



HARLEQUIN®

Temptation®

981
July

THE SPIRITS
ARE WILLING



HEATHER
MACALLISTER

"...hilarious and emotionally satisfying."
—*Romantic Times*

CAN'T BUY ME LOVE

HEATHER MACALLISTER

Can't Buy Me Love

Аннотация

It will take some "spirited" discussion to bring these two together... Lawyer Alexis O'Hara is tired of the dating, mating, then hating game. She wants to settle down, and this time she's not letting her heart get involved. So when her mentor Vincent Cathardy offers her everything she's ever wanted, she agrees to marry him. And by having the wedding at the world-famous Inn at Maiden Falls, she can almost guarantee her own happy ending. Only, it might not be the ending she's expecting....Lawyer Dylan Greene thinks he's negotiating just another prenuptial agreement—until he learns that the bride-to-be is his first and only love, Alexis. And it's soon obvious that the chemistry between them is just as explosive as ever. Even after years apart, they can't keep their hands off each other. So why is Alexis so determined to go through with the wedding? And will Dylan be able to seduce her into saying no to Vincent— and yes to him?

Содержание

The Legend of the Inn at Maiden Falls...	5
Books by Heather MacAllister	7
The Golden Rules for Miss Arlotta's Girls	8
Contents	10
Prologue	11
1	18
2	38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	59

The Legend of the Inn at Maiden Falls...

There are lots of rumors, but no one is exactly sure why even the crankiest twosomes get so very coosome when they spend time at the historic Inn at Maiden Falls, nestled in the Colorado Rockies. Maybe it's the beautiful vista of all that rushing water (the falls) outside the windows. Maybe it's the clean, invigorating mountain air stirring up their blood. Or maybe (as the whispers say) there really are lusty ghosts of shady ladies past floating around the rafters. Old-timers say the inn was a famous brothel more than a hundred years ago; all the "soiled doves" may have mysteriously passed way, but their spirits remain to help young lovers discover the joy of sensual pleasure.

Or so the story goes....

Dear Reader,

I'm thrilled to be part of Temptation's twentieth anniversary celebration! And I hope you're enjoying reading about Miss Arlotta and the girls in **THE SPIRITS ARE WILLING** miniseries as much as I've enjoyed working with fellow writers Julie Kistler and Colleen Collins. You probably already caught Colleen's book, *Sweet Talkin' Guy*, last month, and Julie Kistler's story, *It's in His Kiss*, will be on the shelves in August.

This July also marks the twentieth anniversary of the year Julie

and I first met at a Romance Writers of America conference. So, to celebrate, we decided to come up with a project we could work on together. The idea behind THE SPIRITS ARE WILLING miniseries was inspired by Julie and Colleen's tour of a former brothel in Denver. Afterward I met them for a hilarious dinner in which we plotted the series and our characters.

Come visit with us in the community message boards at www.eHarlequin.com and stop by my Web site, www.HeatherMacAllister.com, for news about upcoming books.

Warmly,

Heather MacAllister

Books by Heather MacAllister

HARLEQUIN TEMPTATION

785—MOONLIGHTING

817—PERSONAL RELATIONS

864—TEMPTED IN TEXAS

892—SKIRTING THE ISSUE

928—MALE CALL

959—HOW TO BE THE PERFECT GIRLFRIEND

Can't Buy Me Love

Heather MacAllister



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Julie Kistler and Colleen Collins

Let's do this again sometime.

The Golden Rules for Miss Arlotta's Girls

We know rules are not your favorite things, but some things need to be written down.

So here's your Golden Rules, girls. Abide by 'em and we'll all do just fine. We weren't exactly angels when we were here the first time around, but we've got another chance. So we want to do what we can to keep the idea of holy matrimony satisfying so's nobody's man will be tempted to go lookin' elsewhere for a good time. It may not seem fair, but them's the rules. We helped 'em stray.

Now we're helping 'em stay.

Rule #1: You will never, ever do anything that might come between the bride and groom.

Rule #2: No visibility. You can't be scarin' the livin' daylights out of folks by fading in and out or showing up in bits and pieces at the wrong time.

Rule #3: Never, ever make love with a guest yourself. No exceptions.

Rule #4: No emotional attachments to anyone. You can't follow them when they leave, so you might as well not get attached.

Rule #5: When you have successfully put a troubled couple

on the road to bedroom bliss, you earn a Notch in Miss Arlotta's Bedpost Book.

Rule #6: Especially good or bad activities may earn you Gold Stars or Black Marks.

Rule #7: It's gonna take ten Notches before you can advance. All Advancements shall be determined by Miss Arlotta and the Council, who will consider how difficult your couples were, how much work you had to do, your level of creativity, whether your heart was in the right place and those Gold Stars or Black Marks.

Rule #8: Any girl who disobeys these rules shall be punished.

Rule #9: Any and all rules may be changed by Miss Arlotta as she sees fit.

That's it. Push those couples into as much wedded bliss as they can handle, and we'll all do fine. You're all creative ladies when it comes to what happens between the sheets. So let's get to work and show 'em what kinds of sparks can fly when the spirits are willing!

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

Prologue

“I HAVE A REAL GOOD FEELING about today.” Sunshine hitched herself onto the window seat in the bay window and retied the drawstring on her white bloomers. “It’s a sunny day and I always have a good feeling about sunny days.”

“You have a good feeling about every day. How you can be so cheerful and so dead at the same time is beyond my figuring. It’s enough to drive a body, if I had a body, to drink. If I could drink.” Flo drew her shawl more tightly around her shoulders.

Sunshine swung her foot and regarded Flo and the rest of the former good-time girls lounging in the parlor of what had once been one of the most exclusive bordellos in Colorado. “You’re just cranky because your corset is too tight.”

“I’m cranky because I’m dead! I’m dead and doomed to spend the rest of eternity in this corset because Mimi never came to loosen the knots.”

Everyone looked at the dark-haired Mimi, dressed in a sumptuous French robe de chambre. She shrugged. “I, myself, was busy dying.”

Over in the corner of a red-velvet chaise, Rosebud looked up from reading *Madame Bovary*. “Could we please talk about something else? We have discussed the fact that we’re dead every day for the past one hundred and nine years. There was a gas leak. We died. It’s time to move on.”

“I would love to move on!” Flo shifted uncomfortably. “I can’t believe that Belle Bulette, of all people, has gone to the Great Sunday Picnic in the Sky and I’m still here.”

“I miss Belle,” Sunshine said wistfully. But she smiled as she said it.

“You would.”

“It was never this boring when she was around,” said another one of the girls, a strawberry blonde in a lavender chemise.

“Oh, I know. She was always so spirited.”

“Spirited—ha, ha.”

“Oh, Flo, you know what I meant.”

“One makes one’s own excitement and profits, as vell. Is zat not so?” An elegant woman dressed in a Chinese-silk wrapper lounged against the doorway next to one of the brass-potted palms. She gestured toward the guests checking into what was now the Inn at Maiden Falls. “Specifically, I would like to make some excitement viz zat fine young buck.”

“Countess, you know the rules,” Sunshine reminded her.

“My dear, for him, I would break zee rules.”

Sunshine watched as a lone male—they all had such broad shoulders these days—checked into the hotel. He had a fine face, sure enough, and held himself with a confidence that promised confidence in the bedroom, as well.

However, everyone knew Miss Arlotta’s Golden Rules, specifically the no hanky-panky rule, and what would happen if a girl broke them—a black mark in the Bedpost Book. Too many

black marks and there would never be a chance of earning the ten notches it took to go to the Eternal Picnic.

After decades of bemoaning their fate, Miss Arlotta and Judge Hangen, who had unfortunately been visiting Miss Arlotta at the time of the gas leak, figured out that since they'd sold fake love in life, they could redeem themselves by selling true love in death.

Or something. Whatever the reasoning, their plan seemed to be working.

Sunshine didn't know if there was exactly a Great Picnic, or an Eternal Picnic, or whatever, but when they were alive, every Sunday Miss Arlotta's boarders had dressed in their finest and driven the buggy through the town of Maiden Falls to the lovely shaded meadow where they'd picnicked and laughed and sometimes taken a dip in the pool beneath the falls.

Sunshine and the others had loved the Sunday picnics—even Belle, the sharpshooting, whiskey-drinking cynical gambler. It had taken quite a lot of man to handle Belle. And quite a lot of men had.

Anyway, being outside, feeling the grass tickle her bare feet, wading in the pool, even just plain lying around in the shade was what Sunshine missed the most.

She and the others couldn't leave the inn proper. Oh, they could go out on the roof, but it wasn't the same.

But what if they didn't even have that? It could be worse. And now they knew that there was a way to go on to—if not the Great Picnic as they'd taken to calling it—then someplace else fine and

good. Someplace Belle had gone. Someplace Sunshine was going to go, too, as soon as she helped one more couple on the path to true love. So fine, face or no, the man wasn't worth risking a black mark.

"Ooh-la-la. That is a fine one indeed." Mimi's accent became more pronounced the nearer a man got to her. It was generally agreed that she more than likely came from Paris, Texas, rather than Paris, France.

"He must be the groom." Sunshine, along with the others, drifted over to the lobby check-in desk. "There's a wedding this weekend, you know." She clasped her hands together. "I just love weddings."

"Oh, that was canceled," Lavender said.

"It's back on," Rosebud informed them from her place on the chaise. She was more interested in her book, which Lord knows she'd had over a hundred years to read, than she was in men. She simply didn't know any better. Poor Rosebud had the misfortune of arriving at Miss Arlotta's just before the gas leak, so her experience of men was extremely limited. Extremely.

"If the wedding is back on, then the bride and groom must need help," Sunshine said.

"Same wedding, different bride and groom," Rosebud told her.

"Me, I would like to give that man some very special help."

Lavender sighed. "Oh, Mimi, wouldn't we all."

"I wouldn't," Flo snapped. "No man is worth giving up the

chance of a loosened corset.”

“Amen to that,” drawled a voice from the door of the secret passage. “Listen up, ladies, and Glory Hallelujah will set you straight. Desdemoaner and I have been on the roof and, y’all, that man is not the groom. Looky yonder at the door.”

At that moment, a distinguished older man with silver temples and a full head of salt-and-pepper hair strode through the lobby as though he owned the place.

Sunshine had seen his type before—usually with a gavel in his hand or a badge on his chest.

“Behold, the groom.”

“Oh, it’s an older couple then. A second marriage maybe? How nice.” Sunshine ignored all the eye rolling. So she chose to look on the bright side all the time. Might as well enjoy life, er, death. Or whatever limbo they were in.

“Not quite.” Glory hooked her thumb over her shoulder as a dark-suited younger woman joined the man at the reception desk.

She had her hair cut in one of those styles that looked as though she’d hacked at it with a dull knife on a windy day. Sunshine patted her own long curls.

“His daughter?” Flo asked.

“The bride,” Glory announced.

“And I say brava!” The Countess clapped slowly.

“And, me, I say it depends on how much money he has.” Mimi rubbed her fingers together.

Flo cackled. “Honey, it wouldn’t take much for me.”

“It never did, Flo, it never did,” the Countess murmured.

“I heard that!”

“And so did I.” A voice boomed around them.

Sunshine could never figure out how Miss Arlotta, who spent most of her time in the attic, was nevertheless able to hear all and see all and speak to them wherever they were.

“Sunshine! The bride is checking into your room.” Lavender was hovering behind the guest register.

“And the groom?” Mimi asked.

“The new section.”

“Well, that can’t be good,” Glory said.

“Why not? You know the groom isn’t supposed to see the bride on their wedding day until she walks down the aisle.” Sunshine sighed. “It’s so romantic.”

“Sunshine will assist this couple,” Miss Arlotta pronounced. “Older gentlemen are her speciality.”

“Thank you, Miss Arlotta!” Sunshine drew a deep breath as the others protested—but not too much—before gradually drifting away to other parts of the inn. Older men who were lonely and liked her youthful looks and innocent chatter had been, indeed, her speciality.

She felt a tug on her gauzy wrapper. Rosebud had abandoned her book and was watching the couple check in. “You can drop the act,” she murmured. “We’re alone.”

“What act?” Sunshine batted her eyelashes.

“They have blonde jokes now, you know.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Jokes about girls with yellow hair being dumb.” She tweaked one of Sunshine’s sausage curls. “Only you’re not dumb.”

Sunshine kept her smile in place. “And don’t you forget it, sweetie.”

“I mean...take all this romantic talk. This was a place of business.”

Sunshine laughed. “Sure was—monkey business.”

“It was sex for money.” Rosebud pushed her wire-rim glasses up higher on her nose. “The men gave us money and we gave them sex. It was as simple as that.”

Sunshine looked across the lobby at the couple. Other than briefly resting his hand on the small of the woman’s back, the man never touched her. And she didn’t touch him. They smiled politely instead of the wide, tooth-baring grins of people who can’t help smiling. Of people who are in love.

“Rosebud,” she murmured, “it was never as simple as that.”

1

WHEN ALEXIS O'HARA ARRIVED at the Inn at Maiden Falls, Colorado, for her wedding and encountered an ex-boyfriend also checking in, she gave him a cool I'm-looking-good-and-aren't-you-sorry-you-dumped-me smile. When he informed her he was representing her fiancé in the pre-nup negotiations, she did what any successful, independent, modern woman did when faced with the unthinkable: she called her mother.

Abandoning her luggage in the center of a lovely Aubusson rug as soon as she got to her room, Alexis stared unseeingly out the window at the gorgeous Rocky Mountain vista, cell phone pressed to her ear. "Mom?"

"You've changed your mind," Patty O'Hara said flatly.

"No! Why do you keep assuming that every time I call?"

"Oh, I don't know—maybe the week-long engagement to a man I've never before heard you mention in a romantic context?"

"This isn't that sort of marriage."

"What sort of marriage is it?"

Alexis began to speak, fully intending to extol the virtues of compatibility, admiration and shared interests, but heard herself say, "It's an I'm-tired-of-dating marriage."

"Oh, one of those. I thought it was an old-fashioned marry-an-old-guy-for-his-money marriage."

Alexis gritted her teeth, then craftily pointed out, “He’s fifty-four. That’s only two years younger than you. Are you saying you’re old?”

“I’m saying I’ve been married to a fifty-four-year-old man and I know what it’s like.”

She was talking about Alexis’s father. Alexis preferred not to think of her father in that context. “But you haven’t been married to a rich fifty-four-year-old man.”

There was silence.

“Mom?”

“I was giving you time to think. You’ve been rushing around like a madwoman and I know you haven’t fully considered what you’re doing.”

“I had plenty of time to think on the plane.” Actually, she’d fallen asleep on the plane. Missed the honey peanuts and everything. “I’m not changing my mind.”

“I’m still not cutting the tags off my dress until I have to walk to my seat.”

“Mom.” Alexis pressed the area between her eyebrows.

“Alexis, as with any mother, I just want you to be happy. Now, I know you didn’t call to argue and I’m in the middle of packing. What’s up?”

“Dylan’s here.” Alexis was proud that her voice sounded calm and matter-of-fact.

“Do I know her?”

“Him.”

“Well, you never know these days with one-size-fits-all names.”

“Like Pat?” Alexis asked dryly, although no one ever called her mother Pat.

“A nickname for Patricia. What’s Dylan a nickname for?”

Alexis exhaled. “Trouble.”

“Why?”

How could her mother have forgotten? “Law school? The guy who drop-kicked my heart into orbit around Planet Pity?”

“Oh. That Dylan.”

“Yes, that Dylan! How could you forget that Dylan?”

“There’ve been...so many...”

Yes, her heart had made many trips to Planet Pity since then. But it had orbited longer over Dylan than anyone else. “Mom, he’s negotiating the pre-nup for Vincent.”

“You be careful with that pre-nup. Don’t sign anything without reading it first.”

“Mom! I’m a lawyer, too! You’re missing the point. Dylan is representing my fiancé.”

“Do you still have feelings for him?” her mother asked carefully.

“Yes—hate!”

“I thought you were over him.”

“I...am.” The unguarded rush of pleasure she’d experienced when she’d seen him in the lobby was just a holdover from their school years. “And I don’t hate him. I haven’t thought of

him.” Much. “But he’s going to be negotiating my pre-nup with Vincent!”

“He apparently doesn’t feel that it’ll be a conflict of interest.”

“That’s because he’s not interested. Forget I said that.” This conversation was not going well.

“So...what do you want from me?” asked her mother.

“Tell me what to do!”

“Wait...Alexis asks her mother for advice. Let me go write this date on the calendar.”

Alexis rolled her eyes. “Maybe if you weren’t so sarcastic, I might ask your advice more often.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“You’re probably right. But I am asking now.” Her mother was an investment banker. Analyzing was her forte.

“Let’s take a couple of steps back and look at the big picture. What do you want? And that’s not a cop-out.”

“I want him not to be here.”

“Because of Vincent or because of him?”

“Because it’s awkward.”

“If Dylan were female, would it be as awkward?”

“Yeeees,” Alexis said slowly. “If I were close friends with a woman and we broke off our friendship, I would feel awkward having her as my fiancé’s counsel. Yes,” she said more firmly.

“It’s that kind of awkwardness.”

“Hmm. If Dylan were female, would you ask Vincent to find other representation?”

Alexis skirted the question. "It's too late now."

"Isn't Denver close by? Surely there are other lawyers available. But the point here is that you'd probably mention it to Vincent if Dylan were female. So why not tell him how uncomfortable you feel anyway? You're marrying the man. You should be able to talk about such things with him."

"Because...because..." Because she just wanted to marry Vincent and get it over with. "I don't want Dylan to know he makes me uncomfortable."

"Or you don't want to chance Vincent discovering that you once had a relationship with his lawyer?" Her mother had found the core of the problem, as Alexis had known she would.

"That sounds so much worse than it is. Truly, this is no big deal and I don't want it to become a big deal. But if I don't mention it and Vincent already knows or finds out, then he'll think I'm hiding something. If I do make a point of telling him about Dylan and me, then I'm drawing unnecessary attention to it, especially if he didn't already know. And I don't know if Dylan has told him or not. And I can't ask Dylan because then he'll think I care whether or not Vincent knows and then Dylan will think he has something over me. A bargaining chip maybe. Which is stupid because whether or not I was once in love with him is not important. But Vincent might think it is." She stopped and drew a deep breath. "My head hurts."

"Poor baby."

"Oh, Mom. What'll I do?"

“Okay. I suggest you treat Dylan the way you’d treat any other former classmate, male or female. You smile, make casual chitchat, go over your pre-nup and send him on his way.”

Smile. Chitchat. Pre-nup. Dylan leaves. Okay. She could do that. “But what if he says something?”

“If he actually has the poor taste to bring up your past personal relationship in front of the man who is his client and your fiancé, you smile, casually acknowledge it, express regret that you’ve lost track of each other and that you don’t have more time to catch up now, then leave.”

Casual. Leave. This could work. She especially liked the leaving scenarios. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Alexis?”

“Yeah?”

“A shot of tequila afterward wouldn’t hurt.”

“AND ON THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY of the marriage ceremony, if no petition for dissolution has been filed, Alexis O’Hara shall be entitled to receive from the Individual Property of Vincent Cathardy, the sum of one hundred thousand dollars plus the salary she would expect to earn if she is not employed. Said salary will be computed according to the formulas in attachment A. On the second anniversary of the marriage ceremony, if no petition for dissolution has been filed, Ms. O’Hara shall be entitled to receive from the Individual Property of Vincent Cathardy, the sum of two hundred thousand dollars plus the salary she would expect to earn if she is not employed.

On the third anniversary...”

And so on and so on. It was a humdinger of a pre-nup, but then Dylan Greene had always thought Alexis O’Hara was a humdinger of a woman.

Not that he’d had any recent firsthand experience of her humdingerness, but if memory served...

However, memory shouldn’t be serving anything right now. Dylan should concentrate on the clauses he was reading. Alexis and her lawyer would be. Vincent would be, too, though he’d written most of the contract himself. Go figure.

Dylan needed to remain sharp. Yeah, he was good and had a reputation as the go-to guy in family law and, if pressed, would admit that the reputation was deserved. After all, he’d successfully faced-off against big-shot lawyer Vincent in a number of pre-nup cases. All things considered, he’d been flattered, enormously flattered—all right, make that totally stunned—when Vincent Cathardy had retained him to negotiate the prenuptial agreement prior to the man’s own forthcoming marriage.

Vincent, senior partner in Swinehart, Cathardy and Steele, was a legend. His name was spoken in hushed tones. A lawyer going up against Vincent Cathardy could expect to receive at least half-a-dozen bottles of sympathy Scotch. Since Vincent Cathardy was a corporate lawyer and Dylan’s firm specialized in family law, Vincent wasn’t a regular opponent. When he was, the case usually involved family businesses and disputed

inheritances or, of course, divorces. High-profile divorces. Expensive divorces.

Dylan wasn't much of a drinker and he thought he probably had maybe four bottles left from the last time he'd faced Vincent Cathardy. Anyway, he kept waiting to discover the catch. He and Vincent didn't move in the same legal—or social—circles. So why had Vincent hired him?

And then he'd caught the name of the bride on the papers. Alexis O'Hara. Alexis. Brilliant and ambitious Alexis.

She was working on a pretty good legend, herself, being Vincent's right-hand man, or woman, as it were. Had she suggested Dylan? Nah. Not judging by the pinched look on her face when she'd walked into the lobby.

He hadn't prepared himself for his first sight of her because he didn't think he needed to. He'd been wrong, as his body quickly informed him. His heart had kicked up a notch—several notches—his blood had warmed and things had definitely stirred in the southern regions. Just like that. Seven years since he'd seen her and just like that his every nerve was attuned to her. He'd barely stopped himself from sweeping her into his arms and kissing her with a pent-up passion that would have left no doubt as to their former relationship. But he had stopped himself and returned Alexis's cool, polite smile with one of his own.

Vincent had been standing there, of course, and Vincent was the sort of man who would have made it his business to learn that Dylan and Alexis were once involved. But that was law school,

Dylan reminded himself. Puppy love. Over long ago. A fond memory, very fond as his reaction just told him, but nothing more. Certainly no threat to the big guy.

No, the reason Vincent had hired him was more likely Dylan's record when they'd gone head-to-head. That must be it. The man respected him. Figured he was one of the best.

He was, but men of Vincent's stature and experience wouldn't like to admit it. And choosing Dylan to negotiate his prenup? Vincent had to know he was elevating Dylan to the legal stratosphere. But if he thought that entitled him to any special legal wrangling, then he thought wrong.

Dylan continued to read, conscious of the utter silence in the room except for the sound of his voice. No objections so far. And why would Alexis object? She was going to get her salary and a bonus for each year she stayed married to the guy. And it was payable during the marriage, not a settlement upon dissolution of the marriage. No, Alexis would be getting a nice little anniversary present each year. The funds were to become her separate property. Nice work, if you could get it, and Alexis apparently could.

He hadn't figured her for the type, the give-it-all-up-and-lounge-around-the-pool-between-spa-treatments type. Not before her legal brilliance had a chance to shine on its own.

What a waste.

But his opinion was completely inappropriate. He wasn't supposed to be having opinions.

And he wasn't supposed to be thinking about Alexis. Seeing her again had an unnerving effect on him. It was as though he'd entered a classroom to find her waiting for him as usual, and he was entitled to the hot feelings that coursed through him. But he wasn't entitled. Unfortunately, the feelings were still coursing. He was remembering long hours spent in her arms, kissing until their lips had gone numb, studying until they'd fallen asleep together. The scent of her skin and hair. The curve at her waist. The—no. Put the memories away, Dylan.

Alexis had become a striking woman, not that he'd expected her to go to seed or anything. He was going to have to watch himself this weekend.

Dylan glanced up to find her inky-black gaze on him. He'd always been fascinated by her eyes. They were the darkest brown he'd ever seen. It was unnerving to stare at them, and she knew it and used her eyes to excellent advantage.

Once or twice, he'd seen emotion in those eyes, but not often. And not now.

DYLAN STILL HADN'T DEVELOPED a poker face, Alexis saw. He'd always been easy to read, so when he'd split up with her without warning a few weeks before graduation, she'd been stunned that she'd never seen it coming. Even now, she could remember the expression in his eyes. Surprise that she was so upset. And pity—she'd hated that.

But no regret. No second thoughts.

Now, those warm, caramel-colored emotional semaphores

were signaling disapproval across the polished walnut of the Victorian dining table.

As if he had any right to approve or disapprove of anything she did.

And so what if he or anyone else did disapprove? If Alexis wanted to marry Vincent, then that's what she was going to do. She'd earned the right to do whatever she wanted. She'd worked hard for years, and guess what? She'd been working to achieve a certain kind of life and now that she was pulling in the kind of money to support that life, she didn't have the time or the energy to enjoy it.

Alexis was tired of working at this insane pace. And darn it, she wanted kids eventually, but she didn't want to be put on the mommy track because she couldn't routinely work eighty to ninety hours a week or because she took off a couple of years.

That's what had happened to every woman who'd given birth while Alexis had been at Swinehart, Cathardy and Steele. And it wasn't just her firm, or even law, itself. Even Marisa, who'd joined the firm at the same time as Alexis, and who had her mother, younger sister and a nanny living with her, had given up and now consulted from her home.

So, it still came down to family or career. But why did women have to make this wrenching choice? Why couldn't they do both? She'd never heard of the men in her office agonizing over it. She knew they had families. New photos of smiling wives and children regularly sprouted on their desks, although that could be

so they could recognize them when they crossed paths at home.

Still, they had something she didn't. Something she wanted. And by marrying Vincent, she could have it. She could have it all.

A week ago, she'd been looking forward to collapsing and sleeping late Saturday morning—maybe even sleeping the whole weekend. She so rarely had a weekend off. She'd just given herself the old pep talk, the one that said being primary associate on Vincent's high-profile team was worth it. Worth no personal life, worth the lack of sleep, worth missing birthdays and holidays, worth never really getting to know her three-year-old niece.

She could slow down later, she'd always assured herself at the end. That was the point when she usually slipped into her fantasy, the one filled with shopping, salon appointments, lunches and sleep, glorious sleep.

Except, she wanted to slow down—stop—now. She wanted the fantasy now. She hadn't felt the same sense of satisfaction that she used to feel at the end of a big project. And the oblique remarks made by her mother and sister now stung. She would never know her three-year-old niece, her sister, Leigh, pointed out, because she hadn't seen her niece as a three year old. And unless Alexis managed a trip to Austin before May 24, Madison's fourth birthday, she wouldn't.

Alexis had checked her Palm and found out that Leigh was right.

It had given her something to think about.

She'd been thinking about it last Friday after she and Vincent had finished work on a huge merger. Vincent had opened a bottle of champagne and the two crystal flutes she'd drunk coupled with the feeling of accomplishment and the magnificent high-rise view from Vincent's equally magnificent office had loosened her tongue.

Vincent had waved an arm at the lights of Houston winking at them and asked, "How does it feel to look out there and know you're one of the best?" She'd answered, "Not the way I thought it would."

"Then you need more champagne," Vincent had said. That was when he'd poured the fateful second flute.

Alexis never drank more than one drink in a business setting. But, Vincent was her mentor and she was so used to following his advice that she'd held out her flute without a second thought.

He'd clinked their glasses together and then she'd rashly drained hers, never tasting the pricey Dom something or other that Vincent kept chilled in his office refrigerator.

"Well?" One thick eyebrow raised. His face was impossibly tanned. Impossibly as in, where did he find the time to have the fake tan sprayed on? Alexis hadn't even managed to find a reliable manicurist to come to her office.

"How do you feel now?" Vincent had asked.

"I want more," she remembered saying. But when he'd held up the bottle, she'd shaken her head. "Not champagne. More."

A smile had curved his lips.

Now that she thought about it, Alexis recalled that it was the same smile he gave opponents before obliterating them. It was an I've-won-but-I'm-going-to-play-with-you-awhile smile.

She hadn't been an opponent, had she?

"You're entitled to more." He'd named a figure.

To her astonishment, Alexis had realized she'd negotiated a raise without even trying. "Has all this been worth it to you?" she'd asked him.

He'd looked her right in the eyes, his blue ones so bright and so sharp they cut through her champagne haze. "Absolutely."

Alexis had felt herself relax until he added, "But then my biological clock runs longer than yours."

Biological clock. Hadn't that become a cliché yet? And yet once he'd mentioned it, she'd realized all her unease was probably related to that same biological clock. Cliché or not, she was thirty-one and had no boyfriend and no time to find one, along with tattered friendships and blood relatives who were strangers. She'd poured out all this to an uncharacteristically sympathetic Vincent. Oh, it had been a calculated sympathy, Alexis knew that, but she'd pretended she didn't.

And then he'd said, "I have a proposal for you." And that's exactly what it had been.

She'd been shocked and then the idea had grown on her. Though he was older, Vincent was by no means unattractive and quite frankly, he could provide a better life for her than she could provide for herself.

And she didn't want to hear any of this letting-down-the-sisterhood stuff, either. She'd just like to see how many of the sisterhood would turn down an offer like the one Vincent had made. Not many, and not Alexis.

So here she was, a week later, marrying a man she admired, but didn't love. Who admired, but didn't love, her. Still, they both wanted the same thing—a family and children. Well, Alexis also wanted a personal trainer and a standing appointment with a masseuse, but basically, she and Vincent were on the same page.

It made so much sense—Alexis would settle in to the marriage for a couple of months, then work on having children right away, and by the time they were well into elementary school, Vincent would be ready to take over parenting duties and Alexis would pick up her legal career where she left off. Thanks to Vincent, there would be no mommy track for Alexis. As one of the founding partners, he had that kind of power, and he was putting it in writing, right in this pre-nup that she should be paying attention to instead of mentally justifying her actions to a pair of caramel-colored eyes that still had the power to affect her.

“Alexis?” Margaret, her lawyer, gave her a look that meant Alexis had missed something.

In her late forties, Margaret had never married. She was hard as nails, humorless, and her roots needed retouching.

She was Alexis's future.

No, not anymore. Not now that she was marrying Vincent. “Margaret?”

“Do you agree to the terms of the preceding clause?”

“I...”

“There is a significant—” Margaret paused to emphasize just how significant “—monetary penalty should you return to work. In addition, there is a non-compete clause that troubles me.”

“It didn’t trouble Alexis,” Vincent inserted smoothly.

“We have had barely forty-eight hours to review the contract.” Margaret peered at Vincent over the top of some unflattering reading glasses. They were in no way stylish, nor had they ever been. Shopping for frames would take time, time a high-powered attorney like Margaret didn’t have.

“I would suggest that if Alexis works for another firm, you mitigate the financial penalty,” she said.

“I wouldn’t work for another firm.” That would be defeating the whole purpose of the marriage.

Margaret and her awful glasses turned to Alexis. “All the more reason to take a second look at those financial terms.”

Alexis didn’t want to take a second look. Truly, she was going to start on a family right away and planned to spend the next few years decorating nurseries and changing diapers in between rejuvenating facials. No sense in wasting time. No sense in destroying the lovely weightless bubbly feeling she’d had ever since she’d agreed to marry Vincent and let him worry about acquiring money for a while.

And then Dylan spoke. “Vincent, I usually advise my clients to provide for the unexpected. In this instance, a clause dealing

with your possible incapacitation would not be amiss. Should your income stop, under these terms, Alexis would be penalized for supporting you.”

Dylan sure was a real lead weight.

Vincent gave him a patronizing smile. “If I had wanted such a clause, then I would have inserted it myself.”

“If you’d thought of it.”

“I did.”

“Judges like to see those clauses.” Dylan wasn’t intimidated in the slightest, Alexis would give him that, though not much more. “They’re a sign of good faith and make the pre-nup harder to break.”

“I expect an unbreakable contract from you, Dylan. Is my faith misplaced?”

“Not if your faith takes my advice.”

Sheesh. Why didn’t they just unzip their pants and get out rulers?

“Alexis has faith, don’t you, Alexis?” Vincent asked.

Dylan’s gaze flicked to Alexis at the same time Margaret’s foot nudged hers. Yeah, yeah. The clause should be there. She couldn’t help feeling that it was some kind of test, though.

“Vincent...” she began.

“If I’m incapacitated, then more than ever, I would want my lovely wife by my side.” He reached across the table and squeezed Alexis’s hand. “We’d hardly be destitute. I have a lifetime income from the firm.”

“Oh.” Wow. Maybe she’d never go back to work. Work was overrated. Spa paraffin and sea-salt scrub pedicures were not. Alexis slipped back into her fantasy as one of the rich and idle.

She heard a buzz and saw Vincent remove his cell phone. “Excuse me. I need to take this.” He raised his eyebrows at Alexis. “Briarwood.”

The next big case. One that she would have been working on with him if she hadn’t been planning a wedding in a week. “Of course,” she mouthed. But Vincent had already turned away and was leaving the room.

“Alexis, you and I need to talk.”

“Margaret—”

“But not now.” Margaret picked up her copy of the contract and stood. “I’m going to look up a couple of things.” She pointed at Dylan. “You know the rules. No discussing the contract unless I’m present.”

Dylan sat back in the chair, palms outward. “Hey. She’s a lawyer, too.”

“She was,” Margaret stated over her shoulder as she jogged out the doorway.

That stung a little until Alexis told herself that Margaret was just jealous. Who wouldn’t be?

She turned her gaze to the man across the table to find him watching her. She watched him back. He looked the same. More polished and with shorter hair, but basically the same. They might have been sitting across from each other at one of the

heavy wooden library tables at school. They'd always had to put the table between them so they could concentrate on studying instead of each other.

It rarely worked then and it wasn't working now.

Dylan had never been one of those catch-your-breath attractive men, but he made the effort with what he had and the effect was a nonthreatening handsomeness. Except now, it was threatening her peace of mind. She narrowed her eyes at his tan. Fake. When did these men have the time?

"So," he said.

"So," she said back. He was going to be trouble. She could tell already.

"Long time no see."

"Commencement." She'd stared at the back of his head two rows ahead and alternated between fury and heartbreak. But she'd recovered.

"So how have you been, Alexis?"

"Good. I've kept busy."

"You're being overly modest. The mere mention of your name strikes fear into the hearts of small-business owners everywhere."

Was that a compliment, or not? And did she care? "I've heard your name bandied about, as well."

"I'll bet you have."

"Usually 'that damn Dylan Greene.' You should change your letterhead to D. Dylan Greene."

He laughed. "Yeah. Vincent has had to restructure a couple of

deals when he couldn't break one of my pre-nups."

"Actually, I did the restructuring." Hours and hours and hours of restructuring.

"You get to do the dirty work, huh?"

Alexis folded her hands on the table in front of her. Gripped her knuckles, actually. Hard. "I get the experience."

"Which you are now throwing away."

Alexis drew a deep breath. So much for their stilted little conversation. "Watch it, Dylan."

"I am watching it." He pushed back from the table and stood. Shoving his hands in his pockets he walked over to the huge windows looking out on the Colorado mountains. "I'm watching a woman throw away her career. What happened to you, Alexis?"

2

ALEXIS WAS INSTANTLY ANGRY on so many levels, she could barely respond. “Are you married, Dylan?”

“No.”

“Been married?”

“No.”

“Given birth?”

He leveled a look at her.

“Anyone given birth on your behalf?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“So you really don’t know what’s at stake for women who have children? Things are very different for men and women.”

“No duh.”

“Ooh. Like the technical lawyer-speak, Dylan.”

“I’m not speaking as a lawyer. It’s against the rules.”

“Then what are you speaking as?”

“A friend.”

“I think not.” She’d been aiming for matter-of-fact, but had hit snippy.

He smiled. No grinned, damn it. “You’re still mad at me.”

“I am so over you.” She was. She was.

“You’re still mad. Yes, you are.” The grin widened. “I must be a better lover than I thought.”

Typical. “I’ve had worse,” she told him. “And I’ve had better.

You're somewhere in the middle. Average." Honestly, never tell a man he was the worst lover you ever had, he wouldn't believe it. But mediocre? Now that really got to him.

"And how does Vincent rank?"

She couldn't believe he'd asked that. "You're not the first to imply that Vincent must have selected me to be on his team because I slept with him, but you're the most unexpected. That was unworthy of you, Dylan."

He blinked. "I wasn't impugning your legal skill." Watching her carefully, he continued softly, "You're marrying the guy."

"Yes."

"So it's a safe assumption you've slept with him."

They stared at each other and Alexis knew that she must not look away. Didn't dare blink. She was good at this game. Her eyes were so dark people remarked on them. She used cosmetics to emphasize them and she practiced chilling expressions that revealed nothing.

However, eyes were one thing. The blush she was horrified to feel creeping up her throat was something else. She, who could bluff anyone, could not bluff Dylan.

She blinked.

And he pounced. "You've never slept with the guy."

Alexis darted a look toward the doorway. How mortifying if Vincent or Margaret caught them discussing such a subject. "That—is—none—of—your—business."

Dylan sat on the edge of the table. "But I'm fascinated by

your logic—or the lack thereof. What the heck are you doing, Alexis?”

“I’m thinking with my head and not with my heart. ‘If more people thought with their heads instead of their hearts, we’d be out of a job.’ You said that.”

“I did. Go on.”

“Well,” she deliberately lowered her voice, injecting a sultry quality, “you know that first, wonderful rush of passion, when two people can’t get enough of each other, when they’re blind to anything else about each other as long as they can be entwined for hours and hours...?”

His eyes had darkened. Alexis thought he might even be drooling. He nodded and swallowed.

Deliberately breaking the mood, she sat back and threw up her hands. “It never lasts. And then you’re stuck with what’s left. And you look around and think, ‘Ick. I can’t live with that. What was I thinking?’ And then you realize you weren’t thinking. You were seduced by the sizzle. This time, I evaluated the rest of the man first. And he’s some man.” She gave Dylan her best seductive smile. “I’ll fire up the sizzle later. And you know I can.”

For a moment, she would have sworn that she had him, then he said, “Better make sure you’ve got some good wood.”

“Don’t be crude.”

“Hey, I’m just saying that if you want little sizzlers, you’re going to have to build the campfire with something.”

“And explain to me why you care about my campfire?”

He reached toward her and she thought he was going to touch her. She just stopped herself from flinching as he tapped the contract before her. “I want to know if successful career women selling themselves as high-priced wives is the new trend.”

“You’re being deliberately insulting.”

He eyed her speculatively. “I might be trying to shake you up and see if all your cylinders are firing.”

“Do you ever use plain English?”

“I thought the statement about selling yourself as a high-priced wife was pretty plain.”

“I look on it as protecting my future and the future of my children.”

“I’m listening.”

He was. And Alexis wanted to explain. “I want children and the thing is, a woman risks a lot careerwise these days. As soon as she’s visibly pregnant, she loses her edge. If she becomes angry, it’s hormones. Sad? Hormones. Aggressive? Hormones. So it’s ‘let’s not put too much pressure on the little mother.’ Give her the routine cases. Don’t let her start long-term litigation, because she’ll be taking maternity leave. And from then on, she’s on the mommy track, because she can’t work the long hours she has been because children get sick and she’ll have child-care problems. And guilt. Let’s not forget the guilt. I have seen it happen over and over again. For some reason, men don’t have these problems. He takes time off to meet with the kid’s teacher and he’s a caring and involved father. She takes time off and she’s

allowing her children to interfere with her work. I don't want to have to choose between my children and my career, so I'll take time off in the beginning and go back to work when they're older. The beauty of it is that I'll pick up right where I left off. That's what it says in the contract. My lovely, lovely contract. So don't talk to me about throwing away my career. I'm preserving it."

Dylan regarded her for a moment, then moved closer on the table until he was sitting right next to her, and then he stared at her some more.

She didn't want him staring at her and she didn't want him sitting next to her. He was too close. He made her too aware of him as a man, a man that, in spite of herself, she still wanted. After all this time, it wasn't fair that her body would betray her this way.

Alexis looked down at her copy of the prenuptial agreement, flinching when Dylan nudged her chin upward with his knuckles. "You're not in love with him."

"How could you possibly know how I feel?"

His voice deepened. "Because I remember how you look when you think you're in love."

What a low blow. She had been in love. She'd thought Dylan was The One. "Someone once told me that there're all kinds of love and not all of them come with a ring. This time, I get the ring."

YEAH, HE'D SAID THAT, TOO. Had actually used it again, it was such a good line. But she was missing the point. Dylan

indicated the contract. “That’s not a ring. It’s a noose.”

“I’m well aware of your feelings on marriage.”

He gave a huge mock sigh. “Alexis, Alexis, Alexis.”

“What?”

“This isn’t the same. Back then, we’d both worked very hard. And we were going to be working very hard. In different cities. Remember? You were staying in Austin and I was going to Houston.” An awful thought occurred to him. “You didn’t go with the Swinehart firm because it’s in—”

“Of course not.” She spoke with ego-deflating scorn.

“Marriage was impossible then. Neither of us was ready—” he hadn’t been ready “—and I figured you knew it. But you got serious all of a sudden.” Maybe he’d been naive, but he’d thought they could keep in touch as they began their careers. After all, it was what they’d worked for. What they’d talked about. What they’d wanted. Serious life commitments could come later.

“It wasn’t all of a sudden,” she snapped. “I was expecting something entirely different that afternoon. I thought you were going to propose.”

He’d long suspected as much. “I’m sorry. Truly I am. But if we’d stayed together then, we wouldn’t be together now. Not with both of us having the kind of careers we’ve had.”

She didn’t say anything and it irked him. “Marriage would have held you back. You know it’s true. Come on. Admit it.”

“Maybe it would have held you back.”

He just shook his head.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Alexis looked to the side. “You’re right. Happy now?”

He wasn’t. He wasn’t at all. Not because of the wrong timing for the two of them, but because his conscience was telling him she was making a big mistake now and he should stop her. Funny, he never remembered his conscience being this loud before. However, it still made a valid point. Marriage to him wasn’t right for her then, and marriage to Vincent wasn’t right for her now.

“Anyway, every relationship I’ve had since has fallen apart. So instead of basing a relationship solely on mutual attraction and hoping that everything else works out, Vincent and I are basing our marriage on affection, compatibility, respect and shared goals and interests. If we find passion, great. But passion fades. At least I know we’ve got something solid left.”

“Yeah. Over a hundred thousand solids each year.”

She gave him that blank look she was so good at. “You’re flirting with an ethics violation.”

They both knew he’d gone way beyond flirting. He tried for a lighter tone. “I thought I was flirting with you.”

“Your technique needs work.” She checked her watch. “Where are they? I’m supposed to meet with the hotel wedding coordinator.”

“Do you mind me asking what the hurry is?”

“I mind you asking on principle. But the truth is that I wanted to get married here and they had a last-minute cancellation. I could have the booking if I agreed to use all the bride’s choices.

There're too many dripping pearls and way too much netting, but other than tweaking the menu and canceling the karaoke machine, I can live with lilac and white."

So. Alexis was using someone else's wedding to marry Vincent. Could she be more unsentimental? Yes, Dylan did wish more of his clients thought with their heads instead of their hearts, but Alexis had carried it to the ultimate extreme.

"But can you live with this?" He picked up the contract and flipped through it. Folding it open to a section he'd hoped her lawyer would have flagged, he set the document in front of her.

She didn't even glance down. "We're not supposed to be negotiating the contract without my lawyer present."

"We're not negotiating. But due to the time constraints, I thought if there was language to which you objected, you could point it out and while I'm sitting here, I could get a start on making it more acceptable. It would save time." He tried one of his soothing smiles, which of course, she didn't buy.

"I would not dream of taking away any element of surprise that Margaret has planned."

"You're not supposed to be the one who's surprised." Dylan had begun to have doubts about Margaret. The clause in question could be interpreted as allowing Vincent to have mistresses in certain circumstances, the cost of which would be deducted from the payments due Alexis. Why hadn't she or her lawyer caught that? Had her lawyer been raised in a convent? Clearly, the woman had no clue as to the devious workings of the male mind.

“What do you care?” Alexis asked him.

He...just did. He didn't expect her to understand because he didn't quite understand. “Because I don't want to have to waste my time defending this thing in court when you realize what you've signed.”

And that pretty much violated a whole slew of the canon of ethics. He'd get a few moral points, though, not that they would do him any good if Alexis reported him. He didn't think she would, but the fact that she could was bad enough.

As for Vincent finding out...Dylan would never practice law again.

“What do you mean?” she asked him.

He'd already said too much. “Look at it this way—you know what you're getting out of the deal, but ask yourself—what's Vincent getting?”

She gave him a slow, wide smile. “Me.”

WELL, SNAP HER GARTERS if that wasn't the most impressive thing she'd ever heard in her life. And her death. A hundred thousand dollars a year. Sure, a dollar didn't go as far now as it did during Sunshine's life, but from everything Rosebud reported from reading newspapers, a hundred thousand dollars was alot during this life, too.

The dark-haired woman with the awful haircut had not only convinced the silver-haired fellow to marry her, he was paying for the privilege. Well done. Sunshine applauded her, though Alexis couldn't hear her. It was always heartening to see a sister in sin

make good. Women had certainly come a long way.

Sunshine sat on the back of the chair behind Dylan—nice Welsh name—and massaged his neck and shoulders. He wouldn't feel anything more than a vague relaxed feeling, but Sunshine thought he deserved some relaxing, poor tense baby. The man had itchy pants for Alexis, sure enough, and Sunshine was just in the right spot to know.

But Alexis was way beyond him. Alexis was looking out for Alexis and Sunshine was all for that. From what she'd overheard, it appeared that Mr. Cutie Pie here had had his chance and failed to take advantage of it.

His loss. Besides, for all his squawking, had he made a counteroffer? Not that Sunshine had heard.

Well, Sunshine's assignment was to make sure the bride and groom had no problems in the bedroom. Technically, it was to make sure they were happy and it was generally found that happiness in the bedroom meant happiness all around. However, bedroom or not, Sunshine was thinking she could be happy with a hundred thousand dollars a year.

DYLAN SAT ALONE in the conference and studied the magnificent view of the Rockies, which he appreciated not at all. What was the matter with him? Alexis had gone to her meeting and now Dylan waited for Vincent and Margaret to return. They all seemed very casual about this whole prenuptial agreement, which left him feeling unsettled. Squeamish. He rubbed at a tight spot just to the side of his neck and miraculously, it

eased. Honestly, for all intents and purposes, this was a business merger and if the bride had been anyone else, Dylan would have applauded the match.

But the bride was Alexis.

ALEXIS LAY PRONE ON THE BED of a very quaintly decorated Victorian-style room, the charms of which were currently lost on her.

Alexis's eyes were closed and she'd taken aspirin to get rid of a throbbing tension headache caused by attempting to appear competent, in control and extremely hot while having her ex negotiate her future. She'd like to see anyone try that and not get a headache.

So? Did Vincent know she'd once dated Dylan or not? She couldn't tell.

She was long over Dylan. Yes, he was still attractive. No, she was not going to admit that the instant she'd walked into the conference room she'd remembered how his mouth had felt on hers. She wasn't proud of that. This guy had dumped her. Didn't she have more self-respect than to picture him naked the first time she saw him in seven years?

Dylan hadn't been the first to break her heart and he hadn't been the last, but was there any woman alive who wouldn't want to make a man who'd once dumped her kick himself when he saw her again?

Instead, she felt kicked. Just listening to him read the generous monetary settlement, with each year of marriage assigned a value

in a way she tried not to find humiliating, was a strain. And she didn't want to justify why she'd agreed to the work terms. She understood why they were there—Vincent planned to have children after all this time and wanted to guarantee that his wife was around to raise them. And he was acknowledging the career sacrifice she'd be making by providing her with financial independence. He'd never wonder whether she was there because she wanted to be, or because she felt stuck.

Why couldn't everyone understand this?

And it wasn't as if she was completely abandoning her career in law. She was just off the payroll. Alexis had assisted Vincent for a long time and she expected she'd continue outside the office.

She wasn't going to think about it anymore. She was going to think about her wedding. Her lilac-and-white wedding. Lilac. The more she said it, the more it grew on her. Thank heaven it wasn't pink. She was not a pink person, but lilac, possibly with royal-purple accents—she could work with lilac.

And her family was coming in. She and Vincent, though mostly Vincent, were paying their expenses. She would see her parents, her grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and—mental drumroll—her sister and brother-in-law, along with three-year-old Madison, whom Alexis would get to see before her fourth birthday.

How wonderful that they were all able to stay a few days. How wonderful that they'd rearranged their schedules for her when

she'd been putting them off for years and years...

Had she dozed off? Alexis sat up and quickly squinted at her watch at the same time she became aware of a presence in the room. A presence who was a blonde with old-fashioned sausage curls, red lips, a beauty mark and a great costume. Clearly, one of the hotel maids, probably trying to sneak in a fresh-towel delivery.

"Hi," the girl said. "I'm Sunshine. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"No problem. I shouldn't be sleeping now anyway."

"Oh, good. I've been wanting to meet you. I'm—" here Sunshine clasped both hands over her swelling bodice "—such a fan."

A fan? "I think you're confusing me with someone else."

"Oh, no. You're Alexis O'Hara and you're getting married Sunday afternoon, right?"

"Yes."

"I just admire you for the way you've taken charge of your life. Women make stupid mistakes because they don't think and they don't play to their strengths."

Well, yes, but what was she talking about?

"Don't depend on what a man tells you to get you in the sack. Make 'em pay up front. And you are."

Alexis gave her an icy look. "Are you referring to my prenuptial contract?"

Smiling widely, Sunshine nodded, her curls bouncing over her

bare shoulders.

Alexis's jaw dropped. "Were you listening at the door?"

"Certainly not!"

Well, somebody had heard something and Alexis wasn't going to lower herself by questioning the hotel help. She would, however, inform the others. Vincent had a bad habit of talking loudly on his cell phone no matter where he was.

"Could I ask you a question?"

Alexis nodded.

Beaming, Sunshine bounced on the edge of the bed.

Alexis was taken aback. The maids were very friendly here.

Sunshine leaned forward, revealing an alarming expanse of pushed-up bosom. "How did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Get him to keep paying!" Sunshine giggled. "Just getting him to marry you is what we all hope happens one day before we lose our looks, but how did you get him to agree to keep paying you afterward? Everybody knows it's supposed to be free then."

Alexis opened and shut her mouth. Twice. She should be offended, but this young girl was so good-natured and so eager and, well, the fan thing was flattering.

"I'm making a lot of money now and won't be working after I'm married."

"Exclusivity, yeah, I can see that. But marriage is usually enough."

"That is where women go wrong." Alexis warmed to her

theme. “It should be enough. But what happens when you get a little older, you have a couple of kids and things begin to sag and hubby turns you in for a younger model? There you are with your best earning years behind you, and what have you got?”

The awestruck look on Sunshine’s face was exactly the balm Alexis’s frayed nerves needed. Her headache receded. Her self-confidence blossomed.

“And it’s good for him, too,” Alexis continued. “Think about it. He knows darn good and well you can afford to walk out of the marriage if you don’t like it, yet you choose to stay. Frankly, it’s got to be a huge ego boost.”

Were those tears in Sunshine’s eyes? “You’re such an inspiration,” she whispered.

Somebody finally got it. The last of Alexis’s headache eased. “You’ve got to meet Miss Arlotta.”

Miss Ar—oh! That must be the wedding coordinator. Alexis was late. “I know.” But how did Sunshine know?

“She’s in the attic. I’ll take you there.”

The attic? There had been talk of choosing between two trellises. Maybe that’s where they were stored. Alexis stood and stepped into her shoes. “Thanks.”

“This is such an honor,” Sunshine said.

She was piling it on pretty thick, Alexis thought, then wondered if maybe meeting Miss Arlotta was the honor. She might be very exclusive. Quite honestly, sometime last week, Alexis had stopped asking the price of things.

As they walked down the hallway, Alexis looked to the smiling girl bouncing along next to her. “Great costume.”

“I know.” Sunshine raised a diaphanous panel of the long wrapper she wore. “I was going for innocent naughtiness. The old guys love it.”

The maid sure was blunt. “Good tips, huh?”

She shrugged a milky-white shoulder. “I did okay. Better than some, not as good as others.” She poked Alexis with her elbow. “They love it when they see something they think they’re not supposed to be seeing. You might remember that.”

“Uh, okay. I think it’s a very clever marketing strategy for the hotel to play on its infamous past. I was looking at all the memorabilia in the little parlor downstairs.”

“It was the high rollers’ parlor. For the best customers and, of course, the best girls. Now, me, I figured it was the old guys and the widowers who had the money to spend and I got them to askin’ for me special. Smart, huh?”

Listen to her. She was so into her part. Alexis was charmed. “Very.”

“Cause once I got to the high rollers’ parlor, other high rollers could see me and some of them would ask for me, too.” She looked momentarily wistful. “Some of them were mighty fine o’ face. Like your beau.”

Alexis knew she was referring to Dylan. Were there cameras in that private dining room? “How did you know?”

Sunshine stepped aside and indicated a door near the fire exit.

“Attic stairs.”

Alexis didn't open the door. “Sunshine, how did you know about Dylan?” If their privacy had been invaded, she wanted to know about it.

“I saw your face.”

Her face? She'd always thought she was good about masking her emotions. And, hey, there weren't any emotions to mask here, at least not the nostalgic kind. “Was it obvious?”

“Only to me, honey.”

A stranger could figure out that there had once been something between Dylan and Alexis? That was not good.

“Let's go,” Sunshine urged.

Maybe she should bring it up with Vincent. That would probably be best, Alexis thought as she opened the door and started up the stairs. A casual mention that they'd dated in law school—but then he'd wonder why she hadn't brought it up before. As she'd explained to her mother, the problem here was that there was no problem and as soon as you tried to explain that there wasn't a problem, people immediately thought that there was a problem, only you were trying to hide the size of it.

Alexis was so lost in thought that she'd climbed halfway up an extremely dark and dusty staircase before the rickety handrail had her thinking that this couldn't be meant for guests. Talk about a lawsuit waiting to happen. She turned around to mention it to Sunshine. It was so dark, Sunshine nearly disappeared in the gloom. In a trick of what light there was, Alexis thought she could

see the stairs right through her. She blinked.

“Just a little farther,” Sunshine said.

“You should tell the manager to install more light here. I’m surprised the building inspectors have let this go.”

“I don’t think the building inspectors see this staircase.”

“That’s not really the point.” Alexis came to the door at the top of the stairs. She reached for the old-fashioned door handle. “Is that original to the building?”

“As far as I know. I’ll get the door.”

Alexis never saw her touch it, yet the door creaked open. “That sounds like original hardware, too. I can’t believe the owner isn’t maintaining it.”

And then Alexis forgot about hotel-maintenance problems because the sight of the attic room rendered her mute.

It was as though the picture of the former brothel’s soiled doves, which hung in Sunshine’s high rollers’ parlor, had come to life. A group of young women, dressed in Victorian dishabille, lounged around boxes, trunks, old sheet-covered furniture and generations of castoffs.

“I—I thought this was a private meeting...”

“Hey, girls! Here she is! This is Alexis O’Hara.”

A tiny dark-haired woman raised her arms in a swirl of vintage Chinese silk. “Brava!” She began to clap in the rhythmic European way. “Brava!”

The others began clapping, too. A redhead in cowboy boots and a bustier stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled. “Yee

haw!”

“You do us proud, chérie!”

“What’s going on?” Alexis wondered aloud. Was this like celebrating a birthday at a restaurant and having all the waiters sing? Brides at the Inn at Maiden Falls get a send-off party from costumed maids?

“Yes, yes. She has done well for herself.” A throaty voice boomed from behind a desk that Alexis swore hadn’t been there moments before.

A woman with green-tinged skin, black eyebrows and yellow pin-curled hair sat behind the desk. She was only green-tinged because of the light from the green Tiffany-style torch lamp.

The girls quieted.

“I am Miss Arlotta,” she announced. “You may approach.”

Okay, so she was like a really exclusive wedding coordinator. Alexis decided to play along with whatever skit they were acting out and walked over to the desk. Up close, Miss Arlotta looked straight out of the Madams ’R’ Us catalog.

Sunshine appeared at her side. “Miss Arlotta, Alexis has been offered a contract for marriage that pays her one—hundred—thousand—dollars a year.”

More clapping erupted.

“In gold?” Miss Arlotta asked. She looked at Alexis. “Always make sure it’s in gold.”

Gold. Alexis just stopped herself from laughing. “That’s good advice,” she said, playing her role...of what, she didn’t exactly

know.

“And that’s not all!” Sunshine clapped her hands together and gave a little jump. “She also gets the money she would have made if she’d been working.”

Madam Arlotta sat back. “Well, now that is impressive.”

“Maybe not so impressive.” Alexis was being eyed by a sour-faced woman who plucked at the ties around her corseted waist. “Depends on how much she made.”

“I’m very good at what I do,” Alexis said.

The woman sniffed. “Hidden talents. Tricks. They always pay more for pervers—”

“Flo.” The woman immediately went silent. “Alexis is our guest.” Miss Arlotta stood and Alexis could see she was small for a woman with such a big voice. “We want you to know that though years and circumstances separate us, we celebrate what one of our own has accomplished for working women everywhere.”

“I—thank you.” This was just too weird.

“My Got. She vas showered viz more riches zan a royal courtesan.”

“I thought you were a royal courtesan, Countess,” Sunshine said.

“Zat is how I know zis.” The woman shrugged the silk robe over her shoulders. “I consider you my equal.”

Her equal? “And you were a courtesan?”

The Countess inclined her head. “Zat is so.”

“Like... a mistress.”

“Yes.”

The skit wasn't as fun as it had been. “I'm not going to be a mistress. I'm getting married.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.