanted to help with the car?”

“He does—did.” She lifted her hands, then dropped them helplessly to her sides. “I don’t know what he wants anymore. The last couple of weeks he’s withdrawn more and more into himself, refuses to talk me. I was hoping that restoring the car would pull him out of whatever funk he’s in. Breathe some life back into him.”

“Where’s his mother? Why doesn’t she do something to help him?”

She shook her head sadly at the mention of her sister-in-law. “Patrice is buried so deep in her own grief half the time she’s not even aware Craig’s around.”

He frowned thoughtfully as he wiped the grease from a wrench. “I could have a go at him if you want. See if I can get him back on track.” He tossed the wrench into a drawer, bumped it shut with his knee. “He might respond to a man quicker than he would a woman.”

She looked at him in puzzlement, surprised by his offer. “Why would you want to do that? You don’t even know Craig. “

He shrugged. “Losing a dad can screw with a kid’s head. Having a man to talk to, hang out with, might help him open up, share what’s on his mind.”

She opened a hand in invitation. “If you think you can help him, be my guest.”

“You may not like my methods. If you don’t, you have to promise not to interfere.”

She’d done her own research on the subject of troubled teens and was familiar with some of the commonly used methods—tough love, wilderness survival training, behavior modification—and the names alone were enough to terrify her. “He won’t be in any danger, will he?” she asked uneasily.

He gave her a droll look. “I wasn’t planning on torturing the kid.”

She didn’t find his assurance all that comforting, considering his earlier rough treatment of her. But she feared if something wasn’t done soon, she was going to lose Craig, either to drugs... or, worse, to suicide. Chilled by the thought, she drew in a steadying breath. “Just the same, I don’t want him hurt.”

He stripped off the pad he’d used to protect his stomach while working on the engine and turned away. “Too late. He’s already hurt.”

The sunroom at the rear of Leah’s house was her favorite room in the house. Shortly after moving in, she’d painted the walls a soft buttery yellow and the ceiling with a mural of a cloud-filled sky. She’d chosen wicker to fill the space and positioned

the chairs in front of the casement windows to capture the best views of her pool and landscaped backyard.

In the daytime sunlight flooded the room, creating a sunny and cheery nook in which to relax. At night it was no less restful, with lamplight washing the room with a soft golden glow.

But on this particular night the sunroom failed to work its magic charm for Leah.

Seated in a wicker chair, her feet propped on the matching ottoman, her thoughts were anything but restful as she stared at the apartment over the garage, considering the man inside.

She didn't know what to make of Sam Forrester. He both baffled and intrigued her. She didn't particularly care for the rough way he'd treated her earlier when she'd confronted him about the mess he'd made of her yard. But, in retrospect, she supposed she'd had it coming. She had slapped at him, as he'd accused her of doing.

Yet, in spite of now knowing that he could become physical when provoked, she wasn't afraid of him. That knowledge was simply something she'd keep in mind the next time she decided to go toe-to-toe with him.

But she was still a little miffed about the "anal-retentive" comment.

She wasn't obsessive, she told herself. She simply appreciated order. She supposed growing up in a home in which disorder reigned might have influenced her desire for neatness. But she certainly didn't consider that a personality fault. To her it was a

virtue, a method of survival.

She frowned thoughtfully as she considered again his offer to serve as a mentor of sorts for her nephew. A man who was willing to befriend a troubled teenager couldn't be all bad, she told herself. But what she couldn't figure out was why he would want to do something like that. He didn't know Craig, had no ties to him. Why would he care one way or the other what happened to him?

As she continued to stare, the door to the apartment opened, and her thoughts shattered as Sam stepped out. She gaped when she saw that he was wearing swim trunks and carried a towel draped over his shoulder. Sliding farther down in her chair, she watched him cross to the spa. The lights in the backyard were off, but the lights in the pool and spa were on, offering enough illumination for her to see his movements...as well as his physique.

A slow shiver chased down her spine as she remembered being held against that body that afternoon. The damp heat that had seeped through her blouse, the muscled wall of chest crushed against her breasts. She shivered again at the memory as he tossed the towel onto a chair and sat down on the spa's stone edge. He dipped his fingers into the water, testing the temperature, then glanced toward the house.

She froze, realizing that with the lamp on she was clearly visible. A smile spread across his face as he spotted her, and he motioned for her to join him. She considered ignoring the

invitation, planning to tell him, if questioned later, that she had dozed off in the chair and hadn't seen him.

He robbed her of that excuse by rising and striding toward the house. Prepared to send him on his way, she met him at the French door that opened to the outside.

He greeted her with a friendly smile. "Come on out and join me. The water's just right."

It was an effort, but she managed to keep her gaze fixed on his face and not let it slip to the magnificent view of his chest. "Thanks, but I was just about to head upstairs for the night."

"It's too early to go to bed," he chided. "Besides, you'll sleep better after relaxing in the spa for a while."

"No, really, I..."

He leveled a finger at her nose. "You have exactly five minutes to change into a swimsuit," he warned.

"Then I'm coming after you."

Before she could refuse again, he turned and walked away. Frowning, she closed the door. She considered locking it but knew that would be a waste of time, since she'd given him a key to her house in order for him to have access to the kitchen and laundry room.

Surely he wouldn't make good his threat, she told herself.

"Four minutes, thirty seconds," he called loudly.

Convinced that he would, she ran for the stairs and raced up to change into her swimsuit.

Breathless and with only seconds to spare, she hurried outside

to find Sam already sitting in the spa. Chest-deep in the bubbling water, his arms spread along the spa's stone edge, he watched her approach.

Feeling uncomfortably conspicuous, she unwrapped the towel she'd cinched at her waist and carefully folded it before placing it on the chair with his.

As she turned for the spa, she saw the amusement on his face and stopped. "What?"

He tipped his head toward the towel. "Are you sure you got all the wrinkles out? You might have missed one or two."

She jutted her chin, remembering his anal-retentive comment. "Just because I'm careful with my things doesn't make me anal."

"Uh-huh. Whatever you say." Water sluiced down his body as he rose and offered her a hand.

"You're going to thank me for this later," he assured her as he helped her into the water.

"I wouldn't hold my breath," she muttered and snatched her hand from his. She sank onto the circular bench opposite him. Jets churned the warm water around her, making her skin tingle and the underwater lights dance beneath the surface.

With a contented sigh he dipped his head back and closed his eyes. "Heaven, huh?"

"It does feel good," she said, willing to concede only that much.

"Nothing eases sore muscles faster than a good soak in a spa. Other than a full-fledged massage," he amended, then lifted his

head to peer at her through one eye. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to give me one?”

The smile she offered him was saccharine-sweet. “You’re right. I wouldn’t.”

“I’d return the favor.”

She shook her head, then couldn’t help but laugh when he slid beneath the water, his face a mask of dejection.

Moments later he reemerged, slicking his hair back from his face.

She lifted a brow. “Kind of shallow for swimming, don’t you think?”

He blinked the water from his eyes. “Wasn’t trying to swim. I was checking out your legs.”

She snatched her knees up and hugged them against her breasts. “If I’d known you’d invited me out here to ogle me, I would’ve stayed inside.”

His smile smug, he reared back, splaying his arms along the spa’s stone edge again. “Honey, me ogling you is the least of your worries.”

She tried to frown but couldn’t help but laugh. Pushing out a hand, she shot a spray of water at him. “You’re incorrigible.”

“No,” he corrected, dragging a hand down his face. “I’m just a man who recognizes a pretty woman when he sees one.”

“Much more of your bull, and I’ll need boots.”

He shot her a wink. “No bull, ma’am. Just fact.”

Deciding it best to ignore him, she slid farther down the wall

of the tub and propped her feet against the bench opposite her, wanting to take advantage of the spa's therapeutic effects. The new position aimed jets of water at her upper back and shoulders, pulsing away at the tension knotted there. She would have purred her pleasure, but she refused to give Sam the opportunity to say I told you so.

"Tell me about your family," he said after a moment.

She opened her eyes wide enough to narrow them at him. "Why?"

"It might give me some insight into what's troubling Craig."

At the mention of her nephew she sat up, frowning thoughtfully as she swept her hair up to knot it on top of her head. "We don't have much family left. You already know about my father and brother. My mother died about five years ago, which just leaves Craig, Patrice and me."

"How did your mother die?"

"The official ruling was suicide, but I prefer to believe she grieved herself to death."

"Over the loss of your father?"

Uncomfortable with the subject, she plucked a leaf from the bubbling water, trying to think how best to answer.

He lifted a brow at the action.

"That's not being anal," she informed him and dropped the leaf over the side of the tub. "It would end up in the filter anyway, which I have to clean out. I was just saving myself some time."

"Uh-huh."

Flattening her lips, she directed the conversation back to his question. “And yes, my mother never got over losing my father. She never gave up hope, either. She always believed he’d come home some day.”

“Was Craig close to her?”

She shook her head. “No. Mom was so consumed with finding my dad she didn’t have time for much else.”

“She searched for him?”

“She didn’t go to Vietnam, if that’s what you mean. But she spent hours and hours combing through reports about POWs and MIAs, hoping to find some mention or reference of my dad.” Knowing what most people thought of her mother’s obsession, she grimaced. “You probably think she was crazy.”

“Not in the least. A woman who loved her husband as deeply as your mother obviously did deserves my admiration, not my scorn.”

Though surprised by his response, she didn’t pursue it, as she preferred not to talk about her parents. “Tell me about your family,” she said instead.

“Not much to tell. I’m an only child. My parents divorced when I was fifteen. Dad moved to Atlanta, remarried and has three kids.”

She gave him a chiding look. “And you said you didn’t have siblings.”

“Since I’ve never been allowed to see or talk to them, I don’t consider them siblings.”

“You’ve never even seen them?” she asked incredulously.

“Nope. My stepmother’s rule. She likes to pretend I don’t exist, that my dad’s life began when he married her.”

“And he puts up with that?”

“Not entirely. He and I get together a couple of times a year. At a neutral location,” he added.

“Never at their home.”

Stunned, she sank back against the tile wall. “What a bitch.”

“You won’t get an argument out of me.”

“What about your mother?” she asked after a moment.
“Where is she?”

“In Seattle. Moved there after I graduated from high school. According to her, that was as far away from Dad as she could get without falling into the ocean.”

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