

PEGGY
MORELAND

SINS OF
A TANNER



Desire

Peggy Moreland

Sins Of A Tanner

Аннотация

Years ago, Whit Tanner had taken Melissa Jacobs into his bed - into his heart - only to have her marry his best friend. Now the pretty widow was struggling to raise her son alone. And Whit was bound by Tanner honor not to deny her request for help.... Melissa Jacobs had a son to think of, a future to protect. But once she saw Whit Tanner, surrendered to his tender touch, she found herself wanting it all, wishing for what could have been. Wondering if the rugged cowboy would ever love her again once he discovered the secret she kept....

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She'd Forgotten How Tender A Kiss Could Be, How Sweet.

Tears filled her eyes. She realized now how badly she'd wanted his kiss, how long she'd yearned for his touch.

As if sensing her need, he drew her closer. Heat spilled through her as he deepened the kiss, holding her body against his. Each place his body touched hers tingled with awareness.

Much too soon, he withdrew and she opened her eyes to find his gaze on her. Lifting a hand, he swept a thumb beneath her eye, catching a tear that had escaped.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"No," she said. "You didn't upset me. It's just that I—"

She dropped her gaze, unable to tell him that the tears were tears of joy, not anger or hurt. But the feelings were too unexpected, too confusing to share.

And the secrets she'd kept were too long hidden to reveal....

Dear Reader,

As expected, Silhouette Desire has loads of passionate, powerful and provocative love stories for you this month. Our DYNASTIES: THE DANFORTHS continuity is winding to a close with the penultimate title, *Terms of Surrender*, by Shirley Rogers. A long-lost Danforth heir may just have been found—and heavens, is this prominent family in for a big surprise! And

talk about steamy secrets, Peggy Moreland is back with Sins of a Tanner, a stellar finale to her series THE TANNERS OF TEXAS.

If it's scandalous behavior you're looking for, look no farther than For Services Rendered by Anne Marie Winston. This MANTALK book—the series that offers stories strictly from the hero's point of view—has a fabulous hero who does the heroine a very special favor. Hmmm. And Alexandra Sellers is back in Desire with a fresh installment of her SONS OF THE DESERT series. Sheikh's Castaway will give you plenty of sweet (and naughty) dreams.

Even more shocking situations pop up in Linda Conrad's sensual Between Strangers. Imagine if you were stuck on the side of the road during a blizzard and a sexy cowboy offered you shelter from the storm.... (Hello, are you still with me?) Rounding out the month is Margaret Allison's Principles and Pleasures, a daring romp between a workaholic heroine and a man she doesn't know is actually her archenemy.

So settle in for some sensual, scandalous love stories...and enjoy every moment!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melissa Jefferies". The signature is written in a dark ink and is centered at the bottom of the page.

Melissa Jeglinski
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

Sins of a Tanner

Peggy Moreland



PEGGY MORELAND

published her first romance with Silhouette 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 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.

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One

It was said that there wasn't a woman in the state of Texas who couldn't be seduced by a Tanner once he set his mind to the task. Tall in stature and richer than sin, with their coal-black hair and bedroom-blue eyes, the Tanner brothers were hard to resist.

Whit Tanner was the exception.

Though he stood over six feet tall and was easy enough on the eye, Whit looked nothing like the men whose name he shared. His hair was brown, not the expected black, and streaked with blond from years of working beneath a hot Texas sun. His eyes were brown, too, rather than the trademark blue, and almost the same color of his hair, thanks to the gold shot through the irises.

And the differences didn't stop there.

While it was a well-known fact the Tanner men could charm the panties off a nun, the only females Whit felt comfortable around wore shoes shaped from iron and walked on four legs. When confronted with the human form of the gender, he tended to stammer and stutter and turn three shades of red—which might explain why he was still a bachelor at the ripe old age of twenty-nine.

Truth be known, Whit had never really thought much about his bachelor status one way or the other. He'd accepted his single state as just another curve life had thrown his way—or he had until all his stepbrothers had started marrying and settling down.

First Ace had hitched himself to Maggie, then Woodrow had taken the fall with the doctor from Dallas. Ry had followed shortly thereafter when he'd hooked up with Kayla, the waitress from Austin who had stolen his heart. Together the two had stirred up a media blitz that had kept the Tanner name in the news for weeks. But it was when Rory, the confirmed bachelor of the bunch, had married Macy Keller that Whit had come to the slow realization that he was the last single Tanner.

"Last single Tanner," Whit muttered as he dragged the saddle down from the top rail of the round pen and swung it over the mare's back. He wasn't a Tanner. Not by birth, at any rate. He was the adopted son, the charity case Buck Tanner had taken on when he'd married Whit's mother.

Everybody in Tanner's Crossing, Whit included, had known that the marriage between Buck and Lee Grainger was no love match. A divorcée supporting herself and her young son on the tips she made waiting tables, Lee had been looking for security, while Buck had wanted someone to raise his four motherless sons. In the deal they'd cut, Lee had gotten the home and security she'd desired and Buck had gotten himself a built-in maid and baby-sitter.

And Whit had gotten the Tanner name.

A rivulet of sweat coursed down between his eyes and dripped from the end of his nose. Shoving back his hat, he dragged a sleeve across his face. But looks and blood weren't all that distinguished him from the Tanners, he thought wearily as he

settled his hat back over his head. Tanners didn't have to sweat out a living beneath a broiling sun.

Not unless they chose to, at any rate.

Puffing his cheeks, he blew out a breath, then reached beneath the horse for the cinch. But things could be worse, he told himself as he threaded the leather strap through the rigging ring. He could be stuck behind a desk in some office, shuffling papers, or trapped in some windowless factory putting together widgeits. Few men were able to work at a job they enjoyed...and Whit purely loved working with horses.

He supposed that was one thing he had Buck Tanner to thank for, as it was while working for Buck on the Bar-T, the Tanners's ranch, that Whit had discovered his affinity with horses. But that was all he'd thank Buck for, he thought bitterly. The man had made a lousy stepfather and, according to Whit's stepbrothers, a lousy father, as well.

He paused to frown. But was there such a thing as a good father?

He snorted a breath and fed another loop through the ring. How the hell would he know. His own had lit out just shy of his third birthday, leaving him and his mother to fend for themselves. He had thought the two of them were getting along just fine without a man around the house when one day, out of the blue, his mother had announced that she was marrying Buck and that he was going to adopt Whit. That Buck had agreed to adopt Whit had surprised some, as Buck had seldom had time for his own

four sons. Whit soon learned he'd had even less for a stepson.

Scowling at the reminder of his stepfather's less than benevolent attitude toward him, he gave the cinch one last tug, making sure it was tight. The horse he was saddling—a green-broke sorrel mare—flattened her ears against her head and danced sideways at the increased pressure. He stroked a hand along the sorrel's neck.

“It's just a saddle, darlin’,” he soothed. “I know it feels strange, but you'll get used to it in time.”

Murmuring softly to the mare, he unfastened the lead rope he'd clipped to the halter and replaced it with a longe line, careful to keep his movements slow and easy so as not to spook the horse. Letting out some length in the rope, he smooched to the mare, encouraging her into a trot along the perimeter of the round pen. With the end of the rope gripped in one gloved hand, he turned a slow circle, keeping a steady eye on the mare's movements from his position in the center of the ring. After five nervous laps, the mare began to relax, gradually bringing her ears up and losing some of the prance in her gait.

He liked the looks of this little mare and hoped he could talk the owner into letting him train her for cutting. She'd make a good cutting horse. She was quick on the hoof, intelligent and responded well to commands. The true test would come when he put her nose-to-nose with a calf and saw how she handled herself under pressure.

The sound of a vehicle broke into his thoughts and he cocked

his head slightly, listening to its approach. When the horse reached a spot along the fence that put him in line with the road, he glanced over the animal's back to see who was coming. A smile chipped at one corner of his mouth when he recognized his stepbrother Rory's truck. Riding shotgun was Macy, Rory's new wife.

While it was true that Whit despised Buck Tanner, his resentment didn't carry over to Buck's sons. He respected his stepbrothers, even liked them. Especially Rory. But he supposed that was because Rory was so damn easy to like.

"Hey, Whit!" Rory called as he and Macy climbed down from the truck. "Where'd you get that old nag?"

Whit chuckled as he maneuvered the horse to the center of the ring. "Better not let Dan Miller hear you call this mare a nag," he warned. "He paid a pretty penny for this little gal."

Rory opened the gate, held it while Macy stepped through, then followed her in. Macy made a beeline straight for Whit, her arms flung wide. He braced himself for the hug he knew was coming. Though he was growing rather used to all the female attention his sisters-in-law smothered him with, he still felt the familiar heat crawl up his neck as Macy wrapped her arms around him and squeezed.

He gave her an awkward one-armed hug in return. "Hey, Macy."

"Keep your hands to yourself," Rory complained, joining them. "That's my wife you're fondling."

“If this is your idea of fondling,” Whit said wryly, “it’s no wonder she latches on to me every time she sees me. The woman’s desperate for affection.”

“If she was, she wouldn’t come to you lookin’ for it,” Rory replied, then hooted a laugh. “Hell, Whit. You wouldn’t know what to do with a woman if one was hand-delivered to you with an instruction book attached.”

Accustomed to Rory’s teasing, Whit hid a smile as he led the horse to the fence and tethered it there. “Did y’all drive all the way out here to give me a hard time or is there a purpose for this visit?”

“We’re here to deliver a personal invitation,” Macy said. “The grand opening for my nursery is a week from this Saturday and I want you to come.”

Whit turned, tugging off his gloves. “Grand opening, huh? Gonna have any good grub on hand?”

“Enough to feed a small army. I’m even serving champagne.”

He winced at the mention of champagne. “This isn’t going to be one of those fancy shindigs where I have to wear a suit, is it?”

Smiling, Macy gave his cheek an affectionate pat. “You can wear your birthday suit, for all I care.”

“You expecting company?” Rory asked.

Whit glanced Rory’s way, then followed his stepbrother’s gaze to the road and the approaching SUV.

Frowning, Whit shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of.”

The three watched as the SUV came to a stop beside Rory’s

truck. Whit's gut clenched in denial when he recognized the woman behind the wheel.

"Isn't that Melissa Jacobs?" Rory asked curiously.

Whit quickly averted his gaze. "Yeah," he muttered as he jerked his gloves back on. "That's her, all right."

"Hey, Melissa," Rory called as the woman stepped from the vehicle. "Long time no see."

Lifting a hand in greeting, she crossed to join them in the pen. "It has been a while," she agreed as she accepted the hand Rory offered her. "It's good to see you, Rory."

"Good to see you, too." He tugged Macy forward. "I don't believe you've met my wife. Macy, Melissa Jacobs."

"Congratulations on your marriage," Melissa said as she shook Macy's hand, turning to include Rory in the well-wishes. "To you both."

"Thanks," Rory replied, then slowly sobered. "I sure was sorry to hear about Matt's death. Man, what a shock."

Her smile fading, she nodded. "Yes, it was."

"If there's anything I can do..."

"No," she said quickly, "but I appreciate the thought."

"So," Rory said in an obvious effort to change the subject, "what brings you all the way out here?"

"I came to see Whit."

Rory caught Macy's elbow. "Then we'll get out of your way."

Whit had remained silent and watchful throughout the exchange, but panicked at the thought of being left alone with

Melissa. "There's no need for y'all to run off," he said in a rush. "As soon as I'm done here, we can go up to the house and get us something cool to drink."

Rory glanced at his watch, then shook his head. "Sorry, bro, but we'll have to take a rain check. We left Macy's dad at the nursery alone, and he's liable to disown us if a shipment of plants arrives and he has to unload the truck by himself. See you Sunday at lunch," he called as he herded Macy toward the truck.

"I hope they didn't leave on my account."

Whit glanced Melissa's way, then away, with a frown. "You heard what he said. They had to get back to the nursery." Keeping his back to her, he lifted a stirrup and hooked it over the saddle horn. "Matt's been dead, what? Four months now? Shouldn't you be home grieving?"

He heard her shocked intake of breath and knew that what he'd said was uncalled for. Even cruel. But he didn't care. An eye for an eye. Isn't that what the Good Book taught? You hurt me, I hurt you back.

"I didn't come here to be insulted," she said tersely.

"Then why are you here?"

"I have a horse I want you to break."

He continued to unsaddle the mare, keeping his gaze fixed on the task and his back to her. "There are other trainers available. If you don't know one, I can give you a name."

"I don't want just any trainer. The horse...is Matt's."

Her hesitancy in identifying the horse's owner was obvious...

and telling. Matt Jacobs. Melissa's husband and Whit's best friend.

Ex-best friend, he thought bitterly.

His scowl deepening, he dragged off the saddle and swung it up to balance on the top rail. He knew the horse she wanted him to break. Matt had purchased the stud as a colt several years back, with the intent to train him for the racetrack. The horse's bloodlines were impressive. Unfortunately his temperament wasn't.

Grabbing a brush, he swept it across the mare's back in short, impatient strokes. "Why not just sell the damn horse?" he said irritably. "He'd bring a fair price."

"He'll bring a better one if he's trained."

He heard the determination in her voice and a hint of something more. Desperation?

Refusing to be moved by it, he shook his head and continued to brush down the horse. "I've got a list a mile long of people waiting for me to train their horses. I haven't got time to take on any more."

"I'll pay you your standard fee, plus a percentage of the horse's sale price."

Startled by the unusual offer, he glanced her way...and immediately wished he hadn't. Seeing her again brought every memory, every heartbreak, winging back. Eyes the color of aged whiskey; long, honey-blond hair that tumbled over her shoulders in soft waves; delicate features that had haunted his nights for

seven long years.

Tearing his gaze away, he tossed the brush into the tack box and plucked out a currycomb. “Like I said. I don’t need any more business.”

“Whit, please—”

“No,” he snapped, then spun to glare at her. “Now, if you want me to recommend someone, I will. Otherwise I’d appreciate it if you’d get off my land.”

Melissa sat parked in front of the school, her SUV at the head of the car pool line. A soft breeze blew through the open window on her left, ruffling her hair, but it didn’t come close to cooling the heat in her cheeks. She was embarrassed. Humiliated. Furious. Panic-stricken. It had taken her weeks to work up the nerve to approach Whit about breaking Matt’s horse. Weeks spent searching for another option, anything, so long as it didn’t include Whit. In the end, she was forced to admit he was her only option.

And he’d turned her down flat.

Not that she had expected him to leap at her offer. She’d known going in that there was a strong chance he would refuse. What she hadn’t known was how much it would hurt when he did.

The doors to the school flew open and children spilled out, shrieking and laughing as they raced for the cars that lined the narrow lane. Melissa quickly unfastened her seat belt and pushed open her door. Before she could step down, a pair of arms vised around her legs.

“Hi, Mom!”

Chuckling, she scrubbed her knuckles over her son’s blond hair. “Hi, yourself, kiddo.” She reached down and lifted him up and over her, then plopped him into the passenger seat beside her.

“And how was your day?” she asked as she fastened the seat belt around him.

“Joey Matthews threw up all over his art paper and Shane Ragsdale’s dog had thirteen puppies. Can I have one? Please? Can I?”

She turned the key, starting the engine. “We already have a dog,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, but Champ’s not mine. He’s yours. I want a puppy that’s all mine.”

She checked for traffic, then pulled out onto the street. “One dog is all we can handle right now.”

“Please, Mom?” he begged, straining against the seat belt. “I’ll feed him and take care of him. You won’t have to do nothin’, I promise.”

“Anything,” she corrected automatically, then sighed, feeling as if she was always saying no to her son. “We can’t afford to feed another animal right now,” she explained gently. “You know that.”

He slumped against the seat in a sulk. “Being poor sucks,” he mumbled.

“Grady Jacobs!” she cried. “We are not poor.”

“Then how come you have to sell Dad’s horse?”

“Because we need money more than we need a horse,” she replied, then gave him a stern look. “But that does not mean we are poor.” Jutting her chin, she faced the windshield again. “We’re just experiencing a temporary cash flow problem.”

“Angela Hanes’s mom said we don’t have a pot to pee in or a window to throw it out.”

It was all she could do to keep the vehicle on the road. “Angela’s mother said that to you?” she asked in amazement.

“No, Angela did. She heard her mom talking to Mrs. Henley on the phone. I asked Angela what it meant and she said it meant we’re poor. That when Dad died he left us broke.”

She narrowed her eyes, furious to know that her friends and neighbors were talking about her behind her back. “Well, Mrs. Hanes is wrong,” she informed him. “We are not broke.”

“Then why can’t I have a puppy?”

She closed her eyes a moment, praying for patience, for just the right words to make her son understand their financial situation without letting him know how desperate it really was.

“Before Matt died,” she said carefully, “we had two incomes to pay our bills. With him gone now, we only have the money I make.”

“I could help you so you could earn more money.”

Her heart melting at the offer, she reached to smooth the hair back from his brow. “Thanks, sweet heart. But I don’t want you worrying about our financial situation, okay? Once we sell Matt’s

horse, everything will be fine.”

And everything would be fine, she told herself as she turned her gaze to the road again.

Just as soon as she found someone to break Matt's horse.

After the unexpected visit from Melissa on Monday, Whit's week went downhill in a hurry. Tuesday, one of the studs in his care cut his foreleg while fighting with another stud through the fence that separated them. It required a call to the vet and another to inform the stud's owner, which cost him almost a full day's work. To make matters worse, Wednesday night a raccoon got into the feed room and tore into the sacks of oats stored there, ruining three perfectly good sacks of feed and creating a hell of a mess for Whit to clean up on Thursday. Then on Sunday, a gelding Whit was working with bucked him off, conveniently dumping him in a fresh pile of manure. By the time he returned the horse to its stall and limped back to the house for a shower and a change of clothes, it was pushing noon.

He considered blowing off going to the Bar-T, where his stepbrothers and their families gathered for Sunday lunch, and kicking back with a beer and an afternoon of ESPN instead. But he knew, if he did, the entire Tanner clan would probably show up at his house, looking for him.

Shuddering at the thought of having all those people crammed into his small house, he climbed into his truck and made the drive to the Bar-T. Thanks to the gelding and the landing spot he'd chosen for Whit, he was the last to arrive.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said as he slid into the empty chair beside Rory.

Rory glanced his way, then pulled back, with a frown. “What happened to you?”

Grimacing, Whit rubbed a self-conscious hand over the bruise the fall had left on his cheek. “Horse pitched me off.”

Ry passed Whit a platter stacked high with chicken-fried steak. “If you want, I can take a look at that for you later,” he offered. “Make sure there aren’t any broken bones.”

Whit forked up a steak and dropped it onto his plate before passing the platter on. “It’s nothing. Just a bruise.”

Maggie gave her husband, Ace, a pointed look. “I’ve heard that one before,” she said dryly.

Familiar with the story of Ace’s fall from a horse and his refusal to allow Maggie to take him to the doctor, everyone shared a laugh at Ace’s expense.

“Laugh all you want,” Ace said grumpily. “But a man who can’t take a tumble from a horse, without running to some sawbones to get patched up, isn’t much of a man. Right, Whit?”

Whit glanced around the table. With two doctors and two nurses waiting expectantly for his answer, he decided discretion was the better part of valor. “Whatever you say, Ace.”

“Coward,” Rory said out of the corner of his mouth.

“I’ve already got one bruise,” Whit told him. “I’m not looking for another.”

With a rueful shake of his head, Rory returned to his meal.

“Looks like the lawyers are going to have the old man’s estate ready to settle in a couple of weeks,” Ace said. “We’ll need to pick a time we can all meet to sign the necessary papers.”

A discussion followed, but Whit tuned it out and focused on his meal. Although Ace had told him he would inherit a fifth of the old man’s estate, the same as the rest of his stepbrothers, Whit had informed Ace that he wanted no part of anything that was Buck’s.

“What about you, Whit?” Ace asked. “Is May 29 at two all right with you?”

Caught with his fork halfway to his mouth, Whit glanced around the table and found everyone looking at him expectantly. He slowly lowered the fork to his plate. “I already told y’all I don’t want any part of Buck’s estate.”

“And we understand your reasons for feeling that way,” Ace assured him. “But you’re getting an equal share the same as the rest of us, whether you want it or not.”

“You know damned good and well that if Buck had left a will, he wouldn’t have named me in it,” Whit said.

“That may be true,” Ace conceded. “But there’s a strong chance he wouldn’t have named us, either, since he wasn’t on speaking terms with any of his offspring at the time of his death. Since he didn’t leave a will, the law requires that his estate be divided equally among his children.”

“I’m not one of his children,” Whit reminded him.

“By law you are. I have the adoption papers to prove it.”

Whit slumped back in his chair. “Come on, Ace,” he said in frustration. “Can’t you just tell the lawyers to cut me out?”

Ace opened his hands in a helpless gesture. “Sorry, the law is the law. And without your signature,” he added, “the estate can’t be settled, nor can the assets be awarded.” Knowing he’d put Whit on the spot, he reared back smugly in his chair. “So, how does May 29 at two work for you to meet and sign the papers?”

Scowling, Whit stabbed his fork into his steak. “I’ll sign whatever papers are necessary, but I’ll never touch a cent of Buck’s money.”

“That’s your prerogative,” Rory said, then quickly changed the subject. “So what was Melissa doing over at your house the other day?”

His frown deepening, Whit cut into his steak. “She wanted me to break a horse for her.”

“Melissa Jacobs?” Elizabeth, Woodrow’s wife, asked curiously.

“One and the same,” Rory replied, then gave Whit a speculative look. “Didn’t the two of you use to date?”

Whit stiffened, unaware that Rory—or anyone else, for that matter—had known that he’d dated Melissa. Breaking open a roll, he lifted his shoulder in what he hoped came across as an indifferent shrug. “We went out for a while.”

“Really?” Ace said. “I didn’t know Melissa ever dated anyone other than Matt.”

And you could’ve gone on thinking that, Whit thought

resentfully, if Rory had kept his dang mouth shut.

Avoiding Ace's gaze, he slathered his roll with butter. "Like I said, it was only for a while."

Elizabeth shook her head sadly. "I don't know Melissa all that well, but I feel so sorry for her. Losing a husband in such a tragic accident is bad enough, but to discover that he has left you penniless must be awful."

Whit slowly lowered his knife to his plate and stared at Elizabeth. "Matt left Melissa broke?"

Elizabeth glanced uneasily at the others at the table. "Well, yes. At least, that's what I heard. I assumed it was true."

"It's true enough," Woodrow confirmed. "Dillon Phillips bought a plow from her last week. Said he got it for a good price as she needed the money to make her mortgage."

Whit snorted a breath and picked up his fork. "If that's the story she gave him, she was feeding him a line of bull. There's no mortgage on that property. I know for a fact that Matt inherited the farm free and clear from his granddaddy." He scooped up a forkful of potatoes, then added, "But even if it was true she was broke, Melissa wouldn't have to sell off assets to make her note. Mike would give her whatever she needed."

Macy held up a hand. "Wait a minute. You've lost me. Who is Mike and what does he have to do with Melissa?"

"Mike's Melissa's father," Rory explained. "Lives over in Lampasas. He and Buck were old running buddies. With Buck gone now, Mike's probably the single most wealthy man around

these parts.”

“If that’s the case,” Macy said, “then it would seem that she’d ask her father for money, if she truly needed it.”

“Not necessarily.”

When everyone turned to look at Kayla, she lifted her hands. “Heck, I wouldn’t. It’s a matter of pride.”

Ry gave his wife’s arm an indulgent pat. “Yes, dear. We’re all familiar with your pride.”

“Kayla may have a point,” Rory said in his sister-in-law’s defense. “If you think about it, it’s the only explanation that makes any sense. As I recall, Melissa and Mike butted heads a lot while she was growing up.”

“I can vouch for that,” Ace agreed. “I remember more than once hearing Mike complain to Buck about Melissa being stubborn as a mule.”

“Then it’s unlikely that she would go to her father for help,” Elizabeth said, then shook her head sadly. “And that makes me feel even more sorry for her. At a time like this, a woman needs the support of her family.”

Whit swallowed hard. He knew from personal experience that Rory’s and Ace’s comments about Mike and Melissa butting heads were true. Mike was a hard man to get along with under any circumstances, but the level of control he’d tried to wield over his only daughter would have made even the most docile of individuals fight at the chains he kept her bound with.

And Elizabeth was right, as well. Considering Melissa’s past

relationship with her father, it seemed unlikely that she would turn to him in her time of need.

But if she couldn't go to her father for help, he wondered, who could she go to?

He wiped a shaky hand down his mouth, remembering her visit to his place and the desperation in her voice, when she'd asked him to train the horse.

And how had he responded to her plea for help?

He'd not only refused, he'd ordered her off his land.

He quickly shook off the guilt that tried to settle on his shoulders. He wouldn't feel badly about the way he'd treated Melissa. Hell, why should he? he thought defensively. She'd certainly never concerned herself with his feelings. He'd given her his heart and what had she done in return?

She'd eloped with his best friend.

Two

Though Whit continued to fight the guilt, it dogged his steps for a week, distracting him from his work and robbing him of much-needed sleep at night. He didn't want to feel badly for the way he'd treated Melissa. And he sure as hell didn't want to feel sorry for her. But that's exactly what he found himself doing throughout the week.

By Saturday he was willing to do just about anything to shake loose from the guilt, and the grand opening for Nature's Way, Macy's landscape and nursery business, offered him the perfect escape. He wasn't much on socializing, but he figured going to the grand opening was better than spending another evening at home alone with his conscience.

Even if he did have to wear a suit.

In spite of his anxiousness to attend the party, he was one of the last to arrive and had to park two blocks away and walk to the greenhouse where the opening was to take place.

One step inside the cavernous building reminded him why he normally avoided social gatherings. The noise level alone would have made a deaf man clap his hands over his ears. The music itself wasn't too bad—or at least what he could hear of it sounded pleasant enough. It was the hundred or so conversations going on at the same time that made his head ache.

A waiter rushed by, balancing a tray filled with flutes of

champagne on his shoulder, and Whit quickly stepped out of the way to avoid a collision. Easing back to stand against the wall and out of harm's way, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and looked around.

The last time he'd visited the nursery, the greenhouse had looked like...well, a greenhouse, with long wooden tables laden with plants running the length of the room and tangled hoses trailing over the floor. Now the place looked more like one of those fancy solariums he'd seen featured in the home and garden magazines his sisters-in-law were always drooling over—a fete he figured only Macy could pull off with such style.

A huge tree-shaped fountain, carved from native limestone, rose from the center of a grouping of curved buffet tables. Water bubbled up from the tree's dome and flowed down over intricately carved leaves to tumble into a shallow pool below. Rimmed with vases of fresh-cut flowers that scented the air and strategically placed lighting, the pool and fountain created a spectacular centerpiece for the mouthwatering feast of hors d'oeuvres placed around it.

Above him, miniature lights had been strung along the steel beams that formed the glass roof, giving the ceiling the appearance of a star-filled sky. Urns and pots filled with lush tropical plants occupied every available nook, while tall Norfolk pines stood like sentinels at each of the three doorways. Along the outer walls of the building hung baskets filled with an assortment of flowers and vines, adding yet another splash of

color and texture to the space.

Though impressed with Macy's decorating skills, to truly enjoy it, Whit would have needed a hammock and about two hours alone. For a man who spent the majority of his time in the country, conducting one-sided conversations with horses, the press of people and the noise they created were almost more than he could bear.

Deciding that an evening at home with his conscience didn't seem so bad after all, he began to ease his way down the wall, craning his neck as he searched for Macy, so he could make an appearance and split. Just as he spotted her, his hip bumped something solid and he made a wild grab to keep the object from falling.

"Hey!" Macy cried. "Careful with the merchandise."

His smile sheepish, he righted what appeared to be an old garden gate. "Sorry, Mace," he said, then glanced down at his hands and the rust that covered them. "Uh, you might want to have a talk with your supplier. Looks like he's selling you inferior products."

"Are you kidding me? Salvaged iron is the rage! This stuff flies out of the store faster than I can slap a price tag on it."

Giving her a skeptical look, Whit squatted in front of the gate to examine it more closely. Though old and no longer functional, someone had given it new life by attaching glass jars to the scrolled iron that formed it. Secured by a fine-gauge wire, the jars held lighted votive candles and fresh-cut flowers.

Impressed by the ingenious use of material, Whit pushed his hands against his knees and stood. “Okay,” he conceded. “I have to admit that’s pretty darn clever.”

She lifted a brow. “It can be yours for a price.”

He sputtered a laugh. “And what would I do with a piece of foolishness like that?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, hiding a smile. “I suppose you could set it up on your patio and wow the ladies you entertain at home.”

“What ladies?” he asked wryly.

“My point exactly,” she said as she looped her arm through his and led him toward the crowd. “You need to get out more. Go places where you can meet single women your age.”

“Aw, Macy,” he complained. “Don’t start with me. You know how I am around women. Especially ones I don’t know.”

“Fine. Then we’ll find a woman you do know for you to talk to.”

He tugged her to a stop and lifted a brow. “I am. I’m talking to you.”

“A single woman,” she clarified.

He did a quick scan of the crowd, then shrugged. “Sorry, but it appears all the women here are either married or engaged.”

Macy snagged the arm of a woman who was passing by. “This one’s not.”

“Whoa,” the woman said, laughing as Macy hauled her back. “What am I not?”

“Married,” Macy replied. “Whit was complaining that every woman here was either married or engaged. I just proved him wrong.”

As the woman turned to look at Whit, resentment knotted in his gut when he discovered that out of all the available women in the room, Macy had chosen Melissa Jacobs to prove her point.

“I should have added widow to that list,” he muttered, then turned on his heel and walked away.

The next morning Whit was in the barn early, cleaning out the stalls. It was a hot, backbreaking job, but it suited his mood just fine as he had some steam to work off.

He couldn’t believe he’d run into Melissa the night before. The odds of seeing her twice in a two-week span, after successfully avoiding her for nearly seven years, had to be high.

But Whit’s luck had never been very good. Not where Melissa was concerned.

“I think you owe me an explanation.”

Startled by the voice, he snapped up his head to find Macy standing in the stall’s open doorway. That she was angry with him was obvious in the hands she held fisted against her hips.

With a frown, he resumed his shoveling. “For what?”

Dropping her hands, she marched toward him. “Don’t you play dumb with me, Whit Tanner. You know very well that you were rude to Melissa last night, and I want to know why.”

“No offense, Macy, but you’re not my mother.”

“A fact you should be grateful for,” she informed him. “If

I was, I'd turn you over my knee and give you a spanking you wouldn't soon forget."

He snorted a breath. "I'd like to see you try."

"Don't tempt me," she warned. "I'm about a hair away from snatching you bald-headed as it is."

He stood the shovel up and braced an arm over the handle to peer at her. "Do you talk to Rory like that?"

"Don't try to change the subject. I want an explanation, and I'm not leaving until I get one."

To prove her point, she sat on a bale of hay and folded her arms across her chest. The clencher for Whit, though, was when she pursed her lips and lifted an expectant brow.

Grimacing, he shot the shovel blade beneath a pile of manure and scooped it up, planning to ignore her. He crossed to the wheelbarrow, dumped the manure, then repeated the process four more times. By the time he shot the shovel beneath the fifth pile, her steady gaze was burning a hole in his back and the heavy silence that stretched between them was screaming in his ears.

"Okay!" he said in frustration. "I left because I didn't want to talk to her."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't. Period." He scooped up manure, then turned to frown at her. "And you might as well go on home and irritate Rory for a while, because that's the only explanation you're going to get from me."

Jutting her chin, she stood. "All right. I'll go. But not before I

have my say. Last night you insulted not only one of my guests, but one of my suppliers as well, and I think you owe her an apology.”

“If by supplier you mean Melissa, you’re crazy as a loon. She’s never worked a day in her life.”

“That just proves how little you know. I’ve bought a number of her creations, including the garden gate you tripped over.”

When he merely looked at her, she sagged her shoulders in frustration. “I know you’re shy around women, Whit. But you’re not a mean person. In fact, I can’t think of another man with a heart as soft as yours. That’s why it’s so hard for me to understand why you’d intentionally hurt a woman who has suffered such a tremendous loss, one who is struggling so hard to pull herself out of debt.”

“I did nothing but walk away. If that offended her, that’s her problem, not mine.”

“Her husband was your friend,” she reminded him stubbornly. “And from what Rory has told me, your best friend. If for no other reason than out of respect for Matt, I would think you could put aside whatever differences you might have with his wife, and offer her the kindness and support she needs and deserves.”

Macy may not have gotten the explanation or apology she thought she deserved from Whit, but she had succeeded in making him feel like a heel, a trait he didn’t feel he deserved.

Yeah, you do, his conscience argued. Macy was right. Matt was your friend. Your best friend. And friends take care of

friends.

Scowling, Whit lifted a bale of hay high and heaved it onto the growing stack in the barn's loft. "Matt was a friend, all right," he muttered as he reached for another bale. "The minute I turned my back, he stole my girl."

Your girl?

Yes, dammit, Whit thought angrily as he hefted the bale up. She might have been Matt's girl first, but she'd broken things off with him and started dating Whit. And she'd still be Whit's girl now, maybe even his wife, if Matt hadn't stolen her away.

What did he do? Hold a gun to her head? Hog-tie and gag her? Surely, Matt isn't the only one to blame.

His scowl deepening, Whit shoved the bale onto the stack. No, Melissa owned a part, as well. She'd made Whit fall in love with her. Even claimed to love him, too. Then, the minute he'd left town, she'd run off with his best friend.

There. You admitted it. Matt was your best friend. Y'all sure had some good times together. Remember the night the two of you stole a six-pack of beer out of Matt's parents' refrigerator and got drunk as skunks out by the lake?

Grimacing, Whit tugged off his work gloves. Yeah, he remembered that night, all right. And others, as well.

With a sigh, he sank onto a bale of hay and dropped his forehead to his hands, unable to stop the memories from surfacing.

Growing up, he and Matt had all but lived together, spending

almost every waking hour in each other's company. Before his mother had married Buck and was still working at the café in town, she had arranged for Whit to go home with Matt after school each day. He and Matt would play some ball, watch a little television, wrestle on the floor. His first black eye was courtesy of a left Matt had thrown that Whit hadn't dodged in time.

Even after his mother and Buck had married and Whit had moved to Buck's ranch, he and Matt had managed to continue their friendship. Matt was the one who had listened to all of Whit's frustrations of living in the Tanner household. And it was Matt who had helped him devise the scheme the time he'd planned to run away.

And it was Matt who was the first to appear at the Tanner's door the day Whit's mother was killed in a car wreck.

He gulped back emotion as an image of Matt as he'd looked that day formed in his mind—standing on the porch, his hat in his hands, tears streaming down his face. Whit had needed Matt that day. Needed the comfort and strength his friend had offered as he'd faced the biggest tragedy of his life.

And he'd needed his friend in the days that had followed, when Whit had announced to Buck that he was moving out and Buck had refused to let him go. Since Buck had adopted Whit, by law he was Whit's legal guardian. And there was no way Buck was going to let Whit leave when he represented a source of free labor for the Tanner ranch.

Matt had stood by Whit, with him, helping to make the

intolerable tolerable. Without his friend, Whit wasn't sure he would've survived those last few years he'd lived under Buck's dominating rule.

Guilt tried to settle itself on his shoulders again, but he stubbornly shook it off. He wouldn't feel badly for not helping Matt's widow. He didn't believe for a minute that Matt had left Melissa in the dire financial straits his family insisted she was in. Hell! Matt wasn't an extravagant man. He might have come from money, but he was a good ol' country boy with simple taste and simpler needs, same as Whit.

At least that was the kind of man Matt had been when he and Whit were still running around together. Had he changed that much over the years?

Whit dropped his hands to his thighs with a sigh of defeat. It didn't matter if Matt had changed or not, he told himself as he pushed to his feet. Matt had been a friend, a good friend. And just as his conscience had reminded him, friends took care of friends.

Or, in this case, a friend's family.

Melissa laced her fingers together to keep from wringing her hands as she trailed the trainer, watching as he threw his gear into the back of his truck. He was the third man she'd hired for the job in the same number of days and the third one to leave without so much as laying a hand on the horse.

"I know War Lord can be difficult," she began uneasily.

"Difficult?" he repeated, then barked a laugh and climbed into

his truck. “Lady, that horse isn’t difficult. He’s plumb crazy!”

“Please,” she begged. “Give him another chance. I’m sure he’ll settle down once he gets used to you.”

Heaving a sigh, the man braced his arm on the open window frame and leaned out. “Look, lady,” he said kindly. “That horse is never gonna amount to anything. You can’t even sell him for glue, what with him refusing to load into a trailer. If you want, I’ll put him down for you. No charge.”

Sickened by the suggestion, she stepped back, shaking her head. “N-no. I won’t put him down. I can’t.”

With a shrug, he pulled his arm inside. “It’s your nightmare.”

She watched him drive away, sure that he was taking with him her last hope of paying off her debts. She’d already contacted every trainer within a hundred-mile radius. There was no one left for her to call. It was all she could do to keep from sinking to the ground and crying like a baby.

But crying wouldn’t solve her problems. She’d shed enough tears over the past four months to know that crying wouldn’t get her out of the mess Matt had left her in. Aware of that, she squared her shoulders and turned for the house and the studio behind it.

Throughout her marriage to Matt, the studio had served as a refuge for her as well as a place for her to work. Today, more than ever, she needed the solace it offered. As she stepped inside, walls painted a soft, soothing blue seemed to wrap themselves around her and pull her in. Everything in the room, from the

braided rag rug on the floor to the ceiling fan that stirred the air, she'd chosen herself. More, she'd purchased them with money she'd earned with her own two hands. And it was that feeling of independence, that sense of accomplishment, that carried her on to the worktable that stood on the far side of the room.

Stopping in front of the table, she ran a hand lightly over the edge of the half-finished frame she'd been working on prior to the trainer telling her he was quitting. The tiles of broken china that covered half the frame's face were cool to the touch and rough with dried grout. A pile of unused tiles lay near at hand, waiting to be fitted into place.

Here was the familiar, she thought as she slid onto the stool. The sure. Everything else in her life might be in chaos, but in this one room was peace. Here she was in control.

With her mind already focusing in on the design, she selected a tile and set to work.

Whit gazed at the Lone Star flag painted on the roof of the horse barn as he drove past, wondering if Matt had painted the design himself or hired it done. In either case, he liked the tribute to their home state of Texas and wouldn't mind having a similar one painted on the roof of his own barn.

Focusing his gaze back on the road, he drove the remaining distance to the house, turned off the engine, then sank back and simply stared, remembering the first time Matt had brought him to the house. Matt had been higher than a kite that day, excited about the prospect of living on his own for the first time.

But living on his own was all Matt had to be excited about, he thought wryly as the house hadn't amounted to much back then. An inheritance from his granddaddy, the house had stood vacant for nearly a year before Matt had taken possession of it. Judging by its condition at the time, it had been neglected for a good deal longer than that. Grass had stood knee-high in the yard and loose panels of tin on the roof had flapped in the afternoon breeze, creating an eery sound. But as Matt had said when Whit had commented on the house's poor condition, "Hell, it's free! Who can complain about that?"

Whit certainly couldn't...and hadn't. At the time he'd still been living at the Bar-T under Buck's rule and would've given his right arm to have a place to call his own, even if that place was in danger of collapse at any given moment.

But the house Whit sat in front of now held little resemblance to the one Matt had shown him that day. Fresh paint and a new roof had gone a long way toward improving its appearance. But there was another quality that increased its appeal. Something that could only be sensed, not seen.

Somewhere along the way, the house had become a home.

He could all but feel the warmth that emanated from it, smell the scent of fresh-baked bread wafting from the open windows. A swing suspended from the ceiling of the covered front porch swung lazily in the afternoon breeze, the pillows scattered along its back plump and inviting. Clay pots filled with bright geraniums edged the steps, while tall wicker planters

holding lacy-leafed ferns welcomed guests from either side of the door.

He wanted to believe that Matt was responsible for the changes, just as he wanted to believe that Matt had painted the Lone Star flag on the barn roof. But he knew better. Matt was never one to fret much over appearances. He was just too darn lazy to put forth the effort. If left up to him, the house—as well as the barn—would have remained in the same condition as the day he had moved in.

That left only one person who could be responsible for the changes.

Melissa.

Which made Whit wonder if she was also the one responsible for the debts Matt had supposedly left behind. It wasn't a stretch to imagine her requesting—maybe even demanding—that he remodel the house. More so than Matt, she had come from money and was used to having the best of everything. Her father's home in Lampasas was nothing short of a mansion, complete with a live-in housekeeper, cook and full-time groundskeeper. For her to leave all that opulence and move into Matt's house must have been a shock for her.

But from the looks of things, she hadn't wasted any time bringing the house up to her standards.

Setting his jaw against the resentment that rose, he climbed down from his truck and strode to the front door, anxious to get his business with her over with and be on his way. He rapped

his knuckles hard against the screen door, then waited. When no sound came from within, he glanced around, then headed for the rear of the house. A shed at the back of the yard caught his attention and made him stop and stare. He remembered the building from his first visit to Matt's place as looking as if it was one strong wind away from collapse. Nothing at all like it appeared now.

The wood frame structure had been painted a soft, buttery yellow and trimmed out in a crisp, clean white. The glass in the two windows that faced the front gleamed in the afternoon sunshine and reflected images of the flowers that spilled from the window boxes suspended below them. Though the afternoon was hot, a Dutch-style door was propped open to catch the occasional breeze.

Drawn by the open doorway, curious, Whit crossed the yard to peer inside. Against the far wall, he found Melissa sitting with her back to him, her head bent over some unseen task. Since she didn't appear to have heard his approach, he took a moment to look around.

The room was crowded with a wild assortment of items yet he sensed an order to the chaos. Shelving lined the two longest walls and held buckets of paint, tools and what looked to be jars filled with beads and buttons. A child's playpen was angled into a far corner and stacked high with old, faded quilts. To his left, salvaged iron was propped against the wall, visual proof that Melissa had designed the gate he had tripped over at the grand

opening, just as Macy had claimed.

Not liking the stab of guilt that accompanied the discovery, he scowled.

“Where do you get all this junk?”

Startled, Melissa spun on the stool, her eyes wide in alarm. They narrowed to slits when her gaze met his.

Snatching a rag from the table behind her, she stood and wiped her fingers with quick, angry jerks of her hand. “If you’ve come to insult me again, you can leave.”

He was tempted to do just that. Leave. She was the one who needed him. He sure as hell didn’t need her or her attitude.

But he’d come to help out a friend, he reminded himself. And he wasn’t leaving until he had.

Dragging off his hat, he stepped inside.

“I stopped by to take a look at that horse you wanted me to train.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “I thought you said you didn’t have time to take on any more clients.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Seems now I do.”

She eyed him a moment longer, then turned her back and swiped the rag over the tabletop, sending white dust to clog the air. “Sorry. But I’ve already hired someone else.”

He knew she was lying and knew how to prove it, too. “Who?”

She froze, her fingers knotting in the rag. Forcing her hand into motion again, she said, “That’s none of your business.”

“I’m making it mine.”

When she didn't respond, he lost what little patience he had left with her. Crossing the room in two long strides, he grabbed her elbow and spun her around to face him.

"Listen, dammit," he said angrily. "I know you're in a bind and I'm here to offer my help."

Though the grip he had on her was strong, she didn't cower in fear, as he might have expected. Instead she met his gaze squarely and with an anger that matched his own.

"Why would you want to help me?"

He released her arm with a force that sent her stumbling back a step. "Don't kid yourself, Melissa. I wouldn't spit on you, if you were on fire. I'm doing this for Matt. He was my friend."

"Friend?" she repeated incredulously. "How can you claim to be his friend when you couldn't even be bothered to come to his funeral?"

Shame burned through Whit, but he refused to let her see it. No, he hadn't gone to Matt's funeral. But it wasn't because he hadn't wanted to be there. He'd wanted to go, if for no other reason than to honor the friendship the two had once shared. But he'd deliberately stayed away, knowing that, if he went, he'd see Melissa.

But he wouldn't tell her that. If he did, she might think he still had feelings for her. And he felt nothing for her. Nothing at all.

"Matt was my friend," he maintained stubbornly. "And he'd still be my friend today if you hadn't come between us."

She paled at the accusation, then quickly turned away.

But not before Whit saw the guilt that stained her cheeks.

She inhaled a deep breath, then turned to face him, her chin tilted high enough to catch water. “All right. If training the horse will clear your conscience, then you have my permission to train it.”

Clear his conscience? he thought in amazement. It wasn't his conscience that needed clearing. But she could believe whatever she wanted to believe. He'd come to do a favor for an old friend, not to get into a spitting contest with that friend's widow.

Ramming his hat over his head, he turned for the door. “I'll load him up and take him to my place.”

“You can't.”

He stopped, barely able to contain his frustration. “You just said I could train him.”

“He doesn't load.”

Praying he'd misunderstood, he turned to look at her. “The horse doesn't load?”

She shook her head.

He was tempted to tell her to forget it, that he didn't have time to drive the sixty-plus miles to Briggs and back every day that working with the horse would require. But he'd come to return a favor to a friend and he wasn't going to back out now just because of a little inconvenience.

Dragging off his hat, he pushed his fingers through his hair. “That's gonna change things some,” he said as he worked through his schedule in his mind. “I have stock to feed at my own place,

plus a few that'll require exercise before I can head this way. I probably wouldn't be able to make it over here until noon or so."

Judging by the way she pursed her lips, he assumed she wasn't too pleased with the time he'd named. But what difference did it make if he came at sunup or sundown? he asked himself. Either way, the horse got trained, and that was what she wanted, wasn't it?

Already questioning his sanity in making the offer, he snugged on his hat and turned to leave again. "Look for me around noon tomorrow."

Melissa didn't want to look for Whit, at all. If she never laid eyes on him again, she would die a happy woman.

But looking for him was exactly what she found herself doing the next day as the clock slowly wound its way to noon.

He finally showed up at nine minutes after twelve. She knew the exact moment of his arrival because she glanced at the wall clock above her worktable when she heard his truck, and quickly did the math to see how much time remained before she had to pick up Grady from school. Two hours. Would that give Whit enough time to work with the horse and be gone before she returned?

Intending to ask him how long he planned to stay, she turned to look out the window again and was surprised to see that he had turned onto the lane that led to the barn instead of continuing on to the house.

Irritated that he didn't think it necessary to check in with

her before beginning work, she pursed her lips and turned her attention back to the cutter quilt she had spread over her worktable and the pattern pinned to it. Well, she certainly wasn't going to make the long trek to the barn to see if he needed anything, she told herself as she pushed a tracing wheel along the pattern. Not in this heat. If he had any questions, he could darn well come to her. She was the one paying him, after all. Not the other way around.

Reminded of the money she would owe him, she caught her lower lip between her teeth. She didn't have the money to pay Whit. Not and pay her monthly bills, too.

She blew out a breath. "Who am I trying to kid?" she muttered as she pressed the wheel against the quilt again. She wouldn't have the money to pay him even if she didn't pay her bills.

But he'd get what was due him, she told herself. She'd see that he did. He just wouldn't get it until he'd completed the job and the horse was sold. She'd done her research. At the price War Lord would bring, she'd have enough money to pay Whit his trainer's fee, plus the percentage of the sale price she had promised him, and still have enough left to pay off a large portion of Matt's debts.

She cast an uneasy glance over her shoulder. Or she would if Whit was able to train the horse. The other three men she'd hired for the job had been unable to get close enough to the horse to touch him, much less work with him.

Reminded of the horse's mean disposition, she caught her

lower lip between her teeth again and worried it as she strained to see the area surrounding the barn. She really should at least warn Whit that the horse might be difficult to handle, she told herself.

Huffing a breath, she turned away from the window and pressed the wheel against the pattern again. He was a professional trainer, for heaven's sake. He'd all but grown up on a horse. He didn't need her to warn him that one might be dangerous.

Or did he?

Unsure of the answer, she dropped the wheel and hurried for the door.

When she didn't see any sign of Whit or the horse in the pen or the corral, she broke into a run. By the time she reached the barn, she was out of breath and convinced that War Lord had trampled Whit to death in the stall.

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