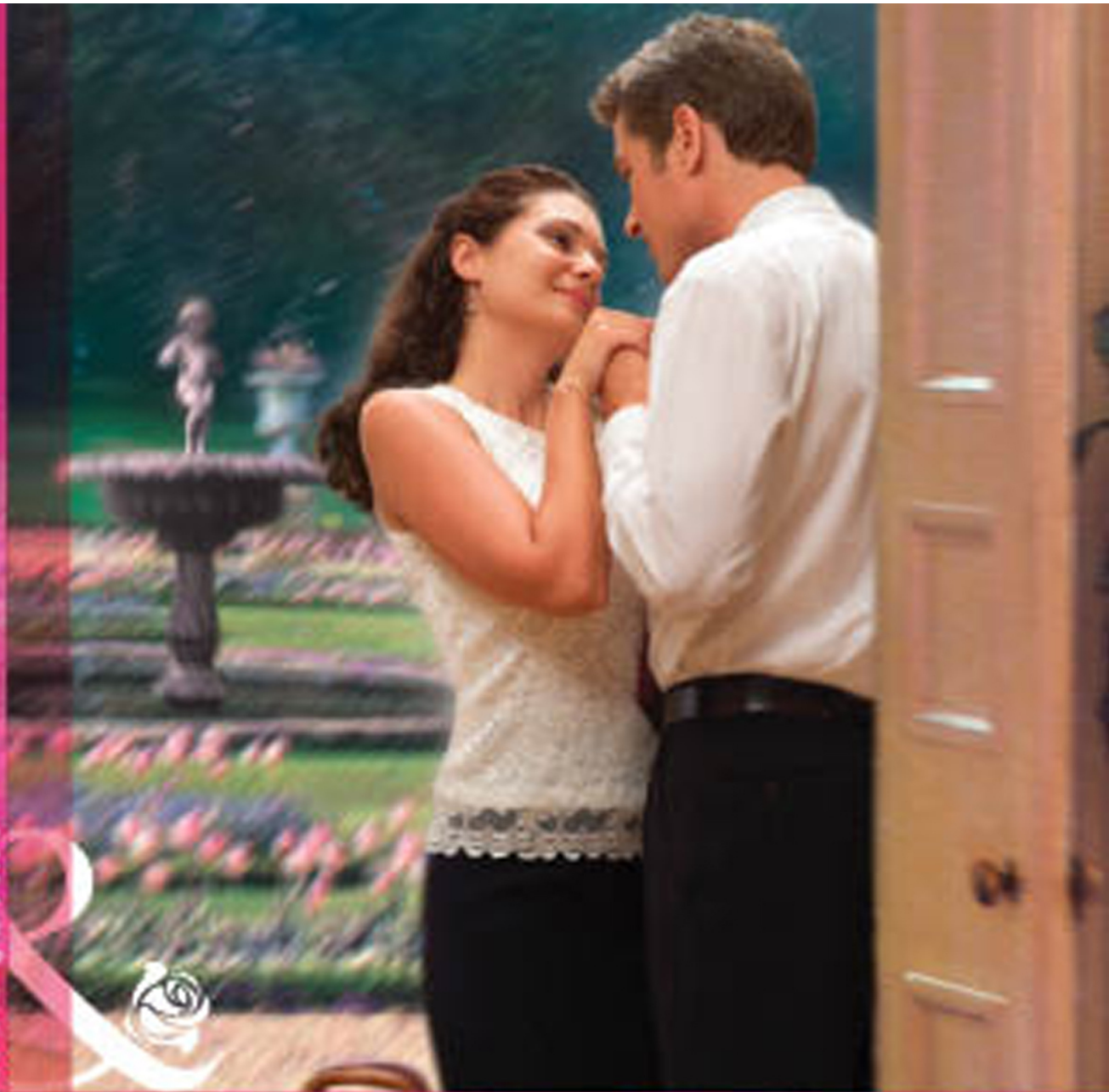


MILLS & BOON



Vintage *Cherish*

**An Heiress On
His Doorstep**

TERESA SOUTHWICK

Mills & Boon Cherish

Teresa Southwick

An Heiress on His Doorstep

«HarperCollins»

Southwick T.

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— (Mills & Boon Cherish)

SHE' D WISHED TO BE A PRINCESS AND LIVE IN A PALACE. A HUSBAND WASN' T PART OF THE DEAL. And being kidnapped was not on heiress Jordan Bishop's itinerary, either. Especially when the crazy scheme was her father's idea of matchmaking, and the hero was Jonathan Prince Patterson—tall, dark and deceptive. After all, what kind of man needed to kidnap a wife? She'd teach him—by faking amnesia and forcing his confession. But this prince had more charm than she'd bargained for. His slow, sexy smile begged her to succumb to seduction. But surrender would mean baring her heart...and confessing her own deceptions.

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Was this her hero?

As he moved toward her, she noticed his confident, sort of predatory walk. His head dipped slightly as he looked down to her shoeless foot. “Did you lose your glass slipper, Cinderella?”

“I think I was kidnapped.” Was it technically a kidnapping when one’s own father was behind it?

“You think? Don’t you remember?”

Remember? What if she couldn’t remember. That would make his life difficult, and she liked the idea of that.

“Who are you?” he asked.

He knew good and well who she was. Okay. That did it. Scaring the stuffing out of a girl then playing dumb was not the way to win a fiancée and influence people. She plastered a confused expression on her face and rubbed her fingertips over her forehead. “I—I can’t remember.”

He gave her a doubtful look. “You’re not going to faint, are you?”

Why not? she thought. She needed a ride; this guy needed a lesson.

She made herself go limp and dropped like a stone.

An Heiress on His Doorstep

Teresa Southwick



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TERESA SOUTHWICK

lives in Southern California with her hero husband who is more than happy to share with her the male point of view. An avid fan of romance novels, she is delighted to be living out her dream of writing for Silhouette Books.

The fortune-teller said...

To be a princess and live in a palace—love is the risk, deception the malice.

If the three born on February twenty-ninth rub the magic from the lamp and make a wish—on that day that comes only once every four years—each shall receive her most coveted desire.

But there is peril.

Each of the three must see beyond the evident. Look into the soul of the one her heart has chosen.

Only then will she find the truth that is hers alone.

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Chapter One

September 15, 2004

Jordan Bishop said goodbye to terror and went straight to furious. Being kidnapped was not the way she'd planned to start her first vacation in two years.

She looked at the guy who'd abducted her. He was hardly more than a kid, an average-looking young man. Average height, average looks and average brown hair. They'd been waiting on this deserted road for what felt like hours, and he'd refused to tell her why. Jordan was fed up.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she said.

He glanced over at her from the driver's seat. "Do you see one, sweetheart?" His voice was rife with sarcasm.

That does it, she thought.

She pressed her legs together. "I wonder how this leather seat would hold up in the event of an unfortunate accident."

That wiped the sarcastic expression off his face. "You gotta go in the bushes."

"Any port in a storm," she replied.

She'd been terrified when he'd grabbed her, expecting to be assaulted or murdered any second. But that feeling faded when he kept driving. After stopping, he hadn't made a single threatening move. It felt like he was waiting for something. And she didn't intend to be around when the wait was over.

He got out of the car and walked around to her side, opening the door with his keys in his hand. He unlocked the cuff hooked to the passenger handhold above her head. The other cuff was attached to her wrist. When he glanced away to put his keys back in his pocket, she swiveled in her seat and kicked out as hard as she could with both legs, making him stumble backward. If she'd known she would be in this mess, she'd have dressed more appropriately. Now was no time to worry about her tight skirt. At least it was short, giving her some maneuverability.

While the creep was getting his footing, Jordan jumped out of the SUV. She winced when a small rock dug into her bare heel. She'd lost one of her pumps when he'd first grabbed her.

He grinned. "Nice try."

"I thought so."

As he started toward her, she braced for her next move. She was about to find out if all those self-defense classes were worth the price. When he put his hands on her upper arms, she jabbed the three-inch spike heel of her remaining pump into his instep. He cried out, but before he could react, she raised her knee and rammed it into his groin. He grunted in pain and doubled over wheezing, then dropped to the ground groaning. This was the part where she was supposed to run like hell.

But where? Even if she knew which way to run, she was out in the sticks, with no sign of civilization in sight. She had to get the keys, but she didn't want to get in too close to him. Even though he was still rolling around and groaning. But how long did it take a man to recover from a knee to the groin?

"Bishop's not paying me enough for this," he muttered to himself.

Bishop? He couldn't have said what she thought she'd heard. "What did you say? Who's paying you?" she demanded.

He glared at her. "Your father."

"My father? I don't believe you."

"I couldn't make up something this weird," he said, sitting up. "He hired me to kidnap you."

"Why?"

"It's a setup. To find you a man."

"You?" she asked, shocked.

"No. And I resent your implication and your tone."

She didn't give a rat's behind what he resented. "Look, buster, my patience is wearing thin. You scared me out of my wits, you handcuffed me." She held up her wrist with the dangling metal still attached. "And you made me lose my shoe. It was my favorite pair and very expensive."

"You're an heiress. You can afford it. Bill your father."

"That's not the point. And none of your business. Start talking. I want the facts, from the beginning."

He held his head in his hands. "Your father has the perfect guy for you. Sir Galahad is due here any minute to waltz in for the rescue. You know, be your hero. After that you're supposed to fall for him and get married. Happy ever after and all that crap. It's the truth. I swear."

"I don't believe this," she said, throwing up her hands.

But the statement was rhetorical, because the more she thought about it, the more she did believe him. It would certainly explain why her father had been so insistent that she have lunch with him today. The kidnapper knew where to find her because her father had set her up. "So when was this guy supposed to be here?"

"An hour ago."

"Figures. Apparently Daddy picks heroes as well as he picks kidnappers."

"It's my first kidnapping and not my sphere of expertise," he said defensively.

"So where did my father find you? Thugs-R-Us?"

"Very funny. I work part-time at Bishop, Inc. while I go to college."

He wasn't very tall, about five-six or five-seven to her five foot one. But he was beefy. If he hadn't surprised her when she'd been leaving her father's office, her self-defense moves would have been more effective. They wouldn't have been effective just now if he'd been a professional kidnapper. Why had he done it?

"Did you need the money? Is that why you agreed to this ridiculous Machiavellian farce?"

"I bet you think I don't know what that means." He looked up at her, his eyes narrowed. "It's hard to say no to your father. And he's my boss."

"You should get another boss." She couldn't get another father.

"No kidding."

She tried not to feel sorry for him, but he really did look pathetic sitting in the dirt at the side of the road. Speaking of which, she hadn't seen another car come along the whole time they'd been here. What the heck was her father thinking? Rage expanded inside her.

"So who's the tardy Prince Charming my father is trying to hook me up with this time?"

"Didn't get his name."

"And no way to contact him," she guessed.

"Nope."

She was twenty-four-and-a-half years old. Her father had pretty much ignored her for the first twenty-four. But he'd changed in the last six months. Right after his heart attack when she'd been in New Orleans for her birthday. A near-death experience gives you a different perspective he'd said. From her perspective, he was acting just plain weird. His explanation was that he wouldn't be around forever, and he wanted to see her settled and secure before he kicked the bucket.

At first she'd thought the change was really sweet and had high hopes of finally building a relationship with him. But he'd gone after this the way he'd built his business—with single-minded determination. He'd started small, with a casual introduction to a man of his choice, then dinner for three, then dinner for three where only she and the man showed up. Then a weekend away for her and her dad. But dad had been conspicuously absent. It was just her and Harman Bishop's current front-runner for her affections.

And the problem was escalating. Last week he'd given Clark Caldwell, a guy she'd broken up with, the key to her apartment to arrange a romantic dinner for two. Her dad wasn't the subtle type. Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead. Another day, another guy. No regard for consequences or

whom he steamrolled. He'd been butting into her life no matter how often or how vehemently she told him to stop.

But this was the last straw. How stupid did he think she was? And what kind of clown was he trying to set her up with? What kind of man would go along with this? Scratch that. She so didn't want to know.

The guy groaned as he stood up, then without warning grabbed her. "Okay. Back in the car."

"No way," she said, pulling hard to try and free her arm.

"I gotta take you back to your dad."

The thought of the man who'd set this series of events in motion generated a red-hot haze of fury. She grabbed his right ear and yanked.

"Ow," he cried, dropping his hand from her arm. "Look, lady," he pleaded, "I only got half the money. If I don't—"

"Tell it to someone who cares." In a strictly reflex action, she raised her knee again.

"Okay, okay, you win."

She backed away and looked around. They were on a farm-to-market road somewhere in Texas, and she couldn't be more specific because this idiot had driven her around for hours. On either side of the two-lane road, rolling hills stretched as far as the eye could see. No stores, no houses, no phones. And she'd dropped her purse with the cell phone inside when she'd been abducted.

Behind her she heard her father's lackey mutter something like "not enough money in the world to put up with this crap." No kidding. When she got ahold of her father, she was going to give him a piece of her mind. Of course, she'd done that many times in the past, and still he'd pulled a stunt like this. She had to think of some way to stop him, to convince him not to interfere in her life.

She took a step, and a pebble bit into her heel again. "Ouch," she said, looking down.

Then she heard the SUV engine roar to life. Spinning around, she watched the big tires throw up dirt and rocks as it screeched onto the road.

The car stopped beside her. "Your hero should be here any minute." Then the window went up, and her abductor drove away.

At first she was too stunned to move. Then she was too angry to think straight.

"That damn thug-in-training should be grounded for the rest of his natural born days," she ranted, limping in a circle.

"Harman Bishop is going to rue the day he messed with me," she sputtered. "An accident of DNA does not give him carte blanche to commandeer my life."

Jordan stood by the side of the road, one shoe off, one shoe on, the handcuff still dangling from her wrist. She looked toward the west. She knew it was west because the sun was descending in the sky and would soon disappear behind the rolling hills on the horizon. In the distance, she saw a car coming from the direction her kidnapper had gone. Was this her hero?

The vehicle, a very pricey luxury model, stopped in front of her. The door opened, and a man got out. He was tall, muscular and looked to be in his early thirties, just exactly the age her father would have chosen. As he moved toward her she noticed his confident, sort of predatory walk. She noticed he was late, too.

When he stopped in front of her, she saw that his eyes were hidden behind aviator sunglasses. His head dipped slightly as he looked down to her shoeless foot. "Did you lose your glass slipper, Cinderella?"

So Mr. Wonderful was playing dumb. "Are you my prince here to see if the shoe fits?"

"I'm here to see if you need help. Car trouble?"

"Not exactly."

He frowned as he looked around the empty road. "How did you get here?"

She started to raise her arm, and the handcuff jangled at the end of her wrist. "I—I think I was kidnapped," she said.

Was it technically a kidnapping when one's own father was behind it? How could he do this to her? And how could this guy go along with it? What was in it for him? Most people sent a card when they wanted to reach out and touch someone. Her father picked a hell of a way to say he cared. And did he really? He hadn't even hired a competent kidnapper. He got an amateur, a guy she could take with weeny moves, and now this winner. Men, she thought disgusted.

He continued to stare at her when she didn't answer right away. "You think you were kidnapped? That's a new one," he mumbled. "Don't you remember?"

Remember? He was taking the playing dumb thing to a new high, or low as the case may be. What if she couldn't remember? That would make his life difficult, and she liked the idea of that. She embraced the saying "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." What if she gave this bozo enough lemonade to drown in?

"Who are you?" he asked.

He knew good and well who she was. Okay. That did it. Scaring the stuffing out of a girl then playing dumb was not the way to win a fiancée and influence people. She was going to make this as difficult as possible for him. She plastered a confused expression on her face, and it didn't require Drama 101 to pull it off. She really was confused by the events of the past few hours.

With the handcuff dangling in front of her, she rubbed her fingertips over her forehead. "I—I can't remember."

He gave her a doubtful look. "You're not going to faint, are you?"

Why not? she thought. She needed a ride; this guy needed a lesson. She made herself go limp and dropped like a stone.

Chapter Two

J. P. Patterson automatically reached out and caught the woman against him. As he lifted her limp body into his arms, her head settled onto his shoulder and he studied her face. It was fine-boned and lovely, with smooth, soft-looking skin. And she was heavier than she looked, which he attributed to muscle, because her pencil-thin skirt wouldn't hide any fat.

Nine out of ten guys would be grateful this woman had fallen into their arms. Apparently J.P. was number ten because he wished she'd fainted in front of the other nine guys. This beautiful brunette had scam written all over her. He didn't for a minute believe this act and cursed the fact that he couldn't just let her hit the pavement. But he had no illusions about trying to get the truth out of her.

He had to give her credit. This scheme was definitely more elaborate and imaginative than the ever-popular sneaking into his hotel room and waiting naked in his bed. The dangling handcuff, the missing shoe and being stranded in the middle of nowhere were all nice touches. Her mission to meet him had been planned and executed with the precision of a military invasion. And that wasn't ego talking. It was the voice of experience.

He didn't flatter himself that women fell all over him because of his sex appeal and animal magnetism. The only magnet was his fortune. He'd made *People* magazine's list of the fifty most beautiful people—Sexiest Gazillionaire it read under his picture. Again, nine out of ten men would be flattered. To him, it was simply more publicity he didn't want or need.

Women threw themselves at him on a fairly regular basis. Just like this one in his arms. The question was, now what did he do with her?

This was the road to his house. It seemed obvious she'd had someone drop her off here so she could wait for him to come by, knowing he wouldn't be able to leave her. He thought about setting her on the blacktop to see how fast the faint would last. He could simply drive away. Unfortunately, his mother had raised him to be a gentleman. He turned toward his SUV and managed to open the passenger door and get her inside.

He looked over his shoulder in the direction of town. He'd just come from there; the sheriff was there. Turning her over to the sheriff would be his best option. But it was a long drive and the estate was closer. Besides, his mother had just arrived for a visit, and she was waiting. He belted the stranger in and went around the front of the car, then entered the driver's side.

He drove to the estate in a couple of minutes. Again he thought how precisely she'd planned her campaign as he braked in front of the closed security gates. He pressed the button on his remote control and the gates opened wide. He guided the vehicle up the long, tree-lined drive, then parked in the semicircular area in front of the house. Turning off the ignition, he glanced at the woman in the other seat.

She opened her eyes—big, beautiful brown eyes, he noticed—and sat up. How convenient.

"Where am I?"

Classic question and certainly in character for the part she was playing. But he was sure she knew exactly where she was. He could end her game any time, but he wanted to wait. It would give him a certain satisfaction to watch her reaction when she tripped up and the plan imploded. And she would trip up. He was certain of that, too.

"This is my home," he said, opening his door. "I brought you here to call the sheriff and report the kidnapping." He watched her closely.

"I can't wait."

A cool customer. Detail noted. He got out of the car and went to her side to swing the door wide. She slid out and her skirt rode up, revealing a flash of shapely thigh. A calculated move, like baiting a hook. He didn't plan to be her unsuspecting mackerel. But he had to admit, if there was any

silver lining to the situation, this view of tempting, tanned flesh was it. Then she was standing on the concrete driveway, wobbling because she was wearing only one high heel.

“You might want to take your shoe off,” he suggested, pointing to her foot.

A dainty foot, he noted. And her nylons were in shreds. That short Band-Aid of a skirt didn't hide much of her legs and her thighs were pretty spectacular, too, even in the tattered panty hose.

To steady herself, she touched his arm. Her hand was small and warm against his skin, and his pulse spiked once before he drew in a deep breath to stabilize it.

She slipped off her high heel then straightened and looked it over as if she'd never seen it before. “Looks like real leather.”

“It does,” he agreed. “You apparently have a memory of genuine leather.”

“Apparently I do. Along with exceptionally good taste in footwear.” She shook her head. “I like this shoe, and I wish I knew where the other one was.”

The comment seemed sincere, but he would bet she wasn't all that worried. Her accomplice was probably taking good care of it. “Let's go inside.”

She turned and froze. Her jaw dropped as she silently stared for several long moments at his house. Either she'd really fainted, which he doubted, or she hadn't peeked on the way up the drive to preserve the pretense that she'd passed out. Either way, her surprise seemed genuine.

“Good Lord, it looks like a castle. Turrets and towers and stones, oh my.”

“It is a castle. Very famous in this part of Texas. In fact that's how the town of Castle Rock got its name.”

She rubbed her forehead. “I don't remember if I've ever heard of it.”

He studied her, again waiting for a slip in her facade. A weakness in her expression. He found none. Not surprising since the rest of this operation had been planned so precisely and in such a detailed manner. He couldn't believe her research hadn't included information about where he lived, so he had to assume her apparent shock meant she was a very good actress.

Then he looked at the impressive stone walls surrounding the extensive manicured grounds of the estate. He studied the main entrance to the house, stately and towering above them. The sheer majesty of the building was something he always took for granted, along with the heavy double doors that led inside.

But he tried to put himself in her shoes, so to speak, he thought, glancing at her bare feet. He lived in the country on five acres and the security surrounding him was state of the art. If she'd been casing the place, he would know. That meant she probably hadn't seen it in person. Up close, it must look pretty extraordinary.

He'd always thought so. “In the late 1800s, my family made more money in cattle than they knew what to do with. Someone on my mother's side decided to buy an English castle. They took it apart and reassembled it here in Texas brick by brick.”

“That must have cost enough to feed a third world country for a year.”

“Probably.” He was volunteering a lot of information to someone who was trying to con him and could only chalk it up to pride in the family digs. Besides, he figured she'd done her homework and already knew the details. “We call it Patterson palace.”

“A palace,” she said, an odd expression on her face. Then she met his gaze. “Patterson? Is that your name?”

As if she didn't know. “J. P. Patterson. And you are?”

“I wish I knew.” She shifted her bare feet and winced, then brushed the bottom of one bare foot across the top of the other. “Ouch. You wouldn't think a palace would allow pebbles.”

“It's not Camelot,” he said wryly. “Let's go inside. My mother's waiting.”

Her gaze narrowed as she looked up at him. “She is?”

“Yes.” He didn't like the look on her face. “What's wrong?”

“There's just something about a guy in his thirties who lives with his mother.”

“Without a memory, you know this—how?”

“Instinct. Just an impression. I can’t explain it.” She shrugged. “If it’s all the same to you, maybe I’ll just take my chances back on the road.”

Her implication irritated him, and he felt compelled to defend himself. “My mother lives in a condo in Dallas. She’s here to visit.”

“If you say so. And since we’re here, I can call the sheriff. Like you said. I’d appreciate the use of your telephone.”

“After you,” he said, holding out his hand.

With an air of stubbornness, she lifted her chin and preceded him up the four steps to the entrance. When she stopped at the door, he reached around her and opened it.

She halted in the entryway, staring from side to side, then up at the ornately carved stone ceiling. “Wow.”

“This way,” he said. “Mother’s probably in the great room.”

Pride in the family digs took him only so far, and he was done now. The sooner he got the sheriff out here to deal with this faker the better.

They moved past the front rooms used as a parlor and living room and headed toward the kitchen and great room, which looked out over the rear gardens and a pool with a brick patio.

“J.P.? Is that you?”

“Yes, Mother.”

They walked into the huge room where his mother sat in an overstuffed chair beside the stone fireplace taking up one full wall. J.P. could almost stand up straight in it. They’d always joked that their ancestors probably used it to roast a steer on a spit.

Audrey put aside the book she’d been reading and looked up. When she spotted his companion, she frowned. “Good lord, J.P., what have you done to that young woman?”

“Nothing. I rescued her.” He glanced at the companion in question and was sure he saw her glare at him. But the look disappeared so fast he wasn’t certain. “She was stranded at the side of the road and there was no car in sight. That seemed odd, so I stopped.”

His mother closed her book and stood, then went to meet them. She was taller than the gold-digging stranger. “What’s your name, dear?”

“I—I don’t remember.”

“J.P.?”

“All she told me is that she thought she’d been kidnapped,” he said.

His mother lifted the dangling handcuff and studied the shoeless stranger, frowning as she took in every detail of her disheveled appearance. “Good heavens. How did you get free?”

Mystery woman shook her head. “My last clear memory is standing on the side of the road and a car driving away. Fast. Then your son stopped to help me. I’m afraid I was so overwhelmed I fainted.”

His mother slid her arm around the faker’s shoulders and led her to the couch on the long oak-panelled wall. He wanted to warn his mother of his suspicions, but didn’t want to make a scene. It wasn’t worth the aggravation since the sheriff would deal with the situation soon enough.

“Poor dear,” his mother said. “Is there anyone we can call who might be worried about you?”

“I can’t remember.”

“J.P., did you find a purse or anything that might give us a clue to her identity?”

“I didn’t look,” he said.

“For goodness’ sake, that’s basic investigative technique.”

“She passed out, Mother. I had my hands full.”

“Sorry, dear. Of course you couldn’t let her fall.”

If there was any plus for him in this whole situation, it had been holding her in his arms. She was soft and curvy in all the right places. He was a guy, and he’d noticed.

“I’m Audrey Patterson,” his mother said. “Obviously you met my son.”

“My hero.”

Was there the slightest trace of sarcasm in the stranger’s tone? When his gaze locked with hers, the hostility there was quickly replaced by innocence and a fragile victim expression.

“Think, dear,” his mother said to her. “Can you tell us where you live? Maybe where you work?”

She was working right now, J.P. thought. Playing his mother like a violin.

“I can’t remember anything.”

“Should we take you to the emergency room? Perhaps a doctor should check you over?”

“My head doesn’t hurt, and I don’t feel any bumps or bruises. I don’t hurt anywhere, in fact. But my memory is blank.” She looked appropriately pathetic.

Audrey patted her hand. “It must be amnesia caused by emotional trauma.”

Not yet, J.P. thought. But soon. With the sheriff’s help, he planned to give her a healthy dose of trauma.

“Mother, I brought her here to call the sheriff.”

“That’s right,” the stranger agreed. “If you’ll tell me where your phone is, I’ll do that. The sooner the sheriff gets involved, the better.” She met his gaze, and her own narrowed. This time there was no doubt about the animosity. “I don’t want the kidnapper’s trail to get cold. Or any accomplices to get away.”

What was that all about? She was playing this to the hilt. And the way she was looking at him. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear she was accusing him of something.

“What are you implying?” he asked sharply.

“J.P., your tone,” his mother admonished. “She’s been through a terrible ordeal. You’d be hostile too if you couldn’t remember your name.”

“If I didn’t know my name, I’d be trying everything possible to remember.”

“It’s not good to force the memories,” Audrey said.

“And you know this—how?” he asked.

“It happens that way in all the romance novels,” she said defensively. “And the movies. They always say the victim needs to rest and feel secure. With relaxation, the memories will start to come back. Probably in isolated flashes.”

“Well, I bet the sheriff can make her feel safe and secure. I’ll just go make a phone call and get him out here.”

“You’re my hero,” their guest said again. “Coming to my rescue yet again.”

He looked at her, pure and pretty as she sat in the circle of Audrey’s maternal embrace. Victimized him was one thing; he was used to it. But he wanted to shield his mother from the gold diggers who were only after his money. The last time he’d let his guard down, he’d been hammered by a woman with the face of an angel and the soul of a snake.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he said.

Jordan watched J.P. walk out of the room and breathed a sigh of relief. She looked at the blond, blue-eyed older woman beside her and wondered if she knew her son was an underhanded weasel.

A weasel who wasn’t hard on the eyes. In the looks department, J. P. Patterson was a twelve on a scale of one to ten. She’d always had a weakness for dark-haired, blue-eyed men. But her father couldn’t have known that because he hardly knew her at all. At least he’d picked a hunk to be her hero. A hunk with money, judging by where he lived.

She hadn’t gotten a good look at this place until she’d slid out of the car. It was a real, honest-to-goodness castle with a drawbridge over a moat and everything. It was like Sleeping Beauty’s castle at Disneyland—only bigger. And with real rooms, not a facade. Really big rooms with beveled, leaded glass windows covered by velvet drapes with gold-braided tiebacks. It was unbelievable.

The first thing she’d thought of was her leap year birthday in New Orleans when she and her friends had rubbed the lamp and made their wishes. Hers had been to be a princess and live in a palace.

She'd been joking, but apparently fate had a sense of humor. If this guy lived here, no way on God's green earth would she live here with him. He was an underhanded scoundrel, a willing and eager participant in this outrageous kidnapping scheme of her father's.

Audrey Patterson patted her hand again. "Can I get you something to drink, dear? Water? Something stronger?"

"No, thanks."

She would have something stronger after the sheriff got there. Then it would be time to celebrate giving J.P. back a little of his own medicine. She just didn't want to do it in front of this woman who seemed a decent sort. If she didn't already know what a conniver her son was, Jordan didn't want to rub her nose in it. Although she did wonder why he was so eager to call the sheriff. Could be he thought he was in the clear. That there was nothing to tie him to the scheme.

Except her father.

Anger knotted inside her. Somehow she had to teach Harman Bishop to mind his own business. Show him he couldn't make up for twenty-four years of indifference with six months of meddling.

J.P. walked back into the room and his mother said, "What did the sheriff say? When can we expect him?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"What?" Jordan asked, surprised.

He looked at her. "It's a small town. The sheriff's department reflects that. On Friday night its resources are stretched to the limit. And this isn't an emergency."

"Since when is a kidnapping not an emergency? I agree with—" Audrey hesitated, obviously not knowing what to call Jordan "—our guest, that we don't want the kidnapper's trail to get cold."

"I'm not so sure there's any trail to cool off," he said.

Jordan thought there was the hint of derision and a shade of cynicism in his voice. Or maybe it was just guilt.

"No one can come out until morning?" she asked.

"That's what he said." He slid his hands into the pockets of his khakis. The long sleeves of his yellow shirt were rolled to just below the elbows. It was a good look.

"That's unacceptable," his mother commented. "When I see Sheriff Michaels, I intend to give him a piece of my mind."

"I actually talked to Rick. He's out on a call, but he said since the victim is physically all right, we should sit tight and someone will be out tomorrow to take a statement." He looked at Jordan. "Or I could drive her into town and leave her at the station."

Jordan stood. "Then that's probably the best thing to do."

"Absolutely not," Audrey said.

"But, Mom, the department has resources—"

Audrey shook her head. "Not the kind she needs. That institutional, bureaucratic little office won't give her the feeling of safety and security necessary for her memory to return."

"You're very kind, Mrs. Patterson," Jordan said. "I've burdened you enough already." But she hadn't burdened him nearly enough, she thought, meeting J.P.'s narrowed gaze.

"Nonsense, dear. Frankly, I was wondering how I was going to keep myself entertained. My condo is being painted, and J.P. insisted I stay with him while the work is being done."

How about that? The man was nice to his mother. But even serial killers had redeeming qualities, and she wanted her pound of flesh for what Harman Bishop and J. P. Patterson had put her through.

"Mom, if she wants to go, I'll be happy to take her into town."

"Really, J.P., you rescued this young woman only to dispose of her at the sheriff's office? She called you her hero. That doesn't seem especially heroic to me." She looked at Jordan. "My dear, you can't remember who you are or where you live. Rick Michaels is an exceptional sheriff in the

finest tradition of Texas lawmen. But, as with most men, he has the sensitivity of a gnat. You're concerned about putting us out and that's very sweet. But this place is big enough to put up several professional sports teams. I think we can handle you for one night. Maybe by morning you'll have your memory back."

Jordan glanced at J.P. who looked as if he would rather eat glass than have her stay. He was good. What an act. Academy Award material. And it made her furious. She'd been put out and put upon with this farce. Surely there was some law against staging a kidnapping. He'd portrayed the rescuer, but he was part of this conspiracy. She'd wanted to make a statement; she'd hoped to embarrass him in front of the sheriff. She'd been frightened to death and held captive by a wimpy little twit who caved at the first sign of trouble. And J. P. Patterson had gone along with the manipulation. What kind of man would do a thing like that?

She wanted to beat him at his own game; she wanted it bad. Sticking around until tomorrow would give her an opportunity.

"Thank you, Mrs. Patterson. I'd be happy and very relieved to accept your generosity."

Chapter Three

J.P. studied the slender wrist with the handcuff attached. Audrey had suggested he figure out a way to remove it while she found some clean clothes for their guest.

The stranger looked around the room. “Nice kitchen. Lots of counter space with that island in the center. The granite countertops are really beautiful. The different shades of brown and beige are a nice complement to the floor tile.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

“And this,” she said, studying the oak table and eight chairs set in the bay area. “This looks like an antique. Did it come with the house?”

“It’s old. It belonged to my great-great-grandmother.”

“It’s in wonderful shape,” she said, rubbing her hand over the wood surface. The cuff scraped against the edge and she quickly grabbed it. “Sorry. I’ll be glad to get rid of this.”

He picked up the bolt cutters he’d found in the tool-shed. “Okay, give me your hand.”

“I’m going to pray you didn’t mean that the way it sounded.” Big, beautiful brown eyes stared at the large tool in his hand. “You’re not going to cut off my hand with that, are you?”

His gaze lowered to the button on her silk blouse that held the material together over her firm breasts. “I’m going to cut off the cuff, unless you’ve got a key tucked away somewhere.”

The idea of fishing for it sent a shaft of heat straight to his groin. He didn’t trust her as far as he could throw her, but, unfortunately, that didn’t shut down his appreciation of her attributes.

“Regrettably, when the kidnapper peeled rubber on the highway as he drove off, he didn’t toss me the key.”

“A simple no would suffice.”

“We’d all like things we can’t have. For instance,” she said, “I’d like whoever’s behind this kidnapping in these cuffs.”

“Me, too.” He met her gaze and waited for her to blink. She didn’t.

“He probably didn’t pull it off by himself,” she said, with what seemed like studied casualness.

“I came to the same conclusion.”

“Really? How about that? We agree on something.”

He was just sliding the bolt cutters beneath the circle of metal on her delicate wrist when he looked up and saw her smile. He was struck by the fact that she was quite remarkably beautiful. As those shock waves hit him, his hand slipped.

She snatched hers back. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing with those things? One of us could get hurt.”

“This isn’t rocket science,” he snapped, annoyed with himself for the lapse.

“Neither is kidnapping. What do you suppose the penalty is for abducting someone against their will?”

“Penalty?”

“Yeah, as in it’s against the law. And when a person breaks the law, there’s a cost for it. Like jail time,” she added.

“I suppose so.”

“And what about accomplices? Coconspirators?”

What the hell was she doing? Was it like hiding in plain sight? Throw him off her trail by discussing the transgression? “What about them?”

“Do you think the punishment for a crime is as stiff for the brawn as it is for the brains behind it?” she asked sweetly.

“I have no idea. What do you think?”

“I think everyone involved should pay big time.”

“Me, too.” He let out a breath and started attempt number two to slide the bolt cutters beneath the circle on her arm. This time he didn’t make the mistake of looking at her.

“So you think jail time is appropriate?”

He kept his eyes on the metal. “Whoever hatched a kidnapping scheme to swindle money and anyone who goes along with said scheme should be locked up. And the key thrown away.”

The cuff was closed as far as it would go, but her wrist was so slender he easily had enough room to get the jaws of the tool between the metal and her flesh. The inside of her arm was pale, a stark contrast to the tan on her forearm. Her skin looked soft, smooth. He lined up the blades of the cutter very carefully. In spite of her sneaky actions, he had no desire to hurt her. Then he pressed the handles of the bolt cutter together and felt the stiff resistance. This wasn’t going to be like a hot knife through butter.

“Do you think those things would cut through the bars of a jail cell?” she asked.

“No.” What was it with her and retribution? She was the one flirting with a felony. But if he confronted her, she’d only deny it. No point in wasting his breath.

However, he wished big time that the scent of her skin didn’t remind him so much of twisted sheets, temptation and sin. The perfume she was wearing smelled subtle, expensive. A tool of her trade as surely as the one he was using.

“Hold still,” he warned, exerting more pressure on the bolt-cutter’s handles.

“Like I would make a sudden move when you’ve got the jaws of death on my arm.” She watched his progress in silence for several moments. “It occurs to me that if a felon has enough money, he can hire some high-powered legal counsel.”

“What does that mean?”

“It seemed an obvious statement of fact to me. There are stories in the news all the time about crooks who get off after hiring pricey legal eagles.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

She glanced around the large kitchen. “I’d say you have a few bucks.”

“You think?” he asked. She knew darn good and well he did. “What was your first clue?”

He pressed the handles together with as much force as he dared and felt the blades come together as they cut completely through the metal. He put down the tool, then worked the cuff off her wrist.

“Paupers don’t live in palaces,” she pointed out, meeting his gaze.

“No, princesses do.”

She looked startled for a moment, but recovered quickly. “Are you looking for a princess?”

“No.” Heaven forbid.

“Good thing.” She rubbed her wrist, now free of the handcuff. “But if you change your mind, you might try adding diamonds to that bracelet before you put it on a girl’s wrist next time.”

He stared at her, surprised at her boldness. “I didn’t put that bracelet on this time. The kidnapper did.” He studied the gleam in her eyes, the rebellious lift of her chin. “For a woman who’s been recently traumatized, you seem to be taking it all in stride.”

“I suppose the silver lining of amnesia is that you can’t remember trauma. It’s the mind’s way of protecting itself,” she said calmly.

“It just seems to me that someone who’s gone through a kidnapping then lost her memory over the whole thing would be more shaken up from the experience. You seem to be handling it very well. Pretty scrappy.”

She shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a scrappy sort of gal.”

“Is that a memory returning?”

“No. Probably just my natural personality coming out. Trauma may have stolen my memories, but it won’t keep me down.” She stood and touched the twisted metal he’d just removed from her wrist. “Next time remember diamonds are a girl’s best friend.”

He opened his mouth to retort when his mother walked into the room.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Mission accomplished,” the mystery woman said, holding up her now naked wrist.

Audrey stood beside him. “I’ve been thinking.”

“That’s a dangerous prospect,” he said.

“Don’t be disrespectful, J.P. I brought you into this world. I can take you out.”

“Yes, Mother.” He thought it wise to hide his grin.

“As I was saying, we can’t keep calling our guest ‘hey, you.’ Until you remember your name,” she said to the woman, “I think we should call you Jane Doe.”

“Don’t tell me,” he said. “That’s what all the books and movies do.”

Audrey shrugged. “Well, it is.”

“Jane works for me,” said the mystery woman.

“Good.” Audrey nodded with satisfaction. “J.P., why don’t you show Jane upstairs to the window seat room. I think you’ll be comfortable there, dear. You can clean up. Everything you’ll need is there, and I’ve left some clean clothes on the bed. You’ll probably want to rest so I’ll send up a light supper for you.”

“Please don’t go to any trouble on my account,” Jane said, absently rubbing her wrist. Or was it nerves making her do that?

“It’s no trouble. I want you to relax and feel safe.”

“You’re very kind,” Jane said.

J.P. moved toward the kitchen doorway. “Follow me.”

He thought about blowing her cover, pointing out the flaws in her plan. Then he figured there was no point in a confrontation since she would be gone by morning. And he wouldn’t upset his mother. But “Jane’s” comments about princesses, palaces and precious stones proved that she was no different from all the other women who had gone to great lengths to meet him.

It wasn’t him she was after him. It was all about his money.

The next morning Jordan left her lovely room. Audrey was right. She’d been very comfortable tucked away there, although she’d felt like the princess in *The Princess and the Pea*, in a bed that seemed as if it was several stories off the ground. She’d had to climb a wooden step stool to get in it. But the velvet curtains at the beveled-glass windows, heavy, carved cherry-wood furniture, gold fixtures in the attached bath—it was all very wonderful.

She marveled at the rest of the house as she came downstairs. It made her interior decorator’s heart beat a little faster. The graceful arches and stained-glass windows high in the brick walls were spectacular. Twin oak staircases curved from the main floor to the second story. Reverently, she touched the bannister as she descended. Then she used it for real to keep from tripping. Audrey had loaned her a T-shirt and sweatpants that were too long. If she wasn’t careful, she’d go down the hard way. How would J.P. explain her broken neck to her father?

There was a certain irony in the fact that her father was throwing her at J. P. Patterson, a man who lived in a castle. She’d become an interior decorator over her father’s protests. Now, she would give her eyeteeth to redo this place; what a plus for her resume. But if she’d gone into the oil business with her father, he wouldn’t be so insistent she marry a man who could run it when he was gone.

She walked into the kitchen and found J.P. sitting at the table with coffee and a newspaper. What was his game? she wondered. Last night she’d been ready for his come-on. But he was barely civil when he’d removed the handcuffs. Then he’d made no protest when she’d gone upstairs right after dinner.

She’d expected him to suggest a walk in the garden. A visit to her room under the pretext of making sure she was comfortable. Something. But she hadn’t seen him again. Was he trying to lull her into a false sense of security before he slithered in for the kill? There was an aura of intelligence about him, and she reminded herself to be on her toes. Until the sheriff arrived.

He would be there sometime this morning. J. P. Patterson didn't know her father's rent-a-thug had spilled his guts to her about everything. In just a little while, she would expose him for the snake he was in front of local law enforcement. The prospect made her decidedly cheerful.

"Good morning," she said.

He looked up. "Good morning."

"Where's your mother?"

"I'm not sure. If you're hungry, there's a buffet set up in the dining room."

"Why aren't you in there?"

"I prefer the kitchen."

So did she. And Jordan found she was hungry. She went into the room, which had a table long enough to land a 747 on, and picked up one of the two remaining plates on the sideboard. Then she lifted lids on the array of chafing dishes. She took some scrambled eggs, a Belgian waffle with strawberries and a dash of cream, a slice of ham and some fruit. There was a lovely silver carafe of coffee, and she settled a delicate china cup beneath the spigot then pushed back the handle to let it flow. It smelled wonderful.

When she sat down across from J.P. in the kitchen, he glanced at her plate. "I see yesterday's ordeal hasn't affected your appetite."

"Nothing like a kidnapping to stimulate a girl's palate," she said.

"I would expect someone who can't remember their own name to be more agitated."

If it wasn't Mr. Happy. She studied his narrow-eyed expression and thought about his distrustful tone. Was this the best he could do? If his goal was to make her dislike him, he was wildly successful.

"I sense a lack of trust. Are you suspicious by nature? Or merely projecting your own character onto others?"

"There's nothing wrong with my character. But I don't trust you," he admitted.

"Really?" This was good.

"Look, I'm going to be honest with you."

"Honesty is the best policy," she said virtuously. His eyes darkened a fraction, and she knew he'd caught her sarcasm.

"You noticed that I'm a wealthy man."

"Yeah. Like I said, the castle is a clue."

"Because of that, women throw themselves at me."

"You mean they're not attracted by your looks and sensitivity?" she asked sweetly.

"It started in high school and escalated from there."

He was probably telling the truth. She was an heiress; she knew all come-ons weren't sincere.

"Women do outrageous things to be noticed," he continued.

"So do men," she said pointedly.

"They do things like staking out the road to my home and pretending to be a victim," he finished, staring at her.

"Then why did you stop yesterday?" she asked, trying to trip him up.

"That's a good question. I've been asking myself the same thing."

"Did you come up with a good answer?"

He shrugged. "Probably the one in ten chance that you really did need help."

Jordan stared at him, searching for a chink in his facade. He was good, she thought. She almost believed him. At least her father had picked a man smart enough to keep the game interesting. If he'd come on to her in a smarmy way, she'd have shut him down faster than Miami in a hurricane. But clearly he was playing his part to the hilt. He was probably telling her this for sympathy, trying to bond so that they'd have something in common when her memory came back. He had no reason to know she was on to him and faking the amnesia.

"I really did need help," she said. "Thanks to you—"

Audrey walked into the kitchen and smiled. “Good morning, Jane.”

“Mrs. Patterson.”

“J.P., the sheriff arrived while I was out in the garden. I’ve shown him into the parlor. If you’ll both join us there when you’ve finished eating?”

Jordan glanced at the half-eaten food on her plate, then stood. “I’ve had enough, thanks. It’s time to get this over with.”

“I agree.” J.P. came around the table and looked down at her.

Jordan would swear he was trying to intimidate her. It wouldn’t work.

They walked through the house to a room near the front door. In the parlor stood a tall man about J.P.’s age and height wearing a beige shirt and matching trousers with olive-green and tan stripes down the leg. If the uniform hadn’t been a clue, the badge on his chest said loud and clear that this good-looking man with light brown hair and green eyes was the sheriff.

When he saw them, a wide grin revealed very white teeth and laugh lines around his eyes. “Hey, J.P. It’s been too long. We were supposed to have a beer together.”

“Rick.” J.P. grinned back and shook his hand. “It’s good to see you. I’ve been busy with work.”

“Me, too,” the other man said. “We’re going to have to put a date on the calendar.”

“I’ll have my secretary call you.” J.P. looked at her. “Rick and I went through school together.”

“How nice,” Jordan said.

“From kindergarten through the twelfth grade,” Audrey added.

Jordan smiled tightly. “It can’t be a bad thing to have friends in the sheriff’s department.”

Rick looked at her. “I wasn’t always in law enforcement. I managed to get into trouble a time or two. In high school, J.P. was voted most likely to take over the world. I was voted most likely to wind up in jail.”

“And you did,” Jordan commented. “In a manner of speaking.”

Audrey gave the sheriff a hug. “How’s your mother, Rick?”

“Doing fine, Mrs. P. I’ll say hello to her for you.”

“Let’s all sit down,” Audrey said. She took Jordan’s hand and sat beside her on a green-and-gold brocade love seat. J.P. stood beside them.

The sheriff remained standing, backlit by the beveled-glass window. He looked at Jordan. “Sorry I couldn’t get out here last night. The department was swamped. What’s this about a kidnapping?”

J.P. should be the one answering that question. But her dream of humiliating him in front of the sheriff had gone down the tubes. They were boyhood buds, which explained how Audrey Patterson knew the sheriff had the sensitivity of a gnat. Under the circumstances, revealing J.P.’s part in this conspiracy would be a waste of time. Number one, she was on his turf and unlikely to get any support. Number two, his mother was obviously not in on the plan. Audrey Patterson was a sweetie. Jordan had no wish to hurt her by exposing her son in her presence.

“A lot of it is a blur.” That part was true. Terror had a way of blurring the facts. “Then I remember riding in a car for what seemed like hours. I don’t know how long it actually was. I was handcuffed to the passenger handle.”

“Then what?”

“He parked on a road in the middle of nowhere. And we waited.” That was true, too. “I told him I had to go to the bathroom.”

The sheriff nodded his understanding. “Then what happened?”

“He unlocked the cuff, and I got out of the car.”

“Can you remember what the perp looked like?”

“Early twenties. Brown hair.”

“How tall?”

She tried to remember. “Not so tall that I couldn’t give him a knee to the groin.” Both men winced at that, but it was small satisfaction. “Shorter than both of you.”

“Any tattoos? Distinguishing marks?”

She thought back and realized she really couldn’t remember. “Not that I can recall.”

The sheriff looked up from the notebook where he’d been jotting down her comments. “I did some checking, and there are no reports of a kidnapping and no one missing who fits your description.”

No surprise there. It wasn’t really a kidnapping, and she wasn’t missing. J.P. had probably been in touch with her father to let him know the plan was working perfectly.

“What does that mean, Rick? In non-sheriff terms,” Audrey added.

“It means I have very little to go on to learn her identity.” He put his hat back on. “So, I’ll take her back to town with me. Put her picture out there and see what we can come up with.”

Jordan decided going with the sheriff would be best. She’d tell him her side of what happened and maybe he would help her find transportation back home. Somehow she would come up with a way to get through to her father that this stunt was an incredible invasion of her privacy.

“Thank you, Sheriff,” she said. “I’d appreciate any help you can give me.”

“Rick to the rescue,” J.P. said.

The smile of satisfaction on his face really rubbed Jordan the wrong way. Along with the word rescue. Her hero seemed relieved to be getting rid of her. She just didn’t get it.

“I won’t hear of it,” Audrey said. “Jane, I think it would be best for you to stay here with us.”

“Mother, we don’t have the resources to help,” J.P. pointed out. “Rick has computers and contacts within the law-enforcement community.”

“And if he can’t find her identity, what then?” Audrey asked. “Where will she go? Where will she stay? Who will take care of her?”

“Mrs. P., there are agencies to help out—city, county and state. She’ll be well taken care of.”

“Bureaucracy? I don’t think so.” Audrey shook her head. “She remembered more details today about what happened to her than she did yesterday. Obviously being here overnight helped. Rest and relaxation is working. It proves my theory that if she feels safe and secure her memory will come back.”

“Mrs. Patterson,” Jordan said, “It’s very kind of you. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your concern. But it’s probably best if I go with the sheriff. I’ve imposed on you too much,” she said, then slid a glare in J.P.’s direction.

“Jane, dear,” Audrey said, taking her hand. “It’s no imposition. We enjoy having you here.”

“Mother, she’s a stranger. It’s Rick’s job to help strangers. Right, Sheriff?”

“J.P.’s right, ma’am,” the sheriff said.

Audrey glared at her son. “J.P., I’m surprised at you. You, too, Rick Michaels. No man is an island. We need to reach out to each other.”

“But she’s not a man, and we don’t know anything about her,” J.P. pointed out.

“I know all I need to. And you’re very well aware that I’m an excellent judge of character. I absolutely won’t hear of her leaving. And that’s final.”

“It’s not really up to you, Mom.” He looked at Jordan. “Are you going to drag this out?”

Drag it out? Her? Anger roared through Jordan and settled in her chest until she could hardly breathe. He’d started this. Him and her father. She’d been bullied and terrified. Ripped from her life and dumped in the middle of nowhere. And this bozo had the nerve to imply this was her fault? He acted like he wanted her gone. Then what would he do? Another kidnapping? Something worse? In cahoots with her father? The two of them had to be stopped.

Talking to her father about his previous stunts hadn’t worked. Words weren’t enough. She needed a statement—something big. Something the two of them would understand. But what? Her

father obviously wanted her with J.P. Sooner or later he would make a move on her. This suspicious act was no doubt a psychological ploy to keep her off balance.

Well, she would turn the tables on him and her father. Take them both down in one fell swoop. For men like Harman Bishop and J. P. Patterson, failure to achieve a desired objective was not an option. If she let on that she knew what they were up to and went quietly, it was nothing more than a bump in the road. If she stayed and played them like a finely tuned fiddle, failure would be bigger and more humiliating. That would scuttle their plans and teach them not to mess with Jordan Bishop.

When J.P. came on to her, she would cut him off at the knees. She would teach him and her father not to meddle in her life.

“Jane, are you all right?” Audrey squeezed her hands. “What do you say?”

She’d planned to spend her vacation relaxing. Her spirit could relax better after a bit of retaliation. She felt safe. Her father knew J.P., probably through business. But no matter how angry she was with Harman Bishop, she didn’t for a moment believe he would harm her or choose a man who would hurt her physically.

Although she felt guilty taking advantage of Audrey’s generous nature, she needed time to plan. Jordan would find a way to make it up to her.

She met Audrey’s gaze. “You’re very kind. I gladly accept your hospitality.”

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