

MARY LYNN
BAXTER

THE
MILLIONAIRE
COMES HOME



Desire

Man of the Month

Mary Lynn

The Millionaire Comes Home

«HarperCollins»

Lynn M. B.

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— (Man of the Month)

His sleek BMW looking like a champion black stallion, Denton rode arrogantly into the one-horse Texas town he'd once called home. Ripe with disdain, he planned to make a quick million – then bolt. But the unexpected sight of Grace Simmons launched him down memory lane to a perfect starlit night when he'd gently taken her innocence...and she'd stolen his heart. Suddenly Denton yearned to relive her exquisite kisses, to revel in her laughter, to squander whole afternoons in her bed – and to turn his first love into his forever love!

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MARY LYNN
BAXTER

THE
MILLIONAIRE
COMES HOME



Grace Was Smitten. Still.

But that would change, she told herself. Thank God, she no longer loved Denton. Her fixation on him was about loneliness and lust. But that was a disastrous combination. Her heart knew they had no future—that he merely wanted to make love to her, then walk away like before.

They were from two different worlds, and that wasn't going to change. Nor did she want it to. She couldn't survive in the city, and he couldn't survive in the country. But their differences went much deeper than locale.

She had known the boy. She didn't know the man.

Would she get the chance...?

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Silhouette Desire, where you can indulge yourself every month with six passionate, powerful and provocative romances! And you can take romance one step further.... Look inside for details about our exciting new contest, "Silhouette Makes You a Star."

Popular author Mary Lynn Baxter returns to Desire with our MAN OF THE MONTH when The Millionaire Comes Home to Texas to reunite with the woman he could never forget. Rising star Sheri WhiteFeather's latest story features a Comanche Vow that leads to a marriage of convenience... until passionate love transforms it into the real thing.

It's our pleasure to present you with a new miniseries entitled 20 AMBER COURT, featuring four twentysomething female friends who share an address...and their discoveries about life and love. Don't miss the launch title, When Jayne Met Erik, by beloved author Elizabeth Bevarly. The scandalous Desire miniseries FORTUNES OF TEXAS: THE LOST HEIRS continues with Fortune's Secret Daughter by Barbara McCauley. Alexandra Sellers offers you another sumptuous story in her miniseries SONS OF THE DESERT: THE SULTANS, Sleeping with the Sultan. And the talented Cindy Gerard brings you a touching love story about a man of honor pledged to marry an innocent young woman with a secret, in The Bridal Arrangement.

Treat yourself to all six of these tantalizing tales from Silhouette Desire.

Enjoy!



Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

The Millionaire Comes Home
Mary Lynn Baxter



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MARY LYNN BAXTER

A native Texan, Mary Lynn Baxter knew instinctively that books would occupy an important part of her life. Always an avid reader, she became a school librarian, then a bookstore owner, before writing her first novel.

Now Mary Lynn Baxter is an award-winning author who has written more than thirty novels, many of which have appeared on the USA Today list.

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One

He wondered if she still lived here.

Denton Hardesty scoffed at his thoughts of his old girlfriend as he braked his BMW at the first and only stoplight in Ruby, Texas. He couldn't believe he'd been born in this one-horse town and lived here until he'd left for college. But Ruby had been his parents' home; he'd had no choice.

Thank heavens he had a choice now. Dallas, the city he called home, was a far cry from this quaint little tourist town with its bed-and-breakfast lodgings, antique and gift shops. Too quiet to suit him. As soon as he finished his meeting with his prospective client, regardless of whether a deal was cemented, he would hit the road again, back to Big D.

When he heard a truck honk from behind Denton realized he'd been camped at the light. Muttering under his breath, he shoved down on the accelerator only to have the engine sputter, then quit completely.

A few choice words escaped his lips as he watched the truck swerve around him, a killer look on the driver's face. So, all of Ruby wasn't that laid-back. With dark amusement, Denton found that somewhat comforting as he restarted the BMW. It died on him again directly in front of a service station, the old-fashioned kind where a sign said owner/mechanic on duty—only in Small Town, USA.

The owner came out immediately, wiping his greasy hands on an equally greasy rag. He smiled, showing off crooked teeth stained with tobacco. "Howdy, need some help?"

Denton figured that went without saying but refrained from stating the obvious, keeping his impatience on a short leash. "My engine's giving me trouble. Mind if I leave it here until the dealership can come get it?"

"Don't mind at all, only how 'bout I take a look at it?"

Denton eyed the tall, lanky man with suspicion. "You know something about foreign cars?"

"Use to work on 'em, especially these." The man nodded toward the sleek black vehicle.

Somehow Denton believed him, even though it seemed unlikely anyone who knew how to work on BMWs would be stuck running a one-man station. But stranger things had happened, he reminded himself ruefully.

"Maybe it's just something minor, and I can have you on your way real soon," the attendant pointed out. "If not, you can call the dealer and nothing will be lost."

Except my valuable time, Denton thought, irritated beyond measure. Curbing his impatience, he made a gesture and said, "Be my guest. See what you can do."

"By the way, my name's Raymond."

"Denton Hardesty."

Raymond stuck out his grimy hand. Then, as if seeing the look on Denton's face, jerked it back and gave a sheepish smile. "Sorry, it's still a bit greasy."

"No problem," Denton muttered, clearly distracted.

"You just passing through?" Raymond asked, his head cocked to one side.

Denton wasn't about to indulge in small talk, not when he had much bigger fish to fry. Besides, for a spring day it was hotter than hell, and he didn't want to be wet with sweat when he met with his client. "Yeah, you might say that."

For once Raymond didn't comment.

"Is there someplace cool where I can get a cup of coffee while I wait?" Denton asked.

Raymond nodded toward a bed-and-breakfast. "Across the street."

"Thanks," Denton said, turning and heading in that direction. The first thing about the two-story colonial style mansion that caught his attention was the lovely grounds: manicured lawns, landscaped flower beds, lilacs and big oak trees, and annual beds that flanked the walkway and proudly lined the front of the porch.

The colors of the mixed annuals were so vivid they were almost blinding. Even though he hadn't set foot on the property, he could smell the lilacs. They offered their ethereal scent and exquisite blossoms to all the passersby. Lucky souls, he thought, remembering the lilacs in his own front yard when he was a youngster.

As he approached the sidewalk, his gaze settled on the porch. Country calm, he reminded himself, a gentle breeze acting as a coolant to his damp skin. Great if you could stand it... He could tolerate this setting maybe a day, two max, then he'd be climbing the walls. He preferred the sound of horns and car doors slamming. Also, it was imperative he hear the sound of human voices as opposed to the chirp of birds.

Yet, he might have felt differently if he and Grace had...

Ah, to hell with those thoughts. While his memories of living here were for the most part good, Denton couldn't imagine ever doing so again under any circumstances.

When his dad had been transferred out of state the summer of his junior year in college, he hadn't been happy. He'd admit that. He hadn't wanted to leave Grace even though what had happened between them had scared the hell out of him. However, his parents were not about to leave him behind. Once they moved, the unthinkable had happened. His dad had fallen victim to a stroke, something else that had torn him in two.

Suddenly forcing his mind off that dark period and back on more pleasant thoughts, Denton's gaze swept his surroundings. Up close he could see the house needed some repairs, especially the porch, though the state of disrepair didn't dilute any of its charm. What a perfect place for guests to gather for nonsensical conversation and summer breezes.

A wicker swing and settee, along with several creaky rockers, provided a Norman Rockwell type setting familiar to porches across the South. The only things missing from the ideal picture were platters of watermelon and pitchers of lemonade that would provide wholesome refreshments for the guests. It was a safe bet both would most likely appear later on in the day.

Thinking of lemonade made him thirsty. But the thought didn't last long, knowing what he really needed was another stiff cup of coffee which never failed to give him the extra push he needed to get through his hectic days and nights. He still had a long way to go before this day was over. And the way it had started out didn't bode well.

Maybe the owner would be obliging this late, sunny morning and provide him with that much-needed kick. After slapping at a bee buzzing around his head, Denton lifted the old-fashioned door knocker and let it go.

Grace Simmons hummed to herself as she finished putting away the last of the clean breakfast dishes. She paused in her actions and peered out the back window at the grounds of Grace House. As always, her breath instantly caught and held.

Tulips, her favorite sign of spring, blended together to form a tapestry of natural beauty nothing could ever surpass.

Hers.

This was all hers. And the bank's, she corrected mentally. But such wouldn't always be the case, she reaffirmed with conviction. One day she'd get it paid off, then she'd be the proud owner of this graceful old house. She'd bought it for a song, but in order to make it habitable, then fulfill her dream of turning it into a profitable bed-and-breakfast, she'd had to borrow an additional healthy sum of money.

Still, she paid her banker each month with a cheerful heart, knowing what she wanted to do would work and eventually pay its own way. And while the profit margin remained ever so slim, she was able to keep herself and the home afloat and pay the bank. For the time being that was all that was important.

Extra money for more repairs to the old home would come. She didn't know when or from what source, but she wasn't worried about it. In fact, she didn't worry period. Not anymore. She had

learned long ago what worrying did to her, and she could no longer allow herself that indulgence, especially since she ran a business in which other people depended on her.

And she thrived on the never-ending challenge of providing her guests with the cleanest rooms, the loveliest ambiance and the best breakfast she could, at an affordable cost.

As a result her house stayed at full occupancy year-round. However, at present she had one room not booked—a rare occurrence. Yet she wasn't concerned. The right person would show up, and the room would be waiting.

A smile brightened Grace's face as her eyes fastened on a bluebird perched on a limb, grooming himself. Spying on a wild creature was such a small thing, but she had learned, the hard way, it was the small things that made life worth living.

So what if she was a woman alone in a couples' world? So what if she was often lonely, especially in her big bed at night? So what if she wished for what was apparently not going to happen—a happy marriage and children?

So what?

After all she'd been through, she could accept that and be glad for the peace and tranquility that now shaped and dominated her life. Besides, her life was too full to dwell on past mistakes and future longings. At thirty-two she had wasted enough time on something that had brought her heartache rather than joy. At present she was only concentrating on the joy.

Living and working in Ruby, Texas, did just that.

Thinking of work made Grace realize she had too much to do to stand and gaze outdoors, even if it was candy for the soul. She would put her grounds up against anyone else's in town, though she could only take credit for the flowers. Those she did plant and maintain, a full-time job in itself. Because of her part-time helper, Connie Foley, Grace was able to create her miracles outdoors, which she knew brought pleasure to her guests.

Maybe later she would cut some of the tulips for the sunroom, definitely before afternoon snack time, a fun ritual that only two of her present occupants would take advantage of—the elderly couple who were honeymooning. A wider smile forced her dimple deeper in her right cheek as she thought about Ed and Zelma Brenner. In their seventies, and giddily in love, they were a hoot. After both had married someone else, borne children, then widowed, they met on a cruise and married five days later.

On their way to a planned honeymoon at a cottage on Lake Austin, the couple had driven through Ruby. They never made it any farther. According to Ed, the minute they saw Grace House, they had been enchanted and chose to stay there. Hence, Grace had been honored with their presence for over two weeks now. Each day she grew more fond of them. If her parents hadn't died in a freak auto accident when she was in college, she wondered if they would have turned out like Ed and Zelma. She liked to think so, since the thought was somehow comforting.

Her other guest, however, was cut from a far different bolt of cloth. Ralph Kennedy was a well-known children's author who sought complete solitude for the purpose of penning his stories. Here he had apparently found his niche because he'd been a guest for more than four weeks. His brief appearance at breakfast was about all she ever saw of him except on rare occasions when she'd catch him strolling through the grounds. She suspected he was trying to work through a story problem. Despite the fact that he wasn't her usual outgoing boarder, rather weird to be exact, she had no complaints. He paid his weekly bill and seemed content. That was all that mattered.

Deciding it was time to get back to her chores, Grace grabbed a dust cloth out of the cabinet. Opting to keep on her apron, which she loved to wear in spite of its being out of vogue, she made her way out of the large, bright kitchen and headed toward the garden room. It was her favorite room in the entire house, a hard choice to make as the rest of the old dwelling had other bragging rights. The polished hardwood floors, which made no attempt to soak up the sounds of hard-soled shoes, were magnificent. Another favorite was the exquisitely gorgeous Waterford chandelier that hung in the foyer.

She gave a cursory glance to the arched doorways and beveled glass of the front door, to the antique furnishings as she went into the garden room that was a prime environment for lush plants. Grace had seen to it that the room was much more than that since the living room flowed into it, providing an informal but lush setting in which to relax over breakfast with a newspaper or good book or to sip afternoon tea.

Grace had wanted the room to seem drenched in light. So she had painted the walls a pearly white, keeping the furniture to a minimum and dispensing with drapes altogether. She had achieved her goal, the space becoming a charming blend of yellows and greens, mixed with seasoned wicker, plump cushions and pillows and a myriad of flowering bushes and plants.

On one wall she'd painted an ivy-covered trellis. Even in the dead of winter the garden room gave one the feeling of being constantly bathed in greenery and light.

She had just begun dusting the glass-topped coffee table when the doorbell chimed. Stuffing her cloth into her apron pocket, she hurried to open the door, only to cling to the doorknob for support.

Grace would have recognized him anywhere, regardless of the fourteen years since she'd seen him. Denton Hardesty, a ghost from the past.

It was obvious from the stunned look on his face that he hadn't expected to see her, either, as his mouth was slightly open while his green eyes narrowed.

"Grace," he finally muttered, his tone hoarse as if he had a sore throat.

"Hello, Denton," she responded, staring at the man who, one starlit night, took her virginity and her heart with him.

Two

Somehow Grace managed to derail that traumatic thought and force herself to behave as though Denton Hardesty were a stranger, someone she'd never known. But that wasn't easy, as she was more than a little overwhelmed and flustered by his showing up on her doorstep out of the blue. Holding on to her fractured composure was even more difficult because her senses had leaped at the sight of him.

Dear Lord, that would never do.

"What on earth are you doing here?" she finally asked, the silence having built to an almost thundering roar, at least to her. Maybe it was the sound of her heart beating. Absurd. She no longer gave a fig about him.

"I could ask you the same thing."

"I live here," she said simply, feeling her chin jut slightly and her spine stiffen.

As if he picked up on the slight edge of defiance in her posture, he sighed. "I was wondering if you'd ever left."

"Again, what brings you back to Ruby?"

His sigh deepened. "So that's the way it's going to be?"

For a second Grace was confused. "Excuse me?"

"I can't say that I blame you for not inviting me in."

Grace flushed, realizing that she hadn't budged so much as an inch since she'd opened the door. In fact, she seemed to be guarding the door as if he was an intruder who might force himself inside. In a way that was exactly what he was. However, she had no intention of letting him know that her senses still hadn't quite settled, that his unexpected presence had definitely thrown her for a curve.

"Of course you may come in."

His head leaned to one side. "Are you sure?"

"Certainly," she said, swallowing her irritation at his assumption that she gave a damn one way or the other. She'd best be careful. He'd always had the uncanny ability to read her heart. But that was then, when she was just a teenager. Now she was an adult and he didn't know beans about her.

Finally she stepped back and gestured with one hand. "Welcome to Grace House."

He pulled up short. "You mean this is your place?"

"Yes." Again her tone held a note of defiance, this time with an edge of acid.

Denton chuckled. "I see you haven't lost that sharp tongue."

"Some things never change," she said, more breathlessly than she intended.

"In some cases that's not bad."

It wasn't so much what he said as the way he said it that set off a warning inside her. That raspy note in his voice was just as much a turn-on now as back then. What had she done to deserve this cruel twist of fate? She'd never expected to lay eyes on her first love again.

And why now, when she was lonelier than she'd ever been?

"I'm impressed."

Grace forced herself back to the moment, though what she really wanted to do was tell him to leave, to go back where he came from and not disrupt her life one more second.

Instead she made her way into the garden room and watched as he strode to the long expanse of windows before turning and facing her again.

"Would you like a glass of iced tea?" she asked. "Or would you rather have coffee?"

"Both, actually."

A spontaneous laugh erupted before she could control it. "That's not a problem."

He answered with a smile that hit her like a sledgehammer. He was still too good-looking for words, even if the added grooves of maturity made him appear older than his thirty-four years, two years her senior.

Too, there was an uptightness, a restlessness that she didn't remember. But it had been so long since that summer evening after her last year in high school, when she'd been so madly in love with him, she couldn't be expected to remember every detail about him. Nor did she want to.

Liar.

Right now she was standing there like an idiot, soaking up every detail about him. His hair, while still brown, was now dusted with silver. Not a bad thing, she noted, since the silver highlighted his tanned skin and green eyes that were surrounded by such thick lashes they appeared darker and sootier than they actually were.

As for his over-six-foot frame, he hadn't added an ounce of fat to it. At one time he'd had washboard abs, and since his knit shirt hugged him in all the right places, she knew that hadn't changed. Nor had his long legs and powerful thighs. When her gaze reached that part of his anatomy, and she saw the slight bulge behind his zipper, she averted her eyes back to his face. Those perfect white teeth hadn't changed, either. Or that smile. Both had always been high-wattage and still were.

Not fair.

Here she was, aging, gathering wrinkles in all the wrong places. So what? It didn't matter whether the years had been kind to her or not. Except that it did. Granted, Denton was just passing through, but it was important to her that she at least didn't look like the wrath of God, for heaven's sake.

Then it hit her she was still wearing her apron.

Feeling her cheeks flood with color, she reached for the sash at the back and jerked it.

"Don't."

Her head jolted up. "Don't what?"

"Take it off."

Her hands stilled, and when she opened her mouth to speak, nothing came out.

"It's...different."

Grace rolled her eyes. "Right."

"No, I'm serious."

"What you are is 'seriously' making fun."

"Somehow it suits you."

"You don't have a clue what suits me," Grace snapped, then mentally kicked herself.

"True," he said, his mouth slightly downturned. "But I know what I like, and I like your apron."

"Fine. But I don't." She jerked it off and headed toward the kitchen. "I'll get the drinks and be right back."

"Need any help?" he called to her back.

She didn't so much as slow down. "No, thanks."

By the time she had a tray filled with both iced tea and coffee, her hands were shaking. It was a miracle she had glassware of any kind left. Just get through this, she told herself. Be polite, make small talk, then get rid of him. Send him back from whence he came.

Blowing out a deep breath, Grace planted a smile on her face and went back into the garden room. Denton had taken a seat in one of the wicker chairs. When he saw her, however, he rose and reached for the tray.

She shook her head, then set it down on the coffee table in front of the settee. "Your choice?"

"Coffee," he said, reaching for it on his own.

She chose a glass of iced tea. For a moment they each sipped in silence, though for Grace that silence still had undertones of booming thunder.

"This is really yours?"

"You sound like that's not possible."

"Hey, that's not it at all. It's just that I'm impressed."

"Impressed, huh?"

“Yeah, impressed. This is a grand old house, and apparently you’ve made a success of operating it as a bed-and-breakfast. To me that’s impressive.”

“I’d like to think so. I know that I love every minute of being an innkeeper, so to speak.”

“You would. It fits your personality to a T.”

Again she wanted to tell him he didn’t know jack about her personality, but she refrained. She was already in water over her head. Why purposely drown herself?

“Did you buy the old place?”

“I’m buying it. Right now the bank and I are partners.”

He chuckled. “I hear you.”

“One of these days, though, it’ll be mine free and clear.”

“You’re that busy?”

“Ruby’s grown, despite the fact that it maintains its status as a quiet country town. Being so close to Austin has given us the tourist boost we needed to grow our economy.”

“I noticed several antique stores as I drove down main street. Ruby never had anything like that before.”

“Again, it’s the boom going on in Austin that’s responsible.”

He looked around for a moment, then faced her again, his eyes probing. If only he didn’t have that certain way of staring at a woman as if she was the only person on the face of the earth. Denton could rival Richard Gere when it came to that feat. At one time she’d loved that. Now she hated it.

“You look great, Grace. Have I told you that?”

A warmth spread through her, which she promptly ignored. “No, but that’s okay. I’d rather talk about you.”

“I’m sure you’re curious.”

“Let’s just say I know you’re not passing through for old time’s sake.”

Did he flush or had she imagined that?

“You’re right,” he said, reaching for his coffee and taking a drink. “I’m here to see a client.”

“In Ruby?” She didn’t bother to mask her astonishment.

“A quirk of fate. What can I say?”

“Whatever,” she said, hearing that breathlessness in her tone again and wishing she could get her act together.

He set his cup down, then crossed an ankle over the other knee. “I’m an investment broker in Dallas, have been for several years now.”

“That’s nice.”

He chuckled. “‘How boring’ is what you’re really saying.”

“I wish you’d stop trying to second-guess me,” she said, trying to control her edginess but failing miserably.

“I was always pretty good at doing that, if you’ll remember.”

His voice had dropped to a husky pitch, and his eyes were so intent on her lips that she felt a rush of color to her face while all the air seemed to have been sucked out of the room. “Look—”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to go down that road. It’s just that I never expected to see you again, especially not here in Ruby.”

“Just because you hauled it—”

His lips thinned. “You’re right to be pissed.”

“Look, Denton, I’m not pissed, okay? Let’s just leave the past where it is. Buried.”

“So my car just broke down. How’s that for a mundane topic of conversation?”

Ignoring his hint of sarcasm, she asked, “Where?”

“At the station across the street.” Denton went on to explain what was going on.

“Ah, Raymond’s in charge.” Her lips quirked in a smile. “No doubt he’s proudly displaying that BMW for all the town to see.”

“Reckon?”

They both laughed at Denton’s choice of words. Then, realizing how chummy that sounded, Grace sobered. “What if he can’t fix it?”

“The dealership in Austin will have a loaner car here in no time.”

My, my, how nice, she almost said in a snippy tone, but didn’t. Obviously, he was making money hand over fist. She wondered which rancher in Ruby had the kind of big dollars it would take to invest with him? She wasn’t about to ask, for several reasons, the main one being she wanted to get rid of him. The longer this indulgence stretched itself, the more dangerous it became to her peace of mind, especially with his gaze seemingly fixed on her breasts.

In spite of her efforts to the contrary, the color lingered in her face. “You’re welcome to wait here,” she said, glancing away.

“Are you sure?”

His husky tone drew her back. “I even have a vacant room,” she quipped.

“I just might take you up on that.”

Her jaw went slack. “I didn’t—”

“I know you didn’t mean it, but I do.”

“We both know that’s not going to happen.”

Both of his eyebrows shot up. “I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“Are you married?” she asked bluntly, more for herself than for him. She was desperate to steer things back on course after she’d opened her mouth again when she shouldn’t have. But no way was he going to remain in Ruby. The thought of him sleeping in her place as a guest was ludicrous and she wouldn’t let it happen.

“Not anymore,” he said in answer to her question.

“Ah, so there was a Mrs. Denton Hardesty?”

“Was is the correct word.”

“Not an amiable parting, huh?”

“Not hardly.”

“Sorry.”

“Me, too. I hate failing at anything. But nothing about our relationship was right from the beginning. Thank goodness there were no children.”

She wanted to amen that but didn’t.

“What about you? I don’t see a ring on your finger.”

“There hasn’t been one.”

He raised his eyebrows again. “I find that hard to believe.”

“That I’m an old maid?”

Denton made a snorting sound as his gaze roamed hotly and blatantly over her. “You know better than that.”

She turned away, her heart in her throat, feeling the inability to handle much more of this togetherness. “Let’s just say I’m happy with my life the way it is.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

A silence fell between them during which she made a conscious effort not to meet his eyes.

It was then his cell phone rang. Grace tried to ignore what he was saying by concentrating on what she was going to serve for snack time. The Brenners would be back shortly, and on rare occasions even Ralph was known to appear for the afternoon goodies.

Only after Denton shoved his cell back into its clip did she face him again.

“I’ve been stood up, at least for today.”

“Oh?”

“My client had an unexpected emergency to deal with. That was his housekeeper.”

Relief almost made her giddy. “I guess you’ll have to come back to Ruby another time.”

Their eyes met and held for the longest time.

“I have a better idea. I’ll take that vacant room and hang around.”

Three

Panic paralyzed her.

Stay. He didn't mean that, not for a minute. He was just jerking her chain again. That had to be the case. It just had to. She almost laughed at the very idea.

In an unsteady tone, she voiced her thoughts. "You're really joking."

His eyes took on a warm, lazy cast as they swept over her. "Is that your way of saying I'm not welcome?"

She swallowed, quelling the urge to slug him. He was baiting her, and she didn't have a clue why. After all, he'd been the one who'd walked out on her. If anyone had an ax to grind, it was she.

"Of course, you're welcome. It's just that—"

"It's just what?" he pressed.

"I can't imagine why you'd want to stay here." There, she'd said it. She'd been as blunt as she knew how to be. If that didn't do the trick then nothing would.

"Can't you?"

Denton's tone suddenly matched his eyes, adding to her confusion. Was he flirting with her? Suddenly the feelings of acute sexual awareness that hung between them was overridden by a sense of outrage. How dare he think he could just show up on her doorstep and behave in such a brazen manner? She had to call a halt to such madness right now. She wasn't about to let him back inside her life only to have him walk out again.

"No, I can't," she said through tight lips. "You don't belong here anymore."

A flash of anger darkened his eyes. Yet, when he spoke his tone was even. "Is a room available?"

Say no. Tell him that you made a mistake and that it's promised. She couldn't lie, and even if she did, he wouldn't believe her. "Yes."

"Good. I'll take it."

"For how long?"

Several heartbeats of silence followed during which Grace forced herself not to bite a hole in her lower lip.

"Couple days max."

"Fine."

A smile of sorts suddenly lightened his features. "I promise not to be any trouble."

"You'll be treated like all my other guests," she said as nonchalantly as possible.

"Fair enough."

Their gazes met again, and only by sheer force of will was Grace able finally to turn away.

"Yo, we're back."

Grace almost wilted visibly with relief at the timely arrival of the Brenners. "In the garden room," she called out.

When the elderly couple walked in and saw Denton, they pulled up short. "Sorry," Zelma said. "Are we interrupting anything?"

Grace smiled. "Of course not."

She introduced them, then watched as Denton smiled and shook their hands.

If ever two people appeared mismatched, it was Ed and Zelma. Ed was short and robust while Zelma was tall and thin. Though both were in their late seventies, they were full of boundless energy. Grace dreaded the day they left Ruby. She would miss them terribly, though they had already promised to return countless times.

"You're going to love your stay here, Mr. Hardesty," Zelma said, taking a seat across from Grace.

"I bet you're right about that," Denton said, smiling at Zelma.

Grace groaned inwardly as she watched him mesmerize the old lady. As a young man, he'd had plenty of charm. As a grown-up, he had perfected it and knew how to use it to his advantage.

With Ed and Zelma he was welcome to go all-out, to turn it on full blast if that would make him happy. As far as she was concerned, he was wasting his time. She planned to avoid him the entire length of his stay.

"Just wait till you taste her cooking," Ed was saying. "It's the best this side of heaven."

Zelma made an unladylike noise, though there was a twinkle in her eye as her gaze landed on her husband. "Are you saying I can't please you?"

"How would I know, honey bun? You haven't ever tried."

"Uh, right," Zelma said with a blush. "Well, are you ever in for a surprise?"

He cut her a look. "I bet you can't cook."

"How'd you guess?"

They all chuckled, then Ed turned to Denton and asked, "You just passing through, young man?"

Grace looked on in silence as Denton explained about his vehicle. She tried not to concentrate on him, but it was hard. He was so easy to stare at she had to force her gaze away.

"Lucky man to have trouble in such an ideal spot," Ed responded. "We're both from Houston, but we're thinking about pulling up stakes and moving here."

Grace stared at them in amazement. "You are?"

"We're talking about it," Zelma said, sounding less enthusiastic.

Ed rested his gaze on Denton. "You couldn't ask for life any easier. It's sure nice not to hear the constant sounds of engines and horns. Instead you hear chirping birds and prattling insects."

"That's not Mr. Hardesty's cup of tea," Grace said without thought. "I'm sure he'll be bored with all that serenity."

Denton rested his intense gaze on her which made her want to squirm, but she didn't.

"I'm counting on you to see that doesn't happen," he said in an easy drawl, in contrast to her rather sharp one.

Ed and Zelma exchanged looks before bouncing their gazes between Grace and Denton as if picking up on the undercurrents in the room.

Deciding it was time to call a halt to this little chat, Grace stood. "Kitchen duty calls."

"I wish you'd let me help," Zelma said.

Grace shook her head. "Not a chance."

"Point me toward my room before you go, will you?" Denton asked, facing Grace.

"Now that I can do," Zelma said, claiming Denton's attention. "You just follow me."

"Thanks," Grace murmured, relieved she was spared being alone with Denton again. Her nerves were far too frayed to push her luck.

Ed shuffled toward them. "Wait for me."

Several minutes later Zelma walked back into the kitchen.

"What did he say?" Grace asked.

"He thanked me, then said he was going across the street to check on his car."

Grace merely nodded, her hands busy placing the fresh fruit on the tray.

"So what's with you two?" Zelma asked, a slight twitter in her tone.

Grace's head popped up. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Now, honey, you can't fool this old fuddy-duddy. I know when electricity's crackling between two people."

"You're imagining things."

Zelma eyed her carefully. "I don't think so, but for now I'll mind my own business. But when you're ready to talk, I'm ready to listen." She paused with a wink. "I'll meet you back in the garden room."

Grace sagged against the counter, her heart beating far too hard and fast against her chest. “It won’t be long now, Mr. Hardesty, and I’ll have you up and running.”

Denton put his sunglasses on, then stared at the mechanic. “So you think you found the problem?”

“I know I have. It’s just taking a tad longer than I thought to fix it.”

“No problem. You take all the time you need.”

Raymond gave him a puzzled look. “You mean you ain’t in no hurry?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

Raymond rubbed his slightly grizzled chin. “Whatever you say.”

Denton slapped a couple of bills in Raymond’s hand then turned and headed back across the street.

A few minutes later he was opening the door to his room when a man strode by without so much as a nod. Strange-looking dude, Denton thought, comparing the stranger to someone out of a Star Wars movie. He was tall and thin to the point of gauntness. A hank of dark hair hung over his left eye.

He certainly didn’t appear as if he belonged at Grace House, but then neither did he, Denton reminded himself scathingly.

Once he was in his room, he walked to the window and peered out at the front lawn. Though glorious beauty filled his vision, he failed to appreciate it, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a roll of antacids. After popping one in his mouth and chewing it, he released a deep sigh, then turned and stared at the antique four-poster bed with a step stool enabling a person to climb aboard. He smiled with no humor.

What the hell was he doing here? Had he lost his mind?

Yes.

No doubt about it: he’d taken complete leave of all his faculties. And why? Grace. It didn’t take anyone with smarts to figure that out. Still, his actions made no sense.

Granted, when she’d opened the door, he’d felt as if he’d been hit upside the head with a crowbar. For some unknown reason, he’d assumed she hadn’t hung around Ruby, either—that she’d flown the coop long ago. So much for that assumption. She’d not only remained but she’d gone into business here and apparently was very successful in her endeavor, which made him glad for her.

What a looker she’d turned into. Oh, she’d always been pretty, especially at eighteen, blessed with a natural beauty that few women could claim but all envied. That naturalness had stayed with her; only now it was enhanced by maturity and a hint of makeup.

Little else about her had changed, though, especially that delightful dimple. That had always captivated him and still did. He’d found himself wanting to dip his tongue in it the way he’d done so many times in the past.

A frown marred his face at the same time his loins stirred. Suddenly he fought the urge to grab another antacid, turn and get the hell out of there as fast as his legs could carry him. Yet he didn’t move a muscle. It was as though his thoughts had him welded to the spot.

And that apron. He couldn’t forget about that. He hadn’t been making fun when he’d called attention to it, either. He’d been intrigued. And delighted. How quaint. How uncitified. But again, only someone with Grace’s whimsical beauty and charm could pull it off. The thought of any of his women friends donning an apron was so ludicrous he almost laughed out loud.

For his own peace of mind he wished Grace were married with 2.3 children and sported wrinkles and a little more fat. Instead she had remained thin, but not too thin, because her breasts seemed to fill her knit shirt to his standard of perfection.

Of course, her hair had changed. She now wore it in a short style that was a little edgy, a little messy. However, its color remained intact, the light-brown locks with blond streaks still contrasting sensationally with her dark eyes and luscious thick lashes.

She oozed a natural sexuality that he'd bet she wasn't even aware of. When he was in the room with her, he found it difficult to breathe. He was sure other men had been affected the same way.

So why had she been content to stagnate here where obviously there were no available men? No wonder she wasn't married. Suddenly he felt a small pinch of gladness at the thought, which was absurd since he was only passing through.

No matter. After he had walked out of her life the way he had, he was surprised she'd let him in the door. Maybe he'd been just as much a passing fancy for her as she'd been for him. Again it didn't matter. He had sworn off women, at least those with marriage in mind.

One wife, followed by a nasty divorce, was enough for him.

Yet he realized now more than ever that he'd never forgotten Grace or that night of passion they'd shared. He'd been nuts about her and hadn't wanted to leave her. He remembered that all too clearly. However, nothing had worked out according to either of their plans.

But that was then and this was now. He was no longer the horny college student who thought he'd die if he couldn't make her his, thinking he was in love. Lust. That was the emotion that had driven him. Love hadn't had anything to do with it, or so he'd convinced himself, having felt rotten at the outcome of their relationship.

"Damn," he muttered, reaching for another antacid.

This time there was no relief for the sour taste in his mouth and in his stomach. All he had to do was walk out of the room, tell Grace he couldn't stay, and that would be that. His life would be back on track once again, back to Dallas, back to his job.

And back to his nightmares about the plane crash that had brought him sleepless nights and restless days. Why had he been the only one spared that fateful day? He had walked away from the scattered debris and the mangled bodies of his best friend and the pilot.

It had been nearly a year since a malfunction in the engine had sent the small plane to the ground. Would the dark end of that bright spring day haunt him forever?

As if his body had suddenly become detached from his mind, Denton reached for his cell phone and punched in the number of his firm in Dallas.

Four

“See you later, dearie.”

“I’m counting on that,” Grace said, mustering up a sincere smile for Zelma.

Zelma winked, then whispered in a conspiratorial tone, “I’m going to join the old man for a late siesta.”

This time Grace grinned openly. “Works for me.”

Zelma’s attractive features sobered. “You really ought to think about—”

“Don’t you dare say it. Don’t you dare think it.”

“Oops, looks like I stepped in over my head again.”

“Close to it,” Grace countered, though her smile was back intact.

“It’s just that you’re so lovely, it’s a shame—”

“Zelma!”

“I’m gone. I’m gone.”

Once Grace was alone, she took a deep breath. She knew Zelma meant well, that she wanted her to find and experience the kind of love that she and Ed shared. And while Grace appreciated that, she couldn’t let Zelma think for one second that Denton might be the one.

A shiver darted through her. She had no intention of trekking down that rocky road again, though Zelma knew nothing of her and Denton’s past and never would. Even so, she wasn’t about to stand for Zelma’s matchmaking, even if it was from the heart.

Grace glanced at the clock and saw that it was later than usual. But then, snack time had been later. Now, with the exception of Denton, the guests had all exited the garden room after having devoured the snack.

Since he’d returned from the gas station, he hadn’t left his room. Most of the time he’d been on the phone. Because his room was the closest to the living areas, all had heard the sounds of his muffled voice. Although she couldn’t decipher the exact words of his conversation and certainly didn’t try, she had gotten the gist of them, anyway—all hell seemed to have broken loose in his office. No wonder he popped antacids as if they were going out of style.

What a dreadful way of life. Still, that was his choice, and he seemed to thrive on pressure. That was why she expected him to renege on his stay and leave at any time, regardless of his client and regardless of the status of his vehicle. She crossed her fingers that would be the case. Having him underfoot for even one night was not good. Seeing him again had affected her much more than she cared to admit. Her mind’s eye suddenly conjured up the whipcord leanness of his body at the same time her senses smelled the slightly musky odor that was exclusively his.

And when he looked at her in that certain way, her entire body tingled. Stop it! she told herself. Stop adding fuel to an already smoldering fire. Those memories were not welcome. Besides, she could feel the anxiety building inside her, and she couldn’t afford to let that happen. She’d been doing so well. No way was Denton Hardesty going to undermine that.

Suddenly unable to stand her idle hands, Grace scooped up the remains of snack time and almost ran into the kitchen. Keeping her momentum, she grabbed a bowl out of the cabinet, then crossed to the pantry where she latched on to a box of coffee cake mix, rationalizing that something different would be an extra attraction for tomorrow’s breakfast. That way she could get ahead and keep her mind and hands occupied at the same time.

She was stirring the batter as if it was the enemy when she looked up and watched Zelma walk back in. “I thought you were taking a nap.” Grace grinned. “Or something.”

Zelma’s mouth turned down. “Ed’s snoring. What does that tell you?”

Grace’s grin spread. “That you struck out.”

“What’s that you’re whipping up on?” Zelma asked.

“Coffee cake.”

“Ah, more fat for these hips.”

“Pooh. You don’t have an ounce of fat on you.”

“Well, Ed does, but he’s working on it.”

“Think he’ll forgive me for throwing temptation in his wake?”

“He won’t forgive you if you don’t.”

They both chuckled, then Zelma said, “I came to see if you wanted to go dancing with us.”

“Dancing?”

“Yeah, in Austin. We accidentally stumbled on a place that caters to old folks like us. Last week, though, there were several singles that joined in. So how about it?”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass. It’s been a long day.”

Zelma eyed her curiously. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Ah, come on and go. It’ll do you good to shake a leg.”

Both women turned and watched as Ed strolled in. Grace frowned, thinking something was not quite right about him, but she couldn’t say what. For starters his color wasn’t good; he looked almost pasty. She wondered if Zelma had picked up on that. Should she express her concern? No. It could just be her imagination which meant she would set off an alarm for nothing. But what if it wasn’t?

“Ed, are you okay?” Grace asked.

“Yeah, honey,” Zelma said, frowning in his direction. “You look—”

“I’m fine, sweetheart,” Ed interrupted. He winked at Grace. “You’re feeding me too good. That’s the problem.”

Still not convinced, but deciding to let the matter drop, Grace smiled. “So you two go ahead and shake all the legs you want. I’m heading for the bathtub.”

“We’ll see you later, then, hon,” Ed said, taking Zelma’s arm and steering her out.

Grace watched as they left the room, then turned her attention back to the cake batter, noticing that it had lumped on her. She began stirring it harder than ever.

“Why didn’t you take them up on their offer?”

Grace’s hands stilled, but her pulse didn’t. It spiked to an all-time high. She raised her head. He was standing just inside the kitchen, looking and smelling much more appetizing than the cake batter in front of her. He had on a white knit shirt and a pair of casual slacks that left no doubt as to the strength of his muscles.

Judging from the dampness of his hair, he’d apparently just showered, which should have made him appear more rested. It didn’t. It was obvious that he was tired, the grooves cutting deeper than ever into his eyes and mouth.

“I didn’t want to dance, that’s why,” she finally said, dragging her gaze off him.

“It sounds like fun.”

“I’m sure they’d let you tag along,” she said for lack of anything better to say.

His lips quirked as he stepped closer. “I don’t think so.”

“Are you hungry?” she forced herself to ask. She had to dispel the sudden burgeoning tension.

“No, thanks.”

“Just tired, huh?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“To me it is.”

“Maybe that’s because you know me so well.”

Her eyes flared. “I don’t know you at all.”

“I haven’t changed that much.”

“Oh, please,” she muttered, feeling as if she just stepped off into quicksand, and it was about to suck her under. But then that was the effect he’d always had on her from the first day she’d met him. Apparently, the years hadn’t changed that, much to her chagrin.

“I like your kitchen.”

His mentioning such a mundane thing was like being thrown a lifeline. She brightened and said, “Since I love to cook, I wanted it to be special.”

And it was, with the large airy windows that went from ceiling to floor, letting in warmth and light and greenery from the outside. One seemed to be embraced the instant one walked in. Another attraction were the updated countertops and the polished hardwood cabinets.

“It feels like you’ve brought the outside in,” Denton said, plopping down on the bar stool in front of her.

It was all Grace could do not to flinch visibly as his body seemed to envelop her. Unable to meet his direct gaze, she took a quivering breath, then pretended to stare outside. “I take that as a real compliment because that’s exactly what I strove to do.”

“So you decorated the house?”

His question drew her back around. “Most of it. Couldn’t afford to hire anyone.” Afraid she might sound as if she was whining, she added hastily, “But I wanted the responsibility, loved every minute of making this old place come back alive after sitting vacant for several years.” She paused. “I’m not through, though, not by a long shot. There’s so much else I want to do that needs to be done.”

“I have faith in you,” he said in a low tone.

Had that been his breath she felt caress her cheek? Swallowing against the clamoring going on inside her, she asked, “Sure you aren’t hungry?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“What you have to offer.”

She expelled a shaky breath but it did little to relieve the pressure inside her. He was deliberately toying with her emotions. But if she hit him with that accusation, he’d deny it. Or would he?

God, what an intolerable situation. Drawing back, she said, in what she hoped was a perfectly normal but standoffish tone, “I have some cold cuts, salad—”

“Thanks but no thanks,” he said abruptly.

She watched as he reached in his pocket and pulled out his pack of antacids.

“That’s obviously your diet of choice.”

His lips thinned as he rubbed the back of his neck in a gesture of frustration. “It gets the job done.”

“I hope the job’s worth it,” she said, holding on to her normal tone, though it was hard, especially when she wanted to reach out and touch those grooves in his forehead, soothe them away. Then, realizing where her thoughts had wandered, she shut them down.

“It is.” His tone was definitely clipped.

“Did I hit an exposed nerve?”

He scowled. “So you obviously don’t like pressure. Well, I do. Otherwise, I’d be bored.”

“Good luck.”

His eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

“On convincing yourself.”

A smile of sorts softened his lips. “You don’t pull any punches, do you? Okay, so things aren’t going so well right now. I’ll admit that.”

“The boss is not happy you’re here.” It was a statement of fact.

Denton’s laugh was humorless. “That’s putting it mildly.”

She didn’t dare ask him when he was leaving. She didn’t want him to go, but she was afraid for him to stay. And why that was so, she dared not ask herself. Having him in front of her, within

touching distance but not touching him, was playing havoc with her emotions, a complication she didn't need or deserve.

“So, is making more money your goal?”

He almost smiled again. “That and making partner in the firm.”

“I guess that makes Mummy and Daddy proud.” She had purposely avoided asking about his parents, whom she partly blamed for their breakup. They had never liked her, never thought she was good enough for their son. However, she couldn't blame them totally. Denton could have bucked them, but he hadn't. He'd gone right along with his dad's wishes. Then his dad had had a stroke, which had further complicated matters.

“Sarcasm doesn't become you,” he said, drawing her back to the moment at hand.

“Is that on the horizon? Becoming partner, I mean?” she said, deliberately changing the subject.

“It'd better be. If I nail this client, then I feel I'm a shoo-in.”

“Then I hope it happens.”

He delved into her eyes. “You don't mean that.”

She flushed, stirring harder. “You're doing it again.”

“What?” he asked in an innocent tone.

Innocent, hell. He'd never been innocent. “Assuming you can read my mind.”

“What are you making?” he asked, his tone having dropped to a sultry pitch deep in the danger zone.

“Uh, a cake,” she responded, clearly thrown off-kilter by his unexpected change in subject.

He chuckled suddenly, and his eyes heated.

Her system went haywire. “What's...so funny?”

“You've got a glob of batter on your face.”

Before she could respond, a finger reached out and scooped it off. Then, without removing his hot gaze, he deliberately licked his finger, making a sucking noise.

The bottom dropped out of her stomach.

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