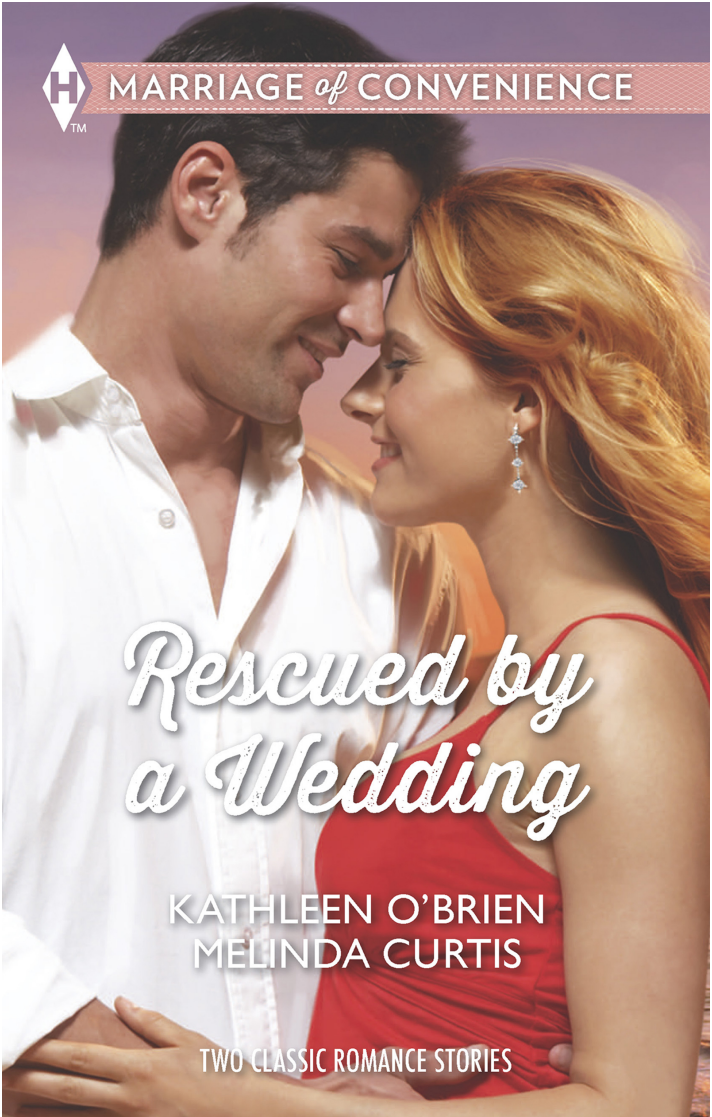

MARRIAGE of CONVENIENCE
Rescued by a Wedding
KATHLEEN O'BRIEN
MELINDA CURTIS
TWO CLASSIC ROMANCE STORIES

Kathleen O'Brien
Melinda Curtis

Rescued by a Wedding: Texas Wedding / A Marriage Between Friends

Аннотация

Marriage seems to be the solution…until the men change the rules! Two beloved marriage of convenience stories from Kathleen OÃ¢â?¬â?¢Brien and Melinda Curtis in one volume.Texas WeddingSusannah Everly is determined to save the family ranch, even if she must marry onetime love Trent Maxwell to do so. They both know this is a business arrangement with rules that do not include rekindling old feelings or surprise midnight seductions. When Trent seems determined to break their agreement, it may be time for Susannah to renegotiate.A Marriage Between FriendsWhen Jill desperately needed a father for her unborn child, Vince Patrizio gave them both his name. Then Jill walked out of his life. Now, years later, it's Vince's turn to have his say. Arriving in Jill's sleepy California town, he has plans to transform it into a mini Vegas…and to turn this convenient marriage into a real one.

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Texas Wedding
Kathleen O'Brien
A Marriage between Friends
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Texas Wedding

Kathleen O'Brien is a former feature writer and TV critic who's written more than thirty-five novels. She's a five-time finalist for the RWA RITA® Award and a multiple nominee for the RT Book Reviews awards. Though her books range from warmly witty to suspenseful, they all focus on strong characters and thrilling romantic relationships. They reflect her deep love of family, home and community, and her empathy for the challenges faced by women as they juggle today's complex lives. Visit her online at kathleenobrienonline.com, facebook.com/kathleenobrienauthor or twitter.com/kobrienromance.

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CHAPTER ONE

SUSANNAH EVERLY MAXWELL had been hiding in the bathroom for half an hour. For a bride on her wedding night, that was at least twenty-nine minutes too long.

She'd left the shower on, hoping Trent would assume she was still bathing, and the cascade of warm water had turned the room into a sauna. The towel knotted at her breasts hung heavily, saturated with moisture. Steam smothered the mirror, forming a blank screen of mist.

She knew she should go out into the bedroom, where her new husband was waiting, but she couldn't force herself to do it.

Her new husband…

None of this seemed real. Reaching out one fingertip, she began to write on the glass.

Mrs.…Trent…Maxwell…

She'd penned the name a thousand times, in the turquoise ink she'd loved back in high school. But before she could finish the last syllable, the condensation pooled and began to run. It was like trying to write with tears.

Her reflection appeared in the open spaces, fractured into a collection of mismatched parts. Ironically, this stranger draped in the white towel, wreathed in clouds of steam, looked more like a bride than she had this afternoon at the courthouse.

But not a happy bride. A broken Picasso bride, or maybe

a ghost bride from some terrifying urban legend—a confused wraith who would never find her way out of the mist.

She touched her damp cheek, as if she needed to confirm that she was made of solid flesh. Her new diamond ring sparkled in the mirror.

After all this time, she was really Trent Maxwell's wife. For one year, anyhow. Not exactly the "forever" she used to dream of.

Suddenly, hard knuckles rapped against wood.

"Susannah?"

Staring at the door, she put her left hand against her heart, which once again thump-jogged in place.

Stop that, she commanded it. But her heart ignored her.

"Susannah? Are you all right?"

He didn't turn the knob. He probably knew it was locked. Not that the flimsy button would have kept him out if he'd really wanted to come in. And he would come in, sooner or later, if she didn't emerge. The Fates had blessed Trent Maxwell with a lot of gifts, but patience wasn't one of them.

She'd fallen for Trent when she was just a kid—not all that much younger than her little sister Nikki was now. Susannah had thought she was so grown-up, ready to be in love. Now, watching Nikki struggle with hormones at the oh-so-mature age of sixteen, she knew better.

It had all been dreams. She'd fantasized about standing at the altar beside him. She'd dreamed of cooking him spaghetti and darning his socks, though she had no clue what that meant.

But those dreams had gone up in flames—quite literally—eleven years ago. Since then, she and Trent had barely exchanged fifty civil words.

Now here she was, a thirty-year-old woman, embarking on a one-year marriage of convenience. How dry those words sounded! They didn't capture any of the heart-skittering anticipation. He was only ten yards away, and waiting for her to come to bed. This would be a real marriage, he'd insisted. And, because she needed a husband, she had agreed.

But maybe she wasn't trapped. She had one last hope—a piece of paper hidden in her nightstand that somehow might miraculously save her.

She tried to imagine handing it to him. Tried to visualize his face as he read it. What would he say? They'd been so close once that they could finish each other's sentences. But the bitter years lay between them now like a continent of ice. Her new husband was a stranger to her, and she had no idea how he would react.

"Susannah?"

His voice wasn't angry. Not yet. That would come later. Later, when he read the paper. When he found out what her plans were for this, the first of their 365 nights of married life.

Her gaze returned to the pieces of woman reflected between the finger-written letters. Mrs… Her eyes shone. Trent… Her lips were parted, vulnerable.

Who was that woman? Suddenly horrified, she drew her eyebrows together. That woman looked like a victim.

Ridiculous. No one had abducted her, tricked her or sold her into wedlock. The bargain had been her idea, the only sensible escape from an impossible situation. It was just that marriage to Trent had seemed so much more manageable when it was weeks, days, even hours in the future, instead of right here, right now.

But she could handle it. She wasn't weak. Ask anyone, from the lowliest fruit picker on her payroll to the richest buyer on the market. You could even ask her grandfather's ghost, which was probably still prowling the halls of Hell, carrying his favorite switching strap.

They'd all tell you. Susannah Everly faced her problems. She took her medicine. And she did it with her chin held high.

"I'm coming."

She reached in and punched off the shower. Enough. She wasn't weak.

She unknotted the towel and let it slide to the ground. Then she plucked her gray, shapeless nightgown from the counter and tugged it over her head.

Hideous.

Perfect.

She wrapped her fingers around the warm doorknob and twisted.

Showtime.

"I'm sorry, Trent. I…"

Her voice dwindled off. The silent shadows of the bedroom momentarily disoriented her. Was he gone? Instead of the

hot voice she'd expected to hear accosting her, demanding an explanation, she was met only by quiet currents of dark air and the faint smell of roses.

That must mean Trent had opened the east window—the roses had climbed as far as the second-story sill this spring and seemed to be trying to nudge the glass open with their pink-and-yellow faces.

She took a deep breath. She adored those flowers, just as she cherished every inch of Everly. She mustn't forget that. She might have grown to hate Trent, but she'd never stopped loving this beautiful ranch, set like a jewel in the middle of a thousand acres of peach orchards.

She was doing this to save Everly.

As her eyes adjusted, she finally saw Trent. He leaned against the window frame with his back angled to her, staring down into the side yard, though she knew he couldn't see much except the grapevine trellis that covered the wicker patio loungers.

Half his body was in shadow. He wore no shirt. Moonlight turned one muscular shoulder and arm to marble, then glimmered against the silver tip of his belt buckle before being swallowed up by the black of his pants.

Her heart tried once again to escape, but she squared her shoulders and forced it into submission. She had made promises. Maybe he'd let her out of them, and maybe he wouldn't. Either way, this had to be faced.

"Trent?"

He tilted his head toward her. “Well, hello,” he said with a smile that just caught the moonlight. “I was beginning to wonder if you’d climbed out the bathroom window.”

“No.” She tried to match his sardonic tone, and she was glad that he probably couldn’t see her flush. “Of course not. Don’t be silly.”

“You think it’s silly?” He moved toward her with a lazy confidence, as if he knew he had all the time in the world. As if he owned this night. As if he owned her, which, in a way, he did.

“Why silly? Are you trying to tell me you’ve really been in the shower all this time?”

She’d never been a good liar. The only person she’d ever needed to lie to had been her grandfather, and her pride had forced her to battle it out with him, toe-to-toe, instead. So now she hesitated just a moment too long.

Trent reached her just as she was opening her mouth to say yes, yes, of course I’ve been in the shower.

One eyebrow rose in that classic, mocking arch as he shook his head slowly. He laid his finger against her lips.

“No,” he said. “Don’t bother to fib. If you’d been under water all this time, you’d be as wrinkled as a raisin.”

Instinctively, she folded her hands into fists. He glanced down at them, and his grin deepened. “Shall we look?”

Damn him…he was so cool, so amused by her discomfort. When he touched her hand, she had to resist the urge to slap him. He hadn’t bought the right to mock her.

But he had bought the right to touch her. He'd been very clear about that. No way in hell was he going to sign on for a year of chastity. "I'm no saint," he had said, with that maddening smile that made it impossible to tell how he really felt. "So you'd better decide whether you can deal with sharing my bed for a whole year."

He took one of her hands, gently pried open the fingers and held it up for inspection. Her fingers were warm and damp, but smooth. No wrinkles. She'd been in the shower a total of maybe five minutes, just long enough to scrub off her makeup.

"So what were you doing in there?" His gaze flicked across her wet hair and bare face, then skimmed the lumpy contours of her overwashed nightgown. "Not primping, apparently. Although… it might have taken a while to dig up anything as unflattering as this rag."

"If I'd had enough money to buy a trousseau, Trent, I wouldn't have needed a husband in the first place."

He chuckled. Could this really be funny to him? Surely he, too, remembered how often they had dreamed of their wedding night. That fairy-tale dream had sparkled with magic, with lace and music and romance and roses. The reality was going to be so different….

But perhaps the fairy dust had been her dream, not his. Though they'd been close, she hadn't ever completely understood him, with his cryptic smiles and his elegant indifference. Perhaps, for him, it had just been about the sex.

"What exactly are you trying to accomplish with all this, Susannah?"

"All what?"

He tugged at the sleeve of her nightgown. The neckline was shot, so even that light pressure caused it to slip over her shoulder. She felt suddenly half-naked.

"This plain-Jane costume. Were you hoping it would turn me off? Did you think you could make yourself so ugly I'd run screaming from the marriage bed?"

"No."

"Good. Because that really would be silly." He set her hand free and put his forefinger under her chin. "The chemistry between us has nothing to do with packaging. It never has."

She couldn't deny it. Back when they were little more than kids, this fire between them had erupted like one of her grandfather's oil drills hitting a pocket of natural gas. Nothing had been strong enough to put it out. It had overpowered pimples and puberty, flus and hangovers, bad moods and bad hair, and even the day the skunk sprayed her right in the face.

It had even outlived love.

She still felt it, arcing between them now. A primal force. Blind and fierce and involuntary.

And dangerous. At least to her.

"Susannah." His voice was a whisper. He moved her wet hair from her shoulder and bent his head toward her bare skin. She made a small, trapped sound, knowing he was going to kiss her.

She couldn't let it happen. Her heart tripped on itself merely at the sound of his voice. The touch of his lips would cause it to explode.

Mumbling something meaningless, she jerked away from him, toward her nightstand. She couldn't breathe, but somehow she kept moving. That piece of paper was her last hope. Like the cyanide pill issued to soldiers, in case of capture.

She flicked on the bedside lamp. Then, her hands shaking only a little, she slid open the top drawer and felt around the stacks of papers inside. It should be on top. She'd written it hastily, only this afternoon.

"I have something…."

She glanced at him, hoping she didn't sound as nervous as she felt. To her surprise, he was smiling. Not a genuine, warm smile, of course—those were rare—but his one-dimple teasing grin was pretty dazzling, too.

"Ah." He glanced at the drawer. "The practical princess strikes again."

"What?" He and Chase had always called her that, back when they were teenagers, and she'd been one inch less reckless than the two boys. But why now? Could he possibly guess what she'd written on that paper?

His dimple deepened. "I think I brought plenty, thanks, though it's nice to know you've got extra. Just in case."

"Extra what?" Then she realized what he meant. Condoms. Her breath came shallowly as she tried not to imagine the

tumbled bed, the discarded silver wrappers littering the floor, their sweaty bodies braided together in the moonlight. "No. It's not that. I have something I want to show you."

Finally her fingers closed around the long white envelope. She pulled it out and extended it toward him. "It's something I'd like you to read. Something I'd like you to sign."

He didn't look at the envelope. The smile stayed in place, but it lost any hint of humor. Above it, his gaze held hers, cool and unblinking blue inside a thick fringe of black lashes. Oh, even when he was angry, he was lethally attractive.

"Sign?"

The word was even colder than his eyes.

"Yes," she said, too quickly. "I got to thinking about things, today after the wedding, and I realized we hadn't really considered…everything."

"No? It seemed to me the prenup your lawyer drew up was pretty damn thorough. He made it quite clear that I'll be shot if I'm caught crossing the Everly threshold with so much as one pillowcase from your mother's needlepoint collection." He lifted an eyebrow. "Which wasn't very likely in the first place, was it?"

"No. It was silly, but Richard's careful. He wanted to protect me—"

"Was the medical certificate his idea, too?"

She felt heat crawling up her throat toward her cheeks. The medical certificate had almost scotched the whole deal. But when Trent had insisted on a physical relationship, she had insisted that

he prove he was healthy. With his Don Juan past, it would have been insane not to.

"No, that was my idea. Richard doesn't know we—that we agreed to—"

"Consummate the marriage?"

"Right. So when he wrote the prenup, of course he wasn't thinking about…things like that. That's what occurred to me today. That we hadn't provided for every contingency."

She felt foolish, still holding out the envelope. She pushed it a few inches closer, till its crisp edge almost touched his bare, bronze chest, like the tip of a sword.

He glanced down at it dismissively, those long eyelashes dusting his cheeks. "It's a little late to try to glue conditions onto this deal, don't you think?"

Of course it was too late, technically. She knew that. He had the moral right to tear this piece of paper into a dozen pieces and fling it in her face. Many might think he had the moral right to shove her onto the waiting bed and force her to do whatever he wanted.

But surely he wouldn't. Surely even the volcano of anger that had been simmering between them for more than a decade wouldn't blow that high. Surely it hadn't taken the laughing boy who used to dance with her down by Green Fern Pool and turned him into a monster.

"Put it away, Susannah. I'm not signing anything."

She lifted her chin. "Just read it."

She was pleased to note that, though her insides were twisting as if she had a bellyful of snakes, her voice sounded strong. In spite of the hot cheeks and the damp palms, somehow she projected confidence.

She sent a mental thank-you to her grandfather, the bully who had taught her how to face down fear.

Trent tilted his head. "Sue, don't do this," he said. His voice was quiet, but held an undercurrent of warning.

"Please. Just read it."

She saw his chest expand as he took in a deep breath. His rib cage brushed the edge of the envelope.

He reached out, finally, and took it. She hadn't sealed the envelope. She hadn't had time. Chase and Josie, who had no doubt meant well, had brought over a few friends to toast the newlyweds this afternoon, and Susannah had found it difficult to steal away long enough to scrawl the words onto the paper.

Trent unfolded it and began to read.

Her heart thumped in her ears, but not loudly enough to drown out the quavering inner voice that read along with him.

In the event that a child is conceived between me and Susannah Kate Everly during our marriage, I, Trent Anderson Maxwell, do hereby relinquish all legal rights to said child. I will not attempt to gain custody, partial or full, of any child of this union. I will have no financial obligations toward said child, nor will I have any right to be involved in decisions involving the child.

He must have read it three times, his handsome face impassive, his black hair falling over his forehead. At least, that was how many times she could scan it in her head—and each time it sounded more ridiculous, with all that fake legalese mimicking wills and contracts she'd seen over the years.

And each time it sounded more damning. More unfair, and insulting. More like the dishonest swindle it was.

His knuckles were white. So were hers.

Breathe… Though her lungs felt like rusty bellows, she had to remember she needed air. Her head swam, and her ears rang. But she refused to do anything as pathetic as fainting.

Thank God she'd sent Nikki away for the summer. Nikki didn't like Trent and, with the judgmental absolutism of the young, she'd made it clear that she thought the whole marriage-of-convenience idea was disgusting. Knowing it would be impossible to fight on two fronts, Susannah had found the cash for a special art school, managed to wrangle permission to take Nikki out of school a bit early to attend, and, just yesterday, had packed her little sister off.

Barely in the nick of time! Nikki acted tough, especially when she locked horns with Susannah, but it was a facade. No sixteen-year-old was tough enough to handle the hell that might break loose at Everly tonight.

It seemed an eternity before Trent raised his eyes again. When he finally did, the look she saw in them terrified her.

"Tell me this is your idea of a joke."

"Of course it's not." She knew a dignified silence would be more powerful, but she suddenly couldn't seem to stop talking. "It's just common sense. No matter how careful we are, everyone knows that birth control isn't one hundred percent reliable. We can't allow our lives to be tangled up forever, with custody battles and court cases, just because we bought a faulty condom, or because—"

"Don't pretend you're stupid." He held the paper between two fingers, as if he meant to flick it away at any moment. "You know this…this juvenile chicken scratch would never hold up in court."

She raised her chin. "I disagree."

"No, you don't. You know it's absurd. They'd laugh you out of court. But it won't come to that, will it? Because you know damned well I'd never sign any such ridiculous document. Never."

"You have to."

"The hell I do. You made your deal with the devil, Susannah. You can't renegotiate now."

"I can." She met his glacial blue gaze, but it made her shudder inside, as if she'd swallowed a stomachful of chipped ice. "I am renegotiating. I have had second thoughts. If you don't sign that document, there will be no…no consummation."

For a minute, he just stared at her. And then, with a sudden oath, he did flick the paper away. He moved toward her, roughly, all six-foot-two-inches of hard, half-naked muscle bearing down.

Every primitive instinct told her to run, but he blocked the

way. She backed up on clumsy legs, knocking against the dresser, sending her earrings and wristwatch clanking to the wood floor.

He didn't even seem to hear it. He just kept coming. Finally, she ran out of room, and her shoulder blades met the wall. He slammed the heels of his hands onto the plaster, just inches from each side of her head. His face was so close she could feel the heat of his breath against her cheek.

"This is what you'd planned all along, isn't it? What a fool I was, to think even for a minute that…" He set his jaw into a right angle of fury. "Right from the start, this was just a nasty game of bait and switch."

"No. No, I just realized this afternoon—"

"The hell you did. Don't give me that crap, Susannah. You're not a fool, and neither am I. You never intended to keep your end of the bargain."

She tried to deny it. But she couldn't. Consciously, she'd meant what she said. But somewhere, deep inside, she had always been praying that she wouldn't have to do this.

"Right." He loaded the syllable with disdain. "But did you ever consider the possibility that your game might just backfire on you?"

"No—it wasn't a game—how could it—"

He lowered his lips to her neck and spoke his next words against her skin. "Did it ever occur to you that I might decide not to just slink away with my tail between my legs? That I might decide to claim what's due me?"

"No, that never occurred to me," she lied, swallowing hard. "I trust you to be sensible, and—"

"You trust me?" He threw his head back, laughing harshly. "That's a good one, sweetheart. According to that prenup, you don't trust me with the dinner forks. And obviously you didn't trust me not to bring a bucket of STDs to the marriage bed, either."

He bent his elbows slightly, and tilted his body toward her, just close enough that the heat and the pressure reminded her how powerful he was. He'd always been tall, even as a teen, with the promise of potency to come. But this was a man's body, with all the promises fulfilled.

She tried to go numb. She didn't want to feel the angles of his hips against hers. She didn't want to be aware of the muscles in his legs, rippling with tension. She didn't want to remember how this same body had once covered hers with tenderness.

"You obviously believe I'm an immoral bastard—and eleven years ago you told me I was a murderer, too." His rough voice scraped her nerves. "What would stop a man like that from asserting his conjugal rights…with whatever force it required?"

"Nothing." She pressed her head against the wall, struggling to create distance. "You're obviously stronger than I am, Trent. Nothing can stop you except your own conscience."

But did he have one? And what about her conscience? She had agreed to a sexual relationship, in exchange for this marriage. If she could anesthetize her conscience, perhaps he could do the

same.

For a minute, she thought he might. He let his body press forward even farther, until the granite of his chest met her breasts. His heat scorched through her nightgown. Too fast for her to react, he thrust his knee between her legs and cocked it up, pressing it hard against the aching spot at the apex of her thighs.

She twisted against the wall, trying to escape both him and the hot desire that traitorously shot through her. Perhaps she wasn't strong enough to prevent this, but she could fight. She didn't have to make it easy for him. She pushed against his chest with her palms, but she might as well have been trying to move a mountain.

He let her squirm for a moment, just long enough for her to realize how helpless she truly was. And then, without warning, he stepped away.

If she hadn't been propped up by the wall, she might have fallen. Her breath was coming so fast, it was as if she'd been running for hours.

He, on the other hand, looked as cool and contemptuous as ever. He picked up his shirt and began walking toward the door.

When he put his hand on the knob, he turned.

"It's not my conscience stopping me," he said, looking her over with a cool appraisal that somehow managed to be as insulting as if he'd spit in her face. "It's my standards. I don't much care for liars, or frigid, manipulative bitches. The truth is, sweetheart, you're not worth it."

CHAPTER TWO

YEARS AGO, Trent had learned that there's no frustration, no pain or fury, no mental monster of any kind, that can't be tamed by a treadmill—assuming you go fast enough and stay on it long enough.

This morning, with Susannah's double cross less than twelve hours behind him, he'd logged about ten miles on the gym's machine before he felt even seminormal. He started Mile One with his cell phone in his hand, fingers itching to call a lawyer, any lawyer, and file for a quickie divorce.

Instead, he dialed up the treadmill speed and jogged till he sweated out some of the poison. Somewhere along the repetitive rubber highway, he found enough sanity to remember why he'd agreed to this marriage in the first place.

It hadn't been just to help Susannah. It hadn't even been just because he'd been fool enough to dream that this might be their second chance.

He'd also done it for Chase.

Originally, Chase had been Susannah's chosen temporary husband. It had made sense. Chase was her best friend. He was unattached and, even more importantly, he was a born saint. The original Mr. Do-Good. So he had been perfectly happy to marry her with no demands, no strings attached.

But then Josie Whitford had come along and hit Chase like

a bolt of lightning. The poor guy's dilemma had been painful to watch. Love or loyalty? Passion or past promises?

Trent had to say one thing for Susannah: though she was as cold as a meat locker toward Trent, she did seem to have a soft spot for Chase. When she'd realized the problem, she'd come to Trent and laid out a deal.

The way she figured it, Trent should marry her. If he hadn't screwed up their relationship eleven years ago, she said, she wouldn't be in the market for a husband in the first place. So Trent owed her. If he'd help her meet the husband clause in her grandfather's will, she'd consider the debt paid.

Trent knew she was desperate, even to suggest it. He knew she would have exhausted all other options, sane or crazy, before coming to him.

Everyone knew she'd tried to break the will legally, of course. But though old man Everly had been mean as a snake and the biggest male chauvinist in Texas, he'd also been clever and controlling, and he'd apparently found a lawyer who was his match.

The resulting will was apparently ironclad. Arlington had left Everly tied up so tight Susannah couldn't sell a single peach tree, not one pebble on the property, no matter how much she needed money. Not till she got married, and stayed married, sleeping under the same roof with her husband for a full year.

Trent was surprised the will hadn't required a check of the honeymoon bedsheets, to prove all marital obligations had been

met. The nasty old bastard.

It had been tempting all on its own, to think of thwarting old man Everly.

But what really made Trent agree to the deal was his own soft spot for Chase, his childhood friend. He'd agreed to take Chase's place. Minus the saint and celibacy stuff, of course. He was willing to help Susannah by presenting himself at the altar, not on it.

And look where he'd ended up anyhow. Lying right on that slab. Staring at the longest, coldest year of his life, beside a marble-hearted bitch who just happened to look like a girl he used to love.

But at least Chase was happy. And that was still worth protecting.

Finally resigned, Trent showered and headed back to Everly.

The house had seen better days—it could definitely use a coat of paint—but the fancy gingerbread Victorian looked its best on this cloudless spring morning, with roses bunched up everywhere, and the trees finally back in leaf.

The minute he opened the door, he heard voices. Susannah was here, but she wasn't alone. He listened a second, and recognized Chase.

He scanned the large honey-pine foyer. The guest powder room door was open, the frilly area empty. No sign of Josie. So Chase had come alone.

Had Susannah sent out an SOS? Needed, one shoulder to cry

on, because my husband is a beast.

"Hey!" Chase stood up from the table as Trent entered the kitchen. He grinned. "You owe me one, buddy. I just barely managed to keep Pastor Wilcox from coming over here. I told him I'd bring his present along, since I was going to stop by anyhow."

Trent was surprised to discover how much the sight of Chase's easy smile annoyed him—especially since he'd just been waxing sentimental about honoring the bond of friendship, taking one for your mate, all that band of brothers nonsense.

But he'd just gotten married last night, for God's sake. Shouldn't your band of brothers be willing to back off for at least one day? Give you time to…

Time to what? To break promises and fling insults? To call each other names and rip open old wounds? Maybe, when he thought about it, he and Susannah had already had all the togetherness they needed.

Trent glanced at her now, standing at the stove. In her usual outfit of sharp khaki slacks and white oxford-cloth shirt, with her hair in a glossy braid down her back, not a strand out of place, she looked utterly serene.

She turned gracefully and held out a blue mug, smiling. "Cup of coffee, Trent? It's fresh."

Her voice was angelic, smooth, as if she'd just this minute set aside her golden harp and stepped down from her cloud. He hesitated a beat before accepting the coffee, sorting the clues.

One thing was clear. She hadn't invited Chase over. She was improvising, pretending that there was smooth sailing in the newlywed world. They weren't going to tell Chase about last night's nosedive into the emotional swamp.

"Okay, thanks," Trent said, playing along. He turned to Chase. "Yeah, we owe you."

But he wasn't sure what to say next. Chase knew them both so well. He wasn't going to be easily fooled.

Trent took a sip of coffee, though it was technically still too hot. Then he reached across the table for the present, wrapped in its flocked silver paper, and picked it up.

"So what did Pastor Wilcox send? I hope it's not one of his wife's samplers. I'll never forget the one in her living room that said 'Enquire not what boils in another's pot.' I swear the thing gave me nightmares."

Chase and Susannah both laughed politely, which in itself was stilted, since this was an old joke. The three of them had made fun of that sampler for years, rewriting it into a hundred vulgar variations, like "Enquire not what rots in another's boils."

He pulled off the white bow and began to rip away the paper, just as if he gave a damn what was inside. They watched him, pretending to be equally transfixed.

It was a picture frame, arranged facedown, so that all he could see was the velvet backing and little gold clips. He flipped it over and readied himself to make some joke about Jenny Wilcox's nutty quotations.

The joke died on his lips. It wasn't a sampler, after all. It was a photograph of Susannah and Trent, standing out in one of the Everly peach orchards. It must have been taken a long time ago. At least eleven years, in fact, because Susannah was laughing, something she hadn't done in Trent's presence since the night of the fire.

She wore a flower-sprigged gypsy dress, and her skirt was full of peaches. She held the fabric up in both hands, just high enough to expose her knees.

Trent was staring at her, goofy and love-struck, peaches littered around his feet. He had been juggling them, and when Susannah lifted her dress, they'd all come tumbling down.

For an aching instant, just looking at the picture, he was there again, at the church picnic, with Pastor Wilcox taking snapshots. Trent could feel the summer sun on his cheeks, and he could taste the sweet, sticky peaches on his tongue. He had made love to Susannah that night, lying under the moonlight on the cooling grass, and she had tasted of peaches, too.

He glanced up at her now, to see how she had reacted. The past had been so alive that it shocked him to see how different the real Susannah was. Not much older, amazingly, and not any less beautiful, but somehow muffled. Empty, as if whatever spring had fed the laughter had dried up and turned to dust.

Though she, too, stared at the picture, she hadn't reacted at all. She still wore that lovely robot smile. The eyes above it were as empty as a doll's.

He held the picture out. It was cruel, perhaps, but he wanted her to touch it. He wanted her to say something, anything, that proved she was still a real human being.

She took it in her hand. "What a lovely thought," she said blandly, looking down at it without blinking. "That was nice of them."

Then she set it on the table gently. "I'm sorry to leave you, boys, but I've got to talk to the foreman about some new hires. Several of my best workers had a terrible car accident last weekend, and I'm going to be shorthanded."

Obediently, Chase stood up and kissed her on the cheek. She smiled, and waited for Trent to do the same. Still part of the charade for Chase's benefit. Trent kissed her, surprised to find that her cheeks were still soft and warm, not firm plastic like a mannequin's.

Then she was gone.

The silence in the kitchen held a million unasked questions —and a million unspoken answers. Trent didn't rush to fill it. Between the two men, words were often unnecessary.

Chase pulled open the cabinet door that hid the trash can. Then he wadded up the wrapping paper and tossed it toward the container. He missed. Trent retrieved it and tried again. He missed, too.

"Pathetic," Chase said. They both stood staring at the misshapen ball of glittering silver paper on the tiled floor.

"Look, Trent. Maybe I should stay out of this but…don't give

up on Sue, okay? It's early days, you know. Things could get better, with a little time."

Trent grunted, then went over and stuffed the paper into the trash can and kicked the cabinet door closed. "Yeah, and you could get drafted by the Mavericks, but I'm not holding my breath."

Chase shook his head. "What the hell happened? I was hoping I'd find you two still in bed. But I get here, you're gone, and she's doing her bookkeeping like it's just any other day. Damn it. I honestly thought that, once you guys were married, she might—"

"Well, she didn't. And she's not going to. I was an idiot to think she ever would. She was always strong, Chase, but it's different now. She's changed. Maybe her grandfather did it to her. Hell, maybe I did it. But she's turned…tough."

"No, she hasn't." Chase chewed the inside of his lip. "Or if she is tough, it's tough like an avocado. Just on the outside. You've got to remember that, you know. She can still be bruised on the inside. Are you sure you didn't do something, say something that might have made her feel—"

"No." Trent took his coffee cup to the large stainless steel sink and tossed the dregs down the drain. "I didn't say a damn thing. And, frankly, I'd prefer not to get lectures from you on this. Why don't you go home and take care of your own wife?"

Chase smiled. One of his best traits was his easy nature. He rarely took offense at anything.

"Gladly," he said. "But I think you're passing up some pretty

useful advice. After all, I do have an embarrassingly happy marriage."

Trent made a harsh sound. "Then your advice is no use to me. Last night made one thing perfectly clear. Susannah and I aren't married." He felt his shoulders tighten. "We're at war."

* * *

AS SUSANNAH SAT with her foreman in his cluttered office just off the barn, listening to him sputter indignantly about the young slacker they'd just interviewed, she really was trying to focus. Every time her mind or her gaze wandered toward the house, she dragged it back.

She had been more relieved to see Trent show up this morning than she wanted to admit. When she'd awakened and found him gone, she hadn't been sure whether he was ever coming back.

But he had come, and that's all that mattered. As long as her plan to break her grandfather's will was safe, she didn't care what Chase and Trent were saying now. Trent had undoubtedly already spilled all the gory details, and they'd begun bashing her, employing the usual macho insults for women who promise things they refuse to deliver.

But so what? That wasn't important. This was. The peach crop was going to be good this year, and, even if she wasn't sure she had buyers for the fruit, she'd still need as many skilled workers as possible to bring it in.

Even the worker she'd just interviewed. Eli Breslin.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw the cheeky little son of a gun."

Zander was so outraged he sputtered. “He has the nerve to walk in here? As if you’d hire that one to shine your shoes!”

She smiled. “I can’t afford to have my shoes shined by anybody. But I do need someone to pick peaches. And he’s the only one who showed up, right?”

“Well.” Zander shuffled papers on his desk. “There were a few calls.”

“Yes, but those men weren’t good enough, either.”

They’d already discussed this. One candidate used to work for the Ritchie spread, which was notoriously badly run, and the second applicant had been on the wagon for only six months, which wasn’t long enough in Zander’s eyes, and…well, the bottom line seemed to be that most of the callers failed to meet the foreman’s standards.

Eli Breslin wouldn’t have made the cut, either, except that he hadn’t bothered to phone first. He’d just knocked on the office door, and Susannah, despairing of getting anyone past Zander’s gauntlet, had insisted on interviewing the kid.

Zander leaned back in his ancient, squeaking leather chair and tapped his pencil against his knee. “He’s got zero experience with peaches.”

“He can learn,” Susannah said. She moved her hand and almost overturned a teetering stack of paperwork. Ironic that Zander required perfection of everyone but himself. “Things are desperate right now. We may have to lower our standards a bit.”

Of course, that was the wrong thing to say. The big man sat

up straight and puffed out his chest. “I’m glad your grandfather isn’t around to hear you say such a thing. He never abandoned his standards, no matter what. Not even when the Alzheimer’s laid him low.”

Sighing, Susannah stood and walked to the window, where she could see the east forty, which looked beautiful in May, with all the trees wearing full green. The sight calmed her a little.

She and Zander had been through this a dozen times in the two years since Arlington H. Everly had died, and she didn’t feel like hashing it out again.

Her grandfather’s “standards” were, in her view, simply mule-headed stubbornness and excessive pride. His refusal to face economic facts had brought Everly to this current disaster, and she and Zander both knew it.

When Susannah was a kid, before her parents died, Everly Industries had owned ten thousand acres of fertile land here near Austin, and almost as many in West Texas, where the land was so rich the oil just boiled out of the ground. Today, they had one tenth that, only one thousand acres, a mere three hundred of them producing. Oh, and a dried-up two-acre plot in West Texas that looked like Swiss cheese from all the useless holes Arlington had kept drilling after Alzheimer’s had claimed his brain.

“I need hands,” she said, trying to stick to the topic. “Lots of hands to prune and thin, and then, in a few weeks, start bringing in those peaches before they rot on the trees. Eli Breslin is a healthy, willing worker with two excellent hands. Hire him.”

The silence behind her was full of disapproval. Finally Zander spoke, his voice a deep, censorious rumble in his chest. "You can't mean that. What about Miss Nikki?"

She bit her lower lip. That was the big question, of course. When Eli Breslin had worked next door at Chase's Double C quarter horse ranch, Nikki had fallen for him like a too-ripe peach dropping from the tree. In fact, Eli Breslin was one of the main reasons Susannah had decided to spring for Nikki's expensive art school. It had simply been too hard to keep the two from sneaking off together into the orchard late at night.

And Susannah knew all too well what could happen in the orchard, under a milky moon, on a warm spring night.

On the other hand, Nikki was gone, and during his interview Eli had apologized with a lot of grace and maturity. Maybe, without her wild little sister to distract him, Eli Breslin could be a good worker.

Or maybe Zander was right. Maybe Eli was just too iffy….

She pressed her hand over her eyes. She'd been staring out into the sun too long, and she was getting a headache.

She heard someone open the office door behind her, and then the sound of Zander levering himself out of his squeaky chair.

"Trent! Thank God you're here! Maybe you can help me talk some sense into Ms. Susannah!"

Oh, great. She needed this right now.

Susannah turned to see Trent moving into the office, his lean height dominating it more thoroughly than even Zander's bulk

could ever do. He shut the door behind him, then came over and shook the foreman's outstretched hand, simultaneously slapping him on the shoulder. They were old friends, and suddenly she felt outnumbered.

"No one needs to talk sense into me." She included both men in her scowl. But damn it. What was it about Trent's lazy, amused grin that made her feel like a kid stamping her foot? "I make my own decisions. I know what I'm doing."

Trent raised his eyebrow, as if she'd said something cute, and transferred that annoying grin to the foreman. "Come on, Zan. You know her. When she makes a decision, you and I and Hell's army couldn't talk her out of it. Save your energy for a battle you can win."

"I would. God knows, I usually do. But this is different. She's getting ready to hire Eli Breslin."

Trent's eyebrow went up even farther. "Really?" He glanced at Susannah. "Why?"

"Because I need workers, that's why. Because Eli applied, and he sounded sincere about needing the job. He went out of his way to apologize for everything that happened with Nikki. He explained that he was just lonesome. Homesick. That's why he wants a second job now, to save up to buy a plane ticket back home to El Cajon."

Trent chuckled. "He actually said that?"

"You should have heard the little weasel." Zander grimaced. "Kid should be an actor. He spread honey on her like she was his

own personal biscuit. Ninety-three percent of it pure baloney, if you ask me."

"But I didn't." Susannah tightened her voice. "I didn't ask either of you. It's my decision."

Zander growled under his breath, like a fussy old hound. "You do remember what he did at the Clayton place, don't you? You remember he walked away from a sick horse, didn't care whether the animal lived or died? You remember Trent had to fire him?"

"She remembers." Trent's smile was gone. In its place was cool speculation. "Is that part of the appeal, Susannah? Do you think it would be fun to tweak my nose a bit?"

It might be fun, she thought, to see if she could slap that insufferable arrogance off his face. But she gritted her teeth and braided her hands behind her back. Her famous self-control was the only thing that kept Zander from quitting. She'd heard him say it was beneath him to work for a woman, but Ms. Everly didn't really act like one, so he didn't mind too much.

She lifted her chin. "As I've pointed out before, Trent, not everything I do is about you."

But he just grinned again, and her palms itched. How did he do this to her? Why couldn't she learn to be immune to his snarky comments and his laughing eyes?

She had been vacillating about Eli, but suddenly her mind was made up.

She moved to the door, opened it, then turned to her foreman. "Hire him. Ask him if he has a brother, an uncle, a dog. Hire

them all."

"Dumb decision," Zander muttered. "You'll regret it."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," Trent said pleasantly. Susannah had let the door begin to fall shut, so she almost missed the rest of the comment.

But his words were loud enough to follow her, like a dart finding its bull's eye.

"Our Susannah's a clever woman, Zan. Trust me. If she regrets it, she can always find a way to wriggle out of it."

CHAPTER THREE

AT THREE O'CLOCK that afternoon, Trent knocked at the baby blue door of a little white cottage over in Darlonsville.

"Trent!" Peggy Archer held out her hand. Her eyes were wide, and she seemed momentarily speechless. "I didn't expect to see you today. Shouldn't you be with…her?"

Trent sensed the trembling in her fingers and squeezed them reassuringly. "I've had a date with you every Saturday afternoon for five years now, Peggy. Marriage isn't going to change that."

She nodded slowly. "Especially that marriage."

"Not any marriage. You told me your satellite dish is broken. I know you can't live without your Sunday night football."

He smiled, aware that Peggy never watched sports on TV, but hoping to distract her from the subject of Susannah. It was a sore one in this house.

Long ago, when they were kids, Peggy's son Paul had been part of the inseparable quartet, the Fugitive Four. Trent, Chase and Susannah had all been Peggy's surrogate children, eating her corn dogs and hot chili every summer afternoon at the Bull's Eye ranch, the ten-thousand-acre Archer homestead.

But then, eleven years ago, a quarrel between Trent and Susannah had escalated into tragedy, and Peggy's son, Paul, had ended up dead. It had been about ninety-nine percent Trent's fault, and it had taken him years to find the courage to come back

to Texas and face what he'd done.

Facing Peggy had been the toughest. But little by little, she had forgiven him and let him slip into the role of surrogate son once more. Oddly, as the years had gone on, she had ended up blaming Susannah the most.

When Trent had told her about the one-year marriage, the news had seemed to distress her out of all proportion. Trent had assumed it had been because of Paul, but he wondered now if Peggy had simply feared she'd lose Trent's weekly visit.

Darn it. Foolishly, he'd taken for granted that she would understand. He'd never stop coming to see her, not as long as she needed him.

His debt to her was eternal. It would never be paid.

He tightened his grip on her hand. "Hey. Don't I get invited in?"

"Of course, but—" She glanced over her shoulder as she backed away from the door. "I thought you weren't coming, so —"

Just at that moment, her ex-husband, Harrison Archer, ambled in from the kitchen, muttering under his breath and studying the bracket that ordinarily held the satellite dish up on the roof.

Harrison was a balding, Texas-sized good old boy with a chest as round and barrel-shaped as any of his steers. At his heels trailed his son Sean, who at eight years old already looked shockingly like Paul. Both sons from Harrison's second marriage did. It was the red hair, mostly. Harrison's new wife, Nora, was

half Peggy's age, but otherwise could have been her clone—same fiery hair, petite body and smart hazel eyes.

Everyone knew what Harrison was doing when he married Nora, only two years after Paul's death. He was doubling back to square one and starting over. Or trying to. But in spite of the healthy new sons and the pretty wife, there was still something dead in his eyes that made Trent uncomfortable whenever their gazes met.

"Trent. Thank God you're here." Harrison held up the bracket. "I can't figure this blame thing out to save my life. And Sean has a game tonight. All right if I let you take over?"

"Sure." Trent smiled at Harrison and then at Sean, who was a cute kid, gangly in his miniature polyester Red Sox uniform. "Hi, kiddo."

"Sean is pitching today," Harrison said in his deepest proud-father voice, his chest expanding subtly, stretching the buttons of his five-hundred-dollar denim shirt.

Trent wasn't sure how to respond. For starters, he couldn't believe the man had brought Sean here suited up like this, like the ghost of Paul. Mentioning the pitching was almost unbelievably insensitive.

But the kid looked excited, so Trent couldn't just ignore it. "Oh, yeah? Cool."

Sean grinned. "I'm working on my knuckleball. Dad says I'm getting pretty good."

Instinctively, Trent shot a glance at Peggy. Once, Paul had

pitched for the high school team. He'd been good—almost great. A&M had offered him a full scholarship. But at the very moment when he should have been reporting for practice, he'd been lying in a hospital bed.

Burned over seventy percent of his body.

Dying.

And now Harrison was teaching the famous Archer knuckleball to this freckle-faced replacement son. Peggy stared at the wall, apparently determined not to look at Sean. Her cheeks were pale, her hazel eyes ominously glassy. Trent's shoulders tightened. It was like torture, rubbing salt in a wound that already refused to heal.

"I need to sit down." Peggy let go of Trent's hand and led the way into the small blue-and-white living room.

Her limp was worse this week, Trent noticed. She must be in a lot of pain. Though only in her early fifties, she moved like a woman of ninety. Her hip replacement surgery was scheduled for July, a long six weeks from now. She was dreading it, but Trent privately hoped it would give her a sort of fresh start, too.

Harrison set the bracket down on the coffee table, not bothering to hide his eagerness to escape. "So, you can handle this alone, right? It's not that big a job, and we probably should hit the road. Nora gets out of Pilates at four, and she needs to shower before the game."

"Yeah, I'll be fine." Trent repressed the urge to shake the older man. Was he doing this deliberately? Why would he mention

Nora's daily exercise class, when his ex-wife could barely walk?

As if Peggy didn't already know that a heartbroken, postmenopausal arthritic could never hold a candle to the buoyant young wife who waited for Harrison at home.

"Good. Well, then, we'll be going." Harrison looked over at Peggy, who had lowered herself into a white rocker and picked up her knitting, as if to say, Yes, I'm a middle-aged woman, and I don't care. "Goodbye, then, Peg."

"Bye, Peggy," Sean echoed politely. "Thanks for having me."

She didn't look up from her yarn. "Goodbye."

The word was so cold it sent a small gust of frigid air out into the room. Bristling, Harrison drew his eyebrows together. He handed his son the car keys and whispered something. Sean nodded and headed toward the front stairs.

As soon as the door shut behind the boy, Harrison turned and glared at his ex-wife. "None of this is Sean's fault, you know," he said gruffly.

She kept knitting. Her fingers looked almost as white as the yarn.

"Damn it, Peggy. You could be a little nicer to him."

She finally looked up. "No. As a matter of fact, Harry, I couldn't. Don't ever bring that boy into my house again."

Harrison made a sharp move forward, but Trent threw out his arm. He'd seen the Archer temper all too often in the old days. Back then, he'd been too young, too intimidated by the Archer acres, to know what he should do about it.

But he knew now.

"Hey," he said. "Easy."

The older man's chest pushed against Trent's forearm, as if he might put up a fight. His breath came harsh and heavy. They stood that way about ten seconds, with Harrison clearly struggling for composure.

Finally he eased back an inch or two. He transferred his glare to Trent. "I need to talk to you, son," he said. "Outside."

Trent didn't much like the autocratic tone, but he very much liked the idea of getting the agitated man away from Peggy. He nodded and followed Harrison through the door and onto the front porch.

"Bitch," Harrison muttered as the door shut behind him. Trent ignored it, but he placed himself between the older man and the entry, just in case.

"You said you wanted to talk to me?"

Harrison took one last deep breath, and ran his hands through his thinning brown hair. "Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lost my temper. It's just that even after all these years, she can still get my goat. She's stuck in the past, Trent. Damn it, I loved Paul, too, but I have to get on with my life, don't I? And she hates me for it."

"Maybe she just hates having your new life thrown in her face."

Harrison's fleshy cheeks reddened. "Thrown in her face? Look, I didn't choose to come here. She called me. She said

she needed help. And look what it turned out to be! The damn television set!"

Trent didn't bother to try to make Harrison understand how important television could be to someone as lonely as Peggy. Empathy wasn't the man's strong suit.

"Well, I'm here now, so you're off the hook. Take Sean to the game and forget about it."

"It's ridiculous, anyhow." Harrison glanced toward the house with distaste. "Why the hell didn't she just hire someone to fix it? God knows the allowance I give her is big enough."

Trent's jaw was so tight he could hardly get words out. "I think she likes the company. Half the time when I come over, she tells me to forget the repairs. She just wants to sit and talk."

Harrison laughed. "What? You think she just likes to hang out with you? Don't kid yourself, son. She's using you. She knows you've got a guilty conscience, so she plays on it."

Trent had heard enough. "You know, I think it's time for you to go."

To his surprise, the edict didn't seem to inflame the older man's tinderbox temper. Instead, Harrison's face softened, as if swept by a sudden and rare compassion. "You really care about her, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Poor kid." Harrison rested his meaty hand gently on Trent's shoulder. "I know you think you can make it up to her. But you can't. It's too big, what happened."

Trent shrugged. “Maybe. I come because I like to. That’s all.”

“Okay.” Harrison nodded, but he chewed on the inside of his cheek as if something troubled him. “Still…you need to watch your step, son. Because I promise you this. Deep down inside where nobody sees, that woman hates you.”

* * *

THOUGH MONDAY was only Eli Breslin’s first day, by midafternoon Susannah was guardedly pleased with his performance. During the lunch break, when Zander and Susannah had gone over business in the foreman’s office, even the older man had grudgingly admitted that, so far, the boy took instruction meekly and worked hard.

Maybe too hard. Mid-May in Central Texas could be cool, but summer was sneaking in early this year, and temperatures were already hitting eighty.

When Susannah drove the flatbed out to see how the tree thinning was coming along, she caught a glimpse of Eli, leaning against the bright yellow shaking machine, dirty and sweaty and shirtless. He held a plastic water bottle above his head and was letting its contents pour over his upturned face and run glistening down his sunburned chest.

For the first time, Susannah could sort of see why Nikki had fallen for him. He did have that hunky blond surfer boy thing going on big-time.

And that had always been Nikki’s type.

Susannah, on the other hand, had always been fatally drawn to

the black-haired, blue-eyed dangerous devil thing. So when this sweaty young sexpot smiled wetly over at her, the only thing she felt was mild anxiety. He was so fair-skinned…would that mean he was susceptible to heatstroke?

A sudden pang pierced just under her ribs. She wished that things could have been different. If only she and Nikki could have been normal sisters. If only they could have laughed about boys, shared secrets, conspired to hide mischief from their parents. Instead, because their mother and father had died when Susannah was fifteen, and Nikki only a toddler, Susannah had been forced into the role of surrogate mother.

How Nikki had hated it, all these years. She had no idea that Susannah had hated it, too. But she did—she hated the injustice of it. They'd both been cheated of their parents. But they'd also been cheated of each other. Even after Nikki passed through adolescence, they would probably never have the tight friendship that real sisters should have.

Susannah squeezed her eyes, as if she could squeeze away the self-pity. She didn't have time to lament tragedies that had happened so long ago. She couldn't change the past. All she could hope was that maybe she could keep the present and future from capsizing, too.

Suddenly, Zander was at Susannah's elbow, wiping a dirty rag across his own sweaty face. "Little brat broke the shaking machine."

"What?"

Susannah looked again toward Eli and realized belatedly that the machine should not have been silent and still. It should have been roaring and grumbling away, moving among the trees, grabbing trunks with its tail-like pincers, and jostling dime-sized peaches from branches like a blush-colored rain.

She sniffed, and finally she smelled it—the stench of steam and burning rubber wafting through the orchard, a dark undercurrent below the sweetness of the fruit-littered ground.

Eli seemed to think she was staring at him, because he smiled again, carving dimples into his cheeks. He pointed the empty water bottle toward the shaking machine, then used it to draw an imaginary line across his throat.

The message was clear. The machine was dead. And Eli thought it was mildly amusing.

Well, he could afford to consider this a little gift from the go-home-early gods, but Susannah wanted to cuss. It could take days to get it repaired. And now that every fruit grower in central Texas was in the throes of thinning season, where would she be able to borrow another one in the meantime?

"I knew it was too good to be true," Zander muttered. "I knew all this perfect employee crap was just an act."

"It's not Eli's fault." Somehow Susannah kept her voice cool. "It broke on you last year, too, Zander. It's just old. We need a new one."

"We can't afford a new one."

She slapped her work gloves into the palm of her hand, trying

to hold back the retort that sprang to her lips. Of course she knew they couldn't afford one. If they hadn't been in dire straits, did Zander think she would have sold herself into a year of matrimonial bondage?

"Maybe," she said, "Chase will loan us his."

"Yes. You should ask Trent about it ASAP." Zander frowned. "Where is he, anyhow? Haven't seen him around all weekend."

That was, of course, the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question. Where was her brand-new husband? He had slept at Everly every night, she knew that. That first night he'd used the sofa, but after that he'd confiscated her grandfather's bedroom. He came in late, then left again early in the morning.

Which was fine with her, of course. The less she saw of him, the better. Still, she couldn't help wondering where he went. To Chase's ranch? Maybe. Running a ranch that large could easily eat up your weekends, too.

But she couldn't help wondering whether he might be going somewhere…softer.

To someone softer.

After all, he'd done it before.

She forced the image out of her mind. As long as he satisfied the will's requirements by spending the nights under her roof, she didn't give a damn about his days. And if she kept letting him disrupt her concentration, she was going to be in even bigger trouble than she was already.

Her gaze drifted to the other workers, who were still moving

toward them, following the machine's path, hand-thinning the small branches that hadn't let go of their bounty.

So much to do…so many people to pay.

Her mind began performing calculations at warp speed. If this was a big repair, and it sure smelled that way, it would eat into the payroll, and then she'd be behind on the—

"Die, you bastard! Die!"

Her heart pounding, she wheeled quickly, just in time to see that Eli had grabbed a shovel and was violently slashing at the ground, just a couple of yards away from the shaker's cab.

For a split second, as he jumped and hollered, she wondered whether Zander and Trent been right about Eli all along. Had she hired a madman?

But then she saw the rubbery-looking, writhing coils at Eli's feet. A shiver sped down her spine.

He was killing a very large rattlesnake.

Though it seemed to be happening in slow motion, it probably was over in less than ten seconds, and the poor creature lay mangled in the dirt, thoroughly destroyed. Several other workers, including Zander, gathered to get a better look.

Eli's cocky smile was gone, and his cheeks were pale beneath the sunburn. He stared down at his palms, bloodied by the pitted metal on the old shovel's handle.

Then he raised a stricken face and glanced over at Susannah, as if he feared he might have done the wrong thing.

"I'm sorry," he said, in a voice that belonged to a much

younger boy. “I just saw him there, and I panicked.”

If she hadn’t been his employer, she would have put her arm around his shoulder, the same way she might have comforted Nikki after a bad day at school. She settled for offering a reassuring smile.

“You did great. Come on, let’s go back and get that blood cleaned up. Zander will take care of all this.”

She ignored the older man’s look of irritation. The boy’s hands needed tending. Besides, it was her fault he was hurt. That shovel should have been replaced years ago, like so many other things on this spread.

She sighed as she started the truck, hearing the hesitation of a battery about to go dead.

How many problems could she handle at once?

* * *

FIVE YEARS AGO, when Trent had accepted Chase’s offer to be the ranch manager at the Double C, he had worked twenty-hour days for more than a year, sleeping on a cot in the office, determined not to let Chase down.

He’d had so much to prove. He knew what everyone had thought when he’d left town six years earlier, after the fire, while Paul still lay dying in that hospital bed.

They’d thought he was a bad-tempered son of a bitch, who had been playing out of his league for years and finally got exposed as the loser he really was. He knew that’s what they’d thought, because that was what he’d thought, too.

So he'd run. He hadn't known what else to do. The whole tragedy had been too much to stand. He was only nineteen, and he'd messed up everything he cared about in the whole stinking world. He'd cheated on Susannah, and then, in a fit of pique, he'd punched his best friend, and somehow rained disaster down on them all.

Sometimes, now, he could hardly remember how it happened. But sometimes it played over in his head, as if it were a videotape caught in a slow-motion loop.

He had been in a rotten mood that night, furious with himself for succumbing to Missy Snowdon's cheap charms, and praying Susannah would never find out. They'd all gone to a bar for dinner, and he had unwisely let himself drink too much. Susannah and Paul had been flirting, and by the third beer, courtesy of friends older than the legal limit, Trent hadn't been able to pretend he didn't care.

He'd said some things, and Paul had said some things, and before he knew what was happening, his fist had been flying. That was when the nightmare took over. He'd expected Paul to punch him back. He even wanted him to. Somehow he felt that a little pain might make him feel less guilty for what he'd done with Missy.

Instead, Paul tilted back, his jaw hanging open. He waved his arms, trying to catch his balance, but he was already falling, falling, slamming into the bar's picnic table seats, his arms still windmilling like a cartoon.

When he hit the ground, so did the kerosene lantern that had looked so kitschy and cute on the table.

The hay on the floor went up like a magician's trick. Paul caught fire, too, rolling at first, trying to get to his feet, then toppling over like a fireplace log. Trent still heard him scream sometimes, and not just in his dreams. The echo of Paul's pain could come out of nowhere, using the voice of everyday things. The cry of owls, the squeal of children playing. A rusty hinge on an old screen door, or the screech of tires on a dangerous road.

The doctors had tried. Paul clung to life for months, mostly because his parents wouldn't disconnect the machines that kept him breathing. But everyone knew he was gone.

And everyone knew who had killed him. Trent might as well have put a gun to Paul's head and pulled the trigger. In fact, it would have been a more merciful death.

So, as soon as he realized it was hopeless, he'd run as far and as long as his college savings would take him. He'd run until he'd hit the Pacific Ocean, chased by the memories of Paul's mutilated body and the curse in Susannah's cold eyes.

He'd run into another woman's arms, and then another's, and then another's. He'd even married one of them, though thank God she was a smart, cheerful woman, who came to her senses before too long.

When Ginny realized her new husband was little more than a cardboard cutout, a shell of a man, she divorced him as cheerfully as she'd married him.

On his twenty-fifth birthday, he had decided to come home. To face all the ghosts, both the living and the dead. To make amends and, maybe, finally, make something of himself.

But that was five years ago, and he was through proving things. Maybe he could never completely silence Paul's screams, but he had finally learned his own worth. Anyone else who was still unconvinced could just remain that way.

Which was why, when he found himself yawning at work and realized he'd put in about forty hours at this desk in the past two days, he decided that enough was enough.

He was going home. He didn't care whether Susannah was hanging around or not. He was too damn tired to get all hot and bothered, not even if she was dancing on the kitchen table wearing a whipped-cream G-string.

He almost made it back to Everly without getting snagged by work—it was the next spread over, no more than fifteen minutes away—but at the last minute his phone buzzed with a text message from Zander, something about a broken shaker. He was tempted to ignore it, but the old guy sounded stressed, so he made some calls.

By the time he rolled into the Everly drive, he had Chase's extra machine lined up for the next two weeks. Still yawning, he walked to the stables, one end of which had been converted into the foreman's office, to tell Zander the good news.

But Zander wasn't there. Instead, Trent opened the door onto a cozy domestic scene, with Susannah and Eli Breslin sitting knee

to knee on Zander's guest chairs. The kid was half-naked and sweaty. Susannah was holding his hand.

Trent frowned, but then it made sense. The moron had managed to get hurt on his very first day.

Susannah was bent over Eli's outstretched fingers, utterly focused on wrapping a bandage around his palm, and her braid fell over her shoulder. She had no idea that Trent had arrived.

But Eli did.

He gave Trent a small smile, which spread across his dirty face until it was a downright nasty grin. Everything Eli had probably heard from gossips about Susannah's new marriage was written in that leer. Trent might have been able to fire Eli from the Double C, but Eli clearly knew that the "husband of convenience" had no power at Everly. He knew that Trent was as much a temporary employee here as Eli himself.

And he wanted Trent to know that he knew.

"Ouch," Eli moaned softly as Susannah worked on the bandage. She murmured an apology for hurting him. The boy smirked down at her, then turned to Trent and slowly winked.

Obnoxious little bastard…

"There. That should hold." Susannah held Eli's hand up for him to inspect. "It looked worse than it was."

Eli bent in close, so that his face was only inches from Susannah's. "Thank you, Ms. Everly. You have mighty gentle hands."

Clearing his throat, Trent moved into the small office, dodging

a trophy that teetered on a bookcase, proclaiming Alexander Hobbin to be the 1978 Men's Bowling Champ. If it had fallen over and beaned Eli on the head, that would have been fine with Trent.

"So," he said. "You think your new hire will live to work another day?"

Susannah looked up. If she felt any embarrassment at being caught holding hands with a bare-chested teenage peach picker, she covered it well.

"Yes," she said as she began to store her first aid supplies neatly away. "It was just a little mishap. Minor abrasions."

"I killed a rattler," Eli put in, stretching out his legs and leaning back in his chair nonchalantly, as if he performed such feats every day. "Nasty, big one. Five feet, at least."

"Taller than you are, then?" Trent smiled. "Impressive."

"No." Eli flushed angrily. "I'm five ten and a half."

"And a half!" Trent raised his eyebrow. "Also impressive. I wouldn't have guessed."

The boy's face was a thundercloud. "Yeah, well, I hear that you—"

"Trent." Susannah snapped the first aid kit shut and gave Trent a look that said enough already.

She was right, of course. It was ridiculous to get into an ego-tussle with a nineteen-year-old. But apparently, where Susannah was concerned, a part of Trent would always be nineteen. Ready to lock horns with any other young buck who tried to trespass

on his turf.

"Did you need something, Trent? Were you looking for Zander? He's still out in the orchard, finishing up the thinning."

"He messaged me about the shaker. I wanted to let him know we've rearranged things at the Double C so that you can use Chase's machine for the next couple of weeks."

"You don't need to borrow one," Eli broke in eagerly, like the smarmy teacher's pet everyone had hated in high school. "I'm good with machines. I bet I could fix ours."

Ours? The kid had worked here one half of one day, and already he owned the equipment? Trent turned toward the brat, ready to let loose, but Susannah put out her hand and touched Trent's forearm lightly.

"Thanks, Eli," she said, "but unless you can actually raise the dead, I'm afraid it's no use. We'll be fine with the loaner. Please go let Mr. Hobbin know it's arranged, okay?"

Eli was caught for a moment, wedged between his desire to avenge himself with Trent and his determination to impress Susannah.

Self-preservation won the day. He bobbed his head deferentially. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

After he was gone, the silence in the office was fraught with tension.

Susannah put the kit away, locked the cabinet and then finally turned to Trent. "Please tell Chase thanks. I appreciate the loan of the shaker."

For some inexplicable reason, Trent was suddenly irritated. For one thing, Chase didn't even know about the loan. Trent was in charge of all such details at the Double C. It was Trent who had made it possible.

But clearly there'd be snowball fights in Hell before Susannah would ever thank Trent for anything.

She lifted her chin. "Was there anything else you needed?"

That ice-cold tone was the last straw. "Yeah," he said. "One other thing. I thought I'd just mention what a colossally bad idea it is to flirt with teenage boys who happen to be on your payroll."

Her eyebrows dived together. "I wasn't flirting with him."

"Really? Are you sure he knows that?"

"I'm quite sure." She stood ramrod straight, clearly offended. "Is that why you were being such an ass to him? Because you thought we were…flirting?"

Trent sat on the corner of Zander's desk, the only spot not covered in files and papers and junk. "No, I was being an ass to him because he is a cocky little loser who hasn't ever done an honest day's work in his life, and I can't believe you were dumb enough to hire him."

She'd gone slightly pale, which he knew from long experience was a sign of fury. He braced himself for the storm, and as he did he realized that, in some strange way, he welcomed the fight.

At least it would be real emotion. A real connection.

And, God help him, he still craved that. All that crap about being too exhausted to desire her? He'd been sunk the minute he

saw the curve of her back as she'd bent over Eli's hand, and the way the sunlight created a halo around her head.

It had been enough to send the hunger raging through him all over again. He wouldn't get what he really wanted, of course. But a good, rousing battle might at least siphon off some of this tension.

She took a couple of deep breaths, obviously determined to hold on to her temper. She placed herself behind the desk, as if she thought its scarred oak surface could provide the buffer zone she clearly needed.

But it wasn't a very big desk.

"How I run Everly is none of your business." She straightened some papers on the desk, a ridiculously futile gesture. "That wasn't part of our deal."

Her fingers trembled as they nudged another sheet of paper into line. The pause stretched until it shimmered in the room like ectoplasm.

"Oh, yes," he said slowly. "The deal."

She didn't look up. But her grip tightened, crumpling the edge of the file she held.

"The deal," he repeated. He reached out and took her wrist between his fingers. "We did have one, didn't we?"

She tensed, though she didn't try to pull back her hand. "Trent, I don't think we should—"

"I do."

She lifted her chin. "Look, I know you're angry."

He ran his thumb across the inside of her wrist, until he found the pulse, jumping and skittering between the delicate bones. "Am I?"

"Well, you've been gone all weekend. I'm not a fool, Trent. I know what that means."

He thought of Peggy, of the secret trips he'd been making to Darlonsville for five years now. He hadn't wanted anyone to know. He hadn't wanted to look as if he did it only for the good public relations it might bring.

"And what do you think it means?"

"It means…" She bit her lower lip. "I know where you must have been, who you must have been with. Even though, when we agreed to do this, you promised me that there would be no other women, not while we were married."

He tugged her wrist slightly. She either had to wrestle herself free or come around the desk to meet him. She chose to come around, though it brought her close enough that he could see the nervous twitch next to the corner of her mouth.

Ah…she felt more fear now than anger. In a perverse way, that pleased him. It proved he still had power.

And he saw something else, too. A physical awareness of him that heated the surface of her cheeks.

It made him ache, being so close to her, smelling her, hating her and wanting her all at the same time. It was as if someone had shoved a hot brand against the small of his back.

"I did promise I'd be faithful," he said, careful to keep his tone

lightly ironic. “But that was when I believed I’d be getting what I needed here at home…within the marriage bed, so to speak.”

“Yes,” she said quickly. “Yes, of course I see the difference. So that’s why I wanted to make you an offer. I understand that it’s a…a hardship to have to…to do without sex for a full year, and…”

He smiled. Her pulse had tripped on itself from the effort to even say the word sex.

“And?”

She swallowed, blinking as she tried to hold his gaze. “And I’d like to make it up to you. Financially, I mean. I was thinking ten thousand dollars for every month we’re married. That’s one hundred and twenty thousand dollars, when the year is up, when I can sell the acres I need, and—”

He tilted his head, chuckling softly. “You’re offering to pay me not to have sex with you?”

“No…I’m paying you for not having it with anyone else, not while we’re married. It’s hard to—” She swallowed and tried again. “If you have a mistress while I’m your wife, it’ll be—well, everyone will say it’s just like before. I’ll be the laughing stock of Texas. I’d prefer not to be shamed like that…not again.”

He cursed inwardly. It always came back to that, didn’t it? Eleven years ago, he’d made a mistake, and, in her eyes, it would forever define the man he was. He felt his hand tighten on her wrist, as the frustration, the anger and the hunger tied every muscle in his body into knots.

"You must agree it's generous, Trent. A hundred and twenty thousand—"

"Oh, sure. It's generous."

He couldn't stand it anymore. Without thinking, he pulled her toward him. She wasn't expecting it, and she stumbled, practically falling into his arms. Her body was stiff, but her flesh trembled. He let his palms encircle her waist, and they met around the slim curves, just as they used to do.

She stared up at him. He didn't apologize, didn't let go. He stroked her rib cage with his thumbs.

"Trent…"

"Your offer is generous as hell, Susannah. But money isn't what I want." He angled her even closer, close enough to feel the heat that throbbed through him. "You know what I want."

"But what you want—you can't…what about the paper?" She seemed to be struggling to catch a breath, inhaling softly between each word. "You won't…sign it?"

"No, I won't sign it, Sue, but there are other ways."

"Other ways to…what?"

Her lips were half-open, peach-pink wet and glimmering in the sunlight. They were ripe and soft. And he remembered exactly how they had tasted. How they had felt, on him, around him. For eleven long years, even in dreams, he had been haunted by the memory of their warmth, their hidden strength.…

A painful heat swelled inside him. She might hate him, but he must have this. He refused to go on burning and wanting, and

being forever denied.

Though she wouldn't admit it, she burned, too, and he would follow that fiery path until he found his way in.

"Trent. Tell me what you mean."

He let his body answer her. He placed his palms against her buttocks, and moved her hips toward him slowly, by agonizing inches, letting his heat find hers. He watched what it did to her. He watched her eyes struggle not to lose focus, watched her throat hold back the moan that wanted to break free.

Somehow she hung on to her question, as if it were a life raft, as if it could take her to a different answer. "Other ways for what?"

"Other ways for husbands and wives to know each other. Please each other. Ways that don't risk making babies."

She stopped breathing entirely. "You can't mean—"

"Yes, I can. There are lots of ways to make love, Susannah." Trent let her go abruptly, smiled and moved toward the door. "And before this year is over, we're going to discover every one of them."

CHAPTER FOUR

IT WASN'T EASY to sleep that night. Every noise Susannah heard, even the familiar oak branch that had scratched against her window since she was six, made her heart race. Outside, the night seemed to go on forever, the mushroom-colored moon caught in a soup of gray clouds. Inside, every creaking floorboard, every snap, groan or sigh from the old house, sounded like Trent coming to find her.

Trent, coming to lie beside her in the darkness and, with his angry lips and determined hands, somehow force her to keep her promise.

She woke up feeling wrung out and muddy-headed. And oddly lonely. In some ways, she missed Nikki. It would have been nice to have someone to talk to. But sitting around gabbing was a luxury she could rarely afford—and it wasn't something Nikki enjoyed much, anyhow. So she tried just to be glad she didn't have to make breakfast for Nikki and nag her out the door to school.

She did have to get up, though. She was due at the burn center by nine, and there was no way to avoid it. She went in only two mornings a week during peach season, and Rachel, her gung-ho administrative assistant, would undoubtedly have scheduled a dozen meetings, phone calls and interviews.

So Susannah put on her best spring suit and extra lipstick, and

made her way across town. She sent up a little prayer that no big problems would present themselves today, and that maybe she could get home early.

No such luck.

"Susannah, thank God you're here." Rachel stood up from her chair when she saw her boss. "You're not going to believe what Dr. Mahaffey's wife did."

Susannah moved into her office and put down her purse, trying to refrain from pointing out that she didn't care what Dr. Mahaffey's wife did. Obviously, she couldn't say such a thing. Dr. Mahaffey was the retired chief of surgery for the burn center, and his wife had organized some of their most successful fund-raisers. So what Mrs. Mahaffey did was always important.

Especially to the executive coordinator of donor/volunteer affairs. And that was Susannah.

"What did she do?" Susannah managed a smile, because she knew the answer would be something hilarious. Spunky, opinionated, energetic Maggie Mahaffey was eighty-two, nine years older than her exhausted husband, and most of the time she lived on Mars.

Rachel stood in the doorway between the offices and held out a plate heaped with pie. "She sent in a recipe for the peach book."

Susannah set down the stack of color-coded phone messages she'd just grabbed and stared at the plate, as if she expected it to explode. "Oh, no."

"Oh, yes." Rachel nodded, her full lips pressed so tightly you

almost couldn't see her signature-red lipstick. "Taste it."

Susannah laughed and took a step backward. "I'll take your word for it. What's wrong this time? Six pounds of sugar? How that woman has managed to avoid diabetes is a mystery to me."

"No sugar. This time she added mint." Rachel widened her eyes dramatically. "Mint. And…cashews."

Susannah's mouth just hung open, seemingly unable to respond to her order to close. "Cashews in her peach pie?"

"Yes. Cashews." Rachel wasn't easily rattled, but this clearly had shaken her. "What are we going to do, Susannah? It's indescribably gross. I brushed my teeth twice, and I still taste it."

Susannah sat on the edge of her desk, suddenly tired. Given what she was going through back at Everly, a disgusting peach pie simply didn't seem important. "I'll just have to create a typo. The line about the cashews will mysteriously drop off."

"Again? You did that last year, with the sugar! Mrs. Mahaffey tried to get you fired then. If you do it again, she'll have your head."

"She's welcome to it." Susannah reached one more time for the phone messages. Red meant "urgent" and the stack was about ninety percent red. "Did the volunteer training session go all right?"

Rachel set the pie down on her desk, giving it one last grimace and a shudder. Then she turned back to Susannah, putting on her professional face. "Yeah, it's going great. They're on day two now, and it's a pretty big group this time. Ten volunteers…no,

wait, eleven."

Susannah looked up. This was unusual. Rachel certainly had the authority to slip a latecomer into the training program without clearing it with her boss, but she didn't often do it. The volunteer application had a box for Susannah's signature, and Rachel wasn't comfortable with empty boxes.

Susannah wondered who the new recruit was. Nell Bollinger had been promising to sign up, but word was the Bollingers had just found pinkeye in their cattle, so this probably wasn't the week she'd finally decide to follow through.

"Eleven is excellent. Who is the new one? Do you remember her name?"

A stupid question, actually. Rachel was so detail oriented she undoubtedly knew the names, addresses, telephone numbers and shoe sizes of all eleven newbies by heart.

"Yes, of course! In fact, she said she was a friend of yours. Let's see. That one was Missy Griffin." She frowned slightly. "No, wait. She said she'd just gotten a divorce and gone back to her maiden name. Missy…Missy Snowdon. That's right."

Missy Snowdon…

Her chest suddenly tight, Susannah stared down at the telephone messages. She struggled to keep her face impassive.

Surely she'd heard wrong. Or else Rachel had remembered wrong.

For one thing, Missy Snowdon had left Texas years ago. She'd gone to Hollywood, or maybe Vegas…one of those cities that act

like magnets on women who are mostly made of collagen and silicone and bleach.

For another, Missy Snowdon wasn't the volunteering type. She was a player, not a worker. A taker, not a giver.

"Um…" Rachel tilted her head, obviously unsettled by something she saw in Susannah's face. "I hope I didn't do the wrong thing. I never would have let her sign up if she hadn't said she was your friend. If that's not true—"

"It's okay," Susannah said. "It's true. We were…we went to high school together."

She couldn't bring herself to speak the word friends. Once, she'd thought so, but…

As she'd said, Missy Snowdon was a taker. And what she'd taken from Susannah was Trent.

Rachel still looked worried, her brow furrowed. "Are you sure? The class is observing in Restorative this morning. I could go over and pull her out—"

"No, no, don't be silly. We don't have so many volunteers that we can afford to chase one away."

Rachel nodded. She knew what a struggle it was to fill the positions.

Susannah managed a smile. "I should get to these phone messages, I suppose. I can't stay long today."

"Oh, of course, what was I thinking? Call Dr. Grieve first. Then Mrs. McManus. Be sure to leave Des Barkley at the Daily Grower for last. He wants an interview about the peach party,

which is good, but you know how he talks."

Susannah nodded. She knew.

It wasn't easy, but somehow she got through the stack by noon. Some of it really was urgent. Some of it was downright boring. But at least it kept her mind off other things.

Like Trent.

And Missy Snowdon.

Susannah wished she'd had the nerve to ask Rachel how Missy looked. Back in high school, Missy had been the fairy princess, with a waterfall of blond hair and round, lash-heavy blue eyes. But the looks had been deceiving. Underneath all that innocent beauty beat the heart of a tiger.

For Missy Snowdon, a day without risk was a day without sunshine. She shoplifted trinkets she could easily afford, cheated on tests she was sure to ace anyhow. She ignored stop signs and streetlights, even when she had all the time in the world, gaily waving her beer can at every policeman she passed.

And boys…she could have had anyone in the school, from the greenest freshman to the married principal himself. But she had been picky. She wanted only the best. And only the ones who were already taken.

Like Trent.

Susannah tapped her pen against the calendar blotter. Finally, she stood up, unable to resist temptation any longer. Forget playing it cool. She had to see Missy for herself.

It would probably make her feel much better. Surely another

decade of bleaching, boozing and bed-hopping had taken its toll. If there was any justice in this world, Missy probably looked a rode-hard fifty, and that would be a sight for sore eyes.

Susannah made her way to Restorative, passing from the relative quiet of the administrative wing to the noisy corridors of the clinic. Though she hurried, it was the lunch hour, and the trail was a bit of an obstacle course.

When she reached the small room where special restorative nurses were feeding the patients, she realized she was too late. The volunteers didn't hang out in any of the working areas. They would be intruding. They just stood to the side, observed quietly, then moved to a classroom for further discussion.

Darn. Susannah had lost her chance to do this the easy way. Of course, as the coordinator of volunteers, she had every right to poke her head into the training classroom and summon Missy Snowdon up for inspection any time she wanted. She had the power around here, not Missy. For once.

But she didn't want to use it. What would be the point? If she treated Missy badly, it would only prove that she still held a grudge, which would make her look pathetic. Their troubles had happened nearly eleven years ago, practically in another lifetime. They'd barely been out of high school, for heaven's sake. High school dramas had no power here, in the real world.

Just when she almost had herself convinced, a low, throaty laugh came from the west wing. The sound went right through her brave facade, like a dart busting a cheap balloon.

It had to be Missy. Because Susannah suddenly felt insecure and jealous and angry as hell.

She looked down the hall and saw a blonde woman moving toward her, flanked by two handsome, white-coated doctors who bent over her as solicitously as they would any critically ill patient in their care.

Susannah instinctively turned her head away, pretending to read a flyer at the nurses' station while the trio floated by, still laughing. She caught only a momentary flash of Missy, but that was enough.

Damn it. The woman was more beautiful than ever, still a princess in her candy-pink pinafore, still sashaying her hips as if she walked to secret salsa music. Still flashing the wide white smile that dazzled quarterbacks, traffic cops, algebra teachers—and apparently surgeons—into instant enslavement.

"Ms. Everly?" Evelyn Marks, the charge nurse, had returned to the station and sounded surprised to see Susannah standing there. That made sense. This wasn't Susannah's part of the building.

"Sorry…I mean Mrs. Maxwell." Evelyn smiled. "I guess I gotta get used to that."

Susannah looked up just in time to see Missy and the doctors disappear onto the elevator. She turned to the nurse, who had been a casual friend for years. "Me, too, Evvy."

Evelyn, a bouncy, round mother of six daughters, three of whom were also nurses at the center, grinned. "You look tired.

How's married life treating you?"

Susannah hesitated. But, like everyone else, Evvy knew the situation, so there was no point pretending to be a dewy-eyed bride.

"Well, it's…tricky," she admitted, opting for at least a degree of honesty.

Evvy laughed, but Susannah's ears were tuned to the tinkling sound as the elevator doors slid shut.

Missy was gone. For now. But even as Susannah breathed a sigh of relief, she knew she'd been a coward. And it was only a temporary reprieve. Sooner or later, she'd encounter her old nemesis face-to-face.

More importantly, so would Trent.

* * *

TRENT HAD his bulky work gloves on, and he'd just arranged the chain saw, pole pruner and baling cord under one arm and the old wooden paint ladder under the other, so naturally his cell phone chose that moment to ring.

He glanced back into the garage, where Zander was working on a broken hedge clipper.

The old man laughed. "Women," he said with a snort. "They have the devil's timing, don't they? Want me to tell Trixie Mae Sexpot to get lost for you?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

Trent wasn't expecting any calls from females, but he stood still as Zander reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the

phone. He would have let it go to voice mail, except that he was stealing these last few hours of daylight from the Double C and using them to cut back the worst dead branches on Everly's old oaks. If the Double C had a problem, he was honor bound to deal with it.

"Trent Maxwell's phone. Zander Hobbin speaking." Zander listened for a few seconds, during which his teasing expression soured into one of real annoyance. "No, Maxy isn't available. You can tell by how he didn't answer the phone. See how that works, sugar?"

Trent felt his eyebrows draw together, and the chain saw slipped an inch under his elbow. Maxy? No one called him Maxy. Not anymore. Not since high school. And the only one who'd done it, even then, was…

"Who?" Zander cut a strange look toward Trent. "Missy Snowdon? Oh, you bet I remember you. Sure, I'll tell him. But just between you and me, don't hold your breath on that callback. Trent got married last week. You been gone a long time, so I'll just assume you didn't know, or you wouldn't have called, right?"

Trent could hear the high, quick voice still talking on the other end as Zander snapped the phone shut. The older man glowered at Trent from under his bushy eyebrows.

"I heard that little minx was back in town, but I didn't think she'd have the nerve to call you, just like that." He ran his upper lip through his teeth, as if he were trying to comb the mustache that tickled down over it. "Unless…you didn't make the first

move, did you, son?"

Trent raised one eyebrow. That tone might have worked if Trent had been ten and had got caught with his hands in the wrong cookie jar, but not now. Trent wouldn't have telephoned Missy Snowdon if she were the last woman surviving this side of Saturn, but frankly, who he called or didn't call wasn't Zander's business.

"What's wrong, Zan? She is pretty hot. You jealous?"

Zander started to bluster, but he must have noticed the tucked corner of Trent's grin, because he ended up grunting and shaking his head.

"Jealous about Missy Snowdon? Hell, no. I wouldn't dream of going barefoot into that particular mud puddle." He slipped the phone back into Trent's jacket with two fingers, as if Missy Snowdon had infected it with something disgusting. "And neither should you, my friend. Neither should you."

"I don't go barefoot anywhere." Trent smiled. "Your generation might not have learned that, but ours has."

Zander grunted again, clearly aware he wasn't going to get anything but sardonic deflections, no matter how long he probed. Trent had mastered this technique in grade school. He could bat away Zander's curiosity all day long.

The two men were friendly colleagues, as managers of adjacent spreads tended to be, but they weren't confidants. Forty years stood between them, and so did Trent's natural preference for emotional privacy.

Zander slapped his hands against his overalls, raising dust in the sunbeams that angled into the dim garage like transparent gold two-by-fours. “So go on, then. Light’s fading. Don’t you have some limbs to cut?”

He did. It was one of many chores that desperately needed doing around here. He had been spending a lot of time at Everly over the past few days, ever since Harrison’s weird warning about Peggy. He didn’t really believe Peggy could pose a threat to anyone, but still…he didn’t like the thought of Susannah here in this big old house, all alone.

Besides, the place could use an extra pair of hands, especially ones that came without a salary attached. He hadn’t noticed just how run-down the place had become since old man Everly had died.

He propped his ladder up against the first oak. This one had a couple of dead branches that, given the right amount of wind, could easily fall right on the east porch roof. As he snapped the ladder’s hinged stays into place, he noticed Eli Breslin over by the barn, slouching against the wall, staring at Trent.

Little bastard. He never did a lick of work around here, did he? He might as well be dipping his hand into Susannah’s wallet and lifting out the cash.

“Hey, Breslin,” Trent called. “If you’re not busy, why don’t you come cut some branches?”

Eli straightened, though the insolent look didn’t drop from his face. He shook his head, the blond curls catching the late-

afternoon sunlight. “Can’t. Got to work on the shaker.”

And then, as if he’d been planning all along to do so, he sauntered toward the back drive, where the old machine had been dragged yesterday after it died in the south forty. He glanced back at Trent, then picked up a wrench and proceeded to peer under the open hood.

Well, that was at least half an hour’s work Susannah would get out of the brat today.

Trent went back to setting up his tools. Zander was right. The light was fading fast. He wouldn’t get much done today. The older man had been right about another thing, too. Trent should have waited until he could have borrowed a good extension ladder from the Double C. Though Everly probably owned about a hundred ladders, they were all in use for the thinning, which would continue right up until harvest.

This old stepladder—the only one Susannah had kept for private use—was a mess, with half-mangled feet that wouldn’t settle level on the root-braided ground.

But the branches were his excuse for hanging around Everly this afternoon, so he needed to cut a few. Susannah would have laughed out loud if he’d admitted that Harrison Archer’s comment had spooked him. She would have countered in her typical dry way that if she needed a guard dog, she’d buy one at the pound.

He looked toward the house. He could just barely make out Susannah’s silhouette at the window of the sunroom. She’d been

in there for a couple of hours now, going over estate details with Richard Doyle, the arrogant twit who was the executor of her grandfather's will.

Doyle might have been one of the reasons Trent had felt the need to stick around. Trent didn't like him, but that didn't mean much. Trent never liked guys like Doyle—guys who bought handkerchiefs to match their ties, which they'd bought to match their eyes, which they'd faked up with tinted contact lenses.

And he might as well be honest. He'd never liked any guy who dared to buzz around Susannah. It was habit, he supposed, but it clearly was a habit he wasn't going to break. Not after twenty-one years, ten with her and eleven without her. He was more likely to break the habit of breathing.

He wondered if she had the same problem. He wondered, for instance, how she would react to the news that Missy Snowdon had just called him.

Not that he planned to tell her. Missy's name was radioactive. It would burn his lips to say it and Susannah's ears to hear it. Maybe it wasn't fair. Missy wasn't to blame for their troubles—the tragedy had been Trent's fault, from beginning to end. But somehow Missy Snowdon had become more than just a trashy girl chasing another girl's man. She'd become iconic. A symbol.

Doves meant peace, rainbows meant hope, roses meant love.

Missy Snowdon meant betrayal and death.

He hadn't seen her in nearly a dozen years. He'd heard she was back in town, but, like Zander, Trent had assumed she'd know

better than to call.

He and Susannah had little enough chance of making this marriage work without throwing Missy into the mix. You might as well dig up an old corpse, toss it onto the table, then ask everyone to enjoy their meal.

He bent over, set the choke on the chain saw. He gave the cord a yank, perhaps a little harder than necessary. Eli was watching him again, as if the boy hoped Trent would have trouble getting the tool started. But the chain saw zoomed into life, its teeth circling furiously, like a mad dog snapping, eager to chomp into something and tear it to shreds.

Trent climbed the ladder, careful not to ascend any higher than he needed to. Heights and chain saws didn't mix. But the limb was farther up than it appeared from the ground. Mildly irritated, he put one foot on the fourth step, then reached out with the chain saw and let it sink into the brittle, sapless limb.

The wood cracked, split and tumbled to the ground before the blade sank even halfway through it. It had been ready to go, that was for sure. He needed to get all this dead wood out of here before the summer storms started, even if it meant delegating some of the paperwork at the Double C.

He glanced at the tractor, just beyond the tree's branches. Eli was gone, the little slacker. Trent scanned the yard, his gaze ending at the back porch. He was surprised to see a man standing there. Would Eli really dare to—

But it wasn't Eli. It was Doyle. Dapper as ever, the lawyer

posed like a GQ model, one foot cocked up against the white scrolled balustrade. His gold silk tie and handkerchief matched his hair.

Somebody should tell the fool that women didn't like their men to be prettier than they were.

Richard held a cocktail in his hand, a signal that the business part of his visit was over. Though Susannah must have provided the drink, she was nowhere in sight.

The porch was about twenty yards away, so it was hard to be sure, but the lawyer seemed to be staring up at the tree where Trent was working. And his handsome face seemed hard, set with hostile intensity that almost exactly replicated the anger Trent had glimpsed on Eli's face earlier.

Trent sighed. This could get old.

None of the men in Susannah's life trusted him. And they were jealous as hell. Okay, fair enough. He got that. The green-eyed monster wasn't exactly a stranger to him, either.

But too bad. Trent was her husband, at least for the next year, and all the wannabes, the sycophants and the stuffed shirts she'd passed over when making her choice would just have to deal with it.

Suddenly, Doyle raised his drink in a stiff salute.

"Afternoon, Maxwell," he called. He sipped the drink, then smiled. "Better watch your step up there."

"Yeah." Trent nodded. "Thanks." But he felt irrationally irritated. Naturally, Doyle thought cutting trees was dangerous. It

was real physical labor, as foreign to the pencil pusher as scaling the craters of the moon.

Or was Trent just regressing again? Resenting the rich boys who never smelled like wood chips…or sweat?

Get over it, Maxwell, he told himself. That chip on his shoulder was every bit as pointless as Doyle's gold silk pocket square.

He held the chain saw above the next limb, then let it fall slowly, the blade slicing into the wood, sending off chips like sparks from a diamond cutter's wheel. But this branch wasn't completely dead. It resisted, and Trent had to put muscle behind it. He leaned over, adding his other foot to the fourth step for balance.

And suddenly, without any warning he could hear over the roar of the chain saw, the step gave way, the old bolt pulled away from the frame and the plank jackknifed right under his feet.

As he felt himself go, he somehow had the presence of mind to release the chain saw. It died immediately and dropped, whining, like a missile to the ground.

The millisecond after, Trent's whole body did the same.

CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS TWO IN THE MORNING. After a long evening poring through payroll records, Susannah yawned while she roamed the first floor, checking dead bolts and turning off lights.

As she passed the staircase that led down to the wine cellar, she heard a strange scrabbling noise deep in its shadows.

For a moment, she felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. The wine cellar had been her grandfather's last folly, a ridiculous expenditure better suited to the millionaire rancher he'd once been than the struggling, debt-ridden peach farmer he'd become.

She used the front part of the cellar now for preserves, and the occasional bottle of peach wine. The back half, beyond the wrought-iron wine door, had become a mess of storage and clutter. Boxes of sentimental junk, yard games, canopies and chairs that came out only for parties, furniture too broken to sit in but too fine for the dump.

Her grandfather's ghost would be appalled.

Luckily, she didn't believe in ghosts.

But she heard the noise again, so it hadn't been her imagination, either. It must be Trent down there, rooting around in the dark. She wondered why, then remembered that she'd mentioned she needed to dig out the tents and get them cleaned for the peach party.

She hadn't been hinting for him to do it. Had he thought she

was? It wouldn't have crossed her mind to ask him to lug anything so heavy, not after taking that hard fall this afternoon.

She felt a nip, like a small bee sting of guilt, deep in her conscience. She hadn't even properly thanked him for his work on the trees, much less offered any TLC for his injury. Pitching in on odd jobs at Everly was above and beyond anything their "agreement" required of him. And things were such a mess around here that she was deeply grateful for any extra help from anyone.

She just hadn't known how to show it without feeling vulnerable. Only anger felt truly safe, and she hadn't had the courage to retreat from it, even when he clearly deserved better treatment.

Relations between them were obviously going to remain complicated, but that didn't absolve her from the obligation to show decent manners. She made her way down the stairs quickly. She had on only a nightshirt, but it was old and grubby, and no one could construe it as a come-on.

"Trent? Please don't bother with the tents tonight. They weigh a ton, and you shouldn't—"

To her surprise, he was sitting at the center tasting table, with a bottle of peach schnapps and a shot glass laid out before him on the recycled-wine-barrel surface. The recessed lighting her grandfather had installed overhead picked out blue-black diamonds in his hair, but the rest of him was mostly in shadow.

"Oh." She stopped at the foot of the stairs. "I'm sorry. I

thought you might be trying to find the tents."

"No." He lifted the bottle and topped off the glass. "Just stealing a little home-made painkiller. If I took the stuff Doc Marchant left, I'd be a zombie tomorrow."

She glanced at his hand, which had a small bandage on the palm, and then his leg, which he had stretched out before him in an ever-so-slightly unnatural position. His jeans covered the cut on his calf, so she couldn't judge how bad it was.

"Does it hurt a lot?"

"Nothing the schnapps won't cure." He jiggled the bottle, sending little white fairy lights scampering over the brick walls. "This stuff packs a punch."

She knew it was true. When her grandfather had run out of money less than halfway through stocking these Malaysian mahogany racks, she'd found him down here almost every night, brooding over his laptop, researching wines he'd never buy and getting plastered on peach schnapps.

But although liquor had always made her grandfather meaner, it seemed to be mellowing Trent. His voice sounded almost warm, as if the drink famous for thawing out Alpine skiers had finally cut through the ice inside him, too.

"I heard Doc Marchant had to sew up your calf." She cringed, imagining. "Nineteen stitches, is that right?"

Trent shook his head. "That sounds like Zander's usual hyperbole. It was only six stitches, and only because Marchant is a worrywart. I've had worse cuts from sliding down rocks at

Green Fern Pool."

She would have believed him, except that she'd seen the blood.

She still wasn't sure how it had happened. The memory had the disjointed quality of a nightmare. She'd just met Richard on the back porch when she heard the crash of something heavy and metallic slamming into the ground. And then, before she could identify the cause, she saw Trent tumble from the ladder.

Without thinking, she flew down onto the lawn, her heart racing. She called out his name. No pausing to consider her dignity. No wondering whether he'd want her help.

Pure reflex. Pure gut.

The ladder wasn't all that high, thank God, and it was clear immediately that there was no grave danger. While she knelt in the grass beside him, trying to still her heart and catch her breath, he pulled himself to his feet and shook himself off with a smile.

Within seconds, Zander, too, came running from the other side of the yard. The two men walked off together to check out what they insisted was just a scrape.

The message had been clear. Trent hadn't wanted her to fuss over him then, and he certainly wouldn't want it now.

"Well, I guess I should go," she said after an awkward pause. "I just wanted to be sure you weren't trying to haul out those tents. I was headed—"

She hesitated, suddenly uncomfortable about mentioning bed, for fear it might sound like an invitation. But the hesitation was conspicuous, too. "Headed upstairs."

He looked amused, though he didn't say anything.

Argh. She leaned her head against the cool bricks and shut her eyes for a second. Did every road lead to sex?

"I wanted to tell you…I'm really sorry about the ladder," she said, eager to change the subject. "As you can see, I've had to let a lot of the repairs and maintenance slide lately."

"Don't worry." He smiled. "I won't sue."

She couldn't help smiling back. "That's only because you know there's nothing to get."

He raised one eyebrow, toying with his empty shot glass with the tips of his fingers. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. No money, maybe."

The cellar's extravagant, Internet-monitored thermostat and humidity control system had long ago been disabled, but suddenly the temperature in the shadowy room seemed to drop ten degrees. Susannah looked at his fingers, and something about their slow grace made her shiver.

The way he looked at her…

There was no mistaking what he meant.

Suddenly she realized what a foolish mistake she'd made, letting guilt send her down here. She knew he hadn't given up his plan to make her pay, and wasn't this the perfect spot, with its cool seclusion, the musty smell of old wine and the sticky sweet scent of peaches? He must have known she'd come. He'd waited here, like a panther, in the dark.

And she'd fallen right into the trap. She was the moronic

horror movie heroine who, even knowing there was a killer in the house, still decided to investigate the spooky noises in the basement.

"But then," he went on, "money hasn't ever been my weakness."

His voice made her shiver, too. She crossed her arms in front, holding them by the elbows, trying to warm herself. "Trent, I really should go to—"

"To bed. Yes, I know. We can do that, too, if you like. Later."

"That isn't what I meant. You're deliberately misunderstanding me."

"I think we understand each other perfectly." He held out a hand, palm up. The bandage gleamed in the recessed lights. "You made a bargain, and it's time to keep it. I promise you it won't be too painful. It will meet all your terms, Sue. All pleasure. No risk. No repercussions."

She flushed, well aware of what he wanted. Oral sex. He wanted her to take him into her mouth, and her hands, and make him come. Back when they first made love, at only eighteen, he'd begged her to. He'd told her that all girls did it. All men wanted it.

But she'd been afraid, afraid that she wouldn't know how, that she wouldn't be good enough, that she'd try and try, humiliating herself, only to fail.

She'd been such a prissy lover, she knew that now. Such a tame little Puritan. Only in the back of the car, only with their clothes on, only on the bottom, only in the dark.

She'd been so naive, in fact, that when she stumbled on Trent and Missy Snowdon in the abandoned playground that rainy midnight, sitting together on the swing, she had no idea what was happening.

She hadn't been able to see him all day. Her grandfather had company and he required her to be on hostess duty. Trent, of course, hadn't been invited. By late night, she knew that Trent probably wasn't expecting her to show up at the playground, where they sometimes met. But she sneaked out anyhow, hoping against hope that he might have gone there, too, just in case. Surely he wanted to see her as much as she wanted to see him.

The sound reached her first, the grind of metal against metal as someone pumped the swing rhythmically back and forth. She heard throaty laughter, and other noises that were harder to identify.

She peered toward the swing set, off in a corner. Rain diamonds winked as moonlight caught on the metal legs and the thick, glistening rod of the frame. She saw the groaning swing move back and forth, never going very high, two sets of hands gripping the wet chains, slipping, gripping again.

At first she thought they were just playing. Doubled up, with Missy in Trent's lap, the way children might do just for the crazy fun of flying backward. Limbs tangled, hair flying, sharing the thrill.

Shock made her stupid. She worried, like an idiot, whether the chains were strong enough to hold them both, with Trent so

tall, so much heavier than any child.

But then Missy's groans turned to soft screams, and the swing's rhythm became jerky, spasming as Trent's heels dug into the ground, finding traction to push harder, thrust faster, finding his own orgasm there in the rain.

And then, finally, far, far too late, Susannah understood. Understood that he had needed more than an uptight little prude.

That she wasn't enough for him.

That the world as she knew it was over.

She wondered why the memory still hurt so much, when she'd hardly thought of that night in years.

Was it because she was finally old enough to see what an idiot she'd been to run away that night, scalded, to nurse her wounds in private and concoct a revenge plot as stupid as flirting with Paul? She knew now that she should have charged right up to that swing set and overturned the cheating bastard headfirst into the dirt. Even if she'd scratched Missy Snowdon's eyes out, that would have been a more mature way to handle it. It couldn't have saved their relationship, but it might have saved Paul's life.

Or maybe the memory felt so fresh and raw again because she realized that she owed Trent. She had made a deal with him, and he'd kept his part of the bargain. After all these years, she was going to have to live up to her part of their agreement and let him touch her again…something he hadn't done since that night.

"All right," she said in a low voice. "I'll give you what you want. But only because I know you, and I know that if you don't

get what you need here, you'll go looking for it somewhere else."

He didn't answer. He just sat there, waiting, as if he didn't care what her reasons were. The king, waiting for his subject to perform.

She felt something harden inside her. She crossed the marble floor in five steps. He still sat in the chair, with his leg stretched out at that odd angle. She took a breath, then, holding the arms of his chair for stability, she sank to her knees in front of him.

"I'll do it, because I won't be a laughingstock for you again."

He smiled oddly. "And because you promised this would be a real marriage? Because you used that promise to get me to marry you? Because you wouldn't want to be a liar and a fraud?"

She tilted her head up and met his gaze without flinching. "You're right. I made this deal, and I have to live with it. But I want you to know that I hate you. I hate you for not being man enough to set me free."

He tilted his head an inch to one side, though otherwise he didn't move a muscle. "I'm afraid you'll have to hate me, then."

She nodded, understanding that there was to be no reprieve. She reached out, forcing her hands not to tremble, and carefully unbuckled his belt. She felt him watching her, but she didn't raise her eyes to his face again.

She unbuttoned the top of his jeans, and as her hands grazed the denim she felt the heat rising from him. She sensed the swollen bulk of his penis under the cloth. Instinctively, she cupped it with her palm, as a sudden tactile memory burned

through her.

She had thought this would be strange, after all these years, after all the anger. But though their hearts had grown apart, grown bitter, their bodies were still the same. This was still Trent, her Trent. She knew him. She knew what he felt like, the shape and warmth and musky smell of him.

He pulsed under her hand. He needed this. She remembered how he had always looked as he first thrust into her, an agony of tension and heat, as if his body was on fire, and only she could put out the flames. It had thrilled her, but it had scared her, too, because she sensed a power she couldn't control.

She slid the zipper down one millimeter at a time, knowing that the pressure was dragging along the length of him like a slow torture. When it was fully open, she pulled back the edges of the denim, slid her hand under the cotton boxers, and took the hard fullness of him into her hand.

He groaned. He throbbed once under her fingers, and she was shocked to realize that something hot and deep inside her was throbbing, too.

She wanted this. For the first time in her life she desperately wanted to feel this velvet steel against her teeth, her tongue. Her mouth curved, instinctively knowing what to do.

She bent her head. But then, out of nowhere, his hands were against her hair.

"What?" His voice was hoarse. "No foreplay?"

She drew a jagged breath. She looked up at him, feeling

slightly dazed. Frustration coursed through her. She was ready. He was ready.

"What do you mean, foreplay?"

He rose to his feet in one graceful motion, his hands urging her up along with him. Before she could orient herself, he held her buttocks and lifted her onto the table.

"I mean this," he said. He slid his hand under her nightshirt and eased off the panties she wore beneath.

He tossed the bit of silk onto the floor and then returned to her, running his rough hands up the length of her thighs. Her knees fell apart, as if they were marionette legs controlled by invisible strings. He went without hesitation to the aching, moist spot he knew so well, and with perfect confidence began to stroke, and press and circle.

She grabbed his shoulders, weak and suddenly dizzy. His fingers were hot, and she was hot, and it felt wonderful and dangerous. It took her breath away.

"Trent," she said, though the word sounded as if it came out on a choke.

He gazed down at her. She wondered whether she looked as dazed as she felt. He smiled cryptically, and then he bent his head and kissed her on her lips. The touch was sweet and lingering, a strange contrast to the hot domination of his fingers.

"It's all right, Susannah," he whispered. "Don't fight it. Lean back."

His voice alone controlled her. The cool cork somehow met

her back, though her hips were half on, half off the table, her legs dangling helplessly over the edge.

But he took her feet, and gently rested her legs across his shoulders. He carried her, braced her, and she was completely open to him. It felt so right, strangely safe, and her hips began to move on the table, shifting slightly, responding to his fingers.

And then, when she could hardly think, it wasn't his fingers anymore. It was his mouth, and his tongue and tiny, fiery hints of teeth. And then came dark heat, and the softest, coaxing pull.

He'd never done this to her, no one had ever done it, but it was perfect, like watching fireworks from a river, like being the fireworks and being the river, like pushing and pulling, like coiling and burning, and burning…

And finally the explosion that somehow she knew she had been born for.

When it stopped, she had no idea how long she lay there. She wasn't sure she'd ever breathe normally again, or sit up or speak. But somehow, little by little, her heart subsided to normal, and she felt reality gathering around her.

She sensed movement, and when she opened her eyes, Trent was sorting out her nightshirt, pulling it down over her thighs. He carefully eased her legs down so that her feet just barely touched the floor.

With one firm hand behind her shoulder, he nudged her to a sitting position.

And then he began to buckle his belt.

"Trent." She stared at the belt, unable to meet his eyes. "I thought—"

She felt like a child just learning to speak. Her mouth wouldn't move quite right, and words eluded her.

She watched his cool motions as he pulled himself together and headed for the cellar stairs.

"Good night, Sue."

He looked so…unmoved. If his lips weren't slightly swollen, she would think she had imagined the entire experience.

"Trent…"

He turned. "Yes?"

"That's all? You're leaving?"

He tilted his watch. "It's late. I have to be at the Double C by six."

Though she wished she could think of something sharp to say, her mind still felt too scrambled. "But I thought you—I thought you wanted me to—"

"I guess you thought wrong, Susannah." He smiled, the classic Trent Maxwell mocking grin. "It wouldn't be the first time."

* * *

FROM THE WINDOW of his office at the Double C the next morning, Trent watched Alcatraz taking a spin around the paddock.

Trent was supposed to be checking over payroll records, but he'd never been crazy about the paperwork part of his job. Right now he couldn't take his eyes off the potent combination of

sunshine, magnificent quarter horse and wide green pastures.

The scene called to him, making his office feel small and stuffy, his work pointless.

But who was he kidding? This mood hadn't come over him because his work was dull. The Double C had twenty-five thousand acres for him to patrol, a million issues to deal with —both indoors and out—and a stable of ranch horses to ride whenever he wanted.

No, this itchy dissatisfaction was all about Susannah.

He tapped his foot against the wooden floor and added a syncopated rhythm with his pen. He couldn't stop thinking about last night—and wondering whether he'd made a serious mistake.

She wouldn't lightly forgive him for the episode in the cellar. He knew that—he'd known even before he touched her that he'd pay dearly for it.

Susannah had always been a proud woman, determined to be in control of her life, her heart…and her body. Even back when they were in the throes of young love, she'd been self-conscious about the final moment of physical surrender. Today, when she saw him as the enemy, and sex as the battleground, that complete meltdown must have felt like a humiliating defeat.

It had begun as a power trip, he had to admit that. He'd wanted to show her that she wasn't as indifferent as she pretended to be. He had wanted to force her to admit that she still felt something for him.

But, in the end, the simple desire to touch her, and taste her,

had been overpowering. He'd needed that more than he'd needed his own release.

Not that the victory had exactly been an ego boost. Making her catch fire had been about as difficult as setting a match to dry kindling. She'd been ready. Beyond ready. Any man who had touched that pent-up dynamite would have created a similar explosion.

Maybe he should have let her finish what she'd started out to do. If she'd been able to control him, to decide what he'd feel and when, she might have been less resentful. He certainly would have been less frustrated.

Trent unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled back his sleeves, wondering if the air conditioner might be broken. He had to get out of here.

It wasn't about the urge to find Susannah and stage a repeat of last night.

It wasn't. He just needed some air.…

Luckily, before he could stand up, the door opened and Chase entered, looking dusty and tired.

Trent settled back into his chair. Saved by the boss.

"We found Blue Boy," Chase said without preamble. The two men were such old friends that they'd long ago dispensed with formalities. Besides, Trent knew all about the missing horse.

"Where was he?"

"The rascal found a bad piece of fencing out by the west ridge and jumped it."

"Is he okay?"

Chase dropped onto the comfortable chair opposite the desk and put his feet up with a sigh. "He twisted his right hind leg. Doc says it's a tendon, not too bad, luckily, so he'll recover. Out of commission for a while, though."

Trent shook his head. "Wish I thought it would teach Blue a lesson. He's too old to go gallivanting."

Chase chuckled. "No such thing, pal. At least I hope there isn't." He yawned happily and scratched at a grass stain on his shirt. Chase was a true Texas blue blood, fifth-generation millionaire, but he loved to get dirty, sneaking away from black tie events to tackle work even his ranch hands hated.

"So. I hear you took a tumble yourself." Chase lifted his chin, pretending to try to see over the edge of the desk. "Clumsy bastard. How hard is it to stay upright on a ladder?"

"Depends on the ladder," Trent said with a scowl. "Everything she's got over there needs fixing. This one was about a hundred years old. The step just gave out under me."

"That damn girl's too proud to live." Chase dusted the knee of his jeans, sending a little cloud of gray Double C dirt into the air. "She can't ask me to loan her a ladder? She lets her people climb around on a rusted piece of crap?"

"Well…" Trent toyed with his pen. "That's the weird thing."

Suddenly, Chase's yawning, sleepy-eyed manner disappeared. He knew Trent, and he recognized the tone.

"What weird thing?"

"I'm not sure. At first I just assumed, as you did, that the bolts were rotten. But I got to thinking, and I'm not so sure. The ladder fell right beside me, and I was lying there a second or two, staring straight at it."

"And?"

"I didn't really put two and two together at the time, being preoccupied with making sure all my body parts still worked. But now that I think back, I'm pretty sure I didn't see any rust."

Chase frowned. "That doesn't make sense. You mean the break was clean?"

"Yeah. Straight. As if someone had cut it in two."

"Did you go back and take a second look at the ladder?"

"It's gone. Zander said Susannah had told him to get rid of it ASAP, so he got Eli to shove it into the Dumpster. They already picked it up. They compact it on the spot, you know. That ladder's history."

"That is weird." Chase was quiet a moment. "Anybody else know you were going up to cut branches that day?"

Trent tried to remember who might have heard. He'd mentioned it several times over the past few days. He'd kept meaning to do it, but he kept getting sidetracked.

"Zander knew. And Eli, I guess. And probably that obnoxious Richard Doyle. He's been at the house three mornings in a row, sucking up to Sue, though he says it's about the will."

Chase nodded. "And Sue."

Trent narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"Sue." Chase shrugged. "I'm just saying, if you think Doyle knew, then Sue must have told him. So Sue must have known, too."

Trent decided to ignore that. Chase had played Sherlock Holmes recently, trying to discover the true identity of Josie's baby's father, and his success must have gone to his head.

He actually thought Sue might have sabotaged her own ladder?

Some detective.

"Obviously she had opportunity, but still, she did marry you only a week ago." The corners of Chase's eyes tilted up. "You're an irritating son of a gun, but even you couldn't have turned her homicidal in a week."

Trent laughed, glad to see that Chase was just joking. "I don't know. Guess it depends on what old man Everly's will says about widows."

He glanced out the window again, as the trainer led Alcatraz back to the stables. What a gorgeous horse he was. He'd been sired by Chase's father's favorite quarter horse, Rampage, a stallion who had definitely lived up to his name. The only one of the Fugitive Four who had been allowed to ride Rampage had been Paul, who'd had such a light hand on the reins and whose intuition about horses had been almost perfect.

"Oh. That reminds me. When I visited Peggy Archer last week, I think I mentioned to her that I'd be cutting back some branches at Everly. Not that I'm implying…"

He paused, remembering. “It was a strange visit, Chase. Harrison actually took me outside and warned me about Peggy. Said a lot of bad feelings got stirred up when Susannah and I got married.”

Chase nodded again. “I can imagine. We’re all married now… something Paul will never get a chance to do. That’s gotta be tough. Still…it’s kind of hard to picture Peggy Archer sneaking into Sue’s barn with a hacksaw, don’t you think?”

“Impossible. Till she gets that new hip, Peggy can barely walk from the chair to the door.”

“So…”

They sat in silence a minute, considering the possibilities—which were, in the end, all impossible. The bottom line was, no one could have known that Trent would use that particular ladder on that particular day.

Finally Chase sighed. “Sorry, pal, it’s just too nuts. Nobody’s out to get you. You must have been imagining things.”

“Possibly. I had just hit my head against an oak root the size of a water main.”

“Clumsy bastard,” Chase repeated affectionately. “Still, women love an injured warrior. I hope you at least have the sense to milk those stitches for a little pity sex.”

“Pity sex?” Trent laughed out loud. “For God’s sake, Chase. How desperate do you think I am?”

“On a scale of one to ten?” Grinning, Chase stood up and headed for the door. “I’d say about a thousand.”

CHAPTER SIX

NEWLYWEDS, Trent decided as he watched Chase and Josie try to assemble the new crib, were disgusting. They should be locked up for the first full calendar year, so they didn't drive everyone else crazy with their cuddles and kisses and lingering looks of hungry adoration.

Of course, technically Trent and Susannah were newlyweds, too. But that was different. Night and day different.

It was a bright Sunday afternoon, the last weekend in May, and the two couples had been working on the nursery at the Double C for the past two hours. Well, at least Trent and Susannah had been working. Chase and Josie got very little done, seemingly magnetized to one another. Chase couldn't pass within six feet of his new wife without scooping her into his arms for a cuddle. Josie couldn't hand him the screwdriver without ending up kissing his neck.

Susannah and Trent, on the other hand, seemed to exist in two separate universes, even when they were standing mere inches apart. In the past two hours, Susannah had met Trent's eyes only once, the moment he arrived. Her shock had been almost palpable. She obviously hadn't realized, when she agreed to help Josie today, that it would be a double date.

Trent had glanced at Chase. Good try, pal, he'd messaged silently. Chase had shrugged, his smile not admitting anything.

Though Susannah was clearly unhappy about the arrangement, she couldn't be accused of being rude. She worked hard. She laughed at Chase's jokes, and oohed over Josie's fluffy lamb mobiles and lamb border stencils and lamb-patterned sheets.

It was only Trent who got the invisible man treatment. She talked around him, walked around him, worked around him without skipping a beat.

"Hey, guys. Would you mind working on the stencil border while we assemble the mobile?" Chase wrapped one arm around Josie's waist. "I don't want Josie in here with the paint fumes. Not good for the baby."

Trent gazed over at Susannah, who frowned. He wondered how she was going to get out of this one.

"Do you really think that needs to be done today?" She smiled to soften the words. "The baby's not due till mid-September, and it's not even June yet."

Trent felt her frustration. Back at Everly, peaches were ripening on the trees in record numbers. She'd spent every day of the past month trying to line up buyers. Tomorrow the harvest would begin, with its harrowing fourteen-hour days. Susannah wouldn't have another free Sunday until late August.

Josie grinned, unabashed. "I know. But I just can't wait to see it. I'm so grateful that you guys are willing to help. It means so much to both of us."

Trent glanced at Chase, who beamed and planted a kiss on the top of her head, as if she'd said something marvelous.

Man, the guy was gone on his wife. He clearly didn't know how to deny her anything. If she'd wanted the baby's room decorated in angel feathers and bits of the pearly gates, Chase would have driven his truck up to Heaven's door and demanded they sell him some.

"Okay, then, we'll be in the study if you need us." Chase apparently had decided to take Susannah's silence as a yes. That was absurd, of course. Chase had been Susannah's best friend since they were babies, and he knew as well as Trent what her frozen face really meant. "Have fun."

They ambled off, still entwined, still teasing each other, still making silly kissing noises between sentences. When they finally disappeared, Trent turned to Susannah with a smile.

"Wow. You could get cavities, just being in the same room with all that sugar."

She didn't smile back. "I think it's sweet."

"My point exactly. Sweet like six banana splits and a double hot fudge sundae. Stomachache sweet."

She studied the stencil. "They're happy. That's what marriage is all about. Most marriages, anyhow." She turned and held the stencil up against the wall, studying it. "I think it's great."

Well, of course she did. Whatever Trent thought, she thought the opposite. If he said go, she'd stop. If he said silence she'd sing.

If he said, Come here, Sue, because I want to make love to you until you forget how to be such a bitch…

She'd run.

And, obviously, neither of them would ever forget that this should have been their own sugary bliss. The look in Susannah's eyes said it all. If Trent hadn't cheated on her, they would have been the kissing, cooing newlyweds.

She had wanted that, once. Trent knew it had been her most comforting dream. It had helped her endure the loss of her parents, and her grandfather's brutality.

And he'd killed it.

She would never forgive him for that. Hell, he'd never forgive himself.

But life went on, damn it. Why couldn't she let go of the past long enough to get through this year without adding more misery to the heaping load they already carried around?

"So let's see how this works." He plucked the stencil from her fingers. "Ummm…" He turned it in all directions, trying to figure out how exactly this collection of random slits in a wobbly plastic rectangle was going to end up looking like anything. "Sorry, but…what the hell?"

In spite of her obvious belief that cracking a smile in his presence would usher in the end of the world, he saw the corner of her mouth tuck back.

"It's a simple stencil, really. Just one color, just one layer. See? You press the stencil against the wall, then sponge over it with paint. What comes through will look like a lamb."

"Really." He squinted. It would, he thought, probably help to be drunk. "I'll have to take your word for it."

But she didn't seem to be listening anymore. When he glanced toward her, he was rewarded with a close-up of her tight, round ass. She'd bent over and begun squeezing blobs of white acrylic paint onto the plates that waited on the bright blue drop cloth.

He took a minute to enjoy the sight. Expecting to work hard—and definitely not expecting to see Trent—she'd dressed casually today. Instead of her regular tailored khaki slacks and oxford cloth shirt, she was wearing cutoff blue jeans, frayed up to the danger zone, and a tiny white halter top.

Eleven years ago, he would have grabbed her in both hands and pulled her in for an X-rated squeeze that would have put Chase and Josie to shame. They would have ended up laughing, stumbling and probably covered in white paint.

Today, they lived under new laws. He gave himself that one stolen minute to look, and then turned away before she sensed the heat of his gaze.

"The border goes along the edge of the ceiling, I suppose?" There were still two ladders in the room, from when Trent and Chase had painted the baby-blue walls two weeks ago, and they'd obviously been left for a reason.

She stood on tiptoe to investigate. "Yeah. Chase already drew the guidelines, so we don't have to worry about spacing. You can start over by the closet. I'll start by the door."

Her gaze dropped to his calf, which still had a bandage over Marchant's six stitches. "Unless…" She waved toward the injury. "If you'd rather not…"

He laughed. “You think I’ve developed a fear of ladders?”

“Probably not.” She actually smiled at that.

For about twenty minutes they worked in silence, atop their own perches on opposite sides of the room. He taped the stencil in place, sponged the paint onto the wall, then moved the stencil and began again.

The lambs looked blobby.… Was he using too much paint? His hands felt too big, mostly thumbs. Though he’d done only five lambs, he was already bored.

He glanced back to see how her wall was coming.

Far better than his, naturally. She had so much more control, so much more patience. He was restless, physical, more comfortable outdoors. He’d always marveled at her ability to sit quietly, to wait, to think things through, to stay on task.

He had none of that. Which was, of course, why he’d botched up his life for so long, making one impulsive mistake after another. What patience he had acquired had come at great cost… and it still didn’t come naturally.

He climbed down, moved his ladder and filled his plate with white paint. He climbed up again, ignoring the twinge in his stitches, and taped the stencil in place. Just before he touched the sponge to the wall, he noticed that he’d taped the lamb upside down.

In spite of his annoyance, he had to laugh. Josie was going to regret letting him get involved with this. “Hey. Remember when Nikki decided she wanted unicorns all over her walls?”

He wasn't surprised when Susannah didn't immediately answer. Normally, they avoided "Remember when" as a conversation starter. But he'd spoken without thinking, of course. And besides, damn it, he was tired of pretending that ten years of intimacy and fun hadn't existed, just because they'd ended in one night of disaster.

She must have decided the same thing, because after only a brief hesitation, she chuckled, too.

"I hope that doesn't mean what I think it means." She put down her sponge and twisted her head to see his border. "Have you screwed up already?"

"Yeah. I almost put one on upside down." He leaned back to let her get a full view of the mess. "Is the paint supposed to drip like that? My lambs look sort of…deformed."

She frowned, studying his line of white, puffy animals. "It's not too bad," she said finally. "You're using too much paint, that's all. I can probably go back with the blue and touch it up."

"Oh." He stared at his row of lambs, as if they'd betrayed him. "Darn."

"Darn? You wanted me to say they were awful?"

"Yeah." He grinned. "I was hoping you'd order me to surrender my sponge immediately."

"Nope." She dabbed her own sponge into the white paint. "Sorry. And don't go making it worse deliberately, just to get out of it. It didn't work with the unicorns, did it?"

It certainly hadn't. At five, Nikki had been in love with

unicorns, and she'd begged Susannah, Trent, Paul and Chase—who, at nineteen, still called themselves the Fugitive Four—to paint the creatures on her bedroom walls.

Ever sensible, Susannah found a picture to copy, but unfortunately none of the boys had an iota of artistic talent. Trent's contributions were the worst, looking like everything from rhinos to car keys…but never like unicorns.

Nikki, who at the time was crazy about Trent, adored the weird creations. She egged him on, encouraging him to make them ever wilder, despite Susannah's frustrated efforts to keep everyone copying the pattern.

Chase and Paul joined in the fun, abandoning the original design without regret. It took a while, but by the end of the day even Sue relented and began adding inventive flourishes to her unicorns, too.

The result was colorful madness, but it had been so joyous, a visible representation of the love and creative camaraderie that had existed among the four friends. It had been one of their happiest days.

They'd all been crushed when, two days later, Arlington Everly had sent one of the ranch hands up to paint over it with a bland eggshell white. It had taken four coats to cover it all, which had given them an irrational sense of pride.

"Okay, but if my lambs all look like unicorns, let it be on your head." He tapped the sponge against the edge of the plate, making sure it didn't soak up too much paint. "That was a fun

day, wasn't it?"

He didn't look at Susannah, but he could feel her tension all the way across the room. He could almost hear her thoughts. She was trying to calculate risk, vulnerability, exposure. Was it too dangerous to agree that yes, she, too, remembered that day with pleasure? Was she somehow in danger if she admitted that, on that one day, they had been happy?

"Yes," she said finally. "Yes, it was a beautiful day."

He waited, wondering whether she'd find a way to erase the tenderness with an extra comment. A great day, and isn't it too bad that you had to go and spoil it all? A great day, but only because we didn't know how soon Paul would be dead.

She didn't. The gentle sound of her "yes" hung in the air, untouched. When he looked up, she had already gone back to swabbing the stencil with her sponge.

It wasn't much. But somehow it felt like a victory.

Suddenly Josie came into the room, holding Trent's cell phone in one outstretched hand. She crossed the room quickly and stopped at the foot of his ladder.

"It must have fallen off when you and Chase were assembling the bookcase," she said. "It was ringing, so I answered it for you. It's Missy Snowdon? She said it was urgent."

Chase appeared in the doorway, holding the fuzzy pieces of the mobile he'd obviously been putting together. The look on his face was priceless. Josie's hand wavered, as if she realized she'd goofed, though she wasn't sure how.

Trent had to enjoy the irony. Though Chase must have told Josie at least some details of Trent and Susannah's problems, apparently he had withheld the piece about Trent sleeping with Missy Snowdon. To protect Trent's reputation, no doubt.

What a joke. Once again, fate proved that hiding the truth didn't work. Secrets simply wouldn't stay buried.

He took the telephone, because, in the end, what else could he do?

He glanced once at Susannah.

He shouldn't have.

"Hello, Missy," he said in an even tone. "Is everything all right?"

"Not really," her arch, sexy voice responded. "My old friend Maxy isn't answering my calls or returning my messages. Here I am, between love affairs and between cocktails, just looking to get together with an old friend, and he won't give me the time of day. I can't figure out why that would be. Can you?"

"It's pretty simple." Trent watched Susannah's face, which had hardened into a sardonic indifference that he was pretty sure he recognized. Had she learned that look from him? "I don't know if you heard. I just got married."

"Oh, I heard. Everyone's talking about it. But it's not that kind of marriage, is it? Word on the street is that she still hates your guts. Sounds like you need a little TLC just as much as I do. And by TLC I mean, touching, licking—"

"Missy." God almighty. She was drunk, and it was only,

what…about three in the afternoon? Poor, beautiful Missy Snowdon. He could have predicted she'd find the real world to be so much harder than high school.

Pity softened his voice. "I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to help you with that. But it was nice of you to call."

Susannah made a low, disgusted noise. She dropped her sponge in the paint, wiped her hands on her shorts and began backing down the ladder.

"Come on, Maxy," Missy wheedled. "I hear she won't sleep with you, even though she promised she would. And I know you. You can't go a year—"

"I'm sorry, but I'm just not available right now. It was good to talk to you. Take care of yourself."

He flipped the phone shut, though she kept talking. He wondered if, when she realized he was gone, she'd call right back. Just in case, he turned the phone to silent mode.

He looked at Susannah, who was watching him, as rigid as an ice mannequin. She smiled slightly, as if she found his predicament amusing, but the frost in her eyes said something different.

Without warning, anger bubbled up, like a geyser that had been dormant so long he'd almost forgotten it was there.

Was it his fault Missy Snowdon needed a man and had decided to become Trent's own personal stalker? He hadn't touched the redhead in almost eleven years, for God's sake. Was there no such thing as forgiveness? No Get Out of Jail card in the game

of Susannah Everly's life?

He was a bloody fool. Why was he trying to make this goddamn marriage work? She wasn't ever going to forgive him. She wasn't ever going to forget. Maybe, over the years, she'd lost whatever sweetness and humanity she'd once possessed.

And if she had nothing to offer him but ice and hatred, why the hell shouldn't he take what Missy Snowdon had to offer? He was tired of guilt, tired of loneliness, tired of wearing sackcloth and ashes while he beat his fists against Susannah's locked door.

Missy might be a drunk, but at least she wasn't a walking textbook of resentment, repression and every emotional issue known to man.

And she got pleasure from making a man feel good, not out of making him feel like shit.

He glanced at the phone, thinking how good it would feel to thumb it open and hit Redial, right here, while Susannah watched with that supercilious look on her face. That "I know you're a bastard" look, which, paradoxically, just made him want to prove her right.

"Trent." Chase's voice cut into his thoughts. "Pal. Think it through."

Trent glanced up. Chase looked worried, but steady. No pressure, which he knew from long experience wouldn't work with Trent at a moment like this. Just a reminder that sanity was still an option.

It was a look that had stopped Trent from doing a lot of dumb

things through the years.

Trent took a breath. Then he slowly slid the cell phone into his back pocket.

He glanced toward Susannah, wondering if she knew how close he'd come.

But she had already left the room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SOMETIMES, life just didn't seem fair.

The next day, in the silver-pink early-morning sunlight, Susannah stood at the edge of her two-acre rows of Rio Grande trees, the first of her peaches to ripen.

She tried not to feel bitter about the rotten trick fate had played on her.

For the first year she could remember, Everly's orchards had been blessed with perfect conditions. No frost, no drought, no catfacing, no scab. As a result, thousands of juicy peaches hung from the trees like Christmas ornaments, glowing gold with deep red blush, throwing off waves of mouthwatering sweetness.

But unless she could pull off a miracle, much of this beautiful fruit would rot, unsold, in cold storage. Because this year, this perfect year, was also the year her biggest buyer had gone bankrupt. The other retail outlets were already contracted with other growers.

Except for a few little mom-and-pop stores, and a bunch of roadside stands, she had nowhere to sell her crop.

Zander came up beside her, panting, his bulky form already sweating, though a chill still hung in the air. It was that kind of morning, when no one moved slowly. Every morning for the next three months would be like that.

"Snap out of it," he said, handing her one of the drop-bottom

bags. “Feeling sorry for yourself isn’t going to get the peaches picked.”

“I know. But look at those trees. They’re all going to look like that this year, from the Rios to the Dixielands. All five hundred acres, all twenty-five varieties. What are we going to do if a new bulk buyer doesn’t show up in the next few weeks?”

He shook his head. “Beats me. Right now all I care about is getting this fruit off the trees. You going to help me or not?”

She smiled. “Yes, sir.”

Adjusting her hat and squaring her shoulders, she scanned the workers, who were pouring out of the makeshift office, where they’d been issued their gear. Male and female, old and young, they began to filter into the rows of dawn-lit trees, ladders and bushel baskets in hand, laughing and talking.

By the time the sun hit the treetops, Susannah knew, only the superfit would still be laughing. The rest would be sweating and silent, aching from shoulder to toe.

Most of her workers each season were regulars, college students and teachers on summer vacation, as well as whole families of migrants who knew the rhythms of nature so well they magically appeared the day she needed them.

But this year she’d hired at least thirty extra pickers to cope with the bumper crop. Many of them were newbies and would need a lot of supervision, just to be sure they didn’t manhandle the fruit or pack it so deep she ended up with box after box of peach mush.

Where the peaches would go after they'd been picked and packed, Susannah had no idea. She was still making calls, exploring options, searching her brain for new ideas, but mostly she was just praying for a miracle. She even dreamed once that a new grocery chain began building a store downtown. In her dream, she'd grabbed a hammer and nails and joyously leaped on a scaffold to help.

She watched the workers, eager to begin, none of them wondering where it would end. "Do you think maybe we could add another couple of roadside stands?"

"We've already doubled what we had last year." Zander tucked his thumbs into his belt loops and sighed. "I did as you said and got Eli supervising the deliveries to the roadside stands. Trent offered to oversee the pick-your-own acres."

Susannah shot him a hard look. "Shouldn't Trent be at the Double C?"

Zander shrugged. "He said he could spare the time."

"Still, he doesn't know anything about peaches—"

"Ms. Susannah, follow my logic. He offered. We need him. I said yes."

Her chest tightened. Though Zander was right, she was reluctant to take any favors from Trent. She didn't want to owe him any more than she already did.

Plus, just knowing he was around would be distracting. They hadn't spoken since yesterday afternoon, when Missy had called him at the Double C. He had come straight home after finishing

up in the nursery. It had been a difficult day, just spending so many hours around Chase and Josie. Susannah was happy for them, really she was. But their uninhibited joy made her think about things that were better left forgotten.

Things like how, once upon a time, she'd truly believed that she and Trent would be sharing such newlywed bliss. Laughing and kissing, and touching at every opportunity.

Even…someday…decorating a nursery of their own.

The dream had exploded eleven years ago. She'd swept it into the corners of her mind. It shocked her yesterday to find that the broken shards still retained the power to slash and tear her heart.

By the time he came home that night, she was already in bed.

Like a fool, she lay awake for hours, thinking he might come up to talk to her, to try to explain Missy's call. Or, perhaps, to insist on another…whatever you could call that episode in the cellar.

Sometime during the long hours of last night, waiting for the knock that never came, she had a disturbing revelation. He didn't need to come to her again because, for him, the cellar encounter hadn't been about sex. It hadn't been about passion, or desire, or even leftover yearning from the old days.

It had been about power. She thought about how he had prevented her from touching him. Of course. It made sense now. He hadn't needed any sexual release. All he had needed was to demonstrate that he was in control. That she was a puppet, and he held the strings.

So no. She didn't want him around all day, didn't want him pitching in, as if he was just another one of her friends. She was comfortable with her anger, and she intended to hang on to it. This ricocheting around between emotions—fury, desire, hope and back to fury—was exhausting.

Zander hitched his jeans, clearly irritated by her silence. "What's the problem? We haven't hired anyone to run those acres yet. If Trent takes over, we can open them today."

Practicality warred with emotion. She couldn't deny it would be a help.

Other growers made lots of money with pick-your-own acres, but Everly had never offered the feature before. Her grandfather had thought it would cheapen the orchard's name.

Susannah couldn't see how it could cheapen their name any more than covering half the county in the stink of Everly peaches rotting on the pallets. So she'd decided to try it with a few acres of Gold Prince, one of the few early-ripening semiclings that actually sold well for anything other than canning.

"All right." She tried not to sound ungracious. Zander was doing everything he could to help unload the peaches. At least the pick-your-own acres were on the other side of the property. "Do you think his stitches are healed enough? He'll be up and down ladders all day, helping people."

Zander snorted. "He's fine."

"Did you check the new ladders?"

Immediately after Trent's fall, she'd replaced all the old ones

on the property—about half of everything they owned. The expense of the new ones pinched, but she couldn't risk letting someone else get hurt. Trent might laugh off stitches in his usual macho way, but the next tumble might leave someone truly injured.

"Checked 'em all. Old and new. They're as safe as aces." Zander shook his head. "I don't know what the heck happened to Trent's ladder. I had used that same one just the day before to get to the garage shingles. I didn't break the step, and I'm about fifty pounds heavier than Trent."

"I know. It seems so strange that—"

"Why look!" Zander gestured broadly. "Isn't that your husband over there?"

She looked, and sure enough, Trent was standing by the barn. He leaned against one of the first peach trees, his long torso and narrow hips looking ridiculously sexy, considering he was wearing just jeans and a T-shirt.

He was talking on a cell phone. To Missy Snowdon, no doubt.

She turned to Zander. "I'm sure he's here to talk to you. I'll start briefing the workers."

"No. I'll handle them," Zander said flatly. "You go talk to Trent."

It wasn't something she liked to do, but occasionally Susannah had to remind Zander exactly what was—and wasn't—listed on his job description. Nowhere, she was quite sure, did it include the words "marriage counselor" or "matchmaker."

"Zander."

Her foreman blinked innocently, and she realized just in time that one of the new workers was watching. She sweetened her voice, remembering that a rumor could race through this orchard faster than San Jose scale. "You decided how the pick-your-own acres should be handled, Zander. I expect you to deal with it."

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