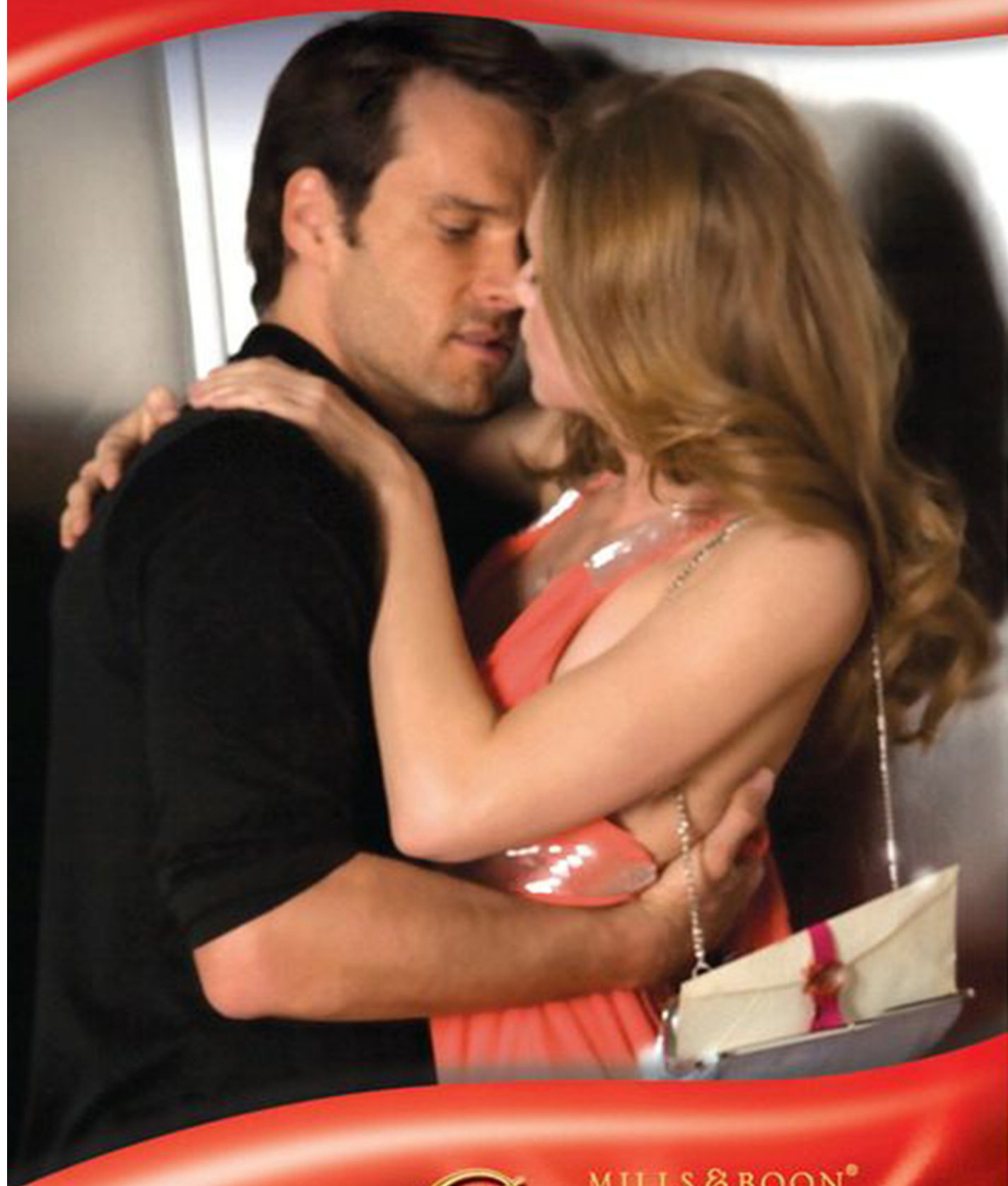


The Magnate's Takeover

Mary McBride

The Tycoon's Secret

Kasey Michaels



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Mary McBride

**The Magnate's Takeover:
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The Magnate's Takeover Mary McBride Sexy billionaire David Halstrom wants what Libby Jost has. It should have been a simple business deal, but instead he. . . lied. Now, amid a maelstrom of intense passion and twisted hotel sheets, David's white lie could cost him the one thing he'd never be able to buy. . . Libby's love. The Tycoon's Secret Kasey Michaels Decorator Paige Halliday received a gift from a mysterious benefactor, yet it was Sam Balfour, the handsome stranger who delivered it, that took her breath away. Paige had never been so attracted to any man. She'd known playboys like Sam before, and while she wasn't for sale, she could be convinced to let Sam woo her. . . a little. GIFTS FROM A BILLIONAIRE
The ultimate surprise!

Содержание

THE MAGNATE'S TAKEOVER	6
MARY McBRIDE	7
KASEY MICHAELS	8
Prologue	9
One	10
Two	14
Three	20
Four	24
Five	29
Six	34
Seven	38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	39

The Magnate's Takeover by Mary McBride

“Here’s to you, Libby, darlin’. Now that you know who I really am, what do you intend to do about it?”

He didn’t have a clue how she’d found out, but it had been bound to happen from the second he’d introduced himself to her as an architect. What kind of fool was he, thinking he’d find “regular love” wearing a disguise?

He really couldn’t blame Libby one bit for being so angry, as would he if it had happened in reverse. But it wasn’t the worst lie that had ever been told. Hell. What if he’d actually been an architect who tried to pass himself off as David Halstrom? Surely that would have been a larger crime and would have angered her even more.

He drained his glass, refilled it, then sat on a leather couch, staring south, wondering what to do next. For the first time in his life, David didn’t have a clue.

The Tycoon's Secret by Kasey Michaels

“It’s all about that money, isn’t it? You’re just used to getting your own way.”

“Wealth has its perks, I won’t deny that. So, how am I doing? Convinced yet?”

She didn’t say anything else for a few tense moments, moments during which they both, he was sure, readjusted the conversation to where all of this verbal foreplay was *really* heading.

When she finally spoke again, he knew they were both on the same page.

“I don’t have a price, Sam,” she warned him tightly.

“We all have a price, Ms Halliday. It just isn’t always money.”

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The Magnate's Takeover by Mary McBride

&

The Tycoon's Secret by Kasey Michaels

Dante's Wedding Deception by Day Leclair

&

Mistaken Mistress by Tessa Radley

The Desert King by Olivia Gates

&

An Affair with the Princess by Michelle Celmer

THE MAGNATE'S TAKEOVER

BY

MARY McBRIDE
THE TYCOON'S SECRET

BY

KASEY MICHAELS



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THE MAGNATE'S TAKEOVER

When it comes to writing romance, historical or contemporary, **Mary McBride** is a natural. What else would anyone expect from someone whose parents met on a blind date on Valentine's Day, and who met her own husband—whose middle name happens to be Valentine!—on 14th February as well?

She lives in Saint Louis, Missouri, with her husband and two sons. Mary loves to hear from readers. You can write to her c/o PO Box 411202, Saint Louis, MO 63141, USA, or contact her online at McBride101@aol.com.

Dear Reader,

What fun it was to work on this series with three great pals who are also terrific writers—Joan Hohl, Leslie LaFoy and Kasey Michaels. In the planning stage, we really kept the internet buzzing with our back-and-forth e-mails.

Here's hoping we've managed to bring you four terrific stories about people who all deserve to win a million dollars.

Happy reading!

Best wishes,

Mary McBride

Prologue

Well, my darlings, it's almost Halloween and I have oodles of treats and goodies for you. Shall we talk about the RB again? That oh-so-generous and oh-so-mysterious Reclusive Billionaire is believed to have struck again, anointing a candidate somewhere in the Midwest—that would be Fly-Over Country for most of you, my dear readers—with his largesse.

Alas, our information does not extend beyond mere geography at this date. Surely someone out there in the vast Heartland has a clue that he or she would be more than delighted to share. Call me, darling. I am, as they say, all ears.

Sam Balfour slapped the newspaper on the desktop as if he were swatting a fly. “This woman is worse than a rabid bloodhound,” he said.

S. Edward Balfour IV, otherwise known as Uncle Ned, glanced up from his own newspaper. “She’s persistent, I’ll grant you that. We could use a few more like her on our team.”

“Our team, as you so casually put it, Uncle Ned, is about to be exposed by this harpy. Doesn’t that worry you in the least?”

“No,” his uncle said. “Actually, I have other things to worry about. Here.” He handed a large book across the desk. “Take a look at this. Tell me what you think.”

Sam, still grinding his teeth, flipped through the pages, mostly photographs of old derelict motels in the Midwest. “They’re nice pictures,” he said, “if you like things like that.”

“I do,” his uncle said as he reached into his desk drawer to produce a green folder which he passed to Sam. “Take care of this for me, will you?”

“You’re crazy, you know, to continue with this little game,” Sam cautioned him.

His uncle merely smiled. “I suspect we’re all a bit crazy, one way or another. Read through the folder, Sam. Then see that the usual check reaches Miss Libby Jost no later than Friday.”

Sam could only sigh. Here we go again...

One

“Here’s to you, you magnificent building.”

Libby Jost stared out the window and raised her wine glass once again to toast the nearly completed 20-story convention hotel on the other side of the highway just west of St. Louis. Now that it was autumn and the trees were nearly bare, and even across six lanes of traffic, the bright lights of the Halstrom Marquis flickered like rubies in what was left of her red Chianti.

“And here’s to you, Mr. Halstrom, whoever you are and if you really do exist. Welcome to the neighborhood.” She swallowed the last of the wine, and then a silly, not-too-sober smile played at the edges of her mouth. “What took you so long?”

She put down her empty glass, stood up and then immediately realized she had celebrated a bit too much. Way too much, in fact, for a person who rarely drank at all. Her last drink, incidentally, had been an obligatory glass of champagne on New Year’s Eve. She was definitely out of practice, she decided, and figured it was time for a very sobering slap of cold October air, so she flipped the main switch for the outside lights and wobbled out the door.

Once outside, Libby glanced up at the ancient neon No Vacancy sign flickering above the office door. How sad was that? she thought. After all these years, all these decades, it was probably some sort of miracle that the V, two c’s and half of the y still managed to faintly sputter. The mere sight of the sign might have completely depressed her a few months ago, but it didn’t tonight. It didn’t bother her at all because she knew there would be a brand-new, far better sign very soon, and instead of perpetual vacancies, the old Haven View Motor Court would once more be full of guests and good times.

Again, as she’d done a thousand times these past few weeks, she gave silent thanks to the anonymous Santa Claus who’d sent her a check for fifty thousand dollars in appreciation of her recent book of photographs of old, downtrodden motels in the Midwest. Libby Jost was, first and foremost, a serious photographer who had worked for the St. Louis newspaper for nearly a decade. She’d garnered numerous awards in the past, but most of them came in the form of plaques or framed certificates usually accompanied by long, boring speeches and polite applause. She’d gotten a check for two hundred bucks once for a photo of the Gateway Arch in morning mist, but never anything close to fifty thousand dollars.

The huge, unexpected check not only sustained her pride in her work, but it also provided her the wherewithal to help her aunt Elizabeth, the woman who had raised her here at this run-down motel after the death of her parents in a car accident when Libby was just a toddler.

Aunt Elizabeth hadn’t asked for her help, but then she didn’t have to. As soon as Libby realized that the fifty-thousand-dollar gift wasn’t a joke or a stunt of some kind, but was indeed good as gold according to her bank, she arranged for a leave of absence from the newspaper and began making plans to revive the derelict motel. It was her aunt’s dream, after all, and Libby felt she owed it to her to keep that dream alive as long as she possibly could.

And while she was giving thanks, she directed a few of them to the Halstrom Marquis, which soon would be sending its overflow customers across the highway to the newly remodeled, all spiffed-up, ready-to-go Haven View.

Libby was determined to make it happen. The anonymous Santa had given her the money to set it all in motion. She had taken her time to nail down her plans and to budget the money properly. Now she was ready to begin.

Stepping out onto the pebbled drive that wound through the dilapidated little tourist court, she noticed that one of the lampposts was dark. Damn. If it wasn’t one irritation, it was another. Exterior bulbs had gotten so expensive, even at the discount stores, and they seemed to burn out way too frequently these days.

Maybe she could let one light go dark for awhile. Maybe no one would even notice. There weren't any guests here, for heaven's sake. But, after another glance at the magnificently illuminated hotel across the highway, Libby sighed. Got to keep up with the Joneses now, she thought, or with the Halstroms as is in this case. She went back into the office in search of a ladder and a light bulb.

Well, this wasn't one of the best ideas she'd ever had, Libby thought ten minutes later as she wobbled and swayed high up on the ladder while trying to juggle a large glass globe, a dead light bulb, a fresh light bulb and the four screws from the lamp. If anything, it was a terrible idea. She could see the paper's headline already: *Woman, inebriated, expires under lamp*.

And if it wasn't a disaster already, it surely became one when a car engine growled behind her, headlights flooding the parking lot and tires biting into the loose gravel of the driveway just behind her. A customer at this time of night? That wasn't at all likely. The motel hadn't had a single customer in three or four weeks.

She tried to look over her shoulder to see who or what it was, but the fierce headlights blinded her. When she heard the car door whip open and then slam shut, her heart leaped into her throat and made it impossible to shout or scream.

This was not good. Not good at all. It was terrible. A strangled little moan broke from her lips.

Then Libby lost her grip and the globe and the light bulbs crashed onto the ground below her, and she was about to crash down, too, on top of all that broken glass when a deep voice said, "Hold still."

Two hands clamped around her waist.

"I've got you," he said. "You're okay. Just relax and let go of the ladder."

Libby, in her total panic, tried to jerk away from his grasp and she held on to the lamppost even tighter than before.

"Dammit," he growled, tightening his grip on her waist. "I said let go. It's okay. I've got you."

He did, indeed, have her.

What else could she do? Libby dragged in a breath, held it and then let go of the lamppost, wondering vaguely if her life was going to flash before her eyes now that it was about to end.

It felt like falling into a giant bear hug. The arms that caught her were warm and encompassing. Then glass crunched under the bear's feet as he turned, took several strides and finally and oh-so-gently set her down.

She was safe, but only for a second. The bear turned on her, his eyes flashing. "What the hell were you doing up there?" he growled. "You could have broken your damn neck."

Libby's heart was pounding like a jackhammer. Her legs felt like jelly, and she was still not exactly sober. Far from it, in fact. But now, instead of feeling tipsy and scared to death, she felt tipsy and mad as hell so she yelled back at the bear, "Well, it's *my* damn neck."

He merely stared at her then, stared hard, as if he were memorizing every feature and angle, every crook and cranny of her body, or else perhaps he was merely calculating the calories there just in case he decided to take a bite out of her.

Belligerently, Libby stared right back, into a face that struck her as more rugged than handsome. Even in the semidarkness of the driveway, she could tell that his eyes were a deep hazel and the line of his chin like granite. He was fairly good-looking, for a bear. She wobbled again, struggling to keep her balance and wound up standing even closer to him. He smelled divine, even though she was too tipsy to identify the scent. Then he smiled. It was a sudden, wonderful surprise of a smile that carved out sexy lines on both sides of his mouth.

"It's a lovely neck," he said, reaching out to touch the hammering pulse in her throat.

Libby blinked. "Thank you," she said. "I think."

Whatever hostility that had flared up so suddenly between them seemed to vanish into the cool night air. She glanced at his car—a dark, sleek Jaguar—and was fairly well convinced that this guy

wasn't a thug or a rapist or, for that matter, a paying customer. People who stayed at the Haven View these days tended to drive dirty pickups and dented sedans.

But before she could ask the Jaguar guy just who or what he truly was, he asked her, "Is the boss around?"

Libby almost laughed. Her whole life she'd looked far younger than she actually was. Now, even at age thirty, she could still easily pass for nineteen or twenty. And obviously she didn't look like a "boss," either, in her current panicky and slightly inebriated state.

Well, in reality she wasn't the actual boss here. The Haven View Motor Court belonged to her aunt Elizabeth, after all, as it had for the past fifty years, but while her elderly aunt was in a nursing home recovering from a broken hip, Libby was most definitely in charge.

"The boss," she said, "is currently under the weather, which means I'm temporarily in charge around here." She attempted to stand a bit taller, a bit more steadily, even as her vision seemed to be blurring. Hoping to appear professional in spite of her condition, Libby stuck out her hand. "I'm Libby Jost. What, may I ask, can I do for you?"

His lips curled into another stunning and sexy grin. "I don't think you can do much of anything for anybody at the moment, little Libby." His hand reached out to steady her. "What do you think?"

What did she think? She thought she heard a bit of a Texas twang in his voice, and then she thought she was going to be very, very sick right here in the parking lot if she didn't make it to the office in time.

"Excuse me," she mumbled, then ran as fast as her wobbly legs would allow.

Well, it wasn't the first time he'd encountered a pretty woman who'd had too much to drink, David Halstrom thought, but it was certainly the first time he'd witnessed a woman four feet off the ground clinging to a lamppost or one who looked like an inebriated fallen angel. She was so damn pretty, even in the dim lamplight, with her strawberry blond hair and her spattering of freckles that he'd almost forgotten why he'd come to this derelict hellhole in the first place.

He sighed and supposed he ought to check on her so he walked in the direction of the buzzing, nearly burned-out vacancy sign. He knocked on the door, waited a moment and when nobody answered, he entered what appeared to be the office of this dump which she claimed to manage. Hell. It was already pretty clear to him that she couldn't even manage herself much less a run-down tourist court.

The office was as tawdry as he expected, like something right out of the 1950s if not earlier. It didn't surprise him a bit to see a small black-and-white television with foil-wrapped rabbit ears wedged into a corner of the room, right next to a windowsill lined with half-dead plants. Good God. Did people actually stay here? Did they *pay* to stay here?

There was a floral couch against one wall. On the table in front of it sat a straw-covered bottle of Chianti and an empty glass. The caretaker's poison, no doubt.

He knocked softly on a nearby door, then he opened it a few inches and saw a dimly lit bedroom that wasn't quite as tattered as the lobby. There was a faint odor of lavender in the small room, and in the center of the bed, beneath the covers, he recognized a Libby-sized lump.

Good, he thought. She'd sleep it off and tomorrow she'd have a headache to remind her that cheap wine had its perils.

"Sleep well, angel," he whispered. "When you lose this job, you can come to work for me."

He quietly closed the door and returned to the parking lot.

A quick walk around the dismal property only served to confirm all of David's suspicions. The place was a total wreck in dire need of demolition, which he would be more than happy to arrange. He got back in his car and headed for his hotel on the other side of the highway. As he drove, his thumb punched in his assistant's number on his cell phone.

Jeff Montgomery was probably in the middle of dinner, he thought, but the call wouldn't surprise him nor would David's demand for instant action. The young man had worked for him for

five years and seemed to thrive on the stress and the frequent travel as well as the variety of tasks that David tossed his way, from *Make sure my tux is ready by six*, to *Put together a proposal for that acreage in New Mexico*.

This evening David told him, “I need to know everything there is to know about the Haven View Motor Court across from the hotel. Who owns it? Is there any debt? What’s the tax situation? Everything. And while you’re at it, see what you can dig up on a woman named Libby Jost. Have it on my desk tomorrow morning, Jeff. Ten at the latest.”

“You got it, boss” came the instant reply. David Halstrom was used to instant replies.

He was used to getting precisely what he wanted, in fact, and he figured he’d own the ramshackle Haven View Motor Court lock, stock and barrel in a few days, or a week at the very most. And if he didn’t exactly own the fallen strawberry-blond angel by then, at least she’d be on his payroll.

Two

At ten o'clock the next morning Libby, in faded jeans and a thick white wool turtleneck, wasn't at all surprised that she had a splitting headache while she followed the painting contractor around Haven View. She couldn't even bear to think about the previous night, even as she wondered what had happened to the handsome bear.

As on most days, a camera hung from a leather strap around her neck because a dedicated photographer never knew when a wonderful picture might present itself. This morning, however, the camera strap felt more like a noose while the camera itself seemed to weigh a lot more than it ever had in the past. She was grateful the contractor didn't walk very fast, which allowed her to sip hot, healing coffee while she tried to interpret his expressions.

Sometimes the man's sandy eyebrows inched together above the bridge of his nose as if he were thinking, *Hmm. This old wood window trim might be a little bit tricky. That won't be cheap.* Other times he narrowed his eyes and bit his lower lip which Libby interpreted as, *There's not enough paint in the state of Missouri to make this crummy place look better.* Once he even sighed rather dramatically and then gazed heavenward, which probably meant he wouldn't take this job no matter how much she offered to pay him.

Finally, the suspense was more than she could stand, not to mention the imagined humiliation when he told her the place wasn't even good enough to paint, so she told the man to take his time, then excused herself. She headed back to the office, pausing once more to look around the foot of the lamppost to make sure she'd picked up every shard of broken glass from last night's sorry incident.

She had almost reached the office door when she heard the familiar growl of a certain sleek automobile. As she turned to watch the dark-green vehicle approach along the gravel driveway, Libby swore she could almost feel the sexual throb of its engine deep in the pit of her stomach. Oh, brother. She wasn't going to drink Chianti again for a long, long time.

Or maybe she was just feeling the deep shame of losing control the way she had the night before. Whoever the guy was and whatever he wanted, his opinion of her must be pretty low. If nothing else, she thought she owed the guy an apology along with a sincere thank-you for rescuing her from all that shattered glass.

She also thought, while staring at his fabulous car, that the vehicle was undoubtedly worth more—way more—than her fifty-thousand-dollar surprise fortune. How depressing was that? Still, it certainly piqued her interest in the man behind the wheel and whatever intentions he might have.

As if by reflex, she put her coffee mug on the ground and lifted her camera, shoving the lens cap in her pocket and glancing to make sure the aperture was set where she wanted it for this relatively bright morning. She snapped him exiting the car.

He seemed taller and more muscular than she remembered from the night before, but that face matched her memory of it perfectly. It was tough. Rugged. Masculine as hell. It was a countenance far better suited to a dusty pickup truck than a shiny luxury sedan.

His face, however, was shielded by his lifted hand as he approached her. Damn. She really wanted to capture those great Marlboro-Man features, especially his wonderful smile lines, but he kept them hidden as he approached.

She lowered the camera. He lowered his hand.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked.

Sensing the smirk just beneath his affable grin, Libby quickly forced her lips into a wide, bright smile as she responded, "One hundred percent."

He cocked his head and narrowed his autumn-colored eyes, scrutinizing her face. "Really?"

“Well...” Libby shrugged. The man knew all too well what her condition had been the night before. She had nearly thrown up on him, after all. There wasn’t much use denying it. “Maybe ninety-five percent. Actually it’s more like eighty-five percent, but definitely trending upward.”

“Yeah,” he said, bending to pick up her coffee, then placing the mug in her hand. “Booze tends to do that more often than not.” Now his gaze strayed from her face, moved down past her turtleneck, paused at her breasts for a second, then focused on her Nikon. “What’s the camera for?”

“I’m a photographer.” She took a sip from her mug.

“I thought you were a motel sitter.”

Libby laughed. “Well, I’m both I guess. I’m Libby Jost.” Locals more often than not recognized her name from the photographs in the paper, but it didn’t seem to ring even a tiny little bell for Mr. Marlboro Man. She extended her hand. “And you are...?”

“David,” he said, reaching out to grip her hand more tightly than she expected. “I’m...” He frowned slightly, then angled his head north in the direction of the hotel across the highway. “I’m the architect of that big shiny box.”

At that particular moment the big, shiny, mirrored façade of the Halstrom Marquis was full of lovely blue autumn sky and a few crisp white clouds. Libby loved it more every time she looked at it, she thought.

“It’s stunning,” she said. “You did a truly spectacular job. And I confess I love taking pictures of it. It’s a completely different building from one day to another, even from one minute to another. Today it’s like a lovely perpendicular piece of sky.”

“Thanks. Just a few more weeks until the grand opening. Would you like an invitation?” He chuckled rather demonically. “I’m sure the liquor will be freely flowing, if that’s any incentive.”

Libby rolled her eyes. “I’ve sworn off. Trust me. But I’d love an invitation. Thank you.”

“You’ve got it.” He plucked a cell phone from his pocket and mere seconds later he was directing someone to put her on the guest list. “No, that’s all right. Don’t worry about the spelling right now. No address necessary,” he said. “I’ll deliver it personally.”

For some odd reason his use of the word *personally* and the way he locked his gaze on her when he said it suddenly caused a tiny shower of sparks to cascade down Libby’s spine. She took a quick gulp of coffee, hoping to extinguish them.

This guy was good, she thought. He was good not only with buildings, but with women, too. At least his technique seemed to be working fairly well with her at the moment. She swallowed the rest of the coffee.

She was so conscious of her sparkling, sizzling innards that she didn’t even realize the painting contractor had walked up behind her until he cleared his throat rather loudly and said, “Here’s your estimate, Ms. Jost. I guess you know it’s a pretty big job, considering the age of the place and all. My numbers are there at the top.” He pointed with a paint-crusted fingernail. “You just give me a call whenever you decide.”

“All right. Thank you so very much for coming. I’ll definitely be in touch.” She was thrilled—amazed actually—that he was willing to take on the work.

The man had turned and walked away as Libby flipped a few pages to glance at the all important bottom line. Reading it, she could almost feel her eyes bulge out like a cartoon character’s. She didn’t know whether to scream or to faint dead away or to throw up—again—right there in the driveway. She might just do all three, she thought bleakly. This was terrible.

He wanted thirty-seven thousand dollars for all the painting and patching that needed to be done, which would leave her the not-quite-staggering sum of thirteen thousand dollars for additional, equally necessary repairs and renovations like plumbing fixtures, tile, carpeting, new beds and bedding and lighting, not to mention a bit of advertising and a new damn sign over the office door. She’d had no idea, none whatsoever, that her dreams were so damned expensive and so dreadfully, impossibly out of reach.

Libby was so stunned, so completely stupefied that she was only vaguely aware that David had taken the paper from her, and then the next thing she heard was a gruff and bear-like curse followed by the sound of tearing. Her painter's estimate, she observed, was now falling to the ground in little pieces, like an early, quite unexpected snow. It was a good thing she didn't want to hang on to it, she supposed.

"This is absolute bull," David said. "It's worse than highway robbery. I'm betting the guy doesn't even want the job, Libby, and that's why he jacked the price up so high. He probably just wanted to scare you off."

"Well, it sure worked," she said, trying to accompany her words with a little laugh. A very little laugh. "Gee, now I can hardly wait to see if the plumbing guy and the electrician try to scare me, too. I can imagine it already. It'll be just like Halloween here every day of the week. Trick or treat!" There was a small but distinct tremor in her voice that her sarcasm couldn't even begin to disguise. At the moment, quite frankly, Libby didn't care.

"Look," David said. "I can get my guys over here for two or three days or however long it takes. They can do the painting for you for a tenth of that amount. Even less than that, I'd be willing to bet."

"Your guys?" Libby's headache took the opportunity to make a curtain call just then. She closed her eyes a moment, hoping to banish the unwelcomed pain. "I don't understand this at all."

David was already opening his phone as he responded to her. "Painters. From the Marquis."

"But you're the architect." She blinked. "How can you..."

"Architect or not, I just happen to be the guy in charge over there right now," he said, sounding most definitely like a guy in charge.

"But..."

He snapped the phone closed and gave her a look that seemed to question not only her ability to make a decision, but her basic intelligence as well. "Look," he said. "It's really pretty simple. Do you want the painting job done, done well at a reasonable price, or not? Yes or no."

This was obviously a man who made lightning-quick decisions, Libby thought, while she tended to procrastinate and then a bit more just to be absolutely sure or, as in most cases, semi-sure. Procrastinating had its benefits, but maybe lightning quick was the right way to go at the moment.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I do want the job done at a reasonable price. Actually, what I want is an utterly fantastic job at a bargain basement price."

"You'll have it," he said. He stabbed in a number, barked some commands that were punctuated here and there with curses, flipped his cell phone closed and then told her, "A crew will be here in twenty minutes. Write a list of everything you want them to do. And be specific."

Libby nodded. She could come up with a list for them in less than five seconds, she thought. Number One was *paint everything*. There was no Number Two.

While Libby worked on her list in the office, David walked around the shabby motel grounds once again, scowling, muttering under his breath, telling himself he must really be losing his grip. He'd just done one of the most stupid things in his life when he'd offered to help fix up the damnable place he had every intention of tearing down.

What was the old expression? Putting lipstick on a pig? He shook his head. There wasn't enough lipstick in the world for this dilapidated pigsty.

On the other hand, his crew of painters were on the clock anyway in case of last-minute problems before the Marquis' opening so this little detour across the highway wasn't going to cost him all that much. It wasn't about the money, though. It was more and more about the woman, the luscious little strawberry blond.

She'd already gotten under his skin just enough for him to fashion a lie about who he actually was. He'd introduced himself to her as the architect of the Marquis—an architect, for God's sake—a mere hired hand instead of the Big Deal Boss. That alone was enough to make him question his sanity.

He hadn't actually planned to do that or rehearsed any sort of deception, it had simply sprung forth somehow when she'd offered her soft, warm hand and then inquired, *And you are?* For a split second, while he held her hand in his, he hadn't been quite sure who he was, where he was or what he was doing.

He wasn't a liar, although he'd probably stretched or bent the truth a few times during business negotiations. But in his personal life, what little there was of it, particularly with women, he never lied and he never promised anything he didn't follow through with from the moment he said hello to a woman to the moment he said goodbye. And he'd said a lot of goodbyes in his time.

He'd spent year after year watching female faces and their accompanying body language abruptly change when they heard the name David Halstrom. It was like going from Zorba the Greek to Aristotle Onassis in the blink of an eye, again and again, year after year, woman after woman. Women looked at Zorba with curiosity and pleasure and genuine affection. They looked at Onassis as if they were seeing their own reflections in the window of a bank.

He was thirty-six-years-old now, and he'd been a millionaire since he was twenty-one and a gazillionaire for most of the last decade. But until he'd laid eyes on Libby Jost, with her strawberry-blond hair and her light blue eyes and the nearly perfect curves of her body, David hadn't realized just how much he'd truly yearned to be treated like a normal, everyday guy instead of a damn cash register.

So, what the hell. He'd be an architect for the next few weeks, and then he'd confess, and the fact that he had more money than God would go a long, long way in soothing Libby Jost's hurt feelings at his deception.

In the meantime, he decided he'd better be going before the painters arrived and greeted him by his actual name. He stopped by the shabby little office to tell Libby goodbye and to give her his private number just in case she needed him, and it was only then, when he actually said the words to her, that David realized just how much he wanted her to need him.

The painting crew turned out to be four young men in their twenties or early thirties, all of them in paint-splattered coveralls, and all of them with long hair tied back in ponytails and piercings in one place or another. They looked more like a rock band than a team of professional painters. She hoped David knew what he was doing as she gave them her list, walked them around the place, then waited for the bad news she had begun to expect.

"So," she asked when they'd completed their inspection of the place. "Can you do it? And for how much?"

She held her breath in anticipation of the bad news.

The tallest of the young men shrugged his shoulders and gave a little snort. "Well, it's a challenge, ma'am, no doubt about that. But, sure we can do it. Hell, yes. As for how much, as far as I know right now, you'll just have to pay for the paint. We're all on the clock over at the Marquis, so we get paid one way or another. Over here. Over there. It doesn't matter."

Libby was still holding her breath, waiting for the bottom line.

"I'm guessing seven hundred dollars ought to cover the supplies," he said. "Give or take a few bucks."

Then he pulled a fold-out palette of paint colors from his back pocket. "If you want to choose the main color and the trim right now, ma'am, we can pick it up and get started after lunch."

Libby was still a few beats behind him, still celebrating the seven hundred dollars, give or take, as if she'd just won the lottery. Things were suddenly, terrifically back on track, she thought, after this morning's horrible derailment.

"Ma'am?" He fanned open the color chart in front of her.

"Oh. Sorry." She looked at the chart. "Well, this won't be too hard. I've had these colors in my head for weeks. I want a rich, creamy ivory for the walls. This one. Right here." She pointed to a swatch. "And I want a deep, deep, wonderful green for the doors and the trim. There. That's it exactly. It's perfect."

“Cool,” the painter said, then turned to his crew. “We’re all set. Mount up, boys. Let’s hit the road.”

Libby hit the road, too, right after her ever reliable front-desk replacement, Douglas Porter, arrived. She’d known him since she was two years old, and if her aunt Elizabeth was the mother figure in Libby’s life, then Doug was most definitely her stand-in father after all these years. His nearly religious attendance at dozens of school plays and concerts and teacher’s meetings, and his presence at every major event in her life more than qualified him for a special kind of parenthood. Plus, it was Doug who’d given her her very first camera on her tenth birthday, then spent hours showing her how to use it properly, not to mention forking over a small fortune for film, filters, lenses and often staggering developing costs.

But he wasn’t really her uncle. He’d been the best man at Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Joe’s wedding and after Uncle Joe went missing in Korea over half a century ago, Doug simply stayed around. It was clear to anyone with eyes that he loved her aunt, and it never failed to sadden Libby that the two of them hadn’t married.

“Elizabeth’s pretty chipper today, Lib,” he had announced when he entered the office. “You’ll be glad to see that, I know. So what’s going on around here? How many guests do we have?”

It had become a running joke between the two of them, about the guests, and she had offered the standard reply. “No more than you can handle, Doug.”

She’d paused on her way out the door. “Oh, I’m expecting some painters this afternoon. They know their way around so you won’t have to do anything.”

“Painters?” His white eyebrows climbed practically up to his scalp. “Why on earth...?”

“No big deal,” she said nonchalantly. “I’m just having them do a few touch-ups.”

As she closed the office door she could hear him muttering something about throwing good money after bad, silk purses and sows’ ears.

Libby was still smiling about that when she parked her car at the nursing home’s rehab facility and walked down the long glossy hallway to her aunt’s room. She knocked softly, then opened the door, happy to see that the crabby roommate wasn’t there at the moment, but not so happy to see the sour expression on Aunt Elizabeth’s face.

“Painters, Libby? You’ve hired painters? What on earth are you thinking, child?”

Libby sighed. “I guess Doug called.” She should have figured on that, she thought, as she pulled a chair close to the bed. “I wish he hadn’t done that. I wanted to surprise you, Aunt Elizabeth.”

“I *am* surprised,” she said, rearranging the sheet that covered her. “And not all that pleasantly, my girl. You shouldn’t be throwing your money away...”

“Wait. Just wait a minute.” Libby held up her hand like a traffic cop. Sometimes it was the only way to stop this woman from going on and on. “I got a very special deal on the labor, so the job really isn’t costing much at all. Trust me.”

Her aunt narrowed her eyes. “How much?”

“Seven, eight hundred tops.”

“I don’t believe you,” she snapped.

“It’s true, Aunt Elizabeth. Cross my heart. I’ll even show you the canceled check when I get it.”

The elderly woman clucked her tongue. “And I suppose it’s already too late to stop this painting nonsense?”

“Yes,” Libby said stubbornly.

Her aunt, equally stubborn, glared out the window for a moment before she snapped, “Well, then tell me what colors you picked out. You know very well that I don’t like change, Libby, and when your Uncle Joe gets home he’ll expect the place to look just as it did when he left for Korea.”

After half a century he’s not coming home, Libby wanted to scream at the top of her lungs, but she didn’t. Aunt Elizabeth was an absolutely sane and reasonable woman, and likely a lot sharper than most folks her age, except for her complete and utter denial of her husband’s death.

If you started to argue with her, if you tried to convince her the man was dead, she'd snap, "Well, then. Show me his death certificate." And of course there wasn't one since he'd gone missing in action, so her aunt always won the argument. And that was that.

When Libby was a little girl, she honestly believed her Uncle Joe would be coming home any day. She couldn't recall how old she was when Doug told her that the man had been missing in action since the 1950s. And he wasn't coming home. Ever. *Now, this is just between you and me, sweetie*, he had said.

Over the years, Aunt Elizabeth's friends and acquaintances tolerated this little lapse of sanity, this unreasonableness, or whatever it was. Doug, bless his heart, seemed to accept it completely. Libby did, too, she supposed, after all this time. When the subject arose, they'd all give her aunt the usual sympathetic nod or a brief *tsk-tsk* before quickly moving on to another topic of conversation.

Was she crazy? Perhaps. But the craziness was quite specific and limited to Uncle Joe and his imminent return. Aside from that particular bat in her belfry, Aunt Elizabeth was completely normal.

"Tell me the colors, Libby," her aunt demanded now.

"You're going to love them," she said. "I tried really hard to duplicate the original cream and green of the Haven View. I knew that's what you'd want."

"I must say that if I'd been in the mood to paint, honey, that's precisely what I would've chosen. And now I can't wait to come home and see it."

Libby nodded, feeling both deeply touched and hugely relieved in the same moment. At least her first surprise had ended well. Now there were approximately forty-nine thousand dollars worth of surprises still to come. Heaven help her.

Happily, there were no more surprises and no more ruffled feathers during the remainder of her visit. They had a good time together, and when Aunt Elizabeth's crabby roommate made her return appearance, Libby hugged and kissed her aunt goodbye and returned to her car. She was just fastening her seat belt when her cell phone rang.

David the Bear didn't waste much time, she thought. Hello was hardly out of her mouth when he asked, "Got any plans for this evening? What are you doing for dinner?"

"Hmm. Dinner." She tried with all her might to suppress a grin even though he obviously couldn't see it. And the answer she gave him wasn't all that far from the truth. "I was just now considering picking up a crisp domestic salad with a light Italian dressing and croutons, of course, while on my way home, then pairing it with delicately microwaved macaroni and cheese. Care to join me?"

"I've got a much better idea," he said.

Yes, he did indeed have a better idea, Libby thought when she finally closed her phone. Being chauffeured to a penthouse dinner at the magnificent Marquis most definitely trumped a take-out salad and lowly mac and cheese.

Three

The penthouse elevator door chimed as it swooshed open, and David, who'd been waiting in the marbled vestibule, turned to greet not the strawberry blonde he was expecting, but rather a luscious peach parfait. His heart shifted perceptibly in his chest and his entire body quickened at the sight of her. The woman looked utterly magnificent. If he'd felt merely smitten with Libby Jost before now, right this second he considered himself completely in lust.

She stepped forward into the vestibule, disclosing a delicate and adorable gold-sandaled foot along with a sleek and shapely length of calf. The pale peach fabric clung to her hips and her breasts, to her whole body like a second, shimmering skin. David swallowed hard. Just as he'd suspected, though, it didn't help all that much.

"Welcome to the Marquis," he said, striding forward and claiming her hand the way he wanted to claim every lovely inch of her from her tumbled hair to her golden toes. He couldn't help but think that her work put her on the wrong side of a camera.

"Thank you." She laughed then, a sound that was slightly husky and infinitely sexy. "I know I'm ridiculously overdressed," she said, "but I decided, since this will probably be my only visit here, at least to the penthouse, I might as well go all the way."

David clenched his teeth. He wasn't going to touch that remark with a ten-foot pole. Not even a twenty-foot one.

She blinked, and the color on her smooth cheeks deepened several shades, turning from delicate pink to a deep warm rose. "Fashion-wise, I mean."

Stupid, Libby chided herself. Even without the benefit of wine, she'd managed to put her foot in her mouth immediately upon her arrival. The man—quite gorgeous now and elegant in a black turtleneck and black pleated slacks—must think she's an absolute and unredeemable twit. She wrenched her gaze away from his face, let it stray around the suite and then immediately focused on the southern wall of floor-to-ceiling windows.

"What an incredible view," she exclaimed. "Oh, it's just amazing."

David reached for her hand. "Come have a closer look," he said, leading her into the suite, across a gorgeous oriental carpet that must've been the size of a football field and around burnished leather chairs and glass tables that gleamed richly in the ambient light. It was as if she'd landed smack in the middle of an issue of *Architectural Digest*.

As exquisite as the penthouse's décor was, the view from its enormous window was even better. Or so it seemed to Libby until her roving gaze practically skidded to a halt upon the scruffy landscape of the Haven View just across the highway. She'd never seen the place from so high, and it was not, she had to admit, a very pleasant sight. It was horrible, in fact. It was worse than horrible. The place was pure suburban blight.

The little guest cabins she'd been so thrilled about painting looked more like outhouses from this vantage point, and the glass globes of the lights along the driveway were so dusty and bug-splattered they barely seemed to shine at all. Squinting, she even decided that she could detect some rather significant damage to the shingles of a few cabin roofs, which was something she hadn't even thought to consider in her careful renovation budget.

It all struck her as utterly depressing, every feature, every shingle, every single square inch of the entire bedraggled place. Once again, she feared that her fifty thousand dollars wasn't nearly enough to bring the poor old motel up to speed. Not even a turtle's speed. She must've sighed just then or muttered something under her breath, because David, who was standing close behind her, touched her shoulder ever so gently and asked her what was wrong.

Everything, she thought, before she managed to put her game face back on as best she could, then turned to her host. "Well, the good news, I guess, is that the poor old Haven View will be hidden

by leaves for eight or nine months every year from the guests of the Marquis. The bad news is worse than I imagined.”

She waved a hand in front of her hoping to rid herself of these brand-new, unbidden feelings of despair. “I really don’t even want to talk about it.”

There was a small flicker of something close to sympathy or sadness in his expression for just an instant before he said, “Come on. Let’s forget about the southern view for now.” He clasped her hand in his once again. “Let me show you the really incredible views to the east and the west.”

The east view was from a wide, slate-floored terrace with gorgeous wrought-iron furniture where Libby could easily imagine wearing an ivory satin robe with matching slippers while lingering over a late breakfast of croissants, sweet butter and strong Jamaican coffee. Right at that moment she could almost taste it.

“On a fine, clear day,” he told her, “you can see the Arch.” He pointed. “Right there. You’ll have to come back sometime with your camera.”

“I’d love to,” she said. Oh, boy, would she love to. “I could get some really interesting shots.”

A minute or so later, having gone from one gorgeous room to another even more gorgeous room, the promised view to the west was revealed when David pushed a button on a bedside console and a whole wall of drapery silently slithered back. Outside the exposed window, on the highway below, eastbound headlights shone like diamonds while westbound taillights sparkled like a river of rubies, and she could actually see a bevy of stars twinkling in the dark sky above them all. It momentarily took her breath away.

Oh, how Libby wished she had her camera and a few specific lenses and filters just then to record it all. She wished she had a tripod in order to take a terrific time-lapse exposure of the traffic. Despite David’s polite invitation a few minutes earlier, she doubted she’d ever be up here in the penthouse again.

“Does Mr. Halstrom have a place like this in all of his hotels?” she asked.

“More or less,” he answered in a tone that struck her as rather brusque. “But when he’s not in residence, his suites are all available to guests for the right price.”

“Don’t even tell me the price,” Libby said. “I couldn’t stand to hear it considering we try so hard to rent our dinky cabins for sixty-five dollars a day.” Sadly, she thought, that economical price was probably far more than the accommodations were worth. Jeez. How long would it be before they might actually be forced to pay people to stay there, just for appearances sake?

“Maybe the new paint job will help,” David offered, sounding vaguely unconvinced if not downright disbelieving.

“Yeah. Maybe.” She sighed. And maybe, she thought, maybe there were far more worthy recipients of her unexpected little fortune than the over-the-hill Haven View. Maybe she should reconsider the whole ridiculous endeavor. Like Scarlett O’Hara, she decided to think about that tomorrow.

Libby found herself forcing another smile then as she turned to her oh-so-handsome host. “Didn’t you promise me a glass of red wine, David?”

The garnet-colored wine, French and positively ancient by her standards, was far and away the best that Libby had ever drunk. She sipped it cautiously, dreading a repeat performance of the night before, while David showed her the other rooms in this incredible place. The bathrooms alone were worth a hefty admission price.

Dinner arrived almost magically, wheeled into the suite on two shiny silver carts before being placed on the dining room table by two smartly outfitted waiters who gave the impression they were auditioning for a play, or perhaps a silent movie as neither one of them made so much as a sound above the clink of a water glass or the soft thud of a piece of heavy silver on the tabletop.

There were four different entrées to choose from, including a buttery salmon, a gorgeous filet mignon, lamb in an exotic mint sauce and roasted chicken with truffles that Libby ultimately couldn’t

resist. She was almost tempted to ask for a doggie bag in which to carry home the rejected dishes that the waiters promptly and silently wheeled away.

“Oh, what a terrible waste,” she said with a sigh as she watched them turn a corner on their way to the elevator.

“Don’t worry,” David told her as he prepared to cut into his steak. “When that food gets back to the kitchen, it’ll be devoured within a matter of seconds. The chef is working with a small staff prior to the opening while he refines the menu. I had him send up four choices because I didn’t know what you might like. Feel perfectly free to be a critic. How’s the chicken?”

“To die for,” she said, reveling in her very first bite. “And the vegetables actually look edible which doesn’t often happen where I come from.”

She tried a petite, buttery carrot dusted with parsley and some other herb she couldn’t identify, then rolled her eyes in delight. “Who knew a lowly carrot could taste so good? You know, David, your boss must weigh a ton if he eats like this every single day.”

“Well, he works out a lot, I’m told,” he said before taking another sip of wine and another bite of his filet. “I’d like to hear more about your photography, if you don’t mind discussing it.”

She didn’t mind at all. It was probably her favorite subject and she was quite capable of going on endlessly about it, which she proceeded to do. But every time she politely—and curiously—attempted to change the subject and to inquire about him, David smoothly and affably turned the conversation back to cameras and lenses.

After dinner, they returned to the living room with its glorious window wall, where Libby avoided another painful glance at the shabby motel below. It was nearly midnight when she finally said, “I really should be getting back to Haven View. The man I left in charge, my uncle Doug, is almost eighty years old and really needs his rest.”

David’s left eyebrow quirked. “And you assume, I suppose, that your uncle has been overrun with demanding guests all the while you’ve been here?”

Libby had to hand it to him. The guy really did try to suppress his laughter even though he didn’t quite succeed. She appreciated his sense of humor despite this particular, rather hurtful and annoying subject matter.

“You never know,” she said with a little shrug of her shoulders before she stood up and extended her hand. “It was a truly lovely dinner, David. Thank you.”

He stepped forward, smoothly brushing her hand aside as his arms reached out to encircle her. He gathered her close, kissed the top of her head, then her forehead, then the bridge of her nose. “I’ve wanted to do this all evening, Libby,” he said, his breath warm and fragrant as expensive French wine on her face.

Libby felt like whimpering, “*What took you so long?*” But then David’s mouth covered hers, and speech was suddenly and completely out of the question. She couldn’t even think, but only inhale his wonderful scent and savor the rich remnants of wine on his lips. A tiny moan mounted in her throat, threatening to break loose and inform him just how much she craved his touch.

He leaned back slightly, used his thumb to angle her face up to meet his gaze. Those lovely hazel eyes of his had deepened to a dark and passionate green. “Stay here with me tonight. Don’t go back to that dump.”

Something clicked in her head, and Libby blinked hard as her eyes began to focus again. She could feel her mouth flattening to a hard, thin line. Then she straightened up even as she took a step back, out of his arms.

“I don’t want to be rude,” she said, “especially after that divine dinner, and also because I truly like you, David. I like you enormously. But I won’t have my aunt’s lifetime endeavor trashed or made fun of. Not by you. Not by anyone.” She paused a second, her eyes still locked on his. “I hope that’s clear.”

He nodded. “Got it,” he said. He sounded absolutely sincere if not somewhat taken aback by her rather unexpected challenge. “I won’t do it again.”

“Good.” Libby smiled. “I’m glad you understand.” Then she lifted her chin and tapped a finger to her lips. “Now kiss me goodnight again. Please.”

Women rarely stood up to him, either professionally or privately. It was such a rarity, in fact, that David couldn’t remember the last time it had happened. Hell, men rarely stood up to him these days. His little Libby was a tigress in peach silk. He smiled in the darkness at the memory of her fierce, flashing eyes, her stiffened spine and her delicate but formidable chin. More power to her, in fact. She’d had every right to put him in his place after he’d spoken disparagingly of her motel, wreck that it was.

He cursed himself now for deceiving this wonderful woman from the get-go. Had he ever had a more stupid, more self-defeating, almost suicidal idea? He was going to have to make it all right, but at the moment he didn’t have a clue how to do it. All he knew was that he didn’t want to lose her. Well, hell. He didn’t even *have* her yet, but Lord how he wanted her.

He turned over in bed, pummeled the pillow once more with his fist, and eyed the bedside clock. It was two-fifteen. He’d be likely to wake her if he called her right now. With any luck, however, she’d be awake also, just across the highway, tossing and turning and thinking about him. Yeah. He should be so lucky.

Well, maybe he was. She answered her phone on the second ring.

David skipped the usual telephone introductions and niceties and immediately said, “Let’s do something fun tomorrow.”

A soft, sexy murmur came through the distance. “Like what?” she purred.

“I don’t know. Let’s just go somewhere, anywhere. We’ll just hold hands and wander. We’ll be kids on our very first date.”

She laughed, and the sound was practically delicious. “I’ll have you know,” she said, “I sprained my ankle on my very first date.”

“No problem. I’ll carry you.” David smiled in the darkness, imagining her in his arms. “Where should we go?” he asked her. “What about the zoo?”

“Been there.”

“The art museum?”

She let out a long sigh. “Been there, too.”

“How about the Arch?”

“Done that.”

David, at a loss now, said, “Well, pick someplace. Anyplace. It doesn’t have to be in St. Louis.”

She was quiet a moment and then she said, “I know. Let’s go to Hannibal.”

“Hannibal?” David scratched his head. “You mean Hannibal, as in Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn?”

“Uh-huh. That’s exactly what I mean. I haven’t been there since I was a kid, and it’s only an hour and a half or so away. I’ll even drive if you’d like.”

“Wait. I’ve got a better idea. Can you be ready to go by ten tomorrow morning?”

“Sure. I’m pretty sure I can get all my work out of the way by ten. Definitely by ten-thirty.”

“Great. I’ll send someone to pick you up then. Sleep well, darlin’. I’ll see you at ten-thirty.”

Then he closed his phone and, like a contented little boy who’d just had his warm milk and chocolate-chip cookies, David at long last drifted off to sleep.

On her side of the highway, Libby finally slept well, too.

Four

Early the next morning Libby taped a sign to the office door. Closed for renovations. She wasn't kidding herself that half a dozen or more cars would suddenly be turning into the motel's drive in search of accommodations, but the sign made her feel better anyway knowing her aunt Elizabeth would approve of properly informing the public. Libby was sure she could count on Doug to pass along the news when he visited her in the rehab facility.

The crew of young ponytailed painters from the Marquis had returned bright and early. Two of the cabins were already finished with their fresh coats of cream and deep green paint and they didn't look all that bad in Libby's admittedly biased opinion. After admiring them, she called a roofing company to arrange for an inspection of the damage she'd seen from the penthouse the night before. It wouldn't do any good to have brand-new décor, she figured, only to have it ruined by a leaky roof.

What else hadn't she considered? Libby wondered, when she'd budgeted her fifty-thousand-dollar gift? At the moment, she didn't even want to think about all the structural problems she might have breezily overlooked while concentrating on the place's worn and outdated décor. Strange and horrible visions of wood rot and mildew and termites began to tumble around in her brain, threatening yet another headache, something she certainly didn't need this morning.

She looked at her watch and realized she had a little less than half an hour before she'd be swept off to the Marquis once again. Libby sighed, silently acknowledging that her time would be better spent here, going over and adjusting renovation plans, than in Hannibal where she merely intended to have fun with a gorgeous guy.

It had been several years since she'd had the least bit of interest in a man, and now—faced with her fifty-thousand-dollar motel makeover challenge—along came David, who actually made her heart flutter while he gave her the impression that his own heart might be fluttering a little bit, too. How was that for terrible timing?

She showered, dressed and was ready to go without a moment to spare when the hotel's black limousine pulled into the drive. Jeff, the young man who had driven the limo the night before, opened the rear door for her. She thanked him, and then once he was settled up in front behind the wheel, she asked him, "How do you like working at the Marquis?"

"I love it," he said, his chin jutting over his shoulder in her direction. "It's a great place. Well, I guess you already know that."

"I do," Libby responded. "It's a beautiful building. Mr. Halstrom certainly hired the right architect."

"For sure. That Japanese team is tops."

Libby frowned. She had no idea that David was affiliated with an overseas company. He'd never mentioned it, and she had simply assumed he was a one-man operation, and a local one at that. It was probably a naive assumption in this day and age when everything and everyone seemed to operate on a global basis.

And then she wondered if David's permanent residence was in Japan, and, if so, just how soon he would be returning there. But then she decided she didn't want to know the answer to that particular question, at least not right now when she was looking so forward to their day in Hannibal, not to mention the night that might follow it.

Well, a girl could hope, couldn't she? She sank back into the luxurious leather upholstery. She didn't want to think about anything except the day ahead and the pleasure it might bring.

What she'd never anticipated, though, and never would have in a million years, was that David would have a helicopter on the roof of the Marquis, waiting to whisk them north along the Mississippi River.

"I've never been in a helicopter," she said more than a bit nervously as David boosted her inside it.

The rotors overhead were beginning to whirl and roar so he had to shout back. "Well, I've never been to Hannibal, Libby, so I guess that makes us even." He settled himself inside, then held her hand tightly as they lifted off into the bright blue sky. It wasn't much more than a minute or two before the big hotel appeared as just a shiny speck in the distance behind them.

The trip that would normally have taken them an hour and a half by car took them a mere thirty minutes in the air. The river town was busy, apparently preparing for a Huckleberry Finn festival, but since it was a weekday the tourists weren't exactly overrunning the place as they might have on a weekend. By a little past one o'clock, Libby and David had visited Mark Twain's boyhood home, ogled Tom Sawyer's whitewashed fence and done a quick, fun trek through the museum, all the while holding hands like a couple of goofy kids. Like Tom and Becky, Libby thought.

For lunch they ordered hot dogs and fries from a street vendor, then carried their goodies down to the riverbank where they sat for an hour talking, watching as the Mighty Mississippi rolled by. As before, it was mostly Libby who talked up a storm while David listened and tended to deflect most of her questions back to her.

"Where were you born?" she asked him.

"Texas," he answered, raising his hand to dab a bit of mustard from a corner of her mouth. "What about you?"

"Here," she said. "Missouri." Then Libby spent a while talking about her parents' deaths, growing up at the Haven View and her aunt Elizabeth and Doug. As far as life stories went, hers wasn't very exotic. It wasn't even very interesting.

"Why did you want to be an architect?" she asked.

His answer was barely more than a shrug, followed by, "Why did you decide to be a photographer?"

Of course, having been asked about her favorite subject, she went into the whole story about her very first camera, her work at the St. Louis newspaper, and on and on.

She snapped pictures all the while—of the wharf, of the riverbank and the river—but hard as she tried, she wasn't able to capture David's face in a single frame. The man had an uncanny knack of turning, bending or lifting his hand at the exact moment she took the shot. She was almost beginning to believe he had some sort of camera phobia, and she so desperately wanted a picture of him, especially since he might be going to Japan at any time and she'd never see him again.

The mere thought of his leaving nearly made her queasy. She excused herself to return to Main Street for a bathroom visit. And then, smart little cookie that she was, she slipped a telephoto lens onto her camera while walking toward town, slowly turned and managed to get some really incredible shots of the man she'd left behind on the riverbank.

The gorgeous autumn day had turned cold late that afternoon, and by the time they climbed out of the helicopter on the roof of the Marquis, Libby was shivering.

"I know just how to warm you up," David said, punching a number on his phone and telling whoever responded to have the hot tub in the penthouse ready in half an hour.

Then he led her to an elevator whose door swooshed open moments later just a few steps outside the cozy and dark little bar on the mezzanine.

"Two brandies, Tom. The good stuff," he said, holding up two fingers in the direction of the bartender who appeared to be presiding over an empty room.

"Right away, Mr...."

"Thanks," David said, cutting him off as he led Libby to a banquette in the corner where a candle glowed in the center of table.

She scooted into the lush leather seat. David slid in next to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "You'll be warm in just one minute, darlin'. I promise."

She'd already warmed up considerably just from the heat of his body so close to hers. The subsequent brandy, in a huge crystal snifter, was hardly a match for her companion's warmth, she thought. And then Libby cautioned herself not to become too accustomed to the man or his warmth since it probably wouldn't be long before he was warming some other woman on the other side of the planet.

"I had more fun today than I've had in a long, long time," she said, lifting the brandy glass toward him. "Here's to my gracious and most gallant host."

The clink of the crystal when their glasses touched was a bit of music all on its own.

"Here's to Tom and Becky and Huck," he said. "And here's to you, Libby. I don't think I've ever had such a good time. Not even when I was a kid." He put the snifter down, and then his brow furrowed as he gathered in a long, deep breath.

It was one of those moments when a tiny little *uhoh* sounded inside her head. Furrows and long, deep breaths were rarely, if ever, followed by good news. Furrows and long, deep breaths usually, almost always, meant trouble.

"Libby," he said softly, his eyes locking on to hers. "There's something that I..."

His cell phone let out a sharp little bleep just then. David cursed as he wrenched it from his pocket and very nearly broke it open in order to respond. "What?" he growled. After listening for a minute or so, he pressed a button to put the caller on hold. "I have to take this infernal call, Libby. I'm sorry, darlin'."

"Go ahead." Libby swirled the remaining brandy in her glass. The candlelight turned its color to a dark and lovely honey. "Take your time, David. I truly don't mind."

He kissed her forehead before he slid out of the booth, then walked—well, the man stalked, if truth be told—to the far end of the bar to continue the conversation. From her vantage point, and judging from his body language, it looked as if he were bestowing some very bad news on the person at the other end of the connection.

For the moment, Libby was just thankful it wasn't her.

David felt his mood darkening. Damn. He'd just had one of the best days of his entire life, but then business interrupted in the form of a threatened lawsuit by an irate guest in his London hotel, and his nervous Nellie of a British attorney felt obliged to alert him, personally, posthaste. David told the hysterical attorney if he ever called him again, he'd have him chained in the Tower of London, then drawn and quartered in front of Buckingham Palace with CNN given the exclusive rights to broadcast it live.

And now, to make matters worse, he'd be damned if he could locate something for Libby to wear in the hot tub. The little complimentary garments should have been stowed in a drawer in the penthouse spa, but it appeared as if someone—some soon-to-be former employee—had decided to stash hotel brochures, postcards and stationery there instead.

"It's all right, David," Libby said from her perch on the edge of the hot tub. "I can wear my bra and panties. It's not a problem. I've done it before."

The vision of her clad only in scanty silks, see-through no doubt, beside some big gorilla in a hot tub didn't do a lot to lighten his current mood. He'd summon his assistant, Jeff, in a moment, no doubt ruining another of the man's dinners. But meanwhile he continued to search like a madman, cursing, slamming drawers and cabinet doors, and all the while berating himself for losing the opportunity to confess to Libby and tell her just who he really was. That, he well knew, was at the heart of his current furor.

Earlier, downstairs in the darkness of the bar, the words had been right there on his tongue, and he'd been ready to get down on his knees if he had to in order for her to forgive him. He wanted her that much. He was going to tell her now, even before their time in the hot tub. What sense was there in prolonging it? Hell. It wasn't as if he were going to confess to her that he was an axe murderer.

She would forgive him, wouldn't she? She had to, otherwise...

Just behind him then, Libby cleared her throat and uttered a whispery little *ta-da*.

He turned to see a vision of absolute delight, Libby clad only in feminine briefs and a snow-white lacey bra. Considering how great she looked when fully clothed, David couldn't even find words to describe her now. She grinned, and then pointed to the bubbling hot tub as she gave a pert little salute.

"Permission to come aboard, sir?"

David sighed inwardly. Whatever he'd intended to confess to her had suddenly flown right out of his head. And he had to admit that, even if he'd remembered, this was not the time to risk a confrontation. He might have been considered a liar under the circumstances, but he wasn't a downright fool.

"Permission granted," he said, quickly shrugging out of his own shirt and jeans, to join her in the warm caress of the water.

Settled chin deep in the wonderfully warm tub, feeling David's lean body right beside hers, Libby's eyes began to drift closed and she nearly fell asleep. How very strange, she thought, to feel so completely at ease with a man she'd only known for a mere two days. It wasn't like her to feel so relaxed with anyone, even after knowing them for months.

"I could stay right here for an entire week," she said, letting go of a soft and wistful sigh. "Maybe even a month."

He chuckled. "I don't know if I'd care to see you turn into a wrinkled, waterlogged prune, darlin'. I have to admit I like you just the way you are."

She turned her head toward him, gazing up at his face where the sexy smile lines had reappeared.

"Do you?"

Her voice was hardly more than a whisper, and even she could hear the longing in her tone. She couldn't help it. She adored this man, and she wanted him with every fiber of her being. If their coming together was fated to be only a brief affair before he went back to Japan, well, then, so be it. *Sayonara* to her dreams of the future. Libby decided to simply live in the present for now. Let the future take care of itself.

Perhaps it was the buoyancy of the water, but David drew her into his arms so effortlessly that Libby felt lighter than a feather. His lips were warm on hers, tender and wonderfully slow and sensuous. The touch of his tongue on hers was tender and exquisite. It seemed, just then, as if they had all the time in the world to explore and discover and make love to each other.

"You're perfect," he whispered. "But I already knew that from the first moment I saw you."

His hand moved to her breast, cupping it, a perfect fit for his smooth wet palm, a perfect distance to her nipple for his thumb to circle and explore. Libby gave a little shudder, and leaned her head back onto the rim of the tub as he covered her neck with languid kisses.

He murmured against her skin. "I've wanted this...I've wanted *you* from the moment I saw you clinging to that silly lamppost like a fallen angel."

"Emphasis on fallen," she said with a little sigh, then blew a puff of air upward to dislodge a damp stray curl from her forehead.

"No." His hand eased from her breast and then smoothed slowly, thrillingly down, over her hip to her inner thigh. "Emphasis on want. I want you, Libby. All of you. Now."

There was a great *whoosh* of water, and then she was high in his arms, clinging to his hard, wet neck as he carried her down a dimly lit hallway and into the bedroom where only the night before she'd watched the traffic flow like a river of jewels out the western window. He put her gently on the bed and left her for a brief moment to open a drawer, tear open a little square package, then returned to gather her into his arms.

“Tell me how to please you,” he said, his fingertips drifting up and down her arm, setting off little shock waves of desire all over her. Then his hand strayed to her leg and the shock waves increased. “Anything you want. Anywhere.”

Libby pressed closer to the hard length of his body, placing the palm of her hand to his cheek and tracing the now barely visible smile lines with her thumb. “Everything about you pleases me,” she said. “I just want you. All of you.”

They made slow, sensuous love while the diamond and ruby traffic lights flickered far below. In Libby’s experience—which admittedly wasn’t vast or all that recent—men tended to go for the gusto, returning to the lady’s pleasure only after crossing the finish line alone. David, however, was in no rush at all. His every touch was leisurely, languid and absolutely divine. He seemed to have infinite pleasure in giving her pleasure.

Then it was Libby, when David at last entered her, who revved up the pace considerably, lifting her hips to meet each thrust of his, wanting almost desperately to capture all of him inside her and to keep him there forever. Their soft murmurs only moments earlier quickened to mutual groans of pleasure.

Everything in Libby’s body curled tighter and tighter, wound up in itself, as she moved toward climax and then...

And then it felt as if her every cell suddenly let go in wave after wave of pleasure so intense she thought she might either laugh or cry or both. Within seconds, David followed her with a final powerful thrust, his whole hard body shuddering in his release.

They simply lay there then, locked in each other’s arms, sated and waiting for their breathing to return to something that resembled normal, if indeed it ever would.

It was nearly nine-thirty before they could rouse themselves from the big bed on the west side of the penthouse. But when David heard a distinct and hungry rumbling coming from the direction of Libby’s stomach, he reached for his phone and called downstairs. The chef, of course, had long ago retired from the kitchen, but an eager sous chef—now in line for a rather hefty raise, David decided—was more than happy to prepare his “special” omelette and a vegetable stir-fry.

When he turned to consult Libby on the meal, her eyes glittered like a wolf just spying a lamb.

“Send it up as quickly as you can,” David told the sous chef.

They ate, quite ravenously, in bed. Libby wore a Marquis bathrobe, and with her tangled hair and her lips still flushed with his kisses, she reminded him of Venus, come to life right here in the Midwest.

“I should probably be getting back to the Haven View,” she said after finishing one of the hotel’s signature amaretto and chocolate-chip cookies.

David frowned. “I thought you said you put a sign on the door saying it’s closed for the duration.”

“I did, but...”

“Well?”

It seemed to dawn on her then that she had no other obligations, at least not at the motel, and there was no one to please for a change but herself. The notion apparently surprised her because she blinked and, for once, since the first time he’d met her, she appeared to be at a loss for words.

But David wasn’t.

“Stay with me, Libby.”

He brushed aside the silver trays, the empty dishes and the glassware, then drew her once more into his arms. “Stay.”

And she did.

Five

When Libby got back to the Haven View at a little after nine the following morning, David's kisses continued to linger on her lips, on her throat, on... Well, everywhere. She felt such a warm and nearly tangible glow inside. It was like a fire that seemed to burn and caress at the same time.

By ten o'clock, however, the fire had fizzled out, most likely because of her tears. The roofing inspector had arrived, looked at all the cabin roofs and then handed her an estimate for forty thousand dollars plus tax.

"Keep in mind," he'd said while shaking his head, "that's just for the roofing, Miss Jost. It doesn't include the new gutters and downspouts this old place badly needs. Otherwise, you're going to see more damage in the future. You can count on it."

After he left, Libby walked inside the apartment behind the office and crumpled on the floor of the shower, letting the hot spray from above blend with her tears. It had been a long, long time since she'd wallowed in self-pity. The last, and probably the only other time she'd given herself permission to break apart, had been when she was ten years old and her cat, Joey, went missing. This morning she felt the way she had when she was ten, as if something so very close to her heart had just been run over or blown to smithereens.

She cried for a long, long time, until she had no more tears to shed, then she dried off, got dressed and went out to the main room of the office where she found Doug wearing his favorite and ancient St. Louis Cardinals sweatshirt while he flipped through a stack of mail. Funny, she thought. If her memory was correct, he'd been wearing a Cardinals T-shirt all those years ago when he'd consoled her about the loss of Joey.

"Morning, honey," he said cheerfully. "Did you have a good time in Hannibal?"

"I had a great time in Hannibal." Libby walked around to the other side of the desk, wrapped her arms around the elderly man's neck and planted a loud kiss on his balding head. "I love you so much, Doug," she said.

"Well, I love you, too, sweetheart." He chuckled. "But what'd I do to deserve such an enthusiastic greeting?"

She flopped onto the ratty floral couch across from the desk. "You were so sweet to me when my little Joey ran away."

Doug scratched his head with the sword-shaped letter opener he'd been using. "Joey. Just a minute. Now let me think back. Was Joey the gerbil or the cat?"

Oh, jeez. She'd completely forgotten about George the gerbil who'd scampered beneath her bed one day, never to be seen again. Well, now she really was depressed.

"Joey was the cat," she said. "He was black with little white slippers on his feet."

"That's right." Doug's whole face seemed to sadden, every line and wrinkle turning downward. "I'm sorry about that, Lib. I remember. You were so unhappy, honey. I'm just glad I managed to soothe your heart a little bit."

Libby let out a long and weary sigh, thinking her heart could surely use a bit of soothing right now. When she was a little girl, she'd always gone to Doug for his comfort as well as his advice. He was patient and kind and incredibly smart. So why not seek his advice now, she wondered. She wasn't exactly doing a stellar job all on her own. She probably should have consulted him from the very beginning of this fifty-thousand dollar debacle.

"Doug..." she said, then hesitated. No, maybe it wasn't such a great idea. He'd tell Aunt Elizabeth every last detail and then all hell would break loose. Libby chewed on her bottom lip, still tender from last night's kisses.

"What, honey? What's bothering you?" Doug asked. "I know something is."

"Am I that transparent?" she asked.

“You are to me, kiddo. You always have been. Want to tell me what’s up?”

Libby crossed her arms over her chest, feeling about ten years old again and horribly vulnerable. “What’s up, huh?” She forced a little half-embarrassed laugh. “Well, let’s see. It’s such a mess that I hardly know where to begin.”

But somehow she began, first with the arrival of the mysterious check for the enormous sum.

Doug stopped her right there. “Wait. Hold it right there, Libby. You’re telling me that somebody, some complete stranger, gave you fifty thousand bucks just because he liked your book about dying and dead motels? It was a wonderful book and all, but that’s a hell of a lot of money just to say thanks for a good read.”

“That’s what I thought, too. I thought it was a joke at first. But the money’s completely legitimate. The bank had no problem with it at all. There’s fifty thousand dollars sitting in my checking account right now just waiting to be spent.”

She followed that amazing bit of news by telling Doug of her hopes and dreams of using the money to revitalize the Haven View. She explained her carefully thought-out plans for both interior and exterior repairs, trying to be true to Aunt Elizabeth’s original plans and color schemes.

When she got to the part about the painters, however, it was a bit tricky to maneuver around the facts because she wasn’t really ready to disclose anything about David or her feelings for him. There was no sense complicating this with the mention of a lover who might not even be here in a week or two.

Finally, Libby concluded her tale with the staggering price of the roof repairs, and then lifted her hands helplessly and said, “I’m still not willing to give up this dream of mine, Doug, but I just don’t know how to make fifty thousand dollars go the distance that’s required. I just don’t know if it’s possible. I’d really, really welcome any ideas or suggestions, if you have them. But, please, please don’t just tell me I’m crazy for wanting to do this.”

Behind the desk, he closed his pale blue eyes a moment and pressed his lips together as if he didn’t know what to say or didn’t even want to respond at all, which Libby could easily understand. It was her money, after all, and therefore her problem. And she’d certainly made a mess of it so far.

Then Doug cursed gruffly, something he rarely did, before he curled one hand into a fist and pounded the desktop with it.

“Dammit, Libby. I wish you’d come to me, to both of us right off the bat. I know you meant well making it a surprise, but your aunt Elizabeth and I are way too old for surprises, honey. We like to know what’s what. We *need* to know. It’s pretty important at our age,” he muttered. “We really need to be kept inside the loop instead of outside in the dark.”

Libby sighed. Doug was absolutely right. She should have informed them. She wished that she had.

“Well, now you know. *What’s what* is fifty thousand dollars is burning a big hole in my pocket. And now that you know about it, you can help me do this right, Doug, if it’s at all possible.” She narrowed her gaze on his face. “Is it possible? Or is it just a silly and impossible dream? Tell me the truth.”

He leaned back in his chair, then rubbed his hand slowly across his white-whiskered chin before he spoke. “That’s a generous thing you want to do for her, Libby. I think your aunt Elizabeth will be thrilled as all to get-out to see this old dump looking the way it did in the old days. It’s been hard on her, watching the place go to seed the way it has over the years.”

“Oh, I know,” Libby said. “And I so desperately want to change all that. I want to make her really happy.”

“I know you do, sweetie.” Doug sighed. “But fifty thousand dollars, as grand a sum as it is, just isn’t going to cut it. Not with prices like they are today, and not with all the repairs we’re in need of around here. Your fifty thousand dollars, honey, is hardly a drop in the bucket.” He shook his head

so very sadly. "I'm afraid it can't be done, Libby. Not unless you're a magician or that secret admirer of yours plans to add a million or two to his original gift."

Libby dragged in her lower lip and bit down on it, trying with all her might not to give way to another flood of tears. What good would they do?

"Unless..." Doug leaned forward in his chair.

"What? Unless what?"

"Ever heard that old expression, Libby, about there being more than one way to skin a cat?"

She nodded, wondering what in the world he was getting at and why he was smiling all of a sudden when everything seemed so horribly, bitterly bleak. He looked like a damned Cheshire cat, and she wanted to skin *him* at the moment. "What?" she pressed. "What are you thinking?"

"Do you remember the work I did a while back for Father James O'Fallon when he was organizing his halfway house and homeless shelter?"

Again, Libby nodded. She remembered it well. Doug had volunteered his time as an accountant to help the energetic young priest acquire an affordable facility and to properly set up his charitable organization. That had been years ago, but the place—Heaven's Gate—was still doing wonderful work by providing food and shelter and hope to those who lacked all three.

"Just what are you getting at, Doug?"

"I drive into the city to visit that place pretty often, you know. Mostly just to chew the fat with Father James. He's a bigger Cardinals' fan than I am, and that's saying something."

"But what does that have to do with Haven View?" she asked. She had absolutely no idea where he was going with this.

"There's a new program at Heaven's Gate," he said. "It just started a couple months ago. They're training some of their people to work in the trades. Painting, carpentry, plumbing, things like that."

Now a little bulb started to glow above Libby's head as she suddenly saw just where he was going. "All the things we need done here," she said.

Doug nodded. "Yep. We need the work done and I can promise you that Father James needs fifty thousand dollars. What do you think, honey?"

Libby stood up so fast she nearly fell over. "My God! I think you're a genius, Doug. That is just inspired. Can we drive downtown right now and talk to him?"

The elderly man laughed. "I guess with that Closed sign on the door we can leave any time we want, Libby. Let me just give the good father a call."

Across the highway, high above it in the penthouse, David was just getting out of bed at eleven-fifteen. He'd gotten up a few hours earlier to see Libby safely off with Jeff, his reliable chauffeur and assistant and then Jeff had immediately returned to see what else the boss needed done.

"I haven't had time to go through all the Haven View documents yet," David told him while trying to stifle a yawn. "Anything I should know about the situation right now? Anything about it that can't wait a couple of hours?"

Jeff shook his head. "I think it'll keep. I probably shouldn't say this, Mr. Halstrom, but you look like you could use a few more hours of sleep."

He usually maintained a fairly stern demeanor with his employees, but David couldn't help but laugh at the remark. "I'm getting too old for this," he said.

"Well, perhaps it's time to settle down, boss. Or at least to think about it."

The kid rarely, if ever, made personal observations or remarks. A few days ago such comments might've earned him a dark, scathing look and a swift verbal reprimand. Today, however, David felt much too mellow and too downright happy to do anything but say, "Maybe you're right, kid. Maybe you're right."

Now, after a few hours of sleep, he felt somewhat restored, but that little thread of giddiness and gladness was still there inside him. Instead of his habitual Grinch demeanor, he felt almost like

a little boy on Christmas morning, and that was some kind of first, he decided, because even when he was a little boy, there wasn't much giddiness or gladness in him. None, if truth be told.

"Libby, Libby," he muttered into the mirror while he shaved. "What the hell are you doing to me?"

After he showered and dressed, he punched her number into his cell phone. She'd written it down for him before leaving, but now he couldn't remember if it was her cell or the front desk at the crummy motel. Either way, there was no answer, which made him feel a little sad and lost for a moment, until feeling sad and lost made him feel like a real jerk.

So, he proceeded to call the Halstrom home office in Corpus Christi. Surely there would be somebody there he could yell at in order to drive this sappiness out of his system.

Once Libby and Doug were downtown, she asked him if he'd mind if they stopped at the newspaper's office for a minute so she could drop off some film for developing. Leave of absence or not, she'd become incredibly spoiled by the paper's freebies. Most newspapers had gone completely digital these days, but the St. Louis paper, out of nostalgia perhaps or pure laziness, still maintained a small, cramped and cobwebby darkroom.

Inside the building, she didn't want to waste time so she tried hard to avoid people she knew—and there were so many of them—as she made her way to the northwest corner of the third floor where her good pal, Hannah Corson, was on duty, looking harried and hassled as always. Libby plucked several film cans from her handbag.

"Can you run these for me, Hannah? No rush, but it'd be wonderful to have the prints in two or three days."

"Sure. No problem." Hannah took the film cans and promptly stashed them on a shelf in a little metal box labeled "To Do." "So, it's good to see you, Libby. How's everything going out at the Weary Traveler?"

Libby couldn't help but laugh. Her coworkers must've come up with a few hundred alternate names for the Haven View in the past decade, most of them rather risqué if not downright X-rated. A few brave souls had even come out to spend the night in one of the little cabins, and although they all claimed to have enjoyed the experience, she noticed nobody ever made a return engagement.

"Everything's going great," she said, surprised that she actually meant it.

"How 'bout hanging around and having lunch with me?"

"Thanks, Hannah, but Doug's waiting for me downstairs."

"Okay. Well, I'll give you a call when your prints are ready. Probably day after tomorrow. I'm backed up here for the Sunday edition. You know how it is. I miss your nice, crisp black-and-white shots, Libby."

Already at the door on her way out, Libby blew her a kiss. "Thanks, Hannah. I owe you. Again."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Everybody owes me," the woman grumbled. "I really should change my name to Hannah Kodak, I guess."

When she got back to the street, Doug had moved to the driver's seat of her ancient minivan. "Hop in, Libby," he said, starting the engine. "Come on. Shake a leg. We're already ten minutes late."

She hopped in, and immediately reached for the seat belt to yank it across herself and fasten it tight. Doug had always been a very creative driver, and now that he was in his late seventies, he didn't seem to feel the rules of the road applied to him personally. She held her breath as they whizzed three blocks north and then two blocks west to the Heaven's Gate facility.

For all the time Libby had spent at the newspaper's office these past years, she rarely visited the adjacent area to the north. Little wonder, because there wasn't much there except crumbling, boarded-up buildings and vacant lots filled with weeds and every kind of trash imaginable. Ever since finishing her book about down-and-out motels, she'd been hoping to be struck by an idea for another book.

It occurred to her now that there was a strange, haunting, even terrible beauty in all this urban decay. There was a burned-out church on a corner that almost seemed to be begging her for a series

of photographs. Libby filed the notion in the back of her brain, hoping that once the repairs were accomplished at the motor court, she'd have time to pursue the concept.

Doug whipped the minivan into a small gravel parking lot, hit the brakes and skidded to a stop, then turned off the engine. "Here we are, Libby, my girl. Let's go. We don't want to keep Father James waiting all afternoon. He's a very busy guy."

As she climbed out of the vehicle, she remembered to check her cell phone for messages. Good grief. There were a half-dozen calls, all of them from David. She didn't know whether to feel flattered or alarmed. Well, emergency or not, he'd simply have to wait until she met with Father James. The fate of the Haven View seemed to be hanging in the balance of this quickly arranged meeting. She couldn't allow anything to distract her.

Not even David.

Six

After their meeting and a brief tour of Heaven's Gate, Father James walked Libby and Doug out to the parking lot. The priest had listened intently to their proposal and seemed to be fascinated by it even though the fine points hadn't been worked out yet. In all honesty, the plan was barely past the light bulb over the head stage, but Libby and Doug had been eager and enthusiastic in their presentation, if not burdened by the details. Obviously the fifty thousand dollars provided Father James with more than a little incentive to take it under consideration.

"I'll present it to my board of directors when we meet early next week," he told them. "And I expect they'll be equally intrigued and enthusiastic."

Libby tried hard to hide her disappointment at the delay. "I don't suppose you could do it any sooner."

He gave her a patient, practically angelic smile, one he must've used a hundred or more times a day in this facility, and then he shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

"That's plenty soon," Doug said. "And remember, both of you, we still have to present this plan to Elizabeth, and Lord only knows—pardon me, Father—how she'll respond. She can be downright cranky and stubborn as all get-out sometimes."

Libby rolled her eyes.

Father James gazed heavenward a moment, then said, "Well, I've been known to get cranky and stubborn myself. If this is meant to be, my friends, it will happen. Perhaps we should simply leave it at that for the time being."

Easier said than done, Libby thought on the drive home. It wasn't going to be so easy for her to put the brakes on her big plan, even if only until next week. Now which one of them was going to make a heartfelt presentation to Aunt Elizabeth, she wondered.

Afternoon westbound traffic was fairly light, so she used her right hand to flip open her cell phone which now registered two additional calls, both of them from David. Libby couldn't help but smile. Persistent fellow, her handsome architect, wasn't he? And, oh my, she thought, how she adored it.

Doug pointed to her phone. "That wouldn't be your new suitor, would it, Libby?"

She nodded.

"I'm looking forward to meeting him."

Libby laughed. "Well, as Father James would say, *All in good time, my dear Doug. All in good time.*"

As it turned out, Libby didn't have to return David's calls. He was waiting at the Haven View—arms crossed and one hip lodged against his Jag—when she and Doug got back.

Libby's heartbeat immediately picked up speed. How was it possible, she wondered, that this man looked better, more handsome and even more desirable every time she laid eyes on him? At this rate, she would surely go into cardiac arrest at the mere sight of him in a week or so. She could only hope that she caused a similar, significant drumbeat inside his hardcarved chest.

By the time she'd parked the minivan in back of the office, he was standing next to the driver's side door, reaching out to open it.

"Hey," she said, sliding from behind the wheel and practically into his arms. "I was just going to call you."

"So you got my calls?"

She laughed. "I got them all. Yes. They very nearly melted my cell phone."

"I missed you."

Well, jeez, now, in addition to her phone, he was melting her heart. "I'm glad," she said softly. "I missed you, too. Hey, I want you to meet somebody very special to me."

By now, Doug had climbed out of the passenger side of the van and was walking toward them, looking once again like a grinning Cheshire cat.

"Doug, I'd like you to meet David," she said. "David, this is Doug, the very best father in the world."

They shook hands, and Doug immediately said, "I've heard a lot about you, young man. Libby tells me you designed that gorgeous building across the street."

David lowered his head and consulted the pebbles beneath his feet for a moment before he said, "Yes, sir."

"Well, let me congratulate you." Doug angled his head northward. "She's a real beauty."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'll leave you two alone. I never did finish up today's mail in the office so I guess I better get to it." Doug kissed Libby's forehead, then turned to walk away.

"Nice guy," David said softly.

Libby nodded. "Yes, he is."

"I really did miss you today." He reached out to touch the back of his fingertips to her cheek.

There was a slightly yearning quality to his voice that Libby had never heard before, and judging from the expression on his face, he really had missed her.

"Good," she said. "I'm glad you did."

"Come back to the hotel with me," he said, pulling her into his arms and burying his face in her neck. "We can play in the hot tub again, and then see what else the kitchen can come up with for our dinner."

Libby made a little humming sound deep in her throat. "That sounds divine, but..."

He lifted his head. "But what?"

"I just hate to leave Doug alone this evening."

"Is he ill?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. The man's healthy as a horse. It's just that we're working on this wonderful idea, and there's so much to discuss."

"What sort of idea?" he asked.

"Well..."

Just then Doug walked around the rear corner of the office, jingling a set of car keys in his hand. "I'm off to see Elizabeth now, Libby. I'll probably stay there and have supper with her while I tell her about today. If you don't need me back here, I'll just go on home afterward, honey."

"Give her my love," Libby said. "And let me know what she says, Doug, will you? As soon as you can."

"Will do." He appeared only a bit stiff and awkward as he angled into the driver's seat of his old Pontiac. "Nice meeting you, David," he said just before turning the key in the ignition.

"Hope to see you again, sir," David responded before he smiled down at Libby. "Looks to me like somebody's a free woman this evening."

The free woman laughed, a luscious sound if ever David had heard one, then took his hand to lead him around the office and into the center of the pebbled drive. The place was deserted. As it should have been, David thought.

Libby made a broad and sweeping gesture with her arm.

"Pick a cabin, my dear. Any cabin," she said. "Or choose a number between one and six."

"What?"

"Choose a cabin, David. We've got the whole place to ourselves." She grinned up at him. "My personal choice would be Three, since it's my lucky number, not to mention the fact that the shower in there still works pretty well."

David decided that his brain was probably operating inefficiently because his bloodstream was shunting its contents below his waist at the moment. She wanted to make love here, in this squalor,

rather than in the silk sheets and wall-to-wall splendor of the Marquis across the street? Make love *here*? Was she nuts?

Maybe the better question from David's point of view was could he even perform here under the circumstances, knowing he was making a concerted effort to acquire the crummy Haven View in order to tear it down.

Early this afternoon, after going through the paperwork, he'd sent Jeff, in the guise of a real-estate investor, to pay a visit to Libby's aunt Elizabeth in the rehab facility, where he had offered the woman whatever price she wanted for the place. "Name your price," Jeff had told her mere seconds before the old lady called the front desk to have this shady weasel escorted from her room.

Having struck out with Aunt Elizabeth, David then opted for plan B, and had directed Jeff to prepare a statement for the municipal council, requesting this acreage to be officially designated as blighted, and thus eligible for condemnation and immediate demolition.

The proposal to the municipal council also included the Halstrom's promise to develop the condemned property, its subsequent usage to be determined at a later date. Jeff was probably working on the document right this minute, dotting *i*'s and crossing *t*'s.

David let go of a long sigh. It wasn't that he didn't know he was working at cross purposes with Libby, but suddenly his deception hit him quite physically. He could feel his erection withering at the mere thought of Libby's reaction to this news. She'd hate him for it. And the sad fact was that she'd have every right to hate him.

"I need to make a quick call," he said, reaching for his phone, then flicking it open and hitting Jeff's number. "This will only take me a minute."

She was still smiling when she said, "Well, you better make it fast, mister, or else I reserve the right to choose the cabin."

He tried to smile back, but his face felt nearly frozen. When Jeff picked up the call on the third ring, David said simply, "Stop working on the current project. I'll get back to you about it later. Understand?"

Jeff uttered a surprised, almost strangled yes, then David snapped the phone closed and dropped it back into his pocket.

"Project?" Libby's lovely face was turned up to his, curiosity sparkling in her blue eyes. "Are you working on another hotel, David?"

"Something like that," he said, finally managing to smile. "But at the moment, my love, I'm working on something much more important."

"What?" she asked.

"This."

He gathered her up, held her closely against his chest, and said, "Show me the way to lucky Number Three."

Libby lingered in the shower, almost too embarrassed to leave the bathroom and face David. Had she ever had a worse idea in her entire life? Why would anyone ask the man responsible for the mirrored and glorious piece of architecture across the highway, the man who'd wine and dine her in its glorious penthouse, to even set foot in this chamber of horrors? What had she been thinking?

The door had opened with a long, drawn-out squeak comparable to a Boris Karloff movie, and then, as they stepped inside, the powerful odor of pine and Lysol had smacked both of them in the face. David, bless his heart, had tried not to cough, but it wasn't possible. Libby herself had had an immediate sneezing fit before running into the bathroom and locking the door.

Now, the fluorescent light over the sink was making an odd, erratic buzzing sound and the toilet, just to the right of the tub, gurgled every once in a while even though she hadn't used it. The plastic shower curtain, with its sand dollars and starfish and various ocean flora, looked so pitiful hanging there that Libby had to keep her eyes closed most of the time she was in the shower.

For one grim and painful moment, she decided that tearing this whole wretched place down was the obvious and only solution. Surely she could make her aunt Elizabeth see that.

But then she knew it was impossible. Aunt Elizabeth, as always, would stand her ground—this ground—her precious turf—the same way she always did when she insisted that Uncle Joe would soon be coming home. Libby couldn't make her change. Lord knew Doug hadn't been able to change her in all their decades together.

When all was said and done, there really wasn't much Libby could do other than go with the flow. And the flow right now, coming down from the shower head, seemed to be welling up in the tub because of a drain that wasn't working properly. She swore under her breath, then yanked the faucets off, hardly caring at the moment if she broke them or not.

She grabbed a towel—thin from years of wear and washing—and did her best to dry off. After raking her fingers through her damp hair, she wrapped the ratty towel around herself and opened the door.

David was sitting on the edge of a twin bed, leaning forward to change channels on the small television, something he probably hadn't done in years.

"Welcome to 1970," Libby said only half in jest. "Do you feel like you're in a time warp? Like you've been transported back several decades?"

"Nope," he answered as he punched off the television, then reached out his arms toward her. "I feel like Prince Charming waiting for his Cinderella."

"David," Libby said softly, hugging her towel tightly around herself. "I'm truly sorry that I insisted on this. I have no idea why it seemed so important to me, but I'm ready to leave, this very minute, if that's what you'd prefer."

He stood, and then took several strides across the gold shag carpet, closing the distance between them. "Actually, I'd prefer to make love to you, Libby darlin'. Here. Now."

She tilted her head up, passed the tip of her tongue across her lips, inviting his kiss. Craving his kiss. "Yes," she said. "Here. And right now."

What did it matter *where* she was, she thought, when David's kisses made her forget *who* she was. She released her grip on the damp towel and let it drop to the floor.

David stepped back. Without even touching her, he ravished her with just his eyes, whose color had deepened to a dark forest green. And his gaze alone caused Libby's stomach to clench with a ravenous hunger, as if she hadn't eaten for weeks. She'd never wanted a man the way she wanted this one. She never even knew, in all her thirty years, that such all-consuming desire was possible.

As he had before, David loved her slowly, exploring every part of her body as if she were the first woman he'd ever encountered, while leading her to discover sensations she'd never felt before.

And as before, it was Libby who, when pushed to the edge by his slow hands, by his warm tongue, by the feel of him so hard and deep inside of her, pulled David with her for the long tumble through magnificent fireworks and bright shooting stars.

Libby let herself drift into sleep, thinking she never wanted this man to leave her. If he did, she just might have to follow him if it meant going to the ends of the earth.

Seven

When Libby offered to fix dinner for him—which translated to popping two cartons of frozen macaroni and cheese into the microwave and seeing what she could come up with for a salad from the contents of the fridge—David politely declined, then offered a far better solution to the problem of dinner.

“Let’s go across the street.”

Libby laughed. “I thought you’d never ask.”

He didn’t take her up to the penthouse this time, but rather directly into the Marquis’ shining new, state-of-the-art kitchen, where the sous chef who’d fed them so well the previous evening was still on duty.

The young man snapped to his feet the moment they walked in.

“How’re y’all?” he said, revealing a wide smile along with a southern accent.

“We’re fine,” David answered, “and we’re famished. Mind if we look around?”

“It’s your kitchen. Whatever you find, sir, I’ll be more than happy to prepare. Kitchen’s are way better for cooking in than for sitting around in.”

David took Libby’s hand and led her deep into the inner workings of the facility. She’d never been in a restaurant kitchen before, and it was a whole new world for her.

“I’m not a very good cook,” she confessed while gazing into a huge stainless-steel refrigerator that was crammed with things she couldn’t even identify.

David, close beside her, chuckled. “So I gathered.”

“My aunt Elizabeth isn’t either.” She sighed.

“Maybe it’s genetic,” David said, his lips sliding into a grin and his eyes nearly twinkling. “What looks good to you? Anything strike your fancy?”

Actually nothing looked good because it wasn’t cooked, and there were no pictures to consult for the final product. “You choose for us, David,” she said. “As an old mac and cheese girl, I’m more than willing to defer to your expertise.”

He called out to the sous chef, naming ingredients and spices and sauces that might have been Martian as far as Libby knew. Then he told him, “We’ll be in the bar. You can serve us in there.”

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