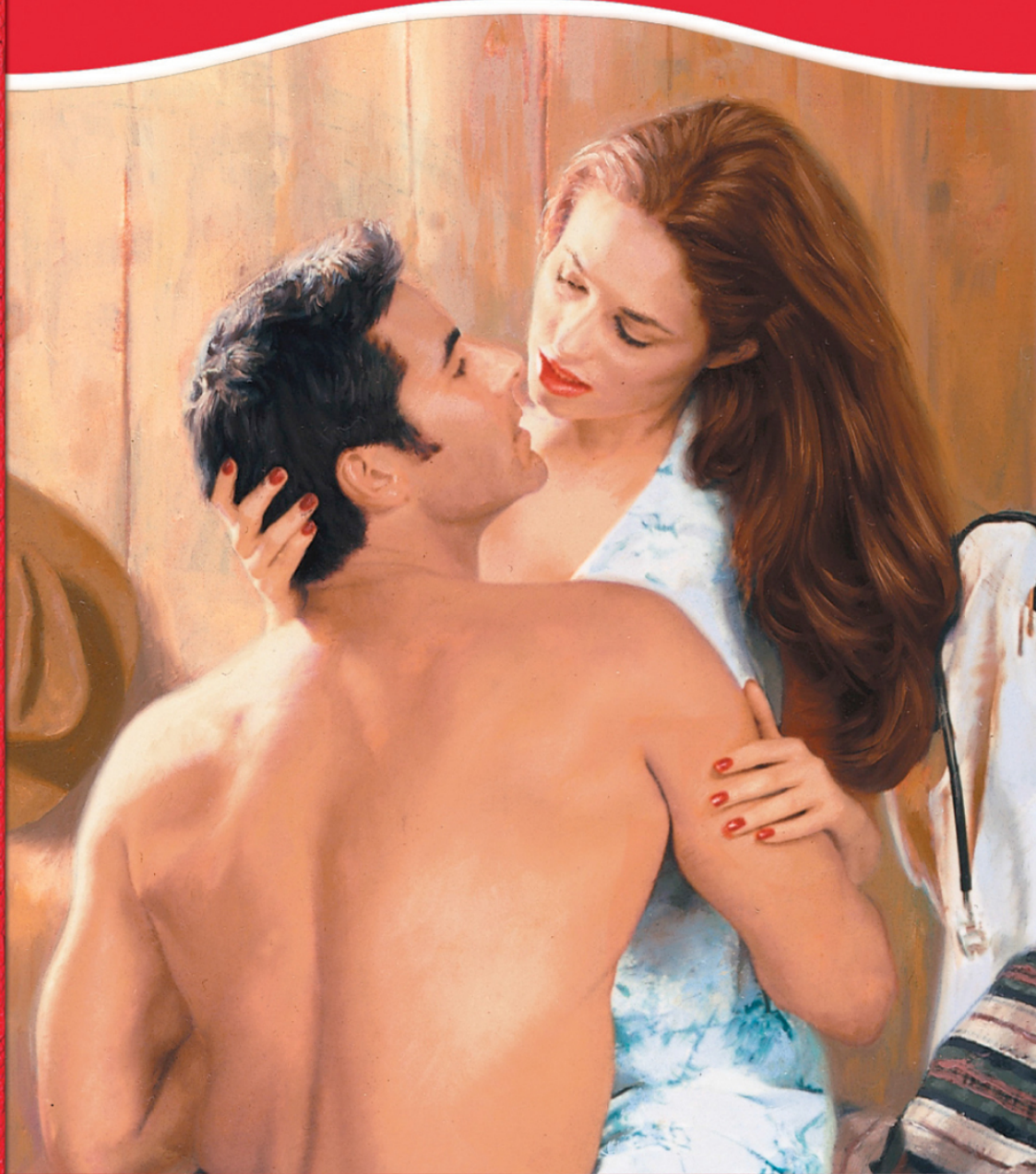


MILLS & BOON®

The M.D. Courts His Nurse

Meagan Mckinney



Vintage Desire

Meagan McKinney

The M.d. Courts His Nurse

«HarperCollins»

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The M.d. Courts His Nurse / M. McKinney — «HarperCollins»,

Whoa! New nurse Rebecca O' Reilly had Dr. John Saville' s thoughts straying into uncharted territory. This female wildcat had obviously been wounded by romance– she protected her frayed heart with a sharp tongue. John suspected her saucy defiance also guarded a secret innocence– and a wanton longing to know true womanhood. John could take no chances with Rebecca' s emotions– an invitation to sensual fulfillment required an iron-clad commitment. Would the handsome M.D. resist the ultimate temptation and preserve his bachelorhood– or fold under the weight of his desire and claim Rebecca as his woman now...and forever?

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At The Rate She Was Going, She'd Be The Town's Resident Old Maid By Forty!

Rebecca could just see her personal ad in Valley Singles: Middle-aged virgin desperately seeks any more-or-less desirable man.

She aimed a covert glance at her new employer, Dr. John Saville. He looked a bit bedraggled this morning. Or, as she used to mispronounce the word, bed-raggled. His normally neat hair was slightly tousled, and there was a heaviness to his eyelids, a rather sexy heaviness that drew Rebecca in at first glance.

That was surely how he would look in the morning after a long night of lovemaking. That was how his lover would see him when she first opened her eyes, the tousled dark hair, the sleep-heavy gaze, and then his mouth that would...

She startled herself out of her reverie. Going down that road was insane, and she would not do it. Never. Absolutely never. But how was she going to fix her "virginity problem" when the only man who excited her was the man she'd sworn off...?

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the world of Silhouette Desire, where you can indulge yourself every month with romances that can only be described as passionate, powerful and provocative!

The incomparable Diana Palmer heads the Desire lineup for March. The Winter Soldier is a continuation of the author's popular cross-line miniseries, SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE. We're sure you'll enjoy this tale of a jaded hero who offers protection in the form of a marriage of convenience to a beautiful woman in jeopardy.

Bestselling author Leanne Banks offers you March's MAN OF THE MONTH, a tempting Millionaire Husband, book two of her seductive miniseries MILLION DOLLAR MEN. The exciting Desire continuity series TEXAS CATTLEMAN'S CLUB: LONE STAR JEWELS continues with Lone Star Knight by Cindy Gerard, in which a lady of royal lineage finds love with a rugged Texas cattle baron.

The M.D. Courts His Nurse as Meagan McKinney's miniseries MATCHED IN MONTANA returns to Desire. And a single-dad rancher falls for the sexy horsetrainer he unexpectedly hires in Kathie DeNosky's The Rough and Ready Rancher. To cap off the month, Shawna Delacorte writes a torrid tale of being Stormbound with a Tycoon.

So make some special time for yourself this month, and read all six of these tantalizing Silhouette Desires!

Enjoy!



Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

The M.D. Courts His Nurse

Meagan McKinney



www.millsandboon.co.uk

MEAGAN MCKINNEY

is the author of over a dozen novels of hardcover and paperback historical and contemporary women's fiction. In addition to romance, she likes to inject mystery and thriller elements into her work. Currently she lives in the Garden District of New Orleans with her two young sons, two very self-entitled cats and a crazy red mutt. Her favorite hobbies are traveling to the Arctic and, of course, reading!

This book is dedicated to Judd and Jude.

I couldn't have done it without you guys.

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One

“I just figured out why men get smarter during sex,” Lois Brubaker announced in a sly undertone, even though the waiting room was presently empty.

Rebecca O’Reilly, busy updating patient files at her wide glass-and-chrome desk, glanced up at her friend and co-worker. For a few confused moments she almost replied seriously, “They do?” Then she realized it was a joke, and she flushed slightly at the unintended reminder of her own sexual ignorance.

But she obligingly fished for the punchline. “Why?”

“Because they’re plugged in to a genius,” Lois replied in a deadpan manner.

A heartbeat later both women burst into laughter just as the door to the examination room swung open. Dr. John Saville emerged, escorting an elderly, moon-faced woman who wore a pullover tunic with a broomstick-pleated skirt.

Rebecca’s laughter died on her lips when John Saville’s eyes, an intensely deep cobalt-blue, seemed to lash at her like whips. He frowned, a deep crease appearing between his eyebrows.

But he stoically ignored her and Lois, walking his elderly patient into the waiting room with its leather-and-chrome furniture and fresh lilacs in wicker baskets. Old-time lithographs of Mystery Valley roundup scenes decorated each pastel painted wall. The decor said homey but high priced, and John Saville’s rates only made the talented young surgeon that much more exclusive and valuable in the eyes of his patients.

“You needn’t worry about your nightly glass of wine, Esther,” he assured her. “Especially since you have it with dinner.”

“Glass—or two?” She seemed prepared to bargain.

That coaxed a smile out of him. “Yes, even two glasses, so long as you don’t mean one-quart glasses.”

Esther Miller laughed and placed a flirtatious hand on his arm. “I was afraid you might not approve,” she confessed. “You seem so stern, Dr. Saville. Old Dr. Winthrop was a regular talk-show host—you know, always kidding around. A caution to screech owls, as my uncle Stan used to say. Not that I’m complaining, mind you. You seem like a very capable young man. And handsome—my lands! I admit I scheduled my operation early just to meet you and see what all the fuss was about. Next time I may even forego the anesthetic just to watch you in action.”

For a moment Rebecca gloated when John Saville, obviously nonplussed by such candor, actually flushed until his smooth-shaven cheeks looked sunburned.

He’s stern, all right, she thought. In fact, the man who prescribes your medicine, Esther, is one bitter pill himself—though it certainly did come in an attractive package.

“I’ll see you at your next appointment, Esther,” he replied so stiffly that Lois and Rebecca exchanged a secret smirk. The pill never did know how to take a compliment. It would require way too much loosening up, and that was something Dr. Dry-As-Dust never did.

But even Rebecca conceded that her new employer was handsome—dangerously so. He was the wrong kind of handsome for his chosen profession. His aristocratic face, athletic build, golden tan and intense eyes conveyed the impression of a French tennis star or a soap opera heart-throb, not a dedicated and brilliant surgeon who ran a thriving private practice, was on twenty-four-hour call at Valley General in nearby Lambertville and still managed to present his published research at several medical conventions each year.

But his good looks were a total, tragic waste, at least where she was concerned. While he was warm and concerned with his patients, with his employees Jekyll became Hyde and started throwing attitude around.

Just like Brian had done to her.

A thick lump of unwanted emotion clogged her throat. She'd told herself for months that Brian was the past, and someone better was the future. But it still didn't make the hurt go away. Brian had been her love, her light, her hope for more than two years. She'd met him at the beginning of his physician's internship at Lutheran Hospital—a man who wanted to heal with her by his side. They'd talked of the future, of children and of building a practice together.

By the end, however, Dr. Brian Gage could only talk about what class of Mercedes he wanted to upgrade to, and what golf community he was going to build his mansion in when he got his chance to wave goodbye to hicksville Mystery, Montana.

He upgraded his fiancée too, exchanging good old small-town Becky for a much better class of trophy wife; one who hadn't grown up poor; one who hadn't grown up struggling. One who didn't wear nurse's scrubs and who had no more ambition to help her fellow human than Marie Antoinette.

Even now Rebecca cursed herself for the bitterness. It was still there, lurking in her heart when she thought she'd scoured it out for good. She was bound and determined that Brian wasn't going to ruin her, and he hadn't. His rejection still stung, but she'd gone on with her life. She even had some hope left for the future. Her only caveat was that her future would contain no more doctors. Not even handsome ones.

And Dr. John Saville was handsome enough to be a threat.

It was sure a good thing that he was such a pill. Otherwise, as she told herself in a fit of brutal honesty, she might find herself attracted once more to the flame that had almost killed her.

"Miss O'Reilly, may I see you in my office, please?"

She looked up. The doctor stood over her desk, those laser-blue eyes focused straight on her.

She nodded. Even now, after two weeks of working with him, his imperious, autocratic manner struck her as more appropriate to a dictator than a doctor. Especially since she'd already had plenty of experience with men who treated her like a lump of gravel on their launch pads.

My word, she thought, we've been working together day in and day out, and he's still "Doctor," his office nurse still "Miss O'Reilly." All the stilted formality made him seem intent on reminding others of their subordinate place in life. And, oh how she hated it.

She stood, sorely missing retired Paul Winthrop's old-world charm and easy smile. He never made her or anyone else feel as if they belonged to an inferior caste.

"Of course, Doctor," she replied, knowing full well what was coming. She watched his ramrod-straight back retreat down the hall toward his private office at the rear.

"Sorry, Becky," Lois told her, keeping her voice down. "I should've saved the joke for lunchtime."

"Oh, baloney," she assured the office manager. "We weren't doing anything wrong. Laughter is good medicine, right? I'm sick of the way he acts as if this place is a funeral home. Cover my phone for me, Lo?"

Lois nodded. She was in her late thirties with stiffly sculpted blond hair and a pleasant face. "Now remember you've got that hair-trigger Irish temper," she cautioned her younger co-worker. "He's still new, we'll have to break him in gradually."

Rebecca stood up, smoothing her skirt with both hands.

John Saville had left the door open for her. He stood poker rigid in front of his neat desk, arms folded over his chest.

For an absurd moment she felt as if she was back in high school, reporting to the principal's office. Except that Mr. McNulty wasn't a bronzed hunk and a half who wore hand-sewn silk ties and Bond Street jackets.

"Yes, Doctor?" she said from the doorway.

His stern visage seemed to rearrange itself in surprise as his gaze took in this full-frontal view of her in the soft, indirect lighting. Unlike hospital nurses, she was not required to wear a uniform, and for a few moments he studied her plum-colored V-neck dress with its wide, flowing skirt. As

usual, her long, chestnut hair was combed back and held in place with barrettes. The hairstyle only highlighted her brow, now furrowed in irritation, and eyes that were once called “snapping-blue.”

“You wanted to see me?” she prompted again.

“Yes, right—of course.” He seemed to collect himself, and the stiff formality was back. “Please come in.”

She did, but he remained standing so she did, too.

The window beside his double row of file cabinets was cracked open a few inches. It was early May, and though the nights still had a nip to them, the days were sunny and growing warmer. Outside, the box elders and dogwoods that grew throughout Mystery were budding into leaf.

“Miss O’Reilly,” he began again, gathering steam now, “would it be at all possible for you and Mrs. Brubaker to practice a bit more...professional decorum on the job?”

She remembered Lois’s warning—and even with her heart speeding up, she admitted she really did have a temper.

But beneath all the anger was a tightly coiled spring of hurt and rejection. It hadn’t been quite six months since Brian had finished his medical internship and dropped her like a bad habit.

It took conscious self-control when she replied, “I’m not sure what you mean, Dr. Saville, by professional decorum.”

“What I mean,” he said tightly, “is that you both need to be more professional about your work. Is that clear enough?”

His tone instantly made her combative. But she remembered to let the first flush of anger pass before she answered. “Is there some problem with my competence as a nurse? Or Lo’s as office manager?”

“Competence?” he repeated. That deep crease between his eyebrows was back as he frowned at her question.

“Yes. I mean, are there problems with medical mistakes? Or have any patients complained about my manner?”

“Well...no. It’s nothing like that. Just as Dr. Winthrop assured me, you are quite efficient and knowledgeable. You and Mrs. Brubaker both. It’s just...”

“Just what, Doctor?”

His glance touched her and quickly slid away. Now, as he finally remembered his specific grievance, a little irritation seeped into his tone.

“Frankly, the walls in this building are not all that thick. Even when you lower your voices,” he added significantly. “And tell...off-color jokes.”

Now it was her turn to flush, although she almost laughed outright at the same time. He must have heard the “plugged-in” joke Lois told her.

But so what, it was harmless. The effort to control her smile alerted him that she’d caught on to his reference.

He spoke up quickly. “It gets difficult at times to concentrate on my patients with—well, with all this loud laughter and chatter. You and Mrs. Brubaker seem to forget this is not a sorority house.”

“It’s Lois, not Mrs. Brubaker,” she retorted irritably. “And I was a full-time working student in nursing school, so I’d know nothing about sorority life.”

As I’m sure you do, golden boy, she almost added, barely catching herself in time.

Her comment, and tone of hurt dignity, forced him into momentary silence.

She felt anger hammer at her temples. Just like all the other male doctors she knew, he was a buttoned-down, wind-up medical doll who could shatter a person’s self-esteem just as effortlessly as tie up a suture. Was he up twenty minutes early this morning to pick those damned lilacs in the waiting room? But he acted as if such things just happened by magic, not even a polite thank-you. Humor was her only “perk” around here—and only a jerk would begrudge it to her.

But she cooled off a bit during his silence. “Lois and I like to have a little harmless fun,” she informed him with cold precision. “The time passes faster that way.”

Obviously hearing the rough bristles in her tone, he arched his eyebrows. His mouth set itself in a grim, straight line of disapproval.

“Having fun,” he lectured her, “isn’t the point of this clinic. We’re supposed to be health professionals. Frankly, I worry what the patients think about our staff.”

“Dr. Saville, I realize you completed your medical studies and residency in Chicago. But this is Mystery, Montana, population four thousand. Your patients are my neighbors, folks I’ve grown up with all my life. They like the staff.”

If a voice could frown, his did now. “I have a solid grasp of my location, Miss O’Reilly—I deliberately picked this town, I didn’t just stick a pin in the map.”

“I confess I can’t see why it appealed to you,” she told him boldly. But she didn’t quite have the courage to add, After all, we’re not royalty here.

“Look, no offense intended—”

“Well, plenty is taken,” she assured him, feeling the warmth of anger in her face and scalp. “You’ve made your point, Doctor. I’ve duly noted the fact that laughter and smiles irritate you. Now, unless you have more complaints I’d like to finish my inventory of the medical supplies.”

For a moment there Rebecca would have sworn his ultracontrolled face showed a flicker of angry animation. If so, the chiseled-coin image was immediately back in place.

“The other complaints can wait,” he assured her.

Dr. Dry-As-Dust. That’s what Lois had nicknamed their stiffly choreographed boss. But all that disappeared, Rebecca reminded herself, the moment some sleek socialite in a fox jacket cape showed up. Then suddenly he became the essence of charm and joie de vivre.

She stepped out of his office, shutting the door harder than necessary, and immediately made eye contact with Lois, just then turning away from the reception window with the day’s mail.

Rebecca waited until she was a few safe steps from the rear office. Then she made a fist and smote her head in jest. Close enough to Lois now that she knew Dr. Saville couldn’t hear her from his office, she said in a stage whisper, “Forgive me, Doctor, for I have sinned.”

Immediately Lois looked horrified, and Rebecca remembered too late how quietly his door opened. She threw a quick glance over her shoulder and saw him only five feet behind her, staring with eyes like hard blue gems. Obviously he overheard her wisecrack.

Miraculously she was reprieved by the telephone on her desk.

“I’ll get it, Lo,” she called too eagerly at Lois. Even as she hurried to her desk, face flaming, John Saville turned on his heel and retreated into his office again, slamming the door even more loudly than Rebecca had.

“Doctor Saville’s office,” she answered the phone somewhat breathlessly. “Rebecca O’Reilly speaking.”

“What’s going on, pecan?” a throaty voice greeted her.

“Hazel, hi.”

“You sound as if you’ve been jogging.”

“I ran to the phone,” she explained. Looking at the closed door, she rolled her eyes. “And I’m sure glad you called.”

“Why? Don’t tell me you’re actually hoping I need a doctor?”

Rebecca’s voice turned serious. “You don’t, do you?”

“Honey, since my surgery I’m fit as a fiddle,” the notorious cattle baroness assured her. “I just called to shoot the breeze.”

Rebecca felt a weight lift from her. Her mother had died from a brain tumor while Rebecca was still in junior high school. With her father’s job as a freelance security consultant keeping him on the road constantly, Hazel had practically adopted her, even insisting that she stay out at the ranch when

her father was gone. She still missed her mother fiercely, and the thought of anything happening to Hazel was like a cold hand wrapping her heart.

“Actually,” Hazel confessed, “I’m curious as the dickens to know how your love life is getting on. Did that good-looking sales rep fellow ever ask you out? The blond who drives the Town Car?”

“No, and he’d better not. His flirting was all a smoke screen.”

“No fire behind the smoke, you mean?”

“No, a wife behind the smoke, I mean. Last time he was here he forgot to take his wedding band off the way he usually does. Horny creep.”

Hazel sighed at her end. “It’s true, isn’t it? The real hunks are either married, gay or cowboys.”

Or snobs suffering from a bad case of “It’s all about me!” Rebecca added inwardly, her glance sliding toward John Saville’s closed door. Still pouting in his office, she told herself. At least she knew this conversation was safe from his sonar ears—her private line was separate from his.

“So how do you like your new boss?” Hazel probed as if plucking Rebecca’s thoughts from her mind.

“I don’t. For such a young man, he’s sure an old sobersides. At least with his co-workers. Or should I say, with his servant staff. It’s funny. I mean, he replaced Dr. Winthrop, but he seems even older. And, heavens, cranky? He’s always got his nose out of joint about something.”

“Well, I met him briefly at the reception Dottie Bryce hosted for him. I didn’t get that impression at all—his nose was perfectly in place, and so was the rest of him. He’s certainly good-looking. He’s well knit, as Grandma Mystery used to say of men with nice builds.”

“Little appeal beyond the eighteenth hole,” Rebecca insisted dismissively.

“Hmm,” was all Hazel said to that—a speculative tone that Rebecca knew well by now. “Anyway,” the rancher went on briskly, “I guess I would like to schedule an appointment after all.”

“I thought you were fit as a fiddle?”

“Hon, even a fiddle needs its strings tuned now and then.”

Hazel’s ironic tone turned the words strings tuned into a bawdy innuendo. Rebecca couldn’t help feeling it was also a little nudge from Hazel, the only person in town besides Lois who knew she was still a virgin with “untuned strings.”

Hazel added quickly, “I just want to ask Dr. Saville some questions about my diet since the gall bladder surgery.”

“Uh-huh,” she replied skeptically as she checked Lois’s appointment calendar. “Seems like a lot of female patients in the Mystery area suddenly want to discuss something with their new doctor.”

“So what? We gals of a certain age aren’t as finicky as you proud and stubborn little twenty-three-year-olds. That’s because you don’t feel Time nipping at your taut little fannies yet. We can feel it, in the form of gravity.”

Rebecca laughed as she scheduled her friend. But Hazel was wrong about one thing—she did feel Time nipping. And the question wasn’t lack of desire or fear about her first time. The one man she had felt like “giving it up to” had coldly rejected her as his social inferior. And once burned, twice shy.

“Ten o’clock next Tuesday sound all right?” she asked Hazel.

“That’s hunky-dory, hon. See you then.”

Even as she put the handset back in its cradle, however, Rebecca was already wondering what the sly Matriarch of Mystery was really up to.

Two

“Miss O’Reilly, when you’re free, may I see you in my office?”

Only my third week under Dr. Dry-As-Dust, Rebecca thought, and I’ve got all his imperious tones filed like everything else in this office.

She glanced at him. The tone he used now included the hardening of his mouth, and it sure wouldn’t have been so irritating if his mouth wasn’t so blamed handsome.

Whatever I’ve done now, he’s really going ballistic over it, she decided, having become a great judge of the doctor’s moods after all she’d observed of him the past weeks.

But she had to admire his nearly flawless control as he stood there in the tiled hallway where the waiting room met the reception area. Only the slight twitch of the muscles of his throat hinted at his anger.

Against her will, Rebecca noticed something else: the way his shoulders were so wide they stretched his pristine oxford-cloth shirt tight across his chest. Even the simple act of removing a pen from his shirt pocket showed the lines of his muscles. Another irritation. If he was going to look so good, why couldn’t the man have a corresponding personality to go with it.

She’d never know why God was so fickle.

“Miss O’Reilly?” he repeated impatiently, still watching her from a stern frown. His arrogant tone made her instantly feel hostile again.

“Yes, Doctor, of course. I’ll be there as soon as I’ve checked in everyone in the waiting room.”

No trace of their personal clashing showed in her face, for the day’s patients had arrived. First on the appointment calendar was Elizabeth Kent, two years older than Rebecca, who had requested a consultation regarding minor surgery to remove bone spurs in her heel. Rebecca had noticed how, ever since John took over the practice, so many women in Mystery Valley had suddenly decided to take care of various elective surgeries they had been postponing.

And they showed up dressed to the nines, looking far more gorgeous than they had bothered to look for Dr. Winthrop. Elizabeth, for example, wore a graceful garland-print dress of crepe de chine silk. And her neatly coiffed hair suggested she had just come from the salon.

But Brennan Webb, too, had already shown up, exactly forty-five minutes early, as he always was. Brennan was eighty-one, frail but courtly, and had always been one of Dr. Winthrop’s—and Rebecca’s—favorite patients. He sat, content and in no hurry, in the waiting room’s most uncomfortable chair, an uncushioned ladderback. He wore a ranch suit with a square-tipped bow tie, an American-flag pin in his lapel. Brennan liked to boast that he was “still strong as horse radish.”

“You sure you don’t want the headphones and remote, Brennan?” she offered, deliberately taking her time to anger her waiting boss. “Won’t take me a second to turn the TV on for you.”

He waved off her suggestion. “I get enough of that crap at home, honey,” he grouched at her. “I get more ’n’ fifty channels, hardly any of ’em worth a tinker’s damn.”

Immediately, however, Brennan altered his tone and added, with no logical connection, “This new doctor is young, but I’m told he knows B from a bull’s foot, all right.”

“Yes, he’s certainly a blessing,” Rebecca drawled with mild irony.

Not mild enough, however, to fool Brennan.

Fancy bridgework brightened the old man’s big smile. But he replied in a phony, quavering tone, “Methinks you protest too much, dearie, but I’m just a senile old man. What would I know?”

“Senile schmenile,” she tossed back at him, choosing to ignore his sly hint that romance was in the air. She also ignored the dirty look Elizabeth sent her way.

Since John Saville’s arrival in town, the young and available women treated her like a rival for the doctor’s attention, not the office nurse.

Even old curmudgeon Brennan has been sucked in, she marveled as she headed down the hallway toward John Saville's private office. The whole town acted as though Apollo had just descended into Mystery Valley from Mount Olympus.

Lois was alone in examination room A, setting up Rebecca's station for initial patient screening before Brennan saw the doctor.

Their eyes met as they passed in the hallway.

Rebecca paused a moment. "I'll be ready in a few minutes."

Lois nodded.

Rebecca didn't have to explain where she was headed—Lois had overheard Dr. Saville's strained request.

"Temper, temper," she reminded Rebecca quietly. "That vein is pulsing in your left temple."

"I'm fine," she insisted. "You're right, we just need to play it cool and break him in right. I'm not going to lose it around him."

Lois, however, had worked with Rebecca going on six years now and trusted that pulsing vein the way weather-men trusted Doppler radar.

"If you're fine, then put this on," Lois dared, picking up the blood pressure cuff and separating the Velcro tabs.

"Take your own pressure and let's see."

Rebecca stepped inside, but only so she could speak privately. "Never mind that. I confess his tone rubbed me the wrong way," she admitted. "Like fingernails scratching a blackboard, actually. But I mean it, I'm not giving him the pleasure of getting to me. Maybe I'll even drop a curtsy as I go in."

"Oh, cripes," Lois fretted. "Everybody buckle up, we're going to get some turbulence."

"You'll see—I mean it. Cool and professional."

However, her resolve was under assault from the first moment she stepped into the doctor's private office.

Usually he prefaced his little lectures with attempts at polite small talk. This morning, however, he waded right in without even testing the water.

"Miss O'Reilly, last Friday I noticed you being extremely rude, in my opinion, with the sales rep from Med-Tech Supplies."

"I doubt if it left him a broken man," she countered, surprising herself at the sarcasm in her tone.

John Saville stared at her for a moment, not sure whether he or the salesman was the target of her scornful tone.

Both of us, he decided, and he felt his angry pulse thrum in his palms.

She's got a hell of a mouth on her, he fumed. But when he glanced at the defiant pout of her lips, he suddenly wondered what it would be like to kiss that angry mouth, kiss it hard until the anger turned to something very different....

Fat chance he had of ever finding out. That was obvious in the way she always looked at him as if she'd love to slap him.

"Yes?" she asked, cutting impatiently into his reverie, trying to get him back on track. "You saw me being rude, as you call it, with the Med-Tech guy?"

Her bossy tone irritated him anew. "Yeah, and now this morning," he forged on, "I learn that you've switched our account to Rocky Mountain Medical Supplies."

So that's what's got him all bent out of shape, she thought, noticing how his features seemed etched in anger.

"I didn't attempt to conceal the change from anyone," she countered, her face coolly indifferent to his obvious irritation. "Is there a problem?"

"None that I was aware of. That's precisely my point in asking. Why fix what isn't broken?"

"Rocky Mountain Medical is a dependable supplier. I switched for a good reason."

Those deep, intensely blue eyes cut into her like diamond drill bits. "That reason being...?"

The salesman was a married man hitting on me, that's why, she wanted to toss in his face. But she feared he would use it as proof of more "unprofessional behavior" on her part. Her resolve to rise above any fray crumbled completely. She suddenly flushed, more angry than embarrassed. "My reasons are personal."

"Yes," he said, smug with triumph, "I figured as much from your behavior last Friday. I could tell there was...something between the two of you."

"You can't possibly conclude—"

She caught herself in the nick of time before exploding. If this was just a fishing expedition, a search for things to throw in her face, she had no intention of taking his hook.

"Look," she told him, her hands balled into fists on her hips, "you know that it's the nurse in any office who uses most of the disposable medical supplies. Dr. Winthrop always trusted me—"

"Yeah, right, I know the riff by now," he said, cutting her off impatiently. "Paul Winthrop is God Almighty, and I'm the heartless outsider. The spawn of Satan."

His rather childish outburst surprised her. His tone had sounded almost human. She might even have felt some sympathy for him if she hadn't still felt the sting of his "your behavior last Friday" remark.

Not that it was any of his damn business, she fumed. Why not just call her the office slut and at least be a man about it instead of dropping smug hints like some little schoolyard snitch?

"I'm sorry," she told him archly, "that you feel so persecuted in Mystery, Doctor. I suppose we hayseed types must seem a bit quaint to sophisticated outsiders."

Her tone heaped extra emphasis on the last two words.

He wanted to laugh out loud. Staring at her, he thought, you beautiful, hotheaded little fool, you are so wrong it's even funny. Sophisticated? He almost snorted. What would she think if she knew he grew up living in a broken-down trailer, or that pretty girls just like her used to mock him in school because of his family's poverty? Medical school had been the only way out. The only way. And he'd grasped it like a lifebuoy.

But it hardly mattered what he thought. She didn't give him a chance to slip a word in.

"I am the office nurse, after all," she said, pushing right on in spite of his closed, angry glower. "It's my job to order medical supplies. But if you have some specific complaint about Rocky Moun—"

"No, it's fine, what the hell," he cut in sarcastically. "I'm only the doctor around here, don't let me interfere with your plans for the office."

"I said if you want, I'll order—"

"Order it from a Hong Kong clearing house for all I care," he snapped, his tone brusquely dismissive. "You're right, it's your job, not mine. Thanks for your time."

He sat down behind his desk and flipped open the current issue of *Surgical Medicine Quarterly*. His rude behavior was meant to be her dismissal.

But Rebecca saw how his eyes were not really reading. Anger flicked in his gaze like light reflected off midnight ice, darkening the blue and tightening his lips and facial muscles.

The feeling is mutual, her own angry eyes assured him right back as she turned away, resenting him to the point of pure hatred.

"One last thing, Miss O'Reilly."

His voice behind her stopped her like a firm grip on her shoulders.

She turned to watch him from the doorway of the office. "Yes?"

"Concerning what I witnessed last Friday—your, uh, personal intrigues are of course your own business. But professionals don't mix business with pleasure for this very reason we see now—it causes unnecessary problems. Try to keep your love life out of the workplace."

His presumptions and false assumptions made anger surge up within her, anger tinged with bewilderment. Why should she care if he had a false impression of her involvement with a would-

be adultering creep? She refused to let Saville get that personal with her, right or wrong in his assumptions. His nose wasn't just out of joint—it was also way too long.

The scornful twist of her mouth was meant to insult him more than any words could. Nonetheless, she flung a few at him for good measure.

“Despite your obvious belief that you are above everyone else,” she snipped, “this is not the Middle Ages, and you do not own your employees. I am a nurse, not a serf. My private life is my business and my business alone. Furthermore, as far as I see it, you have no right to make ridiculous observations like you have just now. In fact, you don't have the right to even speak to me about my love life.”

Or lack thereof, she finished silently to herself with a twist of irony.

In the ensuing silence, her eyes refused to flee from his. Defiance edged every feature as she stared back at him.

His gaze turned toward the window and the view outside as if in surrender, but he still took up the gauntlet.

“If I did own you,” he assured her, “I'd see if I could swap you for an angry grizzly. Might make the office more pleasant.”

Down-home humor, she thought. Just what Mystery needed in a doctor from Chicago.

She turned and left the office. She didn't make note of his angry stare or how it drilled into her. Burning. Burning.

By the time Hazel McCallum left for her 10:00 a.m. appointment with John Saville, not even a sweater was required, and the main yard and corral were teeming with horse wranglers and cow punchers.

Weather-rawed men wearing range clothes and neckerchiefs waved as her cinnamon-and-black Fleetwood wound through the crushed-stone driveway of the front yard. Some of the older hands refused to wave, considering that gesture beneath their dignity and Hazel's status as the last living McCallum. Instead they touched their hats in a respectful “salute to the brand,” a gesture that never ceased to make Hazel feel pride in the cattleman's traditions.

Those corporate boys in the big cities only talk about teamwork, she thought. One old-fashioned cattle drive would teach them the real meaning of pulling together.

She slowed for the asphalt road that led due east into town. Beyond the Lazy M's far-flung corrals and pastures, blue sky curved down to meet green grass in a vista as wide as the eye could see. And rising majestically beyond the verdant floor of Mystery Valley, the hard granite peaks of the Rockies.

Even the stunning view, however, couldn't quite keep her from remembering her daily horoscope, which she always consulted over morning coffee. She smiled, pleased but not at all surprised, as she recalled the advice to “make some connections that appear illogical on the surface.”

Illogical? It was worse than that—Hazel knew Rebecca O'Reilly and John Saville might be her most challenging match yet. But at age seventy-five she was one of the last true mavericks in the American West. Oil money had subdued most of the cattle hierarchy, but the Lazy M brand had survived, even thrived, under her astute management.

And she thrived on a challenge—life was too flat without long shots and lost causes.

She wound through a curve, swooped across a little stone bridge, and now came in sight of the white-painted fence where her land gave way on its east border to John Saville's recently purchased property. She still thought of it as the Papenhagen place even though Tilly's husband had passed away last year and she had sold out, moving to South Florida to join the condo-and-blue-rinse set.

Hazel had always liked the big fieldstone house with its indestructible slate roof and windows with leaded panes. The place is too big, though, for a bachelor, she thought yet again. It needed a wife, some dogs and cats, a few or a bunch of kids. If there were too many, she'd gladly handle the

overflow, for Hazel missed having young neighbors around all the time as Rebecca and her school friends used to be, bless their hearts. If only kids wouldn't grow up so fast.

Seeing the house reminded her: Rebecca was wrong about the young surgeon's personality. Hazel was sure of that already, despite the fact he was not one to volunteer much about his past.

But she also knew that telling Rebecca about her mistake would be pointless. The girl was too headstrong, too young and independent. She would need to make the discovery on her own—with some guidance, of course, Hazel admitted to herself, from the area's best matchmaking operative. For she was nearly convinced, even this early on, that newcomer John Saville and hometown girl Rebecca were an ideal match. If only each could survive the mutual shell shock of their first impressions.

"Lord," Hazel said under her breath, "I'd be a hypocrite if I called matchmaking my burden. It's too much fun. I've never been bashful about meddling."

After all, she had some right to meddle. Her ancestors had been the first to settle in Mystery Valley; now she was determined to save as much of its traditional character as she could. That meant the careful pairing of natives with outsiders, forming bonds of real community. Bonds of real love.

John Saville's classic Alfa Romeo Gran Sport, painted bloodred in the Italian racing tradition, sat in his reserved spot beside the clinic. The very sight of it stirred Hazel's blood, for it had all the grace and power of a fine Thoroughbred. She parked in the spot beside it, admiring the graceful roadster body with its tan leather driver's seat mounted almost over the rear axle.

Not the car of choice for an "old sobersides," she thought as she followed a cobblestone walk toward the glassed-in foyer.

"Sorry if I'm late, ladies," Hazel announced as she entered the waiting room. "I spent too much time gawking at the tourists downtown. My land, where do they learn to dress like they do? They must have one of those whatchamajiggers, a chat room for it on the Internet."

All three of them usually poked harmless fun at the warm-weather influx of visitors, which grew larger every year. This morning, however, only Lois laughed with her. Rebecca was in one of her little snits that Hazel recognized well. Her pretty smile was in place, as usual, dazzling enough to fool most people. But the normally gentle and pleasing brow was now furled from pent-up anger. And that vein in her temple was pulsing, a sure sign.

Sensing Rebecca's mood, Lois took over. "Hi, Hazel. You can come right on back if you want. I've got Becky's station set up."

Instead of heading right to examination room A, Hazel paused between the two women's desks. "You and your new boss getting along any better?" she inquired bluntly of Rebecca.

"Oh, hey, better watch what you say," she replied in a sarcastic warning tone. "The walls have ears, you know. Maybe even bugs planted in them."

"I take it that's a no?"

"A big, loud, resounding no. Frankly, I think there're some people who took their toilet training way too seriously."

"Takes one to know one," Hazel suggested sweetly.

"I'll pretend you didn't say that. You'll see. Don't be surprised if I'm reading the Help Wanted ads soon. I'm glad this guy doesn't wear a ring or we'd all have to kiss it."

"Ahh-hemm." Lois, busy opening mail, cleared her throat, warning Rebecca to hold her voice down. But she was still smarting from her earlier encounter with the doctor and didn't much care what he overheard. Besides, in her mind Hazel was family, not a patient.

Hazel knew this headstrong side of her friend, had even encouraged it after a fashion when she saw how her mother's death left the poor girl faltering in her self-confidence. So Hazel also knew that the only way to handle the lass was with reverse psychology.

In short, she decided with a perverse little grin, maybe Becky needed a date from hell to remind the haughty princess what it's like "out there." And then John Saville might start to look a tad better to her.

“What are you smiling about?” Rebecca challenged her as she led her patient into the examination room.

“Oh, I’m just building castles in the air,” Hazel confessed as she rolled up the sleeve of her blouse. “And even populating them.”

“Hmm,” was Rebecca’s only comment. Anger still distracted her.

She checked Hazel’s blood pressure and heart rate and recorded them on the chart in her clipboard. Next she took her temperature, then weighed her on the same old but reliable triple-beam scale Doc Winthrop had used for decades.

“Hazel,” she remarked, impressed as usual, “you never vary by an ounce, do you?”

“Wouldn’t know,” Hazel admitted. “We McCallums never kept a scale around. What for? Your horse is the only one needs to worry about your weight.”

A moment later John Saville appeared in the doorway, trim and handsome in gray slacks and a light-blue dress shirt with a navy rep tie, loosened but not sloppy. Rebecca handed him the clipboard and then stepped out, closing the door behind her and never once meeting his eyes.

“How’ve you been doing, Hazel?” he greeted her, friendly but somewhat distracted in his manner—just as Rebecca had been.

They’ve been at each other’s throats, all right, the matriarch mused. No good romance should have bland beginnings.

“Feisty as ever,” she assured him, “thanks to my talented young surgeon.”

John pinched the creases of his trousers and tugged them up a fraction, taking over Rebecca’s still-warm chair.

Before he could ask her anything else, Hazel demanded, “What year’s your Alfa? I’m guessing it’s a ’27?”

His face changed immediately, the stern features softening, and enthusiasm lifted his tone. “Hey, you’re pretty close. Nineteen twenty-five Gran Sport 1750,” he boasted like a proud papa. “It’s a classic and then some. That model won every road race of its day. She’s got a super-charged motor, all original. Even today I can push her up close to ninety-five.”

“A 1925, huh?” Hazel winked at him. “Made the same year I was born.”

He glanced briefly at her chart, then smiled. “Yeah, right. And both of you appear to be in excellent running order,” he remarked, holding those intensely blue eyes steady on her—more curious than suspicious, she decided. “I see you take only one medication?”

She nodded. “Nitroglycerin tablets. I only take them occasionally for mild angina pain.”

“But didn’t you mention to Miss O’Reilly—”

Her laugh cut him off. “Is it too hard to say Rebecca?”

“—to Rebecca that you had some questions about your diet since the surgery? Has there been some problem?”

“You know, I recall that I did mention something like that,” she confessed, “but here’s a better question just popped into my head—have you ever watched a cat sitting beside a gopher hole?”

The crease between his eyebrows deepened in a surprised frown. “Can’t say that I have. I was a military brat, lived all over the world. Including near gopher holes. Don’t remember any cats sitting beside them, though.”

“Well, come on out to my place sometime, I’ve got cats and gopher holes,” she assured him. “It’s well worth watching. You’ll soon learn that the cat’s patience is surpassed only by one thing—its confidence that the wait is worth it.”

He met her sparkling gaze for at least five seconds, and he suddenly realized, full force, that he was in the company of an extraordinarily perceptive person.

“There’s a lesson for me in that, right?”

Indeed there was, but Hazel knew she had to give the good doctor his medicine in doses. He wouldn't admit it yet because he was still in the throes of denial. But he was "gone" on Rebecca, all right. Or not yet gone, she corrected herself, but he was going, going...and soon would be gone.

Right now he was still too irritated at her, baffled by her, his confidence thwarted because she was new to his experience. So during this visit, Hazel settled for merely planting a seed. She could water it later. Her secret garden of love.

"A lesson?" she finally responded, her tone innocent of any guile. "Why, Dr. Saville, I may not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but no one ever has much trouble getting my point, if you'll excuse the pun. Well, my goodness!"

She glanced at her watch, then stood up.

John Saville hastily rose, too.

"I've got yard work to do," she explained. "The trees are still winter mulched, can you believe my lazy bones? And today I have to help pick out breed stock. Thanks for the wonderful advice."

"What advice? I didn't give you any."

"Well had you, I'm sure it would have been excellent advice."

"But, Hazel, we still haven't—"

"Toodle-oo," she called as she stepped quickly into the hallway. But she had more medicine to dispense before she left.

She deliberately left the door wide open so the doctor could hear her.

"Becky, hon," she called, her tone making it sound like a mere afterthought. "Do you remember Rick Collins, my accountant, Larry's, kid brother?"

Rebecca, busy taking inventory in the medical supply room, poked her head out into the hallway. She gave Hazel a little frown as she tried to recall. "Have I met him?"

"Not exactly, I don't believe. You saw him waiting in Larry's car one day in my driveway. Remember? You asked me who the cute guy was?"

Rebecca kept the blank expression as memory failed her. "I'm not sure I remember..."

"You said he had a nice smile. Sure you did. So I gave him your phone number," Hazel supplied in an offhand tone. "Suggested he give you a call soon. And I warned him not to put it off too long or he'd end up on the waiting list."

"Hazel," she protested, "I really don't remember—"

"Oh, Larry says he's loads of fun," Hazel said, cutting her off, already letting herself out. "He reads a lot, and you've always liked guys who read."

"Hazel, I can't—"

"I'll send a check when I get home," Hazel commented to Lois as she closed the door behind her. Her last glimpse showed John Saville in the hallway, watching Rebecca with the same hard expression he usually wore around her.

Let not your hearts be troubled, youngsters, she reflected as she walked to her car. True love always finds a way.

Or at least a good agent, she added, and sheer devilry sparkled in her Prussian-blue eyes.

Three

Rick Collins must have followed Hazel's advice about not wasting time, for he called later that very day. The phone rang only minutes after Rebecca had returned to her studio apartment, located just south of Mystery on Bluebush Road. Her place was only minutes from Valley General Hospital, where she'd worked as a surgical-recovery nurse briefly before Dr. Winthrop hired her, impressed by colleagues' reports about her work.

Her very first telephone impression of Rick had been favorable. A nice voice, decidedly masculine but not macho, and he identified himself immediately. No cute little guessing games like some guys played. He simply skipped any preliminaries and politely asked her to dinner the coming weekend at the Hathaway House.

He was a bit businesslike and direct about it, but she sort of liked his confident, why-don't-we-close-a-deal manner, so she accepted. He was friendly without sounding desperate or nervous in the way of men who placed too much importance on a date. And the Hathaway House in nearby Summerfield, while no leader in trendy cuisine, was generally considered the best restaurant in Mystery Valley—respectable but hardly formidable, appropriate for a safe first date.

She had hung up the phone feeling better than she usually did after making a blind date. Well, not actually a totally blind date, she reminded herself while she washed and rinsed a few dirty plates and set them in the drainer. After all, she finally remembered who the guy was. She'd gotten a good look at Rick once a few months ago from Hazel's kitchen window.

She recalled his collar-length blond hair and the gorgeous, sexy smile he'd flashed at her when he caught her scoping him out from the window. But Rick had been at least four or five years ahead of her in school, so she'd never met him and knew little about him except that he was still single and worked for a manufacturing company located about fifteen miles from Mystery.

She was perhaps a little bothered by his by-the-book manner. She liked to flirt a little, but he had passed up the opportunities she had given him over the phone.

God forbid that he'd turn out to be another John Saville—just a good-looking vinyl boy who reserved his charm for debutantes and Vassar grads.

Something else bothered her about the brief conversation. Hazel had implied that she knew Rick well. Yet he admitted on the phone he hardly knew her. But so what if Hazel was being a little pushy. The old girl had always seen herself as a crusader in the cause of romance. Had some notable successes at it, too.

Romance... Rebecca rinsed her hands, then used her wet fingers to comb back a few rebellious strands of chestnut hair that had escaped the barrettes. Suddenly the old rumination came to her again: for too long now she'd been wondering what "doing it" was really like. She'd been close a few times with Brian, but something had always stopped her—some inner sense that the time just wasn't right. In Brian's case, it was the commitment that wasn't right; she saw that now. She only hoped that the next time she had the opportunity to take the plunge, her instincts would go away. So far they'd only prevailed in keeping her from making any move. And she was tired of her virginity, and getting cynical.

If she couldn't find love, then she at least wanted to pretend she knew about it.

Unbidden, an image of John Saville's intense cobalt eyes, raking over her like fingers, filled the screen of her mind, and a restless yearning stirred low in her stomach, quickening her pulse.

That's just great, she chided herself—a cute guy just asked you out, and here you are fantasizing about some self-loving, elitist snob who wouldn't be caught dead with you in public.

Another doctor in her life might send her screaming for the nunnery. So she erased the unwanted image of John Saville from her mind and returned to drying the dishes.

Surprisingly, the rest of the week went by smoothly at the clinic, as if John Saville were on his best behavior. Late on Friday afternoon he came up front from his private office.

“Ladies,” he announced in his stilted, formal manner, “I’ve finished reviewing Dr. Winthrop’s financial books. I see that neither of you has received a raise in almost two years now.”

His fiercely blue eyes lingered on Rebecca, seeming to dwell on the spots where a snug cashmere pullover, despite her bra, clearly marked her nipples. He cleared his throat.

“So I’ve informed our bookkeeper,” he continued, “that retroactive from the day I took over, you both are to receive a 10 percent raise. Also three more paid personal-leave days.”

Rebecca was too pleasantly surprised to speak.

Lois, however, quickly thanked him on behalf of them both. They received a second shock when John Saville actually flashed a quick and very charming smile—nothing imperious about it.

“Nonsense, both of you earn your salaries,” he insisted.

He left, taking some mail with him back to his office.

Lois looked at Rebecca, then fanned herself with the folder in her hand, as if bringing down her temperature.

“Sexy smile. And does that man look good in herring-bone dress slacks? Especially from the rear.”

But a moment later she added, “A pox on myself for such adulterous thoughts. And me the property of the Gang of Four.” The Gang of Four was Lois’s name for her husband, Merrill, and their three sons, who ran Brubaker and Sons Automotive in nearby Colfax.

She looked at Rebecca before adding, “Besides, he was putting the eye on you, Miss O’Reilly. Oo-la-la.”

Rebecca was unimpressed. “I wouldn’t alert the media if I were you, because I doubt that. Unless the doctor had a brief fantasy about slumming with the scullery help.”

“You ingrate. The man just padded our pay envelopes. And you saw how sweet he was about it.”

“I appreciate the raise,” she told Lois. “But he’s right, we are due for one, girlfriend.”

“Not to mention well worth it,” Lois conceded. “Lutheran Hospital has been wooing you ever since you did your nursing practicum there. And I’ll have my business degree in another year—I know for a fact Bruce Everett wants to hire me to manage his new dude ranch.”

Rebecca only half heard her friend, thinking about John Saville. “If you ask me,” she speculated, lowering her voice, “he’s one of these big carrot-and-stick commandos. This raise is a carrot meant to bring us—me, actually—into line.”

“And when he gets that uptight look like somebody’s giving him a wedgie,” Lois giggled, “that’s one of the sticks.”

They enjoyed a rebellious laugh. Their goof-off mood inspired Rebecca to suddenly pucker her face in an exaggerated scowl.

“Having fun, Miss O’Reilly,” she lectured, making her voice as deep and disapproving as she could, “isn’t the point of this clinic.”

They were safe, for he was well out of earshot at the rear of the building. However, the sudden sound of his steps in the hallway caught them before they could quite suppress their mood of bubbling mirth.

“Shush, woman,” Lois hissed melodramatically. “We just got a raise, don’t get him mad.”

But that last smart crack was one joke too many, and badly timed. She had to swivel sideways in her chair, and Lois barely managed to compose her face before the doctor appeared in the doorway, several X-rays in his left hand.

“Miss O’Reilly, has the lab got back with us yet on Bernie Decker’s blood-and-urine workups?”

His request was polite and straightforward, similar to dozens he made each day.

Rebecca never would have foolishly lost it if she hadn’t made the dumb mistake of making eye contact with Lois so soon after they’d just been goofing around.

It was the “Miss O’Reilly” that did it—it was like a spark to a powder keg.

“Yes, Doctor,” was all she managed before she lost her composure and broke into giggles that set Lois off, too.

For a few moments after their adolescent outburst, he was caught completely off guard. Rebecca watched a perplexed smile draw his lips apart. At first he seemed to think something else was causing their mirth. Then she saw a quick glimmer of realization in his eyes that he was the butt of the joke. Then his face registered some deeper emotion—hurt, she realized with a sudden stab of guilt. They were only being immature and laughing at his stuffy formality, but he couldn’t know that.

An indrawn, bitter look came over him, and the handsome, angry face closed against both of them.

“All right,” he replied, still under control but so mad that his jaw muscles bunched tightly. “I guess I’ll get that lab report later, when you two’ve gotten over your private joke.”

Guilt gnawed at Rebecca for the rest of the day. It wasn’t just her childish behavior and the raise thing—she thought of John Saville’s brief but charming smile, the hurt deep in his eyes before anger took over. She also thought about how his gaze had seemed to linger on her body. Not that she cared. No doubt the lover within him was as uptight and calculating as the physician. Being with him wouldn’t be worth the enormous effort she’d have to put forth just to have some fun.

However, all her guilt was whisked away like a feather in a gust the moment she tried to apologize right before quitting time at 5:00 p.m.

He cut her off in midsentence with almost the same caustic retort she had recently flung at him. “I doubt it will leave me a broken man.”

And to think she had wasted time feeling sorry for such an overbearing brute. The absolute creep, she fumed as she drove home in the aging but reliable Bronco her father had turned over to her as a high school graduation present. He was so like Brian. His spitting image exactly, she told herself, self-justification in every word.

Even thoughts of her upcoming date tonight with Rick Collins could not crowd irksome images of John Saville from her mind.

By the time she finished a long and relaxing bath, the light of late afternoon was taking on the mellow richness just before sunset. Wearing a snug terry cloth robe, her long hair wrapped in a towel, she watched the copper blaze of sunset from her bedroom window.

Feeling calmer, she dressed in a hunter green merino wool skirt and a black silk blouse, digging a good pair of black leather pumps out of her closet. She left her hair unrestrained, just combing it out and spritzing it back a little in front, letting it cascade down her back and over her shoulders.

“A very sexy little package,” she approved as she checked herself out in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. “Play your cards right, Mr. Collins, and who knows? This girl is in the mood.”

She hummed pop tunes while she added a finishing touch, a pair of delicate cameo pierced earrings that had belonged to her mother. But while she slipped the delicate French wires through her ears, again she saw John Saville’s face closing against her, the intense cobalt eyes accusing.

A little guilt, and plenty of anger, knotted her stomach, already pinched with hunger.

He was the last man she wanted on her mind tonight.

Noticing it was almost seven o’clock, she quickly opened her compact and lightly brushed her cheeks with blush, trying to get in the right mindset to enjoy a date, John Saville be damned.

Rick Collins rang her doorbell at 7:00 p.m., prompt as a wake-up call and looking quite dapper in a dark evening suit. His blond hair was shorter and neater than she recalled, and he was a little stouter than she had imagined him. Nonetheless, he made a good first impression when Rebecca opened the door.

The smile was still as sexy as she remembered it being. Definitely movie-star teeth.

She was a little put off, however, when he escorted her out to his vehicle: a glittering gold SUV that rode incredibly high off the ground on huge, oversize tires.

“Not quite a monster truck.” Rick seemed to apologize as he helped her in.

She felt as if she was climbing up into a military assault vehicle. This is Montana, she reminded herself. People drive weird trucks out here.

But from that point on, the date rapidly became a fiasco.

During the drive to the restaurant, he rebuffed her every attempt at conversation because, as she quickly learned, he was obsessed with reciting trivial facts. Batting averages, team mascots, per capita consumption of chocolate, the cures for diphtheria in Colonial America, an endless, random recitation of pointless facts proving he had a photographic memory but no other apparent intelligence. Hazel was right to call him a big reader, but she failed to mention he read nothing but books on trivia.

Before long she had also noticed something quite irritating about Rick’s “pleasant voice”—it was oddly uniform in tone, seldom varying much. He might as well be reading out loud from a phone book to pass time. The monotony of it had quickly begun to grate on her.

The date officially tanked by the time the Hathaway House loomed into view. She was practically clawing at her window to escape. He hadn’t shut up once.

“No kidding,” his monotone voice droned on like a weed-eater idling, “Charles Bronson was actually named Charles Buchinsky before he changed his name.”

“Is that right?” she muttered.

“Yeah, and John Denver was Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr. And you know what Eric Clapton’s real name was?”

“You tell me.”

He laughed for the first time. “Eric Clap. No kidding, it really was.”

When she said nothing, he pressed on. “Don’t you get—”

“I get it,” she answered, wondering how she was going to get through the interminable two hours of dinner.

The modern exterior of the Hathaway House, with its elegant marble walls, seemed a deliberate contrast to the old-time intimacy of the interior. Candles burned in sconces along the walls, and two-branched gilt candlesticks illuminated each table.

But tonight it was all wasted on Rebecca. The double line of full-length windows opening onto a scrolled-iron balcony, the tables bright and fragrant with fresh bouquets of spring—all wasted.

In fact even as a pallid and bored maître d’ escorted them to their tables, it was all she could do to restrain herself from bolting. She still smarted with humiliation from their arrival—she had actually required a valet’s help to climb down out of Rick’s truck.

“Hopalong Cassidy’s horse was Topper,” Rick’s voice hammered on, beating at her ears by now. “Dale Evans rode Buttermilk, the Cisco Kid was on Diablo, Gene Autry rode—”

I dared to dream, Rebecca thought with self-lacerating sarcasm that made her smile. Unfortunately she was looking right at Rick when she did it. His next remark proved he misread her ironic smile as some sort of romantic green light.

“I thought maybe after dinner,” he confided in a near whisper so others wouldn’t hear, “we might take a little ride out to Turk Road.”

He couldn’t be serious. Cold revulsion made her shudder. Turk Road used to be a local lovers’ lane until huge feed-lots were built on both sides of it. Either he hadn’t parked there in a long time or he didn’t care about the smell.

“You’re joking, right?” she blurted out. “That area smells like a leaking sewer.”

“Oh, not when the wind’s out of the north,” he assured her with a solemn face. “Like it is tonight. We can just keep the windows rolled up.”

They were seated, and immediately the wine steward hovered at Rick’s elbow while he ordered some white zinfandel she had no intention of drinking.

A brief image of Rick groping her in his almost-monster truck, windows steamed over, cows bellowing on all sides, had killed her earlier appetite.

“Take me home,” she blurted out suddenly. “I don’t feel well.”

“What? But we—”

“I really don’t feel well,” she insisted in a tone that quashed any further resistance from him. To underline her determination she stood up and gathered her purse and sweater.

“Man, oh, man!” he exclaimed in frustration. “Hazel didn’t tell me you were such a dingbat.”

Well at least he gets angry, she thought as the two of them walked quickly outside, scrutinized by curious eyes.

“The gold truck,” Rick snapped to the valet, and the latter trotted around to the side lot. The teen returned a minute later, shaking his head at them.

“Bad news, sir. Your right rear tire is completely flat. If you’ve got a jack that’s big enough, we’ll change it for you.”

Rebecca’s heart sank at this stroke of rotten luck, and Rick cursed. “No, it’ll have to be towed to a hoist. Or at least lifted by a tow-truck winch.”

He looked at Rebecca as if it were all her fault. “I’ll have to call a tow. Looks like it’ll be a while before you get home.”

The date from hell, she thought, as she watched him walk away with the valet to inspect the damage.

Four

Oh, great, Rebecca groaned inwardly while her date dug the phone number for his tow service out of his wallet. Mystery Valley had virtually no cab service, just a shuttle bus service for the airport at Helena, so she couldn't get home that way.

Hazel...her place wasn't all that far, or maybe Lois—

A low rumble of exhaust and a flash of bright-red paint pulled her attention to the street out front. John Saville, looking handsome and slightly windblown in a brown leather bomber jacket, parked his Gran Sport classic right out front and leaped athletically out without opening the door. He carried his leather medical kit and hurried toward the restaurant, ignoring the valets.

"Got it," Rick muttered beside her, finally finding the number. He had already retrieved the wireless phone from his vehicle. "Shouldn't be too long," he told her, avoiding her eyes now. "It doesn't make sense I'd have a flat, those are brand-new tires."

She stood there on the sidewalk, her irritation at herself tinged with sudden curiosity. She wondered what emergency could possibly have called John Saville to the restaurant. The place had seemed calm enough when she and Rick came outside.

An inexplicable flat tire and the doctor's sudden arrival—certainly it was odd timing.

Rick finished his call and pushed down the antenna of his phone. "Forty minutes to an hour," he informed her.

She resisted the urge to snap at him in frustration. It wasn't his fault, after all. "I think I'll go inside and see if I can call a—"

"Rebecca!"

The voice cut into her thoughts. She turned around. John Saville went toward her, dressed in stone-washed jeans and a white pullover she could see under his open jacket.

He actually used my first name, she thought.

Evidently, however, he had not approached her to be friendly. His tight-lipped smile of greeting seemed to cost him great effort.

"Dr. Saville," she greeted him. When he sent a quick glance at Rick she added with perfunctory politeness, "Rick Collins, this is my employer, Dr. John Saville."

"Excuse me for butting in, both of you, but I wonder if you know anything about an elderly woman who had a dizzy spell inside the restaurant? I got the call a few minutes ago, but no one inside seems to know a thing about it."

Rebecca thought once again, How odd. Her suspicions grew stronger. Everyone knew Hazel had matchmaking on her mind. But the town matriarch was tricky. It would be just like Hazel to pull a bait and switch. Accusation aimed squarely at Hazel niggled at her for a few seconds, but it passed as abruptly as it popped into her mind. She had too much to deal with right now to give it the consideration it deserved.

"I didn't notice any trouble," she replied. "Did you, Rick?"

He was still in a sullen mood since she had poured cold water on his hot plans for later.

"Maybe whoever it was left already," he suggested without interest.

"Well..." John Saville's gaze raked over Rebecca. He had never seen her with her hair unrestrained like this, framing her face.

"Well," he repeated, starting to turn away, "I guess it was a false alarm."

"Dr. Saville?"

Her voice brought him back around to face them. "Yes?"

Of all the people to request a favor from, why did it have to be him?

"I, that is, Rick's truck has a flat tire, and he has to wait for someone to come fix it. Could you—would you mind giving me a lift home? If it's not too far out of your way."

“Hey, whoa, here,” Rick objected, sensing an invasion of his male territory. “This is still my date with you, not his.”

The totally unwarranted possessiveness made her flush—she hardly knew the guy. He sure had a lot of nerve.

Despite her horror at making a public scene, she couldn’t stop herself from saying, “If I could remind you, Rick, I’m not exactly feeling well, remember?”

“Look,” the doctor said with diplomatic politeness, addressing himself to Rick, “there’s a service station a few blocks down the street. Why don’t I run the tire over there and get it patched?”

It irked her, suddenly, that her employer showed more consideration for this stranger than he did for her. He walks with kings, she thought scornfully, but never loses the common touch—until he comes to work.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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