



HARLEQUIN®

February

Duets™

Daddy By Design?

Cheryl Anne
Porter

Her Perfect Wife

Kate Thomas



Kate Thomas
Cheryl Anne Porter
Daddy By Design?: Daddy By
Design? / Her Perfect Wife

Аннотация

Daddy By Design? by Cheryl Anne PorterA funny thing happened on the way to the delivery room...Mechanic Trey Cooper has been in some tight spots before—but he's never been stuck in an elevator with a woman about to give birth! Luckily they're rescued before he discovers if changing diapers is anything like changing tires. Still, beautiful Cinda Cavanaugh and her little daughter suddenly make Trey wish he had a family—and little does he guess how soon he's going to need one....Her Perfect Wife by Kate ThomasHunk for hire!Busy Dr. Melinda Burke requires more than a housekeeper to get her hectic life in order. She needs a stay-at-home wife! But she never expects a stud like Jack Halloran to sign up to do her dirty work. The only hitch: Marry him! That's because Jack needs medical coverage so he can quit his job and plan his own company. The sexy doc offers him the perfect out. Besides, how hard can cooking and cleaning be? The toughest part is keeping his oven mitts off his new boss...

Содержание

Duets™	5
Contents	7
Books by Cheryl Anne Porter	10
1	11
2	27
3	47
4	67
5	84
6	101
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	105

Duets™

Two brand-new stories in every volume...twice a month!

Duets Vol. #69

Popular Barbara Daly serves up a delightful Double Duets this month featuring the smart, sexy, sassy Sumner sisters, Faith and Charity. The Telegraph Herald says this about Barbara's books. Look for "...a delicious blend of humor, seduction and romance as refreshing as a day in New England."

Duets Vol. #70

Cheryl Anne Porter returns with the second book in her humorous miniseries **A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE DELIVERY ROOM**. This talented writer always delivers "a funny ride—a roller coaster of fun and adventure." Joining her is Silhouette author Kate Thomas with a neat premise. What does an overburdened working woman need these days? A stay-at-home "wife!"—in the form of the sexy, ever helpful hero!

Be sure to pick up both Duets volumes today!

Daddy by Design?

Cheryl Anne Porter

Her Perfect Wife

Kate Thomas



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Contents

Daddy by Design?

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Her Perfect Wife

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Daddy by Design?

Cheryl Anne Porter

The elevator stopped with a sick, grinding crunch.

“This is not happening.” Trey turned toward the panel of buttons, pushing every one. Nothing happened. He muttered beneath his breath then started beating on the door with a fist. “Hey, out there! We need help. There’s a woman in labor in here—and a man about to have a heart attack. Can anybody hear me?”

Apparently nobody could. Trey turned to Cinda, eyeing her as if he’d known all along that she’d be trouble. “So, how are you feeling right now?” he asked.

“Fine.” Trey gave her a doubting stare and Cinda caved. “Okay, so I could explode any minute here. I’m not any happier about this than you are.” She bit down on her bottom lip. “Oh, God. A labor pain. I don’t think I can hold on. You have to do something.”

His eyes widened. “Got any suggestions?”

Was she not busy enough already? Did she have to do everything? Cinda breathed through her physical pain and pointed to the emergency phone behind its glass case. “Try calling someone, Mr. Cooper. Because if my labor progresses much further, the two of us are quickly going to become the three of us....”

Dear Reader,

I always love writing books set in the South, because the

stories seem to take on a life of their own. The sultry climate and the slow pace of living offer great potential for plot, character and conflict. And with all that in place, all I have to do is write what I know! See, I'm a Southern girl myself, born in Savannah, Georgia. So when I was thinking about writing my second book in the A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE DELIVERY ROOM miniseries, how could I set it anywhere else?

All I had to come up with was a fictitious small town, a couple of transplanted Yankees, a stuck elevator, a cute baby...and, well, you can read for yourself! I hope you have as much fun reading this story as I did creating it.

Enjoy!

Cheryl Anne Porter

Books by Cheryl Anne Porter

HARLEQUIN DUETS

12—PUPPY LOVE

21—DRIVE-BY DADDY

35—SITTING PRETTY

HARLEQUIN TEMPTATION

818—HER ONLY CHANCE

To my sweet baby girl, MacKenzie.

Love you, “Macaroon.”

And to all my relatives in Georgia

(about half the state at last count),

but most especially to my cousin Joyce Colbaugh

for her unflagging efforts to promote my books

in her neck of the woods!

1

IT WAS JANUARY 2. A gray and sleety New York City day, full of traffic gridlock, honking car horns, and short tempers. A day of overworked people in a hurry to get home. What a time for Cinda Cavanaugh to be waiting for the cranky elevator outside her obstetrician's office. She'd just been given the news that she was about to become a mother—soon. Not that she didn't know that. She was, after all, more or less nine months pregnant, the key words being “more or less.”

It turned out it was going to be “more.” Her routine appointment had suddenly become anything but. In her mind, Cinda could still hear Dr. Butler confirming that Cinda, after many false alarms, was now truly in the early stages of real labor. Only the baby was still in a breach position. So the doctor had promptly sent Cinda on her way to the hospital, promising to follow her as soon as she rearranged her other appointments.

“Ha,” Cinda muttered, standing there alone in the long hallway, “I should have taken a rolled-up magazine to those other women and chased them away myself.”

Though Cinda felt a little bad about her self-centered, mean-spirited thoughts, she reminded herself that she wasn't always this testy. It was just today. She'd heard that women in labor had a different set of rules. She squeezed her eyes shut and put a hand to her forehead. “So, what made me think I could do

this alone?" She opened her eyes, grimacing. "Better yet, what made Dr. Butler think I really needed to be enlightened as to what actually goes on during a Caesarean-section delivery? God, just do it. Don't tell me about it. Ick."

Cinda caressed her swollen abdomen, now directing her conversation to the perfectly formed little girl whose image she'd just seen on the ultrasound screen. You know what, my little princess? You could really help out. Go ahead—turn. Don't give your mother such a hard time. Mother? Cinda thought about that. "Oh, God, I'm the mother."

She pushed the down button again and suddenly caught her own reflection staring back at her from the polished-metal elevator doors. "Oh, surely not." But, yes, that carnival fun-house reflection was indeed her own. "Are you telling me that I left the house looking like this?"

Obviously she had, because polished metal didn't lie. What she saw was a pale-blond head with angst-widened golden eyes above a swollen body covered by a black-wool winter coat, cream-colored slacks, and black boots. Well, great. I look like a sheep ready for shearing. Cinda pursed her lips, transferring her disgust to the elevator. "Come on, what's the problem here? As you can plainly see, I need to get to the hospital. Preferably today."

She pushed the down button firmly again. And then ten more times after that before she caught herself. Get a grip, Cinda. She put her fingers to her temples and pressed lightly. "I can do this. I have to do this. The nursery's ready. I'm ready. My baby is

apparently ready.” Cinda put a hand to her swollen belly. “We can do this, baby girl.”

Just then, an irritatingly pleasant ding alerted Cinda that the contrary elevator car had deigned to arrive. She exhaled her relief. “Oh, thank God.”

The doors opened without incident, presenting an empty elevator car. Swallowing back a sudden and uncustomary sense of impending doom, Cinda stepped inside and forced herself to push the button for the lobby. Anticipating the closing of the doors and the pull of gravity on her ride downward, she anchored herself by hanging on to the handrail that girded three sides of the rickety car. Not the least bit reassured, she studied her boxlike surroundings. Had this elevator really been this old and wobbly when she’d used it just an hour ago?

The doors closed. “Oh, calm down. You’re getting yourself all worked up,” she fussed, breathing in and out, in and out, as she watched the little lights blaze on and then off, indicating the incredibly slow, passage of each floor going by. Fourteen. No thirteen. Twelve. Eleven.

“There. See? It’s working fine. You’re just being silly.” Cinda spoke to herself as if she were her own best friend who needed reassuring. “That whole ‘woman in labor stuck inside an elevator’ thing is just some silly Hollywood scenario. Or maybe a book. You’d think writers would have more of an imagination these days.”

The elevator jerked to a stop. Cinda’s heart nearly burst, but

the dingling bell alerted her that all was well. Her hands shaking, she clutched at the opening of her woolly black coat as if it could ward off disaster. This is not a bad thing. It's just somebody on the tenth floor waiting to be picked up. No problem.

Confirming her conclusion, the doors opened to reveal a prospective passenger...who just happened to be an outrageously and ruggedly handsome man. Cinda's eyes widened with heart-stopping appreciation. Oh...my...God.

The man saw her and stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes widened. Clearly, he was just as affected by the sight of her as she was by him. No doubt, for differing reasons. After all, here she was nine months pregnant, and there he was...well, there he was. He belonged on a billboard where he'd be engaged in something really macho that required him to show a bunch of muscles—and not wear a lot of clothes, if there was an advertising god.

Those blue eyes and that sandy-brown hair. The broad and capable shoulders. Movie-star looks. Not the pretty-boy kind. The serious romantic-lead kind. The chiseled jaw. And the raised eyebrows, the look of, yes, dismay as he eyed her. Cinda didn't blame him a bit. After all, her size rivaled that of a balloon float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Thinking to put the gorgeous guy at ease, she offered him a tentative smile.

He grinned back but shook his head. "No thank you, ma'am, I've seen this movie, and it ends badly." His accent dripped with knee-weakening, molasses-thick Southern charm. "I'll just wait for the next car." He stepped back and waved. "Y'all have a nice

day.”

She could not let him go. That was all she knew. Cinda held down the door open button. “Wait. You might as well get in. Trust me, a teenager could qualify for Medicare before it comes back to this floor again.”

He eyed her, the elevator, and then the hallway to either side of him. Cinda waited with the proverbial bated breath. She tried to tell herself that she just didn’t want to be alone in the elevator, should it do something heinous like stick between floors. But even she wasn’t buying that. The truth was that there was something about this man that affected her, even on today of all days. And she plainly just wanted him in this elevator with her.

And he plainly didn’t want to be in here with her. Grimacing with good-natured humor, he eyed Cinda’s girth. She would have held her stomach in, but there weren’t enough muscles in the human body to make that feat possible.

“I’m pregnant, not contagious,” she tried helpfully.

That embarrassed him. His color heightened, but he laughed. “Okay, you win, pretty lady. I may as well chance it.” With a confident gait that exuded masculine sensuality, he walked into the car, hitting the buttons labeled Lobby and then Door Close.

Nothing happened. Not for several heart-stopping seconds. Cinda froze. The good-looking guy froze. Then, exhibiting a flair for drama, the doors belatedly shut. The elevator, coughing and wheezing like an asthmatic locomotive, begrudgingly set them on a slow-motion downward journey. Cinda clutched at the

iron handrails and tried not to look afraid—or like she'd been flattered by the handsome man's calling her a pretty lady. She'd needed that. For a very long time...she had needed that.

Just then her fellow passenger turned to her. With a disarming smile that confirmed his Southern upbringing, he said, "If you don't mind me asking, when's your blessed event due? And don't say yesterday."

"Okay. My due date is a week from today." That was all she meant to say, but his smiling sigh of relief had her conscience railing at her to tell the man the whole truth. "However, I'm in labor right now, so I'm on my way to the hospital."

His expression fell. He looked so disappointed in her. "And we were getting along so well."

"I know. Trust me, it wasn't my idea. Sorry."

"That may be, but I feel it only fair to warn you that, as a pit crew mechanic on the Jude Barrett stock car racing team, I can take an entire car apart and reassemble it in five minutes. But nowhere on my resume does it say anything about delivering babies. So unless you need an oil change and your tires rotated, you just stand over there and behave yourself, you hear?"

Now he'd made her laugh. "You poor man. I'll try to hold on." Now more at ease with the stranger, Cinda heard herself asking him a personal question. "You're Southern, aren't you?"

He sent her an arch expression. "What gave me away?"

Cinda pointed to him. "That package of grits sticking out of your coat pocket."

He actually patted down his pocket as humor sparked in his blue eyes. "Damn. I meant to take that out." Then he stuck a hand out for her to shake. "I'm from Atlanta. Well, actually a little town just west of there that nobody's ever heard of called Southwood. My name is George Winston Cooper the Third, but my friends call me Trey. And you are...?"

"Not from Atlanta." Cinda clasped his hand. His flesh was warm, his palm slightly callused. While his grip was firm, he didn't squeeze too hard, and her swollen fingers appreciated that. "I'm Cinda Cavanaugh of Canandaigua, New York. It's just outside of Rochester. But I live here in Manhattan now." He nodded, but didn't let go of her hand. Cinda melted...and added, stupidly, "But I have a house in Atlanta."

As if fate had been waiting only for her to admit that, the diabolically evil elevator stopped dead between floors with a sick grinding crunch of something metallic and a prolonged twanging of cables that just didn't bode well at all. The ensuing lack of movement taunted its passengers. Cinda gasped, clutching harder at the man's hand. "Oh, no."

Trey Cooper voiced her fears. "This is not happening." He untangled his hand from hers and turned to the panel of buttons, every one of which he proceeded to push. And still nothing happened. He glanced bale-fully at her and then tried to wedge the double doors open. But despite his evident strength and his concerted effort, they wouldn't budge. He muttered beneath his breath and changed tactics, now beating on the doors with a fist.

“Hey, out there! We need help. We’re stuck. There’s a woman in here in labor—and a man about to have a heart attack. Hello! Can anyone hear me?”

Apparently no one could. Trey Cooper turned to her, eyeing her as if he’d known all along that she carried some mutant strain of virus that threatened humankind. Cinda stared soberly back at him. His eyes pleaded for her to reassure him. “So, Mrs. Cavanaugh, how are you feeling right about now?”

Scared, her heart pounding—and her abdomen cramping—Cinda lied. “Fine.” The man gave her a doubting stare. She caved. “Okay, so I could explode any minute here. Trust me, I am not any happier about this than you are, Mr. Cooper. We’re in real trouble.”

“Beyond the obvious, you mean?”

“Way beyond the obvious. My baby is in a breach position, which means I can’t deliver her in the normal...well, on my own. I will need help.”

His frown deepened. “And me without my toolbox. Darn.”

Cinda’s fear and pain turned to testiness. “Oh, like you’re the one scheduled for a C-section delivery in a nice, safe hospital surrounded by people who know what they’re doing...only you can’t get there.”

“No one wants you to get there more than me, Mrs. Cavanaugh. So you just stand there and keep your baby where it is.”

Cinda’s retort was on her lips, but then a twinge of building

discomfort made her grimace. She bit down on her bottom lip. “Oh, God. A labor pain. I don’t think I can hold on. Please. You need to do something—and do it now.”

His eyes widened. “Got any suggestions?”

Was she not busy enough already? Did she have to do everything? Cinda clutched reflexively at her abdomen. “You said you know something about cars. This is an elevator car. So do something.”

“Ma’am, my expertise is with the four-wheeled variety that tear around racetracks for huge amounts of money.”

Suffering a pang of doubt about this heroic-looking man’s ability to cope in this situation, Cinda breathed through her physical pain and pointed to the emergency phone behind its glass case. “Try calling someone, Mr. Cooper.” She took a few more puffing breaths. “Because if my labor progresses much further, the two of us are quickly going to become the three of us.”

He blanched. “Then you have got to stop doing that whole labor pains thing.”

Cinda tried not to double over. “I would if I could, trust me. My baby’s early. We didn’t expect this. So do something—and do it before I have to name this child Otis.”

“Otis?”

“After the man who invented the elevator. Now, do something.”

“Good idea.” Trey Cooper whipped around, opened the case, and lifted the telephone receiver. But before he put it to his ear,

he treated her to a surly “why-me” expression. “So where’s your husband? I’m of a mind to throttle him but good for not being the one here with you right now.”

Cinda’s labor pain receded. She inhaled deeply, relaxed, leaned against the wall behind her, and said, very matter-of-factly, “It wouldn’t do much good. Richard is dead.”

Instant dismay and sympathy radiated from Trey Cooper’s blue eyes. “Oh, hell, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any disrespect. You’re just so young. I never thought you’d be a widow.”

She held his gaze. “Neither did I.”

“No,” he said quietly, “I guess you didn’t.”

Cinda had no idea what to say next. Apparently, neither did Trey. That left only the obvious between them to fill the gap—a pregnant silence. But as they stared at one another, a totally unexpected jet of sensual awareness sparked between them, catching Cinda off guard. Her gaze met and truly held his. Strangers across a crowded room...or a stuck elevator...whatever. It was as if they were the only two people in the world. The moment got warm, heating up with that whole man/woman thing. That kiss-me-now-big-boy feeling.

Still staring at Trey Cooper, Cinda blinked. She could not believe this. Who’d have thought that in this ridiculous situation—and with me nine months pregnant—that now I’m going to feel a spark of connection, of attraction with some man?

“So,” Trey said a bit too loudly, breaking the spell between them, “what happened to your husband? Do you mind me

asking?”

“No. I don’t mind.” Surprising her was the realization that she really didn’t. In fact, she realized now that she needed to tell him, a stranger, about Richard’s death, as well as the truth of how she felt about it—a truth she could hardly share with family and friends. “It was all really pretty stupid,” she began. “And I’m still mad at him. In fact, I may never forgive him. You see, Richard was trying to go around the world in a hot-air balloon. You know the type—bored multimillionaire adventurer. Almost a cliché nowadays, right?”

“Sure.”

He’d agreed with her, but his expression said he didn’t have a clue about what she was talking about. Different worlds, she supposed. “Well, anyway, he was ballooning and something happened to the equipment. The sick joke was he finally ran out of hot air. Ha-ha. So there he was over Tibet and going down fast.” Cinda paused and eyed Trey Cooper. “I know you’re not going to believe this next part. The falling balloon frightened a herd of yaks.”

“Yaks?” Trey looked at her as if she’d said something as absurd as, well, yaks. “Those big, hairy buffalo-looking things with the horns, right?”

Cinda nodded. “Right. So, anyway, the basket hit the ground, and—” She inhaled deeply for courage and then pushed out her words. “—Richard spilled out. The impact probably killed him, but the yaks stampeded and...trampled him, pretty much sealing

the deal.”

Trey Cooper’s features contorted with disbelief and horror. “Damn.”

“Exactly. It was pretty bad all around.”

“I’m sure it was.” The man had not yet blinked. “That’s quite a story.”

“I know. And much stranger than fiction.”

“I hear you. Well, still, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. And I thank you for not laughing. Some people have.”

He shook his head. “Hey, I never laugh at death. My job revolves around the daily possibility of taking a permanent dirt nap—” His eyes rounded. “Oh, hell, excuse me. I didn’t mean—”

“I know you didn’t. It’s okay.”

“And I was just teasing about throttling your husband, Mrs. Cavanaugh. I’m not the violent type.”

“Imagine my relief.” Glad to have her story out, Cinda smiled at him. “Would you call me Cinda, please? Every time you say Mrs. Cavanaugh, I think my mother-in-law is behind me. And I have enough trouble right now without that image.” Conjuring up Richard’s mother sent a pang of disloyalty through Cinda. She looked down and away, then up at Trey Cooper. “Look, about Richard. Please don’t think I didn’t care. I did. It’s just that I’m mad at him—as silly as that sounds—for being so careless with his life.”

“I can see how you would be.”

“You’re very kind. I keep telling myself I need to get over it. Richard has been gone awhile.” Trey Cooper raised his eyebrows as he glanced the way of her pregnant belly. Cinda got his drift. “Well, not a long while. Nine months.”

“Wow. That had to be tough...Cinda.”

“It was.” Something about the way he said her name sent a thrill rushing through her. He was so easy to talk to, so attentive and sympathetic that she almost forgot she was stuck in an elevator. “Richard was killed before I even realized I was pregnant, so obviously I never got to tell him.”

Trey Cooper’s expression morphed into the same one worn by people who are unwilling witnesses to a train wreck. “Cinda, does tabloid TV know about you? I swear, you keep this up and I’m going to be crying.”

Embarrassed, Cinda bit down on her bottom lip. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t be burdening you with all this.” That was all she’d meant to say, but apparently today her psyche had a mind of its own. “Still, even if Richard had known about the baby, I don’t think it would have changed anything between us. We were separated. I think. I mean I’d left him, but he didn’t even realize it. Not for three days, anyway. But, oh well, that was our life.”

The poor man trapped in here with her, a captive audience, just stared at her, his features a mask of sympathy.

Cinda put a hand to her forehead. “There I go again. All this voluntary sharing of mine. Could I be more Tennessee Williams? More Blanche DuBois, depending on the kindness of strangers?

You'd think this elevator car was named Desire, instead of Otis."

"Hey, don't worry about it. All I want to know is what kind of idiot was Richard Cavanaugh not to have realized a woman like you wasn't around anymore? To me, that would be like not noticing that the sun didn't come up in the morning."

He couldn't be more wonderful. Sudden shyness, and a telling prick of tears, assailed Cinda. "Thank you. I needed that—especially in this condition." She rubbed her rounded belly. Trey Cooper stared at her...warmly, openly. That awareness bug was flying around them again. Cinda quickly pointed to the phone he held in his hand. "Maybe now would be a good time to try that emergency number."

"Right." He put the receiver to his ear, listened, and then shook his head in apparent disbelief. "As long as you live, you are not going to believe this. The line is busy."

"What?"

"I'm not lying. It's busy."

Cinda swallowed the rising panic in her throat. "Busy? How can it be busy? It's the emergency phone for this elevator—and we're the only ones in it."

"Believe me, I'm aware of that. Maybe whatever knocked out the elevator, took out the phone, too. Add Edison to your list of inventors to hate right now." He hung up the phone and then stuck his hands in his pants pockets. "Somewhere in here is a...aha, there it is."

He pulled out a pocketknife and held it up for her inspection.

“Never leave home without it.” He opened the knife and turned away from her to face the control panel.

This couldn’t be good. Cinda peeked around him to see what he might be doing. Dear God. He was un-screwing the metal facing plate over the buttons that marked each floor. She put a hand on his arm. “Trey, what are you doing?”

He spared her a glance. “Taking this panel off. Underneath, there should be miles of wiring. Maybe I can figure out which ones to hot-wire and get this elevator back on the fast track again.”

Cinda’s knees stiffened with her disbelief. “You can’t do that.”

“Actually, I probably can.” His expression radiated confident good humor. “You’re the one who told me to do something, remember.”

“Well, quit listening to me. What do I know? My point is this is not a ’56 Chevy. And I would appreciate it if you would not fiddle with the wires. You could blow us up.”

He shook his head, unfazed. “That’s only if there’s a bomb. The worst I could do is fool with the wrong wires and send us hurtling down in a free fall to the basement.”

“Well, thank God for that,” she said brightly, falsely. Cinda stared at his handsome but possibly crazy profile and retreated to the back wall. “I’m doomed. And so is my baby.”

Trey reached out and gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. “Hey, don’t give up on me so easily. I have lots of ideas. If I can’t hot-wire the thing, I’ll remove that ceiling panel up there and climb

out on top of the car—”

“No you will not.” Cinda sternly stared at her companion. “You absolutely will not.”

He stepped back. “Are you always this bossy, Cinda?”

“Are you always this impractical, Trey?”

A flash of anger sparked in his eyes. “What’s so impractical about trying to get us out of here?”

Suddenly, he was acting like Richard Cavanaugh all over again—all strut and no substance, not someone she could rely on. “Look, Trey, there are two things here you are not going to do. One, you are not going to do anything to get yourself killed. And two, you are not leaving me here alone. I have been there and done that. And I am not going through it again.”

“All right.” He flipped his knife closed and shoved it back in his pocket. “You got any better ideas?”

Cinda cast about in her mind—only to suddenly realize that she should have been casting about in her handbag instead. She suddenly brightened. “Yes I do. I can’t believe I didn’t think of it before now. My cell phone. It’s in my purse. We can call someone.”

Trey Cooper’s suddenly radiant expression said he forgave her doubting him. He stretched his arms wide, as if he meant to hug her. “Bless this technological age. We are saved. I could kiss you, Cinda Cavanaugh. And I just might do it, too.”

CINDA'S INSIDES FLUTTERED. What would Trey's kiss be like? But then reality—which included her pregnancy, her ill-timed labor, and their current situation—set in and she looked away from his lips. “Not now,” she chirped, knowing she didn't really mean it and that he probably hadn't, either. “But I will take a rain check.”

His eyes warmed. “You got it.”

Her gaze locked with his. That intense, totally inappropriate awareness again flowed between them.

Then, feeling silly in the face of his flirting with her, Cinda busied herself with rummaging around in her purse. “I call my handbag Wonder Purse. Everyone teases me about its size. But every time anyone needs something, it's in here.”

“I'll believe you if you pull an obstetrician out of there.”

“Wouldn't we both be surprised? But I can do the next best thing. I can call one. My doctor's office is on the fifteenth floor of this very building.” Cinda kept up her rummaging, telling herself that she was not undergoing another labor pain. She began to sweat. No such luck. It was a definite labor pain. Her hand closed around her slim cell phone. She pulled it out and shoved it into Trey's hands. “Here. You'll have to dial. Pain. Another one.”

“Oh, no. Hang on, Miss Cinda. Hold on to me if it helps.” He held his arm out for her. Cinda clutched at him as if he were

a life preserver. And in a way, if these pains came any faster, he very well might be. "Squeeze hard," he said. "I don't mind. What's your doctor's number?"

Between shortened breaths, Cinda told him. He dialed, evidently got somebody and began—very calmly and practically—relating the emergency to Dr. Butler's office staff. Cinda's pain receded. Still clutching Trey's arm, she rested her forehead against his muscled bicep. Even through his clothing, she could feel that he was big and strong and warm. Tears of gratitude for a solid, if temporary, presence to lean on, filled her eyes. She'd never had this with Richard, this support, this steadfastness. Not in the five years of their marriage.

Cinda now realized she'd been wrong about this man. He wasn't at all like the late Richard Cavanaugh. Instead, Trey Cooper was a rock, solid and dependable. And kind. She looked up at him, afraid her heart was in her eyes.

"Hey, no crying," he said tenderly, tipping her chin up with his free hand. With great casualness he planted a kiss on her forehead. "The nurse is getting your doctor. Evidently somebody's already called building maintenance about the elevator being stuck. They're working on it now. And the receptionist will call for an ambulance on the other line. So everything is going to be fine, all right?"

Cinda started to thank him, but he gestured for her not to speak as he listened to whatever was being said to him on the phone. Finally, he nodded and said, "Hello, Dr. Butler. Trey

Cooper here. Yes, she's right here with me, although I'd venture to say she'd prefer being with you." Grinning—a killer one that exposed an expanse of white and even teeth—he handed Cinda the phone.

She took it, putting it to her ear as she pushed her thick shoulder-length hair back. "Dr. Butler? Oh, thank God. Yes, I'm fine. For the moment, at least. How many pains? Two. Maybe three. No, they're not that bad...I guess. I don't know. I've never had labor pains before. What? No, not very long. But I think they're getting closer and harder. Okay. Here he is." She held the phone out to Trey. "She wants to talk to you."

"Me?" Frowning, Trey took the phone. "Hello?" As he listened, his eyes widened and he stared at Cinda. "Her what? Birthing coach, if it comes to that? Oh, ma'am, we can't let it come to that. Miss Cinda told me this baby is breach—what? That means it's turned sideways? It is?" Sweat broke out on his brow. He ran a hand over his mouth. "Oh, lordy. No, I'm fine. I'll do it. What? Hold on, and I'll tell her." He focused on Cinda. "She's on her cordless phone. She and her nurse are already taking the stairs to meet us in the lobby when we get there."

When we get there. Such a wonderful phrase. Still, Cinda had her reservations. "She's running down fifteen flights of stairs? That poor woman. She ought to be in great shape when she gets to the lobby."

"She'll be fine, Cinda. And so will we...if there's a God. In the meantime, I'm to relay her instructions to you and, uh, do

what she says.”

Knowing what a birth coach had to do—and see—Cinda understood his hesitation and felt her face flame. “Maybe you won’t have to do anything. I haven’t had a contraction now for a few—” A sudden, hard pain tore across her abdomen and cut her breath off. She clutched at Trey and the handrail, and began her breathing exercises. “Okay, this one’s bad. Talk to her. Tell her. See what to do. Oh, God.”

Trey was wild-eyed. “It’s bad,” he said to the doctor. “She’s having a pain. Time it? I can’t. She’s holding on to my arm. I can’t get to my watch and hang on to this phone at the same time. What? Tell her to breathe?” With great pomp and seriousness, he told Cinda, “Breathe.”

Feeling as if her insides were being torn apart, Cinda shrieked, “I am, you jackass.”

“She is, you jackass,” Trey yelled into the cell phone before catching himself. “No. Wait. Sorry. Not you. I didn’t mean—do what?” The color drained from the man’s face. “Oh, I don’t think so. I can’t—okay, okay, I will.” He focused on Cinda and exhaled. “This is not my idea. But your doctor wants you to, uh, disrobe from the waist down. She says I may have to check your —”

“You’ll. Check. Nothing,” Cinda snarled, her upper lip actually curling. “You tell her I said people in hell want ice water, too, but do they get it? No. Not in a million years.”

Trey eyed her warily and spoke into the phone. “She said—

oh, you heard that. What? You want me to breathe now?" He did. Deeply, slowly.

The elevator car lurched. Cinda gasped. Trey cursed. "It's the elevator," he explained to Dr. Butler on the other end of the line. "It jumped or something. Yes, we're okay. Maybe. Wait. Hold on. I think it's—yes, it is. It's moving."

As if it had never been problematical, the elevator car began a smooth and controlled descent. With her pain easing, Cinda stared up at Trey, wanting him to corroborate for her that she hadn't lost her mind. "We are moving downward, right? And not in a free fall, right?"

"Right." He then enthusiastically told her doctor, "Yes, Dr. Butler. We're apparently on our way. Where are you now? The fourth floor? Wow. You must be a world-class sprinter. Us?" He looked up to the lighted panel overhead. "Eight...seven. We're on our way. Yeah. See y'all in the lobby." He punched the end button and handed Cinda the cell phone, which she plopped into her purse. "Dr. Butler's meeting us in the lobby," he said, as if reassuring himself as much as her. "With any luck, the ambulance has already arrived."

Another mechanical lurch—a last-gasp one that didn't slow the car down any—had Cinda clumsily falling into Trey's embrace. With his coat open and only his chambray shirt between her and his bare skin, his body felt warm and solid, his scent clean and masculine. His arms about her made her feel the safest she'd felt since before she'd left her parents' home to marry

Richard. "I'm sorry for speaking to you like I did. And thank you for staying with me."

His chuckle rumbled in his chest and vibrated pleasantly against her ear. "No apology necessary. But before you get all sentimental, remember that I didn't have any other choices open to me."

Cinda pulled back and looked up at him. "Still, I don't think you're the sort who would have left me even if you'd been able to."

Looking suddenly embarrassed, he said, "You're right. I would have stuck it out." He frowned. "That didn't sound right. What I mean is, I'd have stayed with you."

AND STAY HE DID. Trey reflected that he'd had no idea, when he'd spoken those words a few moments ago, just how true they'd become. But now he did. The elevator doors opened onto the lobby. A cheering crowd, a virtual welcoming committee, met them. To him, the participants looked more like they belonged at a disaster scene, instead of at the celebration of a new life.

Outside, double-parked in the vehicle-clogged street were the blinking emergency lights of an ambulance, a fire truck, and several police cars—as well as a crowd of curious gawkers, some with cameras. Inside the lobby were several police officers warning people to stay back. Included among the bystanders were two smiling mechanics in greasy overalls. Obviously the heroes who'd fixed the elevator. With them were two emergency

medical technicians, one to either side of a waiting gurney. In front of the crowd stood a woman in a white coat—Dr. Butler, presumably—pretty, dark-eyed, blessedly knowledgeable and in charge. A pony-tailed nurse who looked twelve years old but was clad in surgery scrubs stood behind the doctor. The only thing lacking was a partridge in a pear tree.

Though somewhat taken aback by the scene, Trey nevertheless started forward with Cinda at his side. They weren't even out of the car, though, before everyone rushed forward and began talking at once. Cinda was tugged away from him by the paramedics and gently lifted onto the gurney. Then, with Dr. Butler and her nurse pacing alongside, they all hustled toward the exit. Trey stood where he was, just watching, figuring his involvement had ended. He should be glad, he told himself. And he was—for her. But a pang of something inside him told him he wasn't ready for her to leave him just yet.

Just then, one of the mechanics came over and surprised Trey by shaking his hand and congratulating him on his impending fatherhood. Apparently hearing this, one of the police officers pushed him forward—toward the ambulance outside.

“But I’m not—” was all he could get out as he was hustled onward.

Outside, the crowd parted and Cinda was loaded into the ambulance. Dr. Butler climbed in. So did her nurse. One of the paramedics jogged around to the front, obviously the driver. The other EMT—a big guy who could have played football for a pro

team—latched on to Trey's arm and cheerfully tried to haul him inside. "Come on, Dad. We're burning daylight here. Get in."

Trey resisted. "But I'm not—"

"It's okay. We've seen this nervousness before. In you go."

And in he went. And away they went, the siren clearing the way for them. Standing at the back of the boxlike interior of the emergency vehicle, Trey tried his level best not to be in the way. He watched as people who knew what they were doing went about doing what they knew to do for Cinda and her baby. Evidently, from Cinda's groaning and Dr. Butler's steady, quiet voice alternately giving orders and soothing her patient, things were progressing a lot quicker than anyone would have liked. Trey realized his mouth was dry and his palms were sweaty. He didn't want to watch such a personal moment for Cinda, but he was pretty much forced to by sheer proximity.

The ride to the hospital, with the ambulance dodging and skirting New York traffic, was, to Trey, like some wild and pitching ride at Six Flags Over Georgia. To keep from being tossed about and becoming the next patient, he hung on to a bolted-down metal shelf about shoulder height to him. In a blessedly few minutes, though each one had seemed like hours to him, they were pulling into the emergency bay of a big hospital. The back doors opened. More medical types in hospital greens reached in and hauled Trey out, again tossing him to one side as they concentrated on assisting Dr. Butler and her nurse with Cinda on the gurney. The EMTs who'd brought them here

grabbed Trey up again, calling him Dad and carrying him along in their wake.

Trey was beyond protesting. Instead, he found himself wondering if this much hoopla accompanied every birth...and decided it should. A whole new life was about to happen. A fresh little soul was coming into the world. His stomach knotted with giddy nervousness. He was going to be a father. Wait. No he wasn't. Everyone just thought he was. But it was still exciting—and scary. Cinda was in so much pain. As they all swept along a narrow corridor and through swinging doors, Trey among them, he wanted to shout for them to do something...which of course they were. And very capably.

Suddenly a folded set of surgery greens were shoved into Trey's hands by a short, sturdy nurse with a face that reminded him of a bulldog. Apparently, he'd been handed off. Sure enough, she shunted him down another corridor.

"Put these on in there, Dad." She pointed to a closed door in a wall of doors they were approaching. "Leave on your undershorts and your shoes. You'll find shoe covers and a hair net under the shirt there. Use them. Take off your watch and any jewelry you might have on. Stay here until I come get you. The door will automatically lock when you step out of the dressing room, so don't do that. And once in the surgery room, try to stay out of the way. If you get sick or pass out at a critical moment, you're on your own. You got all that?"

Trey nodded. She reached past him to unlock and open the

door. Revealed was a tiny closet of a room with a few pegs for clothes and a wooden ledge for a seat. She firmly ushered him inside it. The overhead light in the claustrophobic cubicle spotlighted him like a trapped insect. He stumbled in, again protesting, “But I’m not the—”

“Save it. You’ll be fine. Won’t see a thing but your wife’s head. Talk nice to her and stay out of our way. I’ll give you five minutes to change. My name is Peg. You do everything I tell you, and we’ll get along just fine. You got all that?”

What else could he say? “Yes, ma’am...Peg.”

“Good.” She closed the door.

In the entombing quiet, Trey stared at the shirt and pants he held. This was serious. No way was he going into that room and witness...a birth. He’d only come to New York City to take care of some team business. Didn’t it figure that the lawyer’s office was in that damned building with the crotchety elevator?

It suddenly occurred to him that he could just leave. In his mind’s eye, he saw himself doing that, sneaking out—and getting caught by Peg. That did it. Trey quickly began shedding his clothes and pulling on the hospital garb. He didn’t doubt for one minute that the nurse was standing right outside the closed door and would haul him into the delivery suite in his underwear and socks, if he wasn’t ready.

In only a couple more minutes, Trey had everything on and was tying the drawstring at his waist when the door unceremoniously opened to reveal Peg standing there. She stared

disapprovingly at him. Trey had the absurd notion that he should come to attention, like he had during his stint in the army. Peg gave him a formal once-over. “You’ll do. Let’s go.”

Again Trey hesitated. He took a step back into the safety of his cubicle. “Look, I’m not the father—”

“Right.” Peg advanced on him and grabbed his arm, hauling him along after her. “That’s what they all say. And everyone in prison is innocent.”

TWO HOURS LATER, Trey sat glassy-eyed and alone in one of the father’s waiting rooms off the wing of delivery suites. He hadn’t even bothered yet to take off his paper hair net. Slouching on an ugly vinyl seat, one of many pushed up against a sickly green wall, he stared at a blaring TV suspended in a traylike holder from the ceiling. But he didn’t really see or hear a thing that was external. Inside, though, he was humming. He’d seen a baby girl come into the world. He’d never seen anything like that before. Not that there was anything he could compare it to. A whole new and tiny person. And not too happy to be here, either, judging by her squalling when Dr. Butler had held her up.

Chelsi Elise, her groggy mother had named her. Healthy, chubby, perfect. Honey-gold hair, and a fully functioning set of lungs.

Trey sniffed. Okay, so he’d got caught up in the excitement. So he’d shed a tear and had whooped his joy. That was when Dr. Butler had noticed him and had told everyone he really wasn’t the father. Or the husband. Not even the boyfriend. He was just the

guy who got stuck in the elevator with the mother. A stranger.

Peg had damn near pinched his head off once she'd gotten him out of the delivery room. She'd told him to stay in the waiting room and not to move. And he hadn't. Not that he was afraid of her. She just reminded him of his drill sergeant from boot camp. Oliver Dimwitty. That man was so mean, not one recruit had ever dared make a joke about the guy's name.

The double doors into the waiting area whooshed open. In walked Dr. Butler, Peg riding shotgun at her hip. Trey sat up straighter, watching the doctor pull her hair cover off and sit down next to him. Peg stood behind the doctor, her arms folded over her chest. Trey focused on the friendlier figure of Cinda's and Chelsi's deliverer. Dr. Butler really was a beautiful woman, he noticed again. Rich chocolate-brown hair. Big brown eyes. An easy smile. But more importantly, a keen intellect shone from her eyes. She grinned at him. "You doing okay? I didn't mean to get you kicked out."

Trey avoided looking at Peg. "I know. So...how're they doing?"

"They're both great. Chelsi weighs seven pounds, eight ounces and is twenty inches long. A healthy little girl who has the good fortune to look like her mother. And Mom's doing well, too. A bit groggy but okay."

Trey realized his heart was hammering and he was eating up every detail...just like a new father. Which he wasn't. "Well, that's good," he said, trying to sound nonchalant. "I'm glad to

hear that. It was touch-and-go there for a bit in the elevator. But all's well that ends well, thanks to you."

Dr. Butler smiled. "And to you. You were pretty cool during that emergency in the elevator."

Trey shook his head. "You can say that because you weren't in there when I tried to climb the wall. Literally."

She laughed. "No one would have blamed you, either." Her smile slowly faded into a frankly assessing expression. "But it's not over yet. Not if you don't want it to be."

Trey frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Cinda said she'd like to see you. And thank you."

Trey caught his excited grin before it could come fully to his face. He couldn't become attached here. Cinda was not his wife, and Chelsi was not his baby. A wife and a baby were two things he'd postponed, given all the traveling he had to do. And he'd heard enough from Cinda to know he was the last thing she needed, after her late husband's antics. The truth was, he needed to walk away. Now. So, taking a deep breath and letting go reluctantly, he said, "Well, that's real nice of her, but—"

"Do it. Just get up and let's go." That was, of course, Peg. She held her pudgy hand out to him and waggled her fingers. "Come on. Get up. I'll take you to her."

Trey gaped at the stocky woman and then spoke to Dr. Butler. "I see why you brought her."

Dr. Butler chuckled and glanced up at Peg before focusing again on Trey. "You'll have to forgive us. Cinda's become quite

special to all of us. She's been through a rough time, Mr. Cooper. And I don't mean just today."

His serious expression matched hers. "I know. She told me about her husband. That was tragic."

"Yes, as absurd as the circumstances were, it was tragic. I don't know you, but you look like a decent sort. A nice man. We're bending the rules here by allowing you to see her since you're not family. But Cinda asked for you. And I trust her instincts. Just so you'll know, at Cinda's request, the nurses have called her and her late husband's families. They'll all arrive soon. No doubt with enough flowers and toys to spill out into the hallway. But you still have a few minutes of quiet time. That is, if you want to see her."

Trey stood up. "I do. And thank you, Dr. Butler."

She stood along with him. "You're welcome. I've got to go. The pediatrician is checking the baby over, so I'm going to attend that. I'll turn you over to Peg's tender mercies, and she'll take you to Cinda's suite." With that, the doctor strode confidently across the room and out the door.

Arching an eyebrow, Trey eyed Peg. "Lead on. I'd follow you anywhere."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Hmph. My first husband was a Southerner. Biggest mistake I ever made. North/South marriages never work." She spun around, heading for the same double doors, obviously expecting Trey to follow her, which he wisely did. "So don't you try any of your silver-tongued-devil charm on me because it won't work, Mister Kiss My Grits. Besides, I'm a

married woman again.”

Trey grinned at the short woman’s broad back and stocky legs. “Yes, ma’am. Just tell me this, please. Why are the good ones always taken?”

Over her shoulder, she said, “They’re not. At least, Mrs. Cavanaugh isn’t.”

COVERED BY BLANKETS, pale and breathing shallowly, Cinda Cavanaugh lay on her back. Her eyes were closed. Faint purple shadows formed half-moon crescents under her eyes. She was still dressed in an unflattering hospital gown that did nothing, in Trey’s opinion, to detract from her blond, patrician good looks. There was an IV needle stuck in her arm. A bag of so-labeled glucose hanging from a hook on its wheeled stand slowly dripped the fluid into her system. On her other side, some kind of vital-signs-monitoring machine crouched protectively, ticking and beeping away.

Believing her to be asleep, Trey sat quietly beside the bed, which was the centerpiece in a posh and elegant suite. Well, she had said her husband was a millionaire. Her late husband, he amended, recalling Peg’s parting words. He smiled. Not once had Peg or Dr. Butler asked him if he was “taken.” Maybe he gave off “single” vibes accompanied by visible-only-to-females blinking neon arrows that pointed to him.

Just then, Cinda opened her eyes and rolled her head. She caught sight of him. A weak but warm smile came to her generous mouth. She blinked and ran the tip of her tongue over

her pink lips. “Hey, you’re here,” she said, her voice sounding scratchy. “Look at you. You could be a doctor.”

A thrill chased through Trey...at her smile for him, at her wanting him to be here. He looked down at the hospital greens he still wore and tugged the hair net off his head. “What? These old things? They were just hanging in the closet.”

Cinda managed another smile, this one warmer and saying more than her words. “I’m glad you’re here, Mr. Trey Cooper.”

His heart fairly leaping now, and more affected than he was willing to admit—he really had to get away from this woman before it was too late to escape—Trey leaned forward. “I’m glad you’re glad.” Then he didn’t know what to say. The silence grew thick. Finally he remembered Peg’s parting orders. “Hey, you want some water or something? The nurse said you should drink if you woke up.”

Cinda’s chuckle instantly became a grimace of pain. She shifted cautiously about in the bed, putting a hand to her much flatter belly. “Ow,” was her first comment. Then, after another moment, she said, “I was laughing—or trying to—about the medical confirmation that I should drink. In that case, you got any gin you can put in the water?”

Even now she was witty. Trey liked that. He snapped his fingers. “Darn. I knew I forgot something. You want me to run out and get you a six-pack of beer or a nice wine in a paper bag?”

She offered him a quick grin, then became more sober. “Listen, I really am glad you’re here. I was afraid you might have

left. I wanted to thank you for everything. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"It was nothing." Trey was as uncomfortable as he was pleased. This woman troubled him. She could make him want something he could never have. He stood up and went to the pitcher of ice water that sat on the bedside tray, grabbed up the plastic cup, and poured the water into it. He stuck the bendy straw into the cup and handed it to her. "Here you go," he said cheerfully...too cheerfully.

He watched her take tiny sips of the cold water and swallow. After a moment, he felt compelled to speak again. "You don't have to thank me, Cinda. I did what anybody would do, which really wasn't anything, if you'll think about it. So please don't read more into it than that."

Cinda's caramel-gold eyes...such unusual coloring...met his gaze and held. In the next few silent seconds she seemed to read his mind. It was as if she could see his hesitation, his wariness of her...his reluctance to become involved with an uptown girl. A wounded smile tilted her lips. She handed him the water cup and rested her hands against her stomach.

As he set the cup down on the table next to her bed, she said, "You're right, of course. Still, I'm grateful for your presence in that elevator, if nothing else. But it could have been a lot worse for me and my baby and you. Had it been, I...well, let me put it this way—if I'm ever stuck on a deserted island, I now know who I'd want to be stranded with."

Trey allowed himself a grin. “Thanks for that. You’re a great lady. And a new mother. Congratulations.” She beamed a smile his way, making his heart flutter. He looked around the hospital room. “I guess I could have gotten you some flowers or something. Or a stuffed animal for the baby. But Peg wouldn’t allow any detours on the way here.”

She frowned. “Peg?”

“She’s a nurse. And a drill sergeant in a former life. All I can say is do everything she tells you to. Even if it hurts.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

The moment to leave was here.

“Well,” Trey said, “I’ve got to go. And I’m sure you can do with some sleep. Again, it was...” He was dying inside and couldn’t seem to look away from the “please-don’t-go” look in her eyes. “It was nice to meet you. I won’t ever be able to get into an elevator again without thinking of you and Otis and Wonder Purse.”

She blinked and lowered her gaze. When she again met his eyes, her expression was controlled. She lifted a hand and held it out to him. Trey took a deep breath, hating the leave-taking, hating the staying, and then clasped her warm, long fingers in his hand. He had to fight the urge to raise her soft hand to his lips.

“Trey,” she said, somehow giving his nickname a depth it had never before possessed, “Thank you. I owe you one, as they say. A big one. You won’t ever be able to convince me that you did anything less than save my life and my baby’s. I really wish you’d tell me how I can repay you.”

He released her hand before things progressed to the point where he wouldn't let go because he couldn't. In his mind's eye, he saw Nurse Peg wielding a scalpel to cut him away from this fabulous woman. "Repay me, huh? Well, I suppose that maybe one day you could save my life. That'd be a fair trade."

Cinda surprised him by saying, "You've got a deal. Hand me that notepad and the pen there on the table, please. I want to give you my phone number. One day when you need me, you can call."

Though he really didn't think he should, Trey did as she asked and waited while she wrote down her number. Striving to keep things light, he remarked, "Will you just look at what's happening here? I swear, all those nights I've wasted in bars. I never once thought to cruise a maternity ward looking to pick up chicks. And now here's a gorgeous one giving me her number."

Shaking her head and, grinning, Cinda folded the piece of paper and handed it to him. "You Southern gentlemen will be the death of me one day. I swear, how anyone could think I could be gorgeous at this moment is beyond me."

Now, flirting he could do. "I've got eyes. I can see. You're gorgeous."

"And you're too kind."

"Never." He fisted his hand protectively around her phone number. He told himself he wouldn't keep it. It wasn't right. She was just emotional right now and had that hero-worship thing going. By tomorrow, she'd probably regret giving her number

to him, a grease monkey in a dangerous profession. “Well, Mrs. Cavanaugh, I’ve got to be going.” He forced cheer into his voice. “I think I might drop by the viewing window to peek in at your little girl and then I’ve got to get back to my hotel. It’s late and there’s a plane with my name on it leaving early tomorrow morning. You and your daughter take care now, ya hear?”

“I hear,” she said.

He met her gaze. Trey feared she could see right into his heart and could see what he didn’t want her to know...that already, in only a matter of hours after meeting her, he didn’t like the thought of having no part in her life. But when she spoke again, her voice was tinged with finality. “Goodbye, Mr. Trey Cooper.”

3

IN THE LAVISH NURSERY of the huge and elegant Atlanta showcase home she'd lived in with Richard, Cinda sat playing with six-month-old Chelsi. The phone rang. Every nerve ending in Cinda's body jumped. This was ridiculous, and she knew it. If the man hadn't called her in the past six months, what made her think he'd choose today to do it? But she'd seen in the paper this morning that the Jude Barrett racing team was back home in Atlanta. That meant Trey Cooper was, too, and could call if he wanted to.

But he hadn't. So obviously, he didn't want to. That knowledge didn't keep Cinda from waiting, her heart thumping heavily, as Major Clovis answered it in the next room. She could hear the older woman talking but couldn't hear what she said. Cinda held her breath. Could this finally be him?

Come on, Cinda, her conscience railed at her. This is really a bad crush you have here. You'd think that after six months without a call, you'd be over him. And what about you? You can't call? You looked up his number in the phone book, but you haven't used it. So get over it. But she couldn't. He'd been this nice, handsome guy who'd stood by her during her worst possible moment. So maybe she just had a bad case of hero worship. Maybe. She tried not to look desperately up at her regimentally formal assistant/nurse/social secretary who entered the nursery

with the cordless phone in her hand.

The afternoon's late-June sunlight filtered through the sheer curtains at the windows across the room. Major Irene Clovis—a no-nonsense older woman with severely short gray hair—walked in and out of sun and shadow as she approached her employer. “Hate to ruin your day, ma’am, but it’s The Real Mrs. Cavanaugh.”

Disappointment ate at Cinda. It wasn’t him. It was never him. She groaned and slumped over her legs. “Not her again, Major. Not my mother-in-law.”

“My apologies,” her unsmiling ex-Marine assistant said. “I told Dragon Lady that you’d dyed your hair and the baby’s purple and the two of you had run off with the drug-selling leader of a motorcycle gang. I further said the two of you were now known as Hell’s Belles. But she didn’t believe me.”

“I can’t imagine why not. But still, you always know just what to say, Major.” Cinda’s grimace over the caller’s identity warred with a grin that tugged at her lips. Major Clovis was the most outrageous and loyal person Cinda had ever met. She also harbored all the love and protective instincts of a lioness toward Cinda and Chelsi. “Thanks for trying.”

“Yes, ma’am. Next time, I’ll tell her you became a Buddhist monk and sold the only Cavanaugh heir to a zoo in Berlin as part of their mammalian exchange program. That ought to do it.” With that, she handed Cinda the phone, did a smart military about-face, and precision-marched toward the door.

Bemused, Cinda watched her go. When Major Clovis reached the open door, she neatly executed a left turn and disappeared from sight around a corner. No doubt she was going to torture poor Marta in the kitchen. Not because the cook had done anything wrong, but simply because the ex-military nurse could hassle her—and because the tiny Hispanic woman was terrified of her. Cinda fully expected their wary stand-off to one day erupt into a weapon-based free-for-all. She hoped she wasn't home when it happened.

Sighing over her staff's ongoing bilingual and multicultural altercations, Cinda put a hand over the telephone's speaker and whispered to Chelsi. "It's Grandma. The big scary one in New York City."

The bright-eyed baby girl pulled a face, as if she were about to cry. "Oh, honey, I know," Cinda sympathized, taking a chubby little hand in hers and leaning over to kiss the tiny fingers. "Everyone has that reaction. But she loves you and has your best interest at heart. How many times this week has she told me that, huh?" The baby's expression instantly cleared.

"That's my girl." Then, forcing cheerfulness into her voice for her caller, Cinda spoke into the phone. "Hello, Mother Cavanaugh. How nice to hear from you. How are you?"

Sitting on the carpeted floor of the nursery and listening to her mother-in-law's familiar opening harangue, Cinda winked at her baby, who had her own problems. Perched on her diapered bottom atop a large quilted square of colorful blanket, the blond

little girl wobbled tipsily, trying to keep her balance. To Cinda's mother's mind, Chelsi's controlled sitting at six months of age, while a completely normal activity in the development of babies according to the pediatrician, became the newest evidence of her daughter's extreme intelligence and precociousness. A trait she'd inherited from Cinda's side of the family, of course.

Cinda tuned in again to her mother-in-law in time to hear her ask a question, which Cinda promptly answered. "No, Major Clovis isn't drunk. Or on drugs. But I didn't hire her. Richard did. I think. Or she came with the house. One of those. Yes, I'll speak to her about her shocking tales that upset you." But Cinda knew she wouldn't say a word to Major Clovis. Her shocking tales were too funny and too deserved.

The conversation moved on to the weather. "Yes, I've seen the weather report. We do have television in the South now. Yes, it is hot in New York City, isn't it? I'm sure you'll be glad to leave next week for the Hamptons. Oh, you're too kind, but we really couldn't join you. No we can't. Why?" Because I flat out don't want to. Because I'm tired of your subtle manipulation of me, your digs at my family, and your blatant disappointment that Chelsi is not a boy. "I'm afraid something's come up down here," was what she actually said, though, being nice but with an effort. "A thing. Yes. I told you about it." She hadn't. There was no thing. "The important thing with the people I told you about. Over at that place. Yes. That thing."

Cinda silently begged her tiny daughter not to judge her

mother too harshly for lying to The Real Mrs. Cavanaugh, as everyone in this household referred to the imperious blue-blooded Ruth Heston Cavanaugh. The woman allowed no one to forget her graciousness in overlooking the fact that the late Richard the Second's only child was female. Oh, the heartbreak of it all. Now there was no one to carry on the Cavanaugh name. As if they were royalty with their own country. Okay, so they owned most of this one. Big deal.

"Oh, I don't believe we can come after the thing is over," Cinda quickly answered the next demand. "Chelsi has a doctor's appointment later this month. No. Nothing's wrong. There isn't. I'd tell you if there were. I promise. She's fine." If you don't count the fact that she's sprouted another head and gargoyle wings. It was what she wanted to say, Major Clovis style, but didn't.

"Still, I thank you for inviting us. Yes, I'll keep it in mind if anything changes here. No, I'm not moving back to New York. Because I like it here. I just do. My life is here now. I have friends, social clubs, volunteer work, all that right here. Besides, the weather is better for the baby's health." And my sanity. "So we'll be staying here. I'm sorry you don't like my decision, but there it is."

Cinda took the receiver from her ear, gritted her teeth, and took a calming breath. Then smiling determinedly, she resettled the phone to her ear and said, "You give Papa Rick"—her father-in-law, she liked— "our love, okay? Yes, I know I sound 'dreadfully Southern' now. I like that, too. Okay. Talk to y'all

later.”

Cinda pressed the off button and resisted the urge to toss the cordless phone across the room. Instead, she simply laid it beside her on the rug and smiled at Chelsi, whose blue eyes—so reminiscent of her father’s—were rounded as she gnawed at her drool-soaked fist. “Teething is the pits, isn’t it? You’re going to suck all the good out of that thing, honey. Here.”

Cinda leaned over to pluck a toy—a cloth-covered replica of a stock car—out of the mix of toys surrounding them. She held it out to Chelsi, who batted cheerfully and ineffectually—but better than any other child her age could have done, mind you—at the toy, finally succeeding in getting it in her clutches. Joyously, she instantly stuffed as much of it as she could into her mouth and warily eyed her mother above it, as if she expected the toy to be plucked from her at any second.

Chuckling softly, Cinda stretched out until she was lying on her stomach and supporting her weight on her elbows. She contentedly watched her daughter’s antics. “I know. It’s your favorite toy,” she said wistfully...knowing the baby didn’t have a favorite toy at this age but it was Cinda’s favorite one to give her. Because Trey Cooper had sent it for Chelsi months ago, along with his very platonic “Hope you’re doing well, Trey Cooper” best-wishes card.

“Well, I’m not doing well,” she whispered. “I miss you. You’re all I think about. And you’re home, Trey Cooper. I saw it in the papers.” Only recently had Cinda taken to poring over the sports

section. “Why don’t you call me? Doesn’t your life ever need saving?”

ON THE OUTSKIRTS of Atlanta, out on a prime piece of land that served as Jude Barrett’s elite racing team’s headquarters, Trey Cooper was leafing through his mail and frowning. Bill. Bill. Junk mail. Bill. Letter from Mom. Sweepstakes notice. Finally. I’ve won ten million dollars. He tossed it unopened into the waste-basket at his feet.

Still wearing his grimy service overalls, he sat perched atop a wooden stool out in the hangar-like garage. Behind him, up on the lift, being put through a checklist of fine-tuning, was the moneymaker herself. The bright red, shiny, sponsor-decal-covered racing car. Serving as background music was the whine of electric tools, the blare of country music from someone’s radio, and the chatter and catcalls of the team members.

It was close to quitting time for the day. Trey’s work—including a meeting with the big boss man himself in the front office—was done. He’d cleaned up a bit, got some of the grease off his hands and face, and combed his hair. This was his first chance to check his mail since he’d grabbed up a week’s worth of it from his box at the post office earlier that morning. That’s how frenetic this time of year was—he only managed to get by the post office about once a week.

Team Leader Mark Mason was on the phone behind Trey. It was a personal call, and Trey tried not to listen. But Mark’s voice kept getting louder the longer he talked with his wife. It was a

familiar refrain. All the married men here had fielded similar complaints from home. You're never here. The kids hardly know you. I miss you. Your mother's sick. The bills are overdue. On and on with some variation of that song. It was tough and divorces happened. A lot.

Trey felt for his friends and their families. The beefs at both ends were legitimate. But every time he heard them, Trey renewed his promise to himself not to have a family as long as he was on the race circuit. That didn't mean he didn't date and have relationships. He did. Well, he had. Although he hadn't felt too much like making the effort in the past six months or so.

He told himself he was just tired and overworked and thirty years old. All of that was true. But he also couldn't get a certain elegant blonde's face out of his mind. Every other woman had paled in comparison to his few frantic hours with Cinda Cavanaugh. Okay, so he could still see those unique caramel-colored eyes of hers. And, yes, so he still had her phone number folded up and stored in his wallet. He kept meaning to throw it away, but kept forgetting to do it, that was all.

So, why should he call her? What could he offer her that she, a multimillionaire's widow, couldn't get for herself? And, besides, she was probably already surrounded by lots of rich guys anxious to play Papa. So the last thing she needed was someone like him—a high-school-graduate grease monkey. A man with dirt under his fingernails and not enough money in the bank.

At this point in Trey's pity party, Mark hung up the phone...

with force. Trey looked up from his stack of remaining mail to see his boss just standing there, his expression thunderous, his complexion red with anger...and worry.

“You okay, Mark?” Trey asked, knowing better but concerned nonetheless.

Mark ran a hand through his brown hair and shook his head. “Hell no. Diane’s on a tear, man. All I can say is I’m lucky our team’s days off are coming up next month. Everything at home seems to be hitting the fan, you know?”

He didn’t—he thought of his quiet bachelor’s apartment—but he could sympathize. “I hear ya, good buddy.” Then Trey took a chance. “Hey, let me ask you something, Mark. I’ve been thinking about this. Tell me if it’s none of my business. But... how do you do it? I mean the family, the hassles, the fights. The time away and the problems it causes. Here you’ve got a job you love that’s making it all bad at home where you have a wife and kids you love. How do you keep it all together?”

Mark shrugged. Then a slow grin came to his face, which was streaked with the grease and dirt of his job. “It’s like you said, man. Love. Pure love. Passion. For your wife. For your job. It’s got to be there—at home and at work. It’s like that for me and Diane. Yeah, we fuss about things, but we always work it out.” Mark picked up a rag and began wiping his hands as he turned a questioning glance on Trey. “So why you asking?”

Trey felt his face heat up. He swiped a hand under his nose and cleared his throat. “No reason. Just thinking, that’s all.”

Mark tossed the rag into a bin and crossed his arms. A knowing but friendly smirk lit his fair features. "So what's her name?"

"She doesn't have a name." Not one he was going to give, anyway. "I mean there is no 'she.' No special 'she.' No one. Never mind."

Mark grinned devilishly. "Lord above, Trey Cooper's gonna take the bait and settle down. You've been bitten by the lovebug, haven't you? That's why you've been moping around since winter."

Trey frowned. "I don't mope. And how'd you get all that out of what I said? I asked one innocent question. And now I'm in love."

"I didn't say it. You did." Mark crowed with laughter and went off toward the other mechanics, no doubt bent on ruining Trey's ladies' man reputation with the guys. Knowing he'd only make things worse with his protests, Trey shook his head and told himself this was why men shouldn't talk about feelings. It never ended well.

Then he remembered saying something like that, about things not ending well, to Cinda when he'd first seen her. Those elevator doors had opened...and there she'd been. His heart had come close to jumping right out of his chest. He'd seen stars.

And now, six months later, it was like this: And behind Door Number One, Mr. Trey Cooper, is the most beautiful woman you've ever seen, someone you could come to care deeply about. And she could possibly return your affection if you can answer

one simple question. Are you ready, sir? Here's your question: How in the hell do you ever expect to have a chance with her if you don't call her, you big jerk?

Trey's mood darkened. He'd call her if he had a reason. He knew that much. All he needed was a reason. A good one. Something legitimate, substantial. Yeah, right. Feeling deflated, he went back to sorting his mail when, sure enough, the men he worked with began whistling and laughing and calling out his name in a teasing way.

"Why don't y'all just shut up?" he yelled. But they didn't. Pointedly ignoring them, muttering "Bunch of third-graders," he turned over the next envelope...and frowned. The postmark was from his hometown of Southwood. And the return address was that of the Southwood High School Fighting Rebels Reunion Committee.

Reunion? He'd graduated twelve years ago, so this wasn't an anniversary year, like ten or fifteen. What could this be, then? He opened it and read the letter inside. And laughed. This was just like home. They'd let the ten-year mark slip up on them and pass...so they were having their ten-year get-together next month. How messed up was that?

Bemused, Trey read on. According to the letter, the committee hoped to make the reunion into a town-wide celebration by inviting the alumni from every year of the school's existence to attend. About fifty years' worth, as near as he could remember. Sounded like fun. And a nightmare. Trey put the

letter down and caught sight of one he hadn't noticed before in his pile of mail. The Tampa return address curdled his stomach and made him want to bang his head on the workbench in front of him. Bobby Jean Diamante. Nothing like an old girlfriend to liven things up.

Trey sighed, caught up in kaleidoscopic reflections of his and Bobby Jean's shared past. In high school, when she and Trey had been an item, when he'd been captain of the football team and she'd been head cheerleader, when they'd both lost their virginity to each other, she'd been Bobby Jean Nickerson. Then at eighteen, she'd thrown Trey over and married a rich man from Atlanta, who'd made her Bobby Jean Whiteside.

After not too many years of wedded bliss, the much older man had died. Some said mysteriously. Shortly afterward, Bobby Jean married a slug who'd run through her money. So she'd left him and had been forced to marry again. The last Trey had heard—his source being his mother—Bobby Jean had taken up with, then married, some really rich but hard-nosed guy from up north. His mother kept saying Mr. Rocco Diamante had mob connections. Lovely.

Between husbands, Bobby Jean was hell-bent on starting up again with Trey. She always called him her one true love. And somehow, although he never intended to get sucked in by her scheming, he did. Maybe it was the way she went about it that left him no choice. She always involved his poor mother or pulled some public stunt that left him no choice except to get involved

on some level. Some stunt like at the upcoming reunion, maybe? How perfect would that be? Trey grimaced. He could see this one coming. Like a freight train. He really, really didn't want to be involved with Bobby Jean. But she went after him whole-hog and it never ended well. Once he disentangled himself and his family from her clutches, only embarrassment and gossip were left behind.

So what was she up to now? Trey picked up the scented envelope and opened it. On flower-embossed stationery, Bobby Jean—a staggeringly beautiful red-head, no doubt about it, but an overblown magnolia of a woman—told Trey how very excited she was to learn of the reunion. He read about how she was separated now and how her husband wasn't taking it very well. He was harassing her, she said. So she was looking forward to getting away from Tampa and going home for a weekend...the weekend of the reunion.

Trey cursed out loud, wondering what size concrete shoes he might wear. Bobby Jean was on the run from an unhappy mobster husband. Who didn't know he'd follow her right to Southwood—and right to Trey? He repeated his curse, only this time more emphatically. Life was no longer good. It was also about to become very short, if Bobby Jean had her way. But her next sentence curdled Trey's blood. She wrote that she understood from talking with Trey's mother last year that he—meaning Trey—still hadn't married. Aw, man, not my poor mother. The mobster husband didn't have to be a genius to trace that call and

get the name and number.

Trey had to go home. He couldn't leave his mother to face that alone. He could just see her now, a petite, brown-haired woman who wore glasses, worked at the local bowling alley, and loved to bake and do needle-point. She'd become a mother at the age of thirty-eight and a widow at the age of fifty, due to an unfortunate farming accident. Her only child was Trey, and she'd never lived anywhere but in Southwood, Georgia.

It was no wonder, then, that her life revolved around him and the many goings-on in her hometown. She was a goodhearted soul. To Trey, she had only one flaw. She liked Bobby Jean. She always said what pretty babies Trey and Bobby Jean could make together. Dorinda Cooper, Trey's mother, just thought it was so sad, the run of bad luck that poor Bobby Jean always seemed to have with men. Trey could only stare at her when she said that. Run of bad luck? The woman was a black widow.

Sitting there on the stool, Trey shook his head and refocused on the perfumed letter he held in his hand. No surprise here. Bobby Jean wrote that his mother was just the sweetest thing who thought Bobby Jean would make such a wonderful mother. Trey's old girlfriend then chastised him for not giving his mama grandbabies and went on to say how she sincerely hoped that the reason he'd never married had nothing to do with any lingering feelings he might harbor for her. She ended the letter by saying she was very excited about seeing him at the reunion. Trey could only wonder if she'd told her husband that, too. He scrubbed a

hand over his face. Oh, lordy. Between the two women, they're going to get me killed.

Then, because he was sane, and because he was human, Trey considered not going to the reunion. Wouldn't that be the simplest solution? Sure. Until that irate mobster husband showed up on Trey's mother's doorstep. Just the thought of that had every protective fiber in Trey's body raising its hackles. Aw, damn it all to hell. I've got to go. That damned Bobby Jean. Trey knew in his bones that she'd use the reunion to make yet another disastrous play for him. That wasn't conceit on his part. It was knowing Bobby Jean. The woman could not be without a man. And Trey knew he was the man she didn't want to be without. In fact, she'd always let him know, even when she'd been married, that she wouldn't mind seeing him on the side.

Trey had never taken her up on that offer for a lot of reasons. For one, because she'd never wanted to marry him. She just wanted to sleep with him. To Trey's way of thinking, that type of relationship—using the term loosely—would cheapen them both. He also hadn't taken her up on her offer because he wasn't the type to get involved with a married woman. Even if her vows meant nothing to her, they did to him.

He was no saint. But he did respect marriage. Still, if he'd felt for her what she said she felt for him, he couldn't say that he might not have jumped at the chance to be with her. But he hadn't because he didn't have feelings for Bobby Jean. Not the ones she wanted him to have, at any rate. Trey actually felt sorry

for her on some level. He supposed that meant he did care about her in a “childhood sweetheart” way. After all, she had been a big part of his youthful history and glory. Trey believed he owed her respect, if nothing else—respect she didn’t ever seem to accord herself.

But all of that aside, he was in big trouble here. Trey eyed his mother’s unopened letter. Even as he opened it, he felt certain he already knew what she’d written. He unfolded her letter and started reading. Yep, I was right. She wrote that he hadn’t been home for any length of time in almost two years, and that she really wanted him to come home for this event. All his friends would be there, people he hadn’t seen in years. Including Bobby Jean Diamante, who was separated now. Trey sighed and shook his head. I’m a dead man.

He picked up his reading again. The rest was haranguing him, in a loving way, yet again for not having a family. His mother always did this, bless her good heart, saying she hated to think of him being alone now because when she died, he’d be truly alone with no one to love him. How could she rest in her grave knowing that? Trey chuckled, recalling his mother’s lecture the last time he’d been home. It had been more to the point of why she wanted him married.

You’re thirty years old, Trey, and I’m not even a grandmother yet. How am I supposed to hold my head up at the bowling alley and, worse, the beauty shop? Every lady there except me has a string of grandbaby pictures to wag around and stick under

my nose. And me sitting there under the dryer with not the first picture of a child to brag over. How am I supposed to feel when Lula Johnston says “Dorinda, that boy of yours hasn’t made you a grandmother yet? What’s wrong with him?”

Nothing, was Trey’s answer to himself. He just hadn’t met the right woman yet. The one who filled him with passion, like Mark Mason had just said. Suddenly the image of one Cinda Cavanaugh came to mind. Blond, delicate, beautiful. Warm, funny, witty. Rich, out of his league, as good as locked away in a tower, for all the access he had to her. All right, so maybe he had met a possible candidate for “the right one.” But maybe he was trapped in one of those “in another time, another place” deals. Because there she was, a chic millionaire New York woman. And here he was...he looked down at himself, at his greasy dirty mechanic’s coveralls. Yeah, here he was. Damned depressing was what it was.

Trey shrugged his shoulders, as much to exercise cramped muscles as to shake loose his bothersome thoughts. Still, he decided, wouldn’t it be funny if he just waltzed into town with a family? Yeah, real funny. Ha-ha. His mother would kill him. But that was exactly what he needed, if he had any hope of quickly derailing Bobby Jean Diamante’s shallowly disguised plot to catch him in her web. The more Trey thought about it, the better he liked the idea. An instant family. Then he heard himself and shook his head. Like you can pick one of those up on any aisle in a grocery store.

Sudden inspiration dawned. Trey jerked his head up and stared unseeing at the stock-car calendar hanging on the wall in front of him. He knew exactly where to get an instant family. Hadn't she said to call her if his life needed saving? Trey nodded to himself. His life most definitely needed saving. Or did it? After all, he had no proof that the disgruntled Rocco Diamante would follow his wife to Southwood. Not that Trey wanted Cinda to handle the man for him. Or even Bobby Jean. He had always handled her before, and he could do it again this time.

And there was no real danger here, except to him. Still, it wasn't as if Trey thought the man would come in shooting the whole town up like in some old mobster movie. And who said the guy was in the mob, anyway? It wasn't like they advertised that. A more likely story was this was one of Bobby Jean's drama-queen spoutings of organized crime connections, just to make her life look more exciting. Still, if it was true, Trey figured the guy would load him down with chain, sink him in the lake, and then take Bobby Jean home. He wouldn't mess with anyone else. He'd have no reason to. Problem solved.

For Rocco maybe. Certainly not for Trey. Okay, that was a pretty scary thought. Trey preferred to think of this from another angle. The one where his ex-girlfriend had maybe just handed him a golden opportunity to reconnect with Cinda Cavanaugh.

Trey chuckled. Yes, if this worked out, he'd have to remember to thank Bobby Jean. She'd love that—about like a hornet did someone stomping on its hive. That quick-tempered redhead

would probably react in much the same way, he figured. And then, having created sufficient hoopla and having gotten all the attention she wanted, she'd blow out of town and go right back to her husband.

And everyone would be happy. Then it was decided, right?

Yep. Grinning, Trey reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. Before he could change his mind, he lifted out the folded piece of paper and opened it. Staring at Cinda's handwriting and her phone number, he remembered that day as if it had been yesterday. Even after just having a baby, she'd been the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Certainly the classiest. Yeah, he'd been smitten. Since that day, he'd carried this piece of paper in his wallet like a good-luck charm. It had served as a concrete link to her, a slim possibility that the two of them might become something more to each other some day.

And now, maybe that day was here. Trey took a deep breath. This was a big step. And wasn't this using her and her baby, somehow? Maybe, but not really. She'd know up front what was going on. So if she agreed, there'd be no harm. After all he only wanted one weekend out of her life. Nothing more. The worst she could do was say no.

Trey focused on the wall-mounted phone next to the calendar and simply stared at it. He admitted to himself now that one of the reasons he hadn't called her yet was that if he didn't, she couldn't reject him. And if she couldn't reject him, then he wasn't out of her life. Oh hell, man, that's stupid. She couldn't be more

out of your life than she is right now this minute. You don't see her or talk to her. She probably doesn't even think about you anymore.

Great. So he was going to reject himself before he even gave her a chance to do it. This was messed up. He was a thirty-year-old man who was experienced with women. So act like it, he told himself. Trey reached for the phone but caught himself. The guys he worked with would just love this conversation, wouldn't they? Trey lowered his hand. Forget it. If he was going to put his heart and pride on the line, then he'd do it from the privacy of his own home. That way, if she said no, he could immediately go drown himself in his shower.

That sounded like a plan. Trey folded the note Cinda had given him and stuck it back in his wallet. He'd call her later.

FRESHLY BATHED and clad in her nightgown and robe, Cinda sat curled up on the sofa in the family room. The large-screen TV was turned off, and the built-in stereo system softly played jazz in the background. Cinda was tired but it was too early in the evening to go to bed. She'd already nursed and rocked Chelsi to sleep and this was Major Clovis's and Marta's night out. So Cinda essentially had the place to herself.

She loved moments like this. Yet she also hated them. They were too quiet, too ripe for reflection. Her mind insisted on wandering from the book she'd picked up, to center itself on Trey Cooper. She supposed it was only natural. After all, he'd been a major player in a really big moment in her life, the birth of her daughter. Oh, nice try, Cinda. It was more than that and you know it. Much more. Okay, so there had been attraction. She hadn't imagined that. Something chemical had happened between them. He'd made quite the impression on her senses. A lingering impression.

Feeling all dreamy, like a lovesick teenager, Cinda allowed her hardcover mystery to flop onto her lap as she gave in to thoughts of Trey Cooper. Such a handsome, virile man. Cinda sat up, hearing herself and looking around guiltily. What am I thinking? Here I am a widow with a six-month-old baby acting as if I have my first crush. Now she was sounding like her

mother-in-law. The woman would have a stroke if Cinda even thought of seeing someone, much less marrying anyone else. The Real Mrs. Cavanaugh, as Major Clovis called her because of her condescending airs, talked as if she believed Cinda should remain chaste in loving memory of Richard the Second.

Frowning, Cinda spared a moment for her complicated relationship with Ruth Cavanaugh. She supposed she loved the difficult woman, who could be over-bearing and opinionated. Okay, so she could be a battering ram. Most days, though, and on most issues, Cinda simply didn't give in to her. In disagreements with Ruth, Cinda tried to remain firm but respectful. After all, Ruth was Chelsi's grandmother, which meant she would always be a part of her life. And, Cinda knew Ruth had it hard. After all, she'd lost her only child.

Oh, Richard. Cinda's eyes grew damp. She had loved him. Well, she'd tried to. But he wouldn't allow it. He hadn't wanted a wife, just a child, an heir. And now he was gone. But wasn't life for the living? Cinda asked herself. She'd always heard that, and now she understood what it meant. She was alive. And so was Trey Cooper. In light of that, what was she supposed to do with all the hormones that still drove her, as well as the fifty or so years of life still ahead of her? Just sit here and vegetate? She didn't think so.

So why didn't she just get over it and call Trey Cooper? Where was the harm? Women called men all the time now. She had, before she'd met Richard. In fact, that was how she'd

met Richard. She'd called him. Okay, so she'd been a reporter assigned to do a story on him. But still, she'd made the first move. And that had worked out well, hadn't it? For a while, anyway. It had certainly worked out better for her than it had for Richard. Poor Richard. He got the yaks, and she got Chelsi.

Just then, the phone rang, shattering the silence. Nearly jumping out of her skin, Cinda tossed her book aside and scrambled up onto her knees. Reaching over the back of the sofa, she plucked up the cordless hand-set from atop the long narrow table that reposed there. A quick check of the caller ID had her groaning as she sank back onto the plush cushions. Speak of the devil. Her in-laws' name and number graced the tiny glowing screen. So why couldn't she just be "not at home" and let the machine get it? Tempting. But no. Ever dutiful, Cinda depressed the talk button and put the phone to her ear.

"Hello, Mother Cavanaugh," she said in a pleasant voice.

"Sorry to disappoint you, sweetie, but this is Grandpa Rick."

Cinda's mood instantly lifted. Richard's father. She loved this man. "Papa Rick! How are you?" He hardly ever called. Couldn't wrest the phone from his wife's hands, no doubt.

"The Dragon Lady fell asleep in her lair, so I snatched up the phone when it rang an hour or so ago. And it's lucky for you I did."

"For me? Why? Is something wrong?"

"Only if you don't like the young man who called for you."

Cinda sat bolt upright on the sofa. Her pulse picked up.

Anticipation flitted through her, drying her mouth. “A young man called for me?”

“He did. And like I said, it was a good thing I answered and not Ruth.”

“No kidding.” She and Papa Rick were in this conspiracy together to survive the Dragon Lady. “But why would the, uh, young man call you? You’re in the Hamptons. And I certainly haven’t given anybody your number there. This doesn’t make sense.”

“Cinda, slow down. All I know is he sounded Southern.”

“S-Southern?” Cinda could have kicked herself for that stutter in her voice. Thank God, Papa Rick couldn’t know how her heart was leaping right now. Only two days ago she’d been wishing every call was Trey’s. And now, just maybe, here it was.

“So,” she said, trying to play it cool, “Who was he? What’d he say? What’d he want? Why did he call you?”

Okay, so she blew the cool part.

Rick Cavanaugh chuckled in her ear. “My, don’t you sound eager.”

Cinda took a deep breath. She wasn’t certain yet that she wanted to confide in Papa Rick, or if she even should. After all, Richard had been his son, too. “Eager? No. Just curious is all. Like I said, I can’t imagine why anyone would call you looking for me.”

“It wasn’t exactly your young man who called—”

“I don’t have a young man.” Immediately, Cinda grimaced,

rapping her forehead with her knuckles. She'd been too quick to protest.

"Of course you don't." Papa Rick's voice remained friendly and teasing. "You should have one, you know, honey."

Cinda was pleasantly taken aback. Papa Rick thought she should have a young man? That was enlightening.

"At any rate," her father-in-law was saying, "our Miss Reeves—oh, you remember our Miss Reeves, don't you?"

Cinda gave an indelicate snort. He may as well have asked her if she remembered the axe-wielding monster she'd felt certain had resided in her bedroom closet when she'd been a child. "Yes. Tall. Big hair. Humorless. The saint and scourge of social secretaries. The one everyone is afraid of. Well, except Major Clovis, who isn't afraid of anyone. You mean that Miss Reeves?"

"Yes. Well, our Miss Reeves was at your apartment earlier this evening, making her rounds, as it were, checking on things—"

"She was? Why?"

"The Dragon Lady thought it would be a good thing to do."

"I see." So The Real Mrs. Cavanaugh had her spy snooping around in Cinda's absence. There wasn't much Cinda could say about it. The penthouse was in the elder Cavanaughs' names. "So what did she find?"

"A blinking phone message, actually. From two days ago."

"Two days ago?"

"According to the date and time on your voice mail."

"Oh, I can't believe this. I have been so lax about checking it

up there. Every time I did, it seemed like there were no messages. And then I got busy here and just stopped thinking about it. I figured by now everyone knew I was in Atlanta.”

“Well, not everyone, I’d say.”

Suddenly it all made sense. Her caller was Southern and last January she’d given Trey Cooper her New York number. Despite her excitement, Cinda wanted to groan. Trey probably believed that she had no intention of returning his call. What must he think? Putting that aside for the moment she concentrated on Papa Rick. “Hey, have I told you lately that I love you?”

“No. I don’t think you have.”

Cinda grinned at the mock hurt in his voice. “I love you.”

“That’s nice to know. I love you, too.”

“Then it’s mutual.” Though warmed by his affection, Cinda worked to get them back on track. “All right, so your Miss Reeves took down this phone message for me and called to tell the Drag—I mean Mother Cavanaugh about it, but got you instead. So, what did you tell her to do?”

“You know it doesn’t work like that. Our Miss Reeves instructed me to call you to see if you know this man. Do you?”

Well, obviously, it wasn’t only in her home where control over the staff had long since been ceded. “I don’t know, Papa Rick. You haven’t told me who called.”

“Well, that makes it hard then, doesn’t it? Let’s see. It was... Oh, for the love of Mike. Where did it get to? Hold on. I seem to have misplaced the note.”

He'd lost the note. Cinda pitched over onto the sofa's cushions while she listened to sounds of fumbling and searching at the other end. Please, God, let him find the—

“Aha, here it is. Oh, wait a minute. Now I have to find my glasses.”

Cinda vaulted up to a sitting position and shoved her hair back from her too-warm face. “Papa Rick? Look in your shirt pocket. Your reading glasses are always in your shirt pocket.”

Silence. Then... “Well, I'll be darned. What do you know? There they are. Now let me put them on.”

Cinda put her free hand to her aching forehead. God love Papa Rick, the big old bear of a man. It was a good thing this kind and sweet gentleman had inherited his vast wealth and hadn't had to earn it because he would have ended up on the street.

“Okay, I think I'm ready now. Do you have something to write with, dear?”

Cinda gasped. She didn't.

“I'll give you his number. Oh, wait, how's my beautiful granddaughter, the light of my life—after you, of course?”

“Thank you. She's fine. Chubby. Happy. Healthy. She can sit up on her own now.” Cinda fumbled for paper and pen. Until this very moment, there had always been a pen and a notepad of paper on this end table. But not tonight. Cinda scurried around the room, looking. Opening cabinets. Searching through drawers. “I expect she'll be crawling in a few months, if not heading up her own corporation.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. I really miss seeing her.”

The wistful note in his voice caused Cinda to slow down. Her features crumpled into a sympathetic mask. “I know you miss her. I swear I’ll bring her up to see you.” She bit the bullet. “Or why don’t y’all come down here?”

“Ruth won’t cross the Mason-Dixon Line. You know that.”

“Then come without her.” As she listened to Papa Rick telling her all the reasons why he couldn’t come without his wife, Cinda rushed into her gourmet kitchen and snatched a paper towel off the roll. She next opened a drawer of the built-in desk and found a permanent laundry marker. “Oh, sure you can. Just tell your pilot where you want to go, and he’ll fly you here.”

“That’s true. I could do that.”

“See?” Using her teeth, and praying she didn’t get the indelible ink all over her face in the process—she could see a dermatologist having to sand that off—she bit down on the pen, spit the lid out, and said, “Okay, I’m ready. Go ahead.” She smoothed the paper towel atop the granite breakfast bar and waited. “Papa Rick?”

“Shh. Hold on. I think I hear Ruth coming downstairs.”

Dread swept through Cinda and had her gripping the phone tighter. It was like they were conspirators in the French Resistance. “Then hurry, Papa Rick. Give me the name and the number really quick, okay?”

Talking to this dear man was like trying to communicate with a cat—you could, but you had to do it carefully and patiently and

with a lot of cajoling. Yet it still might not work, anyway.

“No. It wasn’t her. Must have been the dog.”

Cinda grimaced her distaste. Calling Ruth’s nasty-tempered little dust-mop of a yappy, biting lap ornament a “dog” was really using the term loosely. “So who was this Southern gentleman who called for me, Papa Rick?”

“I hate that dog. It bites my ankles and shreds all the hems in my pants—while I’m wearing them.”

“I know. I hate Empress, too. She’s got an attitude problem. Now, who was it you said phoned me?” Much more of this, Cinda knew, and it would be three days since Trey had called. If it had been Trey who had called at all.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I haven’t told you yet, have I? Okay, here it is. Let me see now. A Mr. Trey—now, that can’t be right. People in the South don’t name their children after parts of the silver service, do they?”

It was Trey. Dear God, it was Trey. Cinda feared she would burst into flames, she was so giddy with excitement. Still she managed to sound sane when she replied. “Yes. Down here they do. I know actual children named Cream and Sugar.” Of course it wasn’t true, but it was a shorter explanation—and one this blue-blooded, harmless Yankee would believe. “So...Trey who?” she added to maintain her air of innocence.

“Cooper is what I wrote down. And this next part is serious. Miss Reeves said to tell you that Mr. Cooper said his life needed to be saved. Does that mean anything to you?”

Cinda barely covered her gasp. Trey Cooper was calling in his favor. “Uh, maybe. Give me his number, and I’ll try him right now, okay?”

“That’s a good idea. I just hope it’s not too late. He could be dead by now. But anyway, here it is.” He finally read her the telephone number.

Maddeningly, Cinda’s fingers didn’t want to work in concert with her brain. She was too excited, too nervous. She had to ask Papa Rick three times to repeat the numbers to her, but finally she got them in the correct sequence. Relief coursed through her. Short-lived relief.

“Wait a minute,” Papa Rick said. “Trey Cooper. That name sounds familiar. This isn’t the nice young man who was stuck in the elevator with you last January, is it? The one you told us about?”

Oh sure, now his mind clears. “Yes. But don’t tell Mother Cavanaugh, all right? I don’t want her jumping to any conclusions that would have her taking to her bed for a week and making your life unbearable.”

“Oh. I see your point, although I can’t vouch for our Miss Reeves. No doubt, she’ll tattle. But anyway, good luck, dear. I’ll let you go so you can call your young man.”

“He’s not my young man.”

“Well, go see that he is. Goodbye. And kiss that baby for me.”

“I will. And I love you. Goodbye, Papa Rick.”

Cinda disconnected the call, then stared at the paper towel

she held and on which she'd scrawled the phone number with the Atlanta area code. Her heart and her mind were singing. Trey Cooper had called her. And his life needed to be saved. Oh, happy day.

Then she sobered. Surely, he didn't mean that literally. So this could only be a good thing, right? A social call, as in "how are you doing, I meant to call you before now."

That had to be it. She eyed the phone still in her other hand... then the phone number. The phone...the number. Then the kitchen clock. It wasn't even nine yet. She could call right now. Cinda took a deep breath for courage, swallowed her heart back down into her chest, and began dialing Trey Cooper's number. Right then, she couldn't have said if she wanted him to be home or not. After all, this could be a good thing—or it could be opening a Pandora's box of emotions best left unexplored. She just didn't know which.

Somehow, though, the number was dialed and the phone at the other end was ringing. Hearing it, Cinda was seized by a sudden spate of panic that shrieked at her to hang up. Her hand tightened on the phone—

STARTLED AWAKE, Trey grabbed his phone off the hook on the second ring and put it to his ear. "Hello?" No one said anything. "Hello?" He listened. "I can hear you breathing. I know you're there. You might as well say something."

"Oh. Trey, is that you? This is Cinda Cooper—I mean Cavanaugh. Cinda Cavanaugh."

Trey sat bolt upright on his couch, where he'd been about half asleep as the TV blared some mindless nonsense. "Cinda?" Had he heard her right? Had she really said Cooper? Surely not. That was just wistful thinking on his part. "Hi. I didn't think you were going to call me back."

"I'm sure you didn't, but I just now got your message. By a very roundabout way, too."

"Really?" He grabbed the remote and turned the TV off. The sudden quiet was a blessing. "Been away from the house?"

"It's an apartment, actually. In New York. But yes I have been away. In fact, I'm back in Atlanta now."

Excitement quickened in him. "Are you serious? You're here in Atlanta? Just visiting, or what?"

"Or what. I moved back here a few months ago, into my old house. The same one I lived in before."

"Before what?"

"The yaks."

"Oh, hell. Right. But, hey, this is great. If I'd known you were in town, I'd have come by to see the baby. How is she?"

"Asleep, blessedly. But she's fine. Absolutely beautiful, of course, and the smartest child in the world. Just ask her mother."

Trey chuckled. Then he was silent, gathering his thoughts as he ran a hand through his hair. "So, how are you doing, Cinda? I mean really."

"I'm good. You?"

"I'm good." He wasn't. He'd been a wreck since he'd called

her and hadn't received a call back. He'd put himself through hell with all the reasons why she might not be going to call him back. In none of the scenarios had he come off well. In none of them, either, had he assigned such a simple reason as she simply no longer lived at that number.

Suddenly Trey realized there was a silence between them. He opened his mouth to say something, but Cinda beat him to it.

"Well, this is certainly awkward," she said.

"I know. Hard to believe, isn't it? Especially after what we shared together in that stupid elevator—for which I'm eternally grateful, by the way."

"Oh really? Why is that?"

"Because otherwise I never would have met you." Trey applauded his boldness, on the one hand. But on the other, he wanted to kick himself. He held his breath, wondering just how old a man had to be before he no longer felt like a fool just for calling a woman and saying what he really felt.

"Well."

Trey died inside...fourteen times, to be exact.

Finally she saved him. "That's certainly a nice thing to say. You're being very charming, you know."

He exhaled, fully expecting his heart and lungs to whoosh out along with his relief. But boldness had brought him this far. So, ever one to keep crashing onward, even if it was into brick walls, he decided to try again. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It might be." Her tone of voice was clearly teasing. "You

see, I'm very susceptible to charming Southern men and have to watch myself around them."

"And yet, now that you are in Atlanta, you're surrounded by them."

She hesitated a moment. "Not so many as you'd think."

"Really?" Encouraged to know that she wasn't inundated with men, Trey's heart stepped out onto the romantic-risk-taking high-dive and took the plunge. "Good. Because I have a proposition for you."

"Is this the part where I save your life?"

"Pretty much. If you're willing, that is."

"As long as it doesn't include a stalled elevator, I probably am."

"I can guarantee there are no elevators, stuck or otherwise, involved. In fact, I'm not even sure there's a building in Southwood with an elevator."

"Southwood?"

"My hometown. Just west of here."

"That's right. Now I remember. I'm still trying to figure out why I've never heard of it, though, if it's that close to Atlanta."

"No reason why you should have. We didn't produce any Confederate generals or Olympic medalists. Just a dusty little town planning a big celebration."

"I see. Of what?"

"My high-school class reunion. Our tenth, even though it was actually twelve years ago."

"I wish I could say that made sense."

“So do I, but that’s Southwood for you. It’s a long story.”

“Let me guess. You need a date, right?”

“Worse. Or better, depending on how you look at it. I need a wife and a child.”

Silence ensued. Trey held his breath, not knowing if he should say something to assure her he wasn’t joking, or if he should just wait and see what her reaction would be.

“You’re not going to tell me this is some sort of crazy scavenger hunt, are you?” she said a moment later.

Trey grinned. “No. But you may wish that before I’m done here.”

“Wow. Sounds really intriguing. Go ahead. I’m listening.”

Trey exhaled and ran a hand through his hair. “Intrigue may not be the half of it. And I don’t like asking you this over the phone, but—”

“But your life needs to be saved and I owe you, right?”

“Yes and no. Yes my life needs to be saved. And no I don’t feel that you owe me. I meant this to be—I just thought maybe—Oh, hell, never mind, Cinda. Look, I’m sorry. Forget it. This didn’t sound so nuts to me the other day when I called you with this idea of mine. But now, hearing it out loud and asking you, or trying to ask you, well, it sounds stupid. Just never mind. I’m sorry I bothered you. I can go by my—”

“Wait, Trey. Give me a chance here. I didn’t say no, did I? Just tell me what’s going on, and we’ll go from there.”

Hope bloomed in his heart. “You sure?”

She chuckled. "I think I am. Maybe."

"An open mind. That's a good beginning. So, here's the deal..." Trey launched into his predicament, hitting the highlights, as if there were any, of his upcoming reunion weekend and what role he needed her and Chelsi to play. He worked hard to make it sound sane and logical when, in fact, it was neither. He didn't tell her about Rocco Diamante, though, thinking there was no reason to needlessly scare her. If the man showed up and made trouble, Trey would call his friend, the police chief, and then get Cinda, the baby, and his mother out of town. But, still, the longer he talked, the more he was convinced Cinda would not only say no, but she would probably also hang up on him and change her phone number.

But finally, he was through telling his tale. "So, what do you think? You don't have to say yes, Cinda. Seriously. No harm, no foul. Because I think it's a crazy plan, and it's my plan." She didn't say anything. Trey sighed. "You think I'm nuts, don't you?"

"No. I probably should, but I don't. You know what? It sounds fun and crazy. And maybe that's exactly what I need right now. So...yes, Trey Cooper, I'll do it. Well, we'll do it—Chelsi and I."

Trey bolted to his feet, narrowly avoiding colliding with his coffee table, and paced excitedly across the carpet. "You will? You'll be my wife?"

There was a moment's hesitation. "Well, let's keep our heads here. I'm saying that I'll be your wife and Chelsi will be your daughter...but only for that one weekend, of course."

“Yeah. Of course,” Trey echoed. “One weekend. That’s all I need.”

He just wished he could be sure about that. Because he wasn’t. Not at all. And that couldn’t be good.

JUST AFTER NOON on the following Saturday, Cinda waited nervously for Trey's arrival at her Atlanta home. His high-school reunion was the next weekend, the Fourth of July, so she'd invited him over to discuss the details of their ruse and to allow him and Chelsi to get acquainted. After all, it wouldn't do to pose as a loving couple with a young baby if the baby would have nothing to do with her "father."

But those combined reasons, while valid, weren't the whole truth. Cinda forced herself to admit that she wanted to see Trey Cooper and couldn't wait another week to do so. She wanted to know if he could still affect her as he had that January day in the elevator. The evidence—her never-ending thoughts of him, her incredible excitement that he had finally called, and her giddiness at the prospect of seeing him again—already pointed to the fact that he could, he would, and he did.

As if that weren't enough to stress over, Cinda feared that she wasn't yet ready to act on that speeding bullet of awareness between them. It could turn out that she just thought she was ready and that she'd back off when—if—things heated up between her and Trey. And if she let it get that far and then backed off? Well, it wouldn't be fair to him. Or to herself. So here she was, not completely in touch with her emotions beyond the recognition of a confused mishmash of desire and restraint.

And none of that altered the fact that Trey was due at any moment. Cinda had already changed outfits—hers and the baby’s—no less than four times. Right now she had on a new flower-sprigged sundress, but she had yet to call it her final decision. Nor was she satisfied with Chelsi’s outfit. But her daughter wore a mutinous expression that promised a tantrum of diva proportions should her mother try yet again to poke her chubby arms and legs through one more article of complicated baby clothing.

Respecting Chelsi’s stubbornly poked-out bottom lip, Cinda dropped the dress issue and set about making everyone else in the house miserable. With Chelsi in her arms, and with Major Clovis on their heels, Cinda now flitted through every room of the two-story Southern Colonial mansion, conducting an inspection tour. She told herself she simply needed to make certain everything was cleaned and straightened. She wanted to make a good impression. Was that so awful? She stopped in the richly decorated, sunny formal living room and looked around appraisingly.

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” Major Clovis said, “but we didn’t go to this much trouble for the IG’s visit back during my days in the military.”

“The IG?” Cinda asked distractedly, balancing Chelsi carefully while fluffing a throw pillow on the sofa. “What’s an IG?”

“Inspector General, ma’am.” Major Clovis put the pillow back where it had been. “A high mucketymuck with the power to make

your life a living meat grinder if he found so much as one speck of dirt on the ground outside.”

Pinched by the comparison, Cinda began to feel a bit surly. “I hardly think I’m going that far. And I wouldn’t define Mr. Cooper as a muckety-muck. I just want everything to be nice for his visit.”

“I understand. I believe the barracks will pass muster, ma’am. I hired three extra maids for this major field day.”

Long ago Cinda had given up trying to get Major Clovis to call her anything except ma’am or to forego the use of military jargon. Still, as she inspected the hang of the curtains Cinda remained distracted. “What’s a major field day, again? Some sort of military maneuvers?”

“In a way of speaking.” Major Clovis reached around Cinda to shake out the folds she’d just shaken in. “It’s when everyone falls out under orders to clean an entire installation from top to bottom.”

“I see.” Cinda flitted to an end table and ran her fingers over a lampshade. She checked it for dust. There wasn’t any. “Sounds like a worthwhile thing.”

“It’s meant as a punishment, ma’am.”

Cinda faced her adjutant, who stood at ease with her hands behind her back. “Well, that’s not what we’re doing here, Major Clovis. Certainly no one is being punished.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As much put out with herself for caring so much how everything looked as she was with Major Clovis’s hovering,

Cinda clung stubbornly to her defensive mood. She stood back from the gilt-framed beveled-glass mirror that hung over the fireplace and gave it the once-over. "Will you look at that? Why haven't I ever noticed before that it's hanging crookedly?"

Mindful of her daughter on her hip, she reached up on tiptoes to straighten the mirror's edge.

"Here. Allow me, ma'am." Major Clovis leaped to help, essentially swinging the mirror's position back to where it had been a moment ago. She then stood back with Cinda to inspect their counterproductive handiwork. "There. Good as new."

Assessing the frame, tilting her head this way and that, Cinda frowned, "I suppose." She then focused on Major Clovis. "Mr. Cooper will be staying for lunch. Has Marta prepared the menu I requested?"

Major Clovis executed a sharp nod of military precision. "Yes, ma'am. I told her she'd be court-martialed if she failed to please."

Already hating herself for asking, Cinda eyed her aide. "How exactly did you say that to her since you don't speak Spanish?"

The beginnings of a smug little grin became a self-satisfied pursing of the major's lips. "I know a few words, ma'am. But I believe my exact word this time was muerte."

Cinda could only stare without blinking. "Dead? You told her she'd be killed, didn't you?"

"At sunrise." The major's light gray eyes swam with feigned innocence. "Was that too much, ma'am?"

"If it explains the shrieking commotion I heard last night, yes

it was.”

“I wasn’t aware of any such—”

The front doorbell rang, playing a melodious tune. A least, it was supposed to play a melodious tune. Cinda directed an exasperated how-could-you look the major’s way. Obviously the woman had reprogrammed the door chimes. To wit, a very patriotic and rousing rendition of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” rang out through the house.

Over the booming tune, which had baby Chelsi blinking rapidly and screwing up her face as if she weren’t sure if she was supposed to cry, Major Clovis said, “If you’ll excuse me, ma’am. Your guest appears to have arrived.”

My guest. The full implication of those words ran through Cinda, weakening her knees. Forgetting all else, she shot a hand out to stop her assistant from leaving. “Wait. Bring him to me in the family room. And not in chains or with his head on a platter, do you understand?”

“Whatever you say, ma’am.” The wiry woman, dressed in olive-drab belted slacks, a light green button-down blouse and sensible shoes, then performed a sharp about-face and, marching in time to the music, headed for the front door.

In a complete fluster, Cinda walked rapidly toward the back of the house to the family room. She pinched her cheeks to bring more color to them and smoothed a hand through her hair. She pulled a thick lock of it into her view, studied it, and wanted to groan. Just as she’d feared. It looked dull, like dirty dishwater.

What had happened to the blondeness? To the highlights? She hated her hair. It just hung there straight. It had no body. Could it be more stringy and lifeless?

Great. Well, if she couldn't be gorgeous, she could at least be gracious.

Once in the family room, Cinda sat on the sofa and perched her daughter next to her so she could give her a final going-over. Chelsi's dark-blond hair stood up at right angles from her head. The child looked like a little blue-eyed baby monkey. When had that happened? Horrified, Cinda quickly moistened her fingers by dabbing them against her tongue. Then, utilizing a time-honored mothering technique, she applied her wet fingertips to Chelsi's hair and tried to fashion attractive feather-soft curls out of the dandelion fluff that was the baby's hair.

Cinda just wanted the darling little dumpling to shine. Was that so awful? It was to Chelsi, who had not been consulted. This latest act of her mother's was apparently the last straw for the little girl. As if totally over it with the demands of feminine vanity, she stiffened and began screaming her protest.

ALL TREY HAD DONE was push the doorbell. But now, standing outside the impressive and intimidating red-brick Southern Colonial mansion that reposed in a neighborhood of such magnificence that Cinda's house actually seemed small by comparison, he stood stiffly at attention. Four years of military training were hard to overcome. So was the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

But if Trey thought that tune had given him a terrifying flashback of boot camp proportions, it was nothing compared to the woman who opened the door. Tall, slender, with short hair the color of steel, and dressed in an approximation of an army uniform, she eyed him like the lowly enlisted man he'd been. "Yes?"

Trey told himself that this feeling that he'd strayed onto top-secret, off-limits property was ridiculous. He forced a smile and put his best mannerly foot forward. "Hi. I'm Trey Cooper. Mrs. Cavanaugh is expecting me...ma'am."

With the doorbell music dying out, the only sound Trey heard now was a baby crying in the background. It didn't faze the middle-aged woman standing in front of him, though. She slowly roved her gaze up and down him. No doubt about it—this was an inspection. Trey thought of his khaki slacks and light blue knit golf shirt, neatly tucked in and belted...thank God. As he'd had a haircut only this morning, it should pass muster. When the silent woman's gaze lowered to his feet, Trey fought a nearly overwhelming urge to look down to see if his loafers had the appropriate shine.

The woman's gaze flicked back to his face. Trey met her eyes. She never smiled. "You'll do. Come in."

Exhaling as if his life had just been spared, Trey stepped over the threshold and inside the home's grand and tiled foyer. He heard the door—one of a set made of highly polished wood—close behind him. But he forgot the intimidating woman and the

crying baby as he looked around, barely biting back a low whistle of appreciation for the grandeur of Cinda's home. He had one conclusion only. He was in over his head here.

The only house he'd ever seen that he could compare this one to was Jude Barrett's own. Other than his boss's place, Trey had never seen anything like this. His parents' home, where his mother still lived, was a five-room, white wood square of a house with a screened-in front porch, big trees outside and a neglected flower bed. And his apartment here in Atlanta was a nondescript, one-bedroom, furnished box in a complex of over one hundred units skirted by concrete and parking spaces.

Trey tried to picture himself coming home here, closing a door behind him, and calling out, "Hi, honey, I'm home." And then Cinda, smiling, would come greet him—

Someone touched his elbow. Trey jumped and whipped around. His escort was there, right at his back. But she was smiling—about like he expected a praying mantis would before it devoured its prey. The woman leaned in toward him and looked him right in the eye as she whispered, "If you hurt her, I'll hunt you down and rip your beating heart right out of your chest, do you hear me?"

The skin on the back of Trey's neck crawled. He swallowed. "Yes, ma'am. Loud and clear."

She stepped back. "Good. Then we understand each other." With that, she did an about-face and began walking away. Trey put a protective hand over his heart. "Follow me," the woman

said over her shoulder. “Mrs. Cavanaugh awaits you in the family room.”

The queen has granted you an audience, peasant, was how she said it.

Feeling way off his game here but committed to the course, Trey fell in step, thinking this gray-haired character would even scare Peg the Nurse up in New York City. Down a wood-floored hallway they traveled, sweeping past the wide stairs that obviously led up to a second floor. Trey finally found himself in a room that alone had to be bigger than his mother’s entire home.

So this was what it was like to be a millionaire. The room demanded his attention. It was all windows and open spaces and white carpet and big pieces of furniture. Big paintings and sculptures, too. And flowers. Fresh ones. Everywhere. Beautiful. Colors impinged on his senses. He called them red, white and blue, but no doubt some interior decorator had fancy names for them that Trey would never be able to wrap his tongue around.

Just then, he became aware that the crying baby was close by and that the crying was subsiding into hiccups and sniffing. Trey looked around but didn’t see anyone else. Then...Cinda stood up from where she’d obviously been sitting on the other side of a big cushy beige-colored sofa.

Catching sight of her, locking gazes with her, Trey’s breath caught. He forgot his surroundings and his escort. His mouth was suddenly dry, his palms sweaty. For him, no one existed except Cinda. She filled the room with her smiling warmth and her

beauty. She lit up the—

Pow! Trey was smacked hard in the middle of his back, hard enough to rock him off his feet. He tripped forward, gasping, and heard Cinda do the same. She put a hand to her mouth and looked as surprised as he was.

From Trey's left, the austere, serious-minded woman who'd brought him this far said, "Breathe, soldier. You forgot to breathe."

Ever dutiful, Trey breathed. In and out. In and out. And stared at his...what? Assailant? Arch-enemy? Someone to whom he'd forgotten he owed a huge amount of money? "Thanks," he managed to croak out. "I'll try to remember that from now on."

"Good. It makes life a whole lot easier." She got in his face. "And I want you to enjoy what you have left of it, son." Leaving him with that cheery thought, the woman zipped around on her heel and marched out of the room.

Swallowing hard, Trey watched her go. He made certain that the woman was gone before he turned to Cinda and remarked, "She loves me. We're engaged."

Cinda laughed. "Well, I'll certainly look forward to that wedding."

Grinning, Trey noticed how much Cinda had changed in the last six months. Not surprising that she would, since she'd been nine months pregnant when first he saw her. Though beautiful even then, she was more so now. Motherhood agreed with her. Slender and tanned, she stood there in a dress that showed off her

figure. Her face was thinner, too, highlighting her cheekbones and sensual mouth. And those wonderful amber eyes. They were enough to stop a man's heart from beating.

Trey realized he was staring. He also knew that Cinda was watching him do so. He inhaled, trying to rouse himself to action. The polite thing to do was go over to her, sit and visit and make a fuss over the baby. But he'd be damned if he could get his legs to cooperate. That was when it hit him. Wait a minute. Baby? She has a baby in her arms. How had he not noticed before now? He pointed to the child. "Have you always been holding her?"

Cinda raised her eyebrows. "It seems like it some days, but I've only had her for six months, remember? You were there." She pointed to her child. "This is Chelsi Elise."

"She certainly is," Trey said, thinking himself ridiculous. "And she's beautiful. But I must be losing it. I didn't even notice you were holding her when you stood up. All I saw were stars."

Cinda's expression melted into one of apologetic sympathy. "Oh, I know. You poor man. I should tell you that was Major Clovis—the woman who brought you in here and smacked you on the back. She's my nurse, assistant, secretary...bulldog."

Trey had meant Cinda. All he'd seen were stars when he saw her. But it had been a pretty hokey thing to say once, much less twice. "Ah. Major Clovis."

"She came with the house."

"Chained up in the basement, no doubt."

Cinda laughed, and it was magic. "Exactly right. How'd you

know?”

“A lucky guess. I like her. I think she’s nice.” God, how he wanted Cinda.

“You’re being kind.” Cinda patted the happily gurgling blond baby girl in her arms. “The truth is, if you’re not me or Chelsi, she won’t like you. Ever. Now, tell me, what hideous thing did she say to you on the way in here? And don’t tell me she didn’t because she always does.”

She did? Did that mean there had been a procession of men through those front doors? Trey instantly hated that idea—and now truly liked Major Clovis for doing her best to run them off. One thing Trey knew was she wouldn’t run him off. But in answer to Cinda’s question, Trey shrugged. “Nothing much. Ripping my heart out. Things like that. At least she’s up-front about how she feels. I can respect that.”

“Oh, you poor thing. But speaking of respect, come over here and pay yours to my daughter, a little girl you almost had to bring into this world, Mr. Trey Cooper.” Cinda’s eyes shone with maternal pride.

Trey loved the way she said his name. Mr. Trey Cooper. Like she was trying it out for size. Mrs. Trey Cooper. But wait a minute, he chided himself, shouldn’t he hate that whole idea? Shouldn’t he be running away, instead of steadily walking toward her? As he approached where she still stood, he reminded himself of his own rule: no wife and kids while on the race circuit. Sure, he knew that intellectually, but another part of his

psyche, the part that reported directly to his heart, said...maybe, maybe not. Oh, this wasn't good. This woman had danger written all over her. She was the yellow flag that warned the drivers to slow down when there was trouble ahead on the course.

And yet, here he was standing in front of her as close as propriety and the baby's presence between them would allow. He looked into Cinda's golden eyes, caught the scent of her perfume, and smiled. Awareness flashed and caught him off-guard. His heart beat faster, harder. Cinda's lips parted slightly, as if she thought he was about to kiss her. As if she was about to allow him to kiss her. And oh, he wanted to, all right. Trey leaned in toward her. She leaned in toward him. He reached out, putting his hand lightly on her back as he lowered his head to capture her mouth.

He heard her little gasp...of passion for him? No, of pain because the baby had yanked a handful of her mother's hair. And Cinda was pulling away from him and looking embarrassed and disconcerted. Feeling much the same, Trey cleared his throat and retreated a step or two. Still, despite the "kissus interruptus," the good news here was Cinda was obviously as affected by him as he was by her.

"So," Trey remarked, striving to get nonchalant as he pointed to the baby, "tell me about this little lady here who likes to pull hair and ruin tender moments between two adults."

Trey grinned at the child and turned to mush. He was a total sap for babies. The little girl was beautiful. Healthy chubby-baby round. Pretty pink skin. Blue eyes. She had dark blond curly

fuzzy hair that looked...Trey fought a bemused grin...spiky and wet or something. Dressed in a one-piece ruffled pink baby-girl-outfit thingie with snaps, she clung to her mother and eyed him warily as her mother set about making the introductions.

“Mr. Trey Cooper,” Cinda said, “I’d like you to meet my daughter, Miss Chelsi Elise Cavanaugh.”

As Cinda reassured the little girl that it was okay for the big and smiling man to talk to her, Trey suddenly realized something amazing. Chelsi could be his daughter. Not in the biological sense. But in the physical traits department, she looked just like him. Her eyes were blue like his, and her hair was a sandy blond, again like his. He fought to keep the shock off his face, even as he heard himself engaging in the simpleton banter adults employ with babies.

Still, he couldn’t get past it. Anyone who saw the two of them together would have no trouble believing that he was Chelsi’s father. Of course, that was what he wanted people in Southwood to think. But this was pretty upsetting. It bothered him, and he couldn’t figure out why. So she looked like him. So what? His looks and coloring, unlike Cinda’s, weren’t all that unique.

Then Trey realized what had him upset. It wasn’t just that Chelsi looked like him. It was that he was proud she did. As if he’d had something to do with her creation. Well, that did it. Trey’s single-male-and-liking-it genes rose up in protest. Easy, buddy. With this kind of thinking, can pushing a baby buggy be far behind? Or the tan minivan? And holding your wife’s purse

in the mall while she shops for bras? Remember the race circuit. That's your first love. Always will be. Run, man. Just hightail it out of here, dude, I'm telling ya.

Trey knew he wouldn't do that, but a more upsetting realization had just smacked him between the eyes: if Cinda's baby looked so much like him, then that meant he looked a lot like the baby's father, right? Okay, now here was some tricky ground. Trey pretty much believed that Cinda was attracted to him. He knew the signs. But could it be, at least in part, because he reminded her of her deceased husband? Oh, that would really suck.

Trey told himself that he needed to know what Richard Cavanaugh had looked like. Just to put his mind at ease. Just so he'd know that Cinda wasn't a vulnerable widow, one he was taking advantage of. But how the hell was he supposed to go about finding out what her husband had looked like? He couldn't just, out of the blue, ask her. What reason would he give? Nor could he demand that Cinda produce a picture of the man. And he certainly didn't think it would go over very well if he set out on a photograph-hunting safari of his own throughout her house. No doubt, Major Clovis would skewer him before he got to the stairs.

Though still chuckling at the baby who refused to come to him, on the inside Trey was beating himself up. What the hell was he even doing thinking he had a right to question Cinda about her feelings about anything? He barely knew the woman. Only

it didn't feel that way.

So here was the thing: He wanted to see her and get to know her. Yet he didn't. If he did and came to really like her, which he thought he pretty much already did, then he'd have to confront and possibly abandon his own conviction about not being in a committed relationship right now because of the demands of his profession.

Or he could not see her at all. Too late. Here he was in her family room and that was her standing in front of him. All right, so he couldn't stop thinking about her and, yes, he had initiated this meeting between them. But now that he had, he was sorry—not because he didn't feel anything for her, but because he did. And he didn't like that. But since he did, it would really hurt now to find out that he reminded her of her deceased husband.

Damn, this was like a splash of cold water in the face. He'd gone down roads and pathways here in the past few moments that were really not called for. After all, what the two of them were doing here was trying to even a score. That was it. So he was attracted to her. So he'd gone to some lengths to see her. So what? He'd been here before in his thinking with other women.

No he hadn't, Trey realized. Not even close. The way he felt about Cinda was new and different from anything he'd ever felt before. Hell, he'd only seen her twice in six months, but she'd filled every thought he'd had in that half a year. There was no denying that.

So stick to the script, Trey told himself. What difference does

it make who you might remind her of? You didn't come here to ask her to marry you. You came here because she agreed to pretend to be married to you. So get over yourself.

But he couldn't. He realized that this ruse of his could work too darned well. After all, if he could see the resemblance between him and Chelsi, then so would everyone else, which, again, was what he wanted. But—and it was a big but—could he take a whole weekend of being told what a beautiful wife and daughter he had, with him already this attracted to Cinda and smitten with her baby? Wouldn't that fill him with joy and pride? Oh, yeah, no doubt about that. All right, then, wasn't it possible that he would then want to have that feeling permanently?

Extremely possible. And it wasn't fair to either one of them. He had his life on the circuit, and she had her baby and memories of her deceased husband.

Very troubled now, Trey focused on Cinda, who was fussing with the baby's outfit as he stood in front of her and watched. He put his hand on her bare arm. "Cinda, look at me." She did, her expression sweet and expectant. Trey felt like such a jackass. "I don't know how to tell you this, but I think I've made a big mistake in coming here. I don't think this whole thing was a good idea at all. I think I should just leave."

TREY WATCHED CINDA for the effect of his words on her.

“Leave? But why? Because you almost kissed me? Or because I almost let you? I admit it was sudden. And unexpected. But—” Her expression mirrored her sudden concern for him. “Trey, are you all right? You look a little pale.”

“I feel a little pale, but it has nothing to do with our ill-fated kiss. May I sit down?” He was already lowering himself onto the sofa’s cushions.

“Of course.” Cinda sat with him, perching her daughter on her lap. The baby immediately clutched her mother’s heavy gold chain necklace in both fists and tried to stuff it in her mouth. Cinda held on to her daughter’s fists and turned to him. “Tell me what’s wrong. Should I call for Major Clovis? She is a nurse.”

“No. God, no. I don’t need a nurse. I just need to get a grip.” Trey sank back against the supporting comfort of the sofa cushions. His knees apart, his hands resting lightly on his thighs, he stared into Cinda’s mesmerizing golden eyes. “Cinda, I think we should—”

Chelsi let out a squawk, cutting Trey’s words off. She then pitched herself over in his direction, dragging her mother, via her gold chain, with her. “Oops.” Cinda righted herself and her daughter. “I think she wants you to hold her, Trey. You don’t have to—”

“No. Let me see her.” This was perfect. Exactly what he needed to do. “I love babies,” he said holding his hands out. “And I never miss an opportunity to hold one when offered.”

Cinda looked enormously pleased. “Okay. If you’re sure. Just let me get my necklace untangled from her fists.”

As she gently pried her daughter’s fingers open, Trey realized that he already felt a sort of kinship with this baby. After all, he’d been there when she came into the world. But right now, Trey wanted to hold the little girl for a reason not having to do with her own preciousness. Despite his misgivings of a few minutes ago, his not seeing how he could just blatantly ask Cinda what Richard had looked like, he decided that maybe one live picture—of himself and Chelsi together—was worth a thousand words. What he wanted to witness was Cinda’s first and honest reaction upon seeing him and her baby together. He felt certain her face would reveal her emotions, and he might as well know them now as later.

“Okay. There we go. Finally.” Cinda had untangled herself from her child. “I should know better than to wear anything she can get her little paws on.” With that, she scooped up her baby, holding the child up and out to him. “Ready? Be careful. She can be a handful.”

“About like her mother, I suspect,” Trey quipped, striving to sound light and humorous, even though that wasn’t how he felt.

Not yet handing the dangling baby over, Cinda looked at him questioningly. “No one’s ever said that to me before. Richard

thought I was boring.”

“Which is why the yaks got him.” Trey heard himself—and saw Cinda’s startled expression. “I’m sorry. That was out of line.”

With a smile tugging at her lips, Cinda shook her head. “Actually, it was more funny than out of line.”

“Whew. Dodged that bullet.” Trey took hold of the soft and chubby little girl whose limbs were flailing wildly. “Come here, you.” He turned her in his arms and greeted her. “Why, hello there, Chelsi. How you doing, huh?”

The baby stuck out her tongue and gave him the raspberries, a rousing Bronx cheer, and chortled her happiness with her efforts.

“I think I deserved that,” Trey said mock seriously.

“Oh, God.” Cinda covered her eyes with a hand. “I am so embarrassed. Major Clovis taught her that.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Grinning, Trey focused on the baby. She was killer cute. He held her close to his face and turned toward Cinda. But the baby promptly grabbed two handfuls of his hair and, with more strength than he would have credited her with, pulled herself forward, her mouth open as if she meant to gnaw on his scalp. Making a sound of protest, Trey did his best to hold her at bay.

“You’ll have to excuse her. She’s teething,” Cinda explained benignly, not offering him any help. “Either that or there are cannibals in the Cavanaugh bloodlines.”

Trey was still fighting for his scalp, but this was just the opening he wanted. “Speaking of the Cavanaugh’s, what do you

think? Do you see here the same thing that I do, Cinda?"

"If you mean a man trying to keep a baby from snacking on his head, then yes I do."

"Not that. I meant not just any man and not just any baby."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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

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