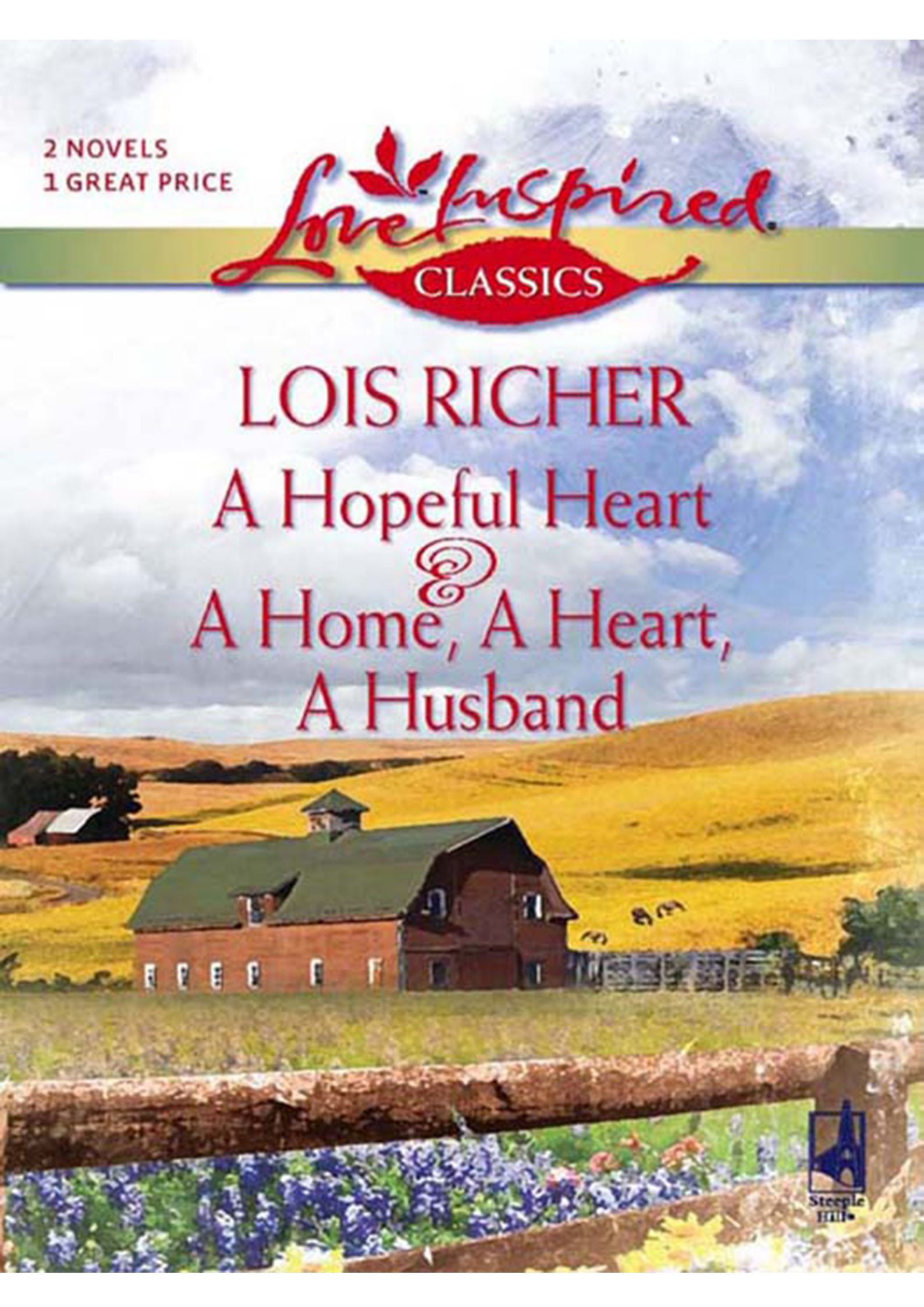
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Love Inspired
CLASSICS

# LOIS RICHER

## A Hopeful Heart
## &
## A Home, A Heart, A Husband



Mills & Boon Love Inspired

Lois Richer

# A Hopeful Heart and A Home, a Heart, A Husband

«HarperCollins»

**Richer L.**

A Hopeful Heart and A Home, a Heart, A Husband / L. Richer — «HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon Love Inspired)

A hopeful heart Melanie Stewart knew her recent contest money would allow her to fulfill her dream of helping others.Until brilliant, handsome Mitch Stewart came along and claimed the prize was his! The town's matchmakers set to work, yet maybe it was God's own plan to join their two hearts in love.A home, a heart, a husband Widow Maggie McCarthy struggled to raise twin daughters and maintain the family farm–until Grady O'Toole showed up at her door, bringing kindness, strong shoulders and second chances. But for Maggie, rebuilding shattered dreams required something doubly precious–faith.

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# A Hopeful Heart
# &
# A Home, A Heart,
# A Husband
# Lois Richer



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# A Hopeful Heart

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on…. Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall He not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?

—Matthew 6:25-30

This book is dedicated to my grandpa John, and to Papa Richer. Both of them would have loved Melanie's refreshing attitude toward seniors and her efforts to improve the lives of those spending their last years in a nursing home. To you who devote your days and nights to caring for someone's spouse, mother, grandparent or friend, may I say "Thank you." Your labors do not go unappreciated.

# Chapter One

Melanie Stewart slipped out of her battered tan car and slammed the door shut, hoping it would catch.

"You're doing fine, Bessie, old girl," she murmured, patting the ancient car's rusty fender. "I know. You need a paint job and new tires, but that will wait. It has to."

She grimaced at the thought of the number of high-priority items on her to-do list that seemed to multiply daily. Oh, for a little spare cash!

"The love of money is the root of all evil," she repeated to herself. "Remember that, and be glad for what you have."

With a sigh, Melanie blew her auburn bangs from her forehead, resigned to both her penurious state and the blistering July heat.

"Just a few dollars would sure be nice, though." She sighed, glancing heavenward. "Just a little spare cash could make a big difference to so many." Unbidden, images of the residents at the Sunset Retirement Home—her residents—rolled through her mind. "Give me a sign, Lord, please," she pleaded in a heartfelt prayer. "Just a little hint that better things are on the way."

"Oh, Melanie!" Mr. Jones strode jauntily down the street toward her, whistling his usual happy tune as he pushed his delivery cart in front of Melanie's redbrick apartment building. "Afternoon, Melanie, my girl."

Fred Jones was a genial man who had been Mossbank's special-delivery officer for twenty years. He knew everyone in town and most of what went on. Melanie had long ceased to wonder how he kept the residents and their stories straight.

"Hi, Mr. Jones. How's your wife doing?" They exchanged the usual banter about the romance Melanie had helped along three years earlier. Then the older man thrust an ordinary white envelope with Official Notice stamped on the front of it into her hand.

"This looks pretty important, Melanie. Thought I'd better bring it over soon as you got off work. It was addressed to the nursing home, but I knew you'd be coming home about now. Sure hope it's good news." He grinned. "You've got a couple more wedding invitations, too. Reckon Cupid and you were real busy last winter," he said teasingly, watching her face flush.

His wiry tanned hand offered the shabby clipboard for her signature.

Melanie shook her head at the suggestion that she was the local matchmaker. In Fred's mind, the two latest invitations confirmed it, even if she hadn't meant to get involved.

"All I did was lend a little advice," she told him. When there was no response, she turned the plain white envelope over. There was nothing to identify it on the back. She peered at the strange letters on the front upper left corner—PJPB.

"Why do those initials seem so familiar?" she wondered. After a few moments of deep thought, Fred Jones answered her.

"It's probably just another of those form letters announcing you have won an unbelievable amount of money." He frowned. "Then, when you read the fine print, there is always a conditional if or possibly to free the sender of any misrepresentation." He shook his head gloomily and watched while Melanie stuffed the envelope into the outside pocket of her tan leather bag. "Then again, maybe it's a letter from an admirer," he suggested slyly.

"Well, whatever it is, it will have to wait," she told him tiredly. "I need a shower and some supper. Thanks anyway, Mr. Jones."

Fred Jones grinned, waved his hand and strode off down the street to his next destination, still whistling, but this time it was "Here Comes the Bride."

Lethargically, Melanie forced her tired feet up the three stairs and into the blessed coolness of the air-conditioned foyer. The elevator took forever, so she slowly climbed the stairs.

As usual, the events of her day threatened to overwhelm her and she forcibly thrust them to the back of her mind, refusing to allow herself to dwell on the sad situations she often handled as director of Sunset Retirement Home.

At twenty-eight, she had never become resigned to the plight of seniors forced to enter a nursing home when they could no longer care for themselves. Empathy of a world-weary foster child, no doubt, she derided herself.

Melanie spent every minute of her workday trying to make their lives interesting and enjoyable. In short, she hoped to allow the residents the freedom to live as they wished with help nearby when necessary. Since her childish dreams of husband and children had never been fulfilled, the small community of Mossbank, North Dakota, but especially the residents at Sunset, had become her special family.

Melanie placed the letter on the hall table just as the phone rang.

"Oh, hi, Mom." She smiled at Charity Flowerday's excited rush of words. "Yes, Mother. I'm perfectly fine." She grinned at the familiar question. "I will eat supper, Mom. A lovely Chinese dinner that Shawna left for me. She's gone out on another date, I think."

"Aren't you going out, dear?"

Melanie burst out laughing.

"Me? No way. I'm dead tired and I just want to relax." She groaned inwardly. "No, Mother, I don't know Judge Conroy's grandson. You said he's moved here?"

Melanie eyed her letter longingly, knowing that her adoptive mother took a special interest in each and every newcomer to their small, closely knit town and would relay every morsel of information she'd found out about this most recent arrival. It seemed Charity had found yet another homeless chick to spread her wings over. For her own sake, Melanie just hoped this grandson was happily married.

"No, I hadn't heard anything, but then I don't know Judge Conroy all that well. If his grandson's been here for two weeks, I'll probably meet him at church soon. If I ever get another Sunday off!" Melanie smiled at the abrupt change of topic.

"Yes, Mother, I know there are some good men in the world. I just haven't met many of them, and those I think I might be interested in usually want my help to attract someone else." She smiled at the volume of reassurances that issued over the phone.

"Listen, Mother, I was just going to start dinner when you called. I have to go now. I'm starved. Have a good time with Faith and Hope. Bye, Mother."

The letter on the hall table stared at her all the while she ate her dinner. Knowing she could procrastinate no longer, Melanie finally carried her tea to the living room and sank into the depths of her overstuffed sofa. Yawning widely, she slit the slim envelope and drew out a single sheet of heavy white paper.

We are pleased to announce that M. Stewart of Mossbank, North Dakota, has been randomly selected by our computer as the grand prize winner of 50,000 in our recent Papa John's Peanut Butter contest.

This will advise you that prizes will be awarded Thursday, July 15, during a televised announcement at WMIX-TV13. Please be at the station no later than 1:00 p.m. of that day. A company representative will contact you within the next few days to confirm your win and to give you additional information.

There was another paragraph offering congratulations and asking her not to talk to the press, but Melanie absorbed none of it. Her eyes read the words, but her mind couldn't comprehend their significance.

She turned it over to check for the usual qualifying sentences and found nothing. There was only a scrawled signature at the end of the letter which was identified as the CEO of Papa John's Peanut Butter. Stupidly, she stared at the embossed golden logo, afraid to believe it.

"He answered," she muttered to herself, dazed. "I've actually won some money!"

Melanie read the wonderful letter three times before her mind acknowledged and processed the information, and then she let out an unbridled squeal of joy.

"A grand prize winner," she mused, twisting one curling lock of her shoulder-length hair. "Thank you, Lord. As usual, Your timing is perfect. Maybe Mr. Henessey will get his wish after all. And of course, Mrs. Blair."

One by one, the residents of the special-care home flew through her thoughts. Many of the seniors had little or no family nearby. Some, like Mr. Henessey, had very little money for things that would make his last few years so enjoyable. A windfall of cash would be just the thing.

When Shawna sauntered through the door three hours later, Melanie had finished drawing up her list of future expenses. She pounced on her friend eagerly.

"I won, I won," she squeaked, thrusting the letter in front of Shawna's sunburned nose.

Her roommate was cool and efficient, well used to Melanie's bursts of excitement. Calmly she laid her jacket and purse on a nearby chair, wished her gaping date a good evening and closed the door on him firmly, then reached for the letter. After a careful scrutiny, she grabbed Melanie and they danced giddily around, laughing hilariously.

A week later, the thrill of excitement had not diminished as Melanie found herself ushered into the makeup room of WMIX, a Bismarck television station that specialized in North Dakota's news events. Melanie sat nervously while a teenage girl applied a thick layer of shadow and mascara. She felt butterflies dance an entire ballet through her midsection. Finally, eons later, a short, frumpy woman bustled into the room.

"M. Stewart?" Accepting the nod, the older woman wrapped her vivid purple nails around Melanie's arm and led her through a maze of corridors to a busy sound stage.

"Now, dear," she said over her shoulder, "we'll be broadcasting shortly. Don't move from this spot. When it's your turn, I'll be here to guide you on."

Like a plump, busy robin, the woman in the bright red shirt whisked through the menagerie of sound men, cameras and directors to the booth across the room.

From behind the curtain, Melanie saw part of the stage setting. A huge structure meant to represent a peanut butter jar full of gold coins sat front and center with the famous glittering golden letters PJPB on its side. Standing beside it was a man Melanie identified as Papa John, clad in his white shirt, bow tie, blue jeans and red suspenders. Snowy white hair looked exactly as it did on the commercials that flashed across the television screen every night.

In the last forty-eight hours, Melanie had spent valuable hours at work wracking her brain, trying to remember entering any contest to do with Papa John's Peanut Butter. Nothing specific came to mind, but then she had been in such a fog during a particularly low period in her life a few months ago. Right after poor old Mrs. Peters had passed away.

Suddenly the announcer's voice penetrated her thoughts.

"The winner is M. Stewart!"

Melanie felt a hand on her back propelling her forward. As she moved toward the grinning announcer, she noticed a tall, dark-haired man moving from the wings on the far side of the stage. Slim and muscular, he exuded the very essence of a man-about-town. He had rugged, chiseled features and the bluest eyes she had ever seen.

And those eyes were fixed firmly on her!

Melanie gave herself a mental shake and focused on the task ahead. Nervously, she wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt before moving to stand beside the announcer.

"M. Stewart," he boomed in his loud, TV personality voice.

"Yes," Melanie answered, and then heard a yes from directly behind her. Turning her head, she found those deep blue eyes glaring at her.

"I'm sorry, miss, but I think he asked for me." Low and rumbling, his voice rolled past her left ear as the man carefully but still rudely elbowed his way past.

"But my name is M. Stewart," Melanie insisted, wondering if the whole thing was a hoax. The announcer was obviously at a loss as he turned his perfectly groomed head from one to the other.

"I'm Melanie Stewart." Melanie was so nervous her voice slipped out in a soft squeak that no one seemed to hear.

Finally the director hissed from his seat in the sound room. The words were audible over the whole stage. "Do something!"

"I'm sorry, folks," the announcer said slowly, "but there seems to be a bit of a mix-up here. Our winner of the Papa John's Peanut Butter contest is M. Stewart. Sir, may I have your full name, please?"

The handsome interloper gracefully inclined his head as he stated clearly, "Mitchel Edward Stewart." His glittering blue eyes dared Melanie to top that.

"And you, miss. Your name is?" The microphone was stuck in her face, and Melanie forced a tight rein on her temper as she answered.

"Melanie Clarice Stewart."

"Well, isn't this great. Are you two married?"

The stranger's dark head shook adamantly, his blue eyes hurling daggers at Melanie.

"I am not married and I have certainly never met Miss Stewart," he said, arrogantly dismissing Melanie's presence with a brush of his hand. "I was advised by telephone that I had won a contest and that I was obligated to be here today."

Melanie's simmering temper flashed to the surface. Not so fast, she thought, and tugged the rumpled letterhead from the pocket of her skirt, intent on wiping the smugly satisfied look from Mr. Mitchel Stewart's handsome countenance.

"I received this letter by special delivery," she said, waving the letter for all to see. Heat flooded her face as she stared into mocking blue eyes.

"I was to receive a phone call with further instructions, but—" She paused for effect. Her tone was acidic in the extreme. "Apparently, that went astray."

Mitchel Stewart looked stunned at her words. Obviously he thought she was faking. Anger rushed through her as Melanie remembered all the things 50,000 could provide for her friends. There was no way this man was going to do her out of what was rightfully hers. She couldn't afford to let Mr. Pushy M. Stewart push her out of the running. If his name really was Stewart!

Just then, Papa John stepped into the spotlight. Taking the mike from the dumbfounded announcer's hand, he spoke into it in the soft, musical drawl known throughout North America.

"Now, folks. It looks like there's been some sort of mix-up here today. According to my information, our winner, M. Stewart, lives at 300 Oak Street in Mossbank, North Dakota."

His weathered face studied the two. Melanie spoke up.

"Yes, well, I work at that address. It's a nursing home. Sunset Retirement Home."

Clearly, Mitchel Stewart was not to be outdone. He stepped forward.

"I am also employed at 300 Oak Street."

Her anger grew as she glared at him, her eyes narrowed and searching. How could he do this to her? He was lying. She knew it. She knew all the tenants in the home, and she knew the employees, as well. He wasn't one of them.

"I started two weeks ago." He said it triumphantly, as if this was a game of one-upmanship. Melanie fumed.

"This sure is a puzzler, folks." Papa John scratched his head, obviously considering the next step.

One of the most popular television stations in North Dakota was broadcasting a lot of dead air, which was certainly not good for business, but it seemed no one could think of anything to say. Finally, the announcer stepped forward and spoke directly to the camera.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you have watched a newsmaking event on WMIX tonight. We apparently have two winners in the Papa John's Peanut Butter contest, both named M. Stewart and

both living in Mossbank and working at 300 Oak Street." He smiled fatuously at both of them before glancing at the camera. "Keep tuned, and WMIX will keep you up to the minute with events as they happen."

As he gave the familiar station call letters, Melanie drooped with fatigue. Papa John moved to brush a gentle hand over hers.

"I'm real sorry about this, miss," he apologized. "I don't know what happened. There must have been some error. The selections were made by computer." Papa John grinned at her. "Couldn't have picked a better station, though, could I? WMIX. Mixed up, they should call it."

Melanie smiled weakly.

They both turned at the throat-clearing sound from Mitchel Stewart. The dark-haired man had absolutely no manners, Melanie decided grimly. He stood peering down at both of them, eavesdropping on their conversation without any compunction. She turned her back to him deliberately as Papa John spoke again.

"I'm sorry about you, too, Mr. Stewart. I promise you that I will get this straightened out and let you know as soon as I can. Thank you both for making time to come down." The old man reached into his shirt pocket for a scrap of paper and a pen.

"Where can I reach you during the day, Miss Stewart?"

Melanie shuffled through her purse for a business card. She tried to ignore the tall man directly behind her.

"I am the director of care at Sunset," she told him, keeping her voice quiet.

"That's the one attached to the hospital," Papa John said, scribbling in odd, unreadable ink strokes. "I know about it from friends."

"Here's my address," Mitchel Stewart announced gruffly, unasked. "I'm often at the hospital, but I'll give you my card with office numbers." Trust him to butt in, Melanie thought.

A lean, muscular hand proffered a crisp white business card. His fingers were long and well cared for. The hands of a surgeon, Melanie guessed. Surgeons were usually arrogant. She turned to leave the two men.

"I have to get back to work," she murmured. "Nice to meet you, Papa John." Melanie glanced at the interloper, nodding dismissively.

As she strode out of the building, she wondered what would happen next when strong fingers closed about her arm.

"I'll walk with you," that firm, bossy voice declared. "If you don't mind, that is. It seems we have something in common besides our names." He smiled that thousand-watt grin that made her pulse flutter. "I didn't realize you worked at Sunset. Guess I didn't notice you."

Egotistical male, Melanie decided and tossed her gleaming curls. Her normally clear skin flushed with irritation in the bright sunlight. That was just what every woman wanted to hear—that she had been overlooked.

"Oh, no, I don't mind at all," she said with a touch of sarcasm. "Please feel free to tag along."

She was not a small woman, but Mitchel Stewart seemed to tower over her. Even with three-inch heels, her five-foot-five-inch stature seemed small and ineffective beside his height. She felt as if she was losing the upper hand in every confrontation with him.

She glared at him, tugging her arm out of his grasp as she stepped back, her body language telling him clearly not to invade her personal space.

"I don't appreciate being accosted in broad daylight, Mr. Stewart," she said through clenched teeth.

"Oh. Sorry. Do you appreciate it more after dark?" he quipped, grinning. "It was a little joke," he said, his smile noticeably drooping.

"Very little." Melanie was not amused. "I expect surgeons are so used to getting what they want, they never think of anyone else's wishes." Her normally calm, even tones were scathing.

"I expect they are."

He was trying to mollify her. She could hear it in his voice.

"You admit it?" Her dark eyes opened wide in disbelief. His impudence galled her.

Mitchel wasn't sure exactly what was going on. He had been aware of her dislike. It emanated from every pore of her well-shaped body. But right now it was as if there was another conversation going on. One that he knew absolutely nothing about.

He studied her small, tilted nose. It fit perfectly with her high-and-mighty attitude. The original attraction he had felt onstage had not abated. For some reason her dislike drew him like a magnet. He wondered if she would consider…Well, why not forge ahead?

Turning quickly, Mitchel folded her arm in his and began striding toward the parking lot. Perforce the lady had to follow, although not happily.

"Will you stop dragging me about?" she demanded. As she tried to push his muscle-hardened body away, her heel caught in a metal grating. Mitchel caught her as she swayed.

"Now look what you've done," he said, smiling sympathetically. "All I wanted was to help you to your car and ask you out for dinner. I wasn't expecting you to fall into my arms."

Melanie pursed her lips and refused to rise to the bait. He was too infuriating. Instead she walked away.

"Where are you going?"

She pointed her finger at the tan beater parked haphazardly in a stall just six feet away. His black eyebrow arched quizzically.

"Vice-president, Communications?" Mitchel's gleaming dark eyes frowned at her. "I thought you said you worked at the retirement home." Clearly puzzled, he stared at her for several moments before his face darkened ominously.

"I get it," he announced, teeth bared. "It was all just a ruse, wasn't it? Just for the money. Well, I'm not going to be part of your little con game." His glittering sapphire eyes stared at the placard in front of her car. "Goodbye, N. Landt."

He turned on his heel and strode furiously away, shoulders stiff with anger.

Melanie sighed, resigned to her fate. "It has been a difficult week, Lord," she mused. "Today isn't going so well, either. And it doesn't look like things will be improving anytime soon. I know I can't understand everything You do, so could You just help me get through today?"

Sighing, she fished her key ring out of the leather shoulder bag and unlocked the car door. Gently she eased herself into the car, glumly grateful that she'd made it through this far. She would probably drive to the home, enjoy a cup of fresh coffee and get down to what she knew best.

A light tapping on her window roused Melanie from her thoughts. Turning, she saw a tall blond Adonis dressed in an elegant black three-piece pinstripe standing outside her car. She rolled down the window.

"Yes?"

"I'm terribly sorry," he apologized, flashing a movie-perfect smile, "but you are parked in my spot. I'm Neal Landt."

It was too much. Melanie burst into laughter, paroxysms of hilarity shaking her narrow shoulders.

"I'm very sorry," she apologized as concern etched itself on his worried face. Quickly she explained the reason for her visit. "I was so afraid I'd be late, I pulled into the first empty spot and rushed into the studio. I'll move right away," she promised.

Melanie flicked on the car's engine and waved at the bemused young man staring after her. When she glanced back, Neal Landt was scribbling furiously as he leaned against his silver-gray Jaguar.

"I'll probably get a ticket for parking in his spot, the way today is going," she muttered, and tried to ignore the pain pulsing through her puffy ankle.

"Once I get to work," she promised herself. "I'll be okay then. In fact," she muttered in frustration, "the whole day would have progressed very well if I had just ignored the stupid letter and gone straight to work in the first place."

There are no free lunches, she remembered Charity lecturing. Whatever you get in this life is exactly what you've worked for, dear. There's no such thing as something for nothing.

"As usual, you are always right, Mother," Melanie lamented sadly. "Especially today. But oh, what we could have done with that prize!"

It really was too bad the ill-humored Mitchel Stewart had not been able to see the funny side of this whole situation, Melanie thought, her lips tilting up as her mind replayed the scene. Humming loudly, she pulled into traffic and headed for Mossbank, confident that a return to routine would put her on track.

The mass of paperwork beckoned, and Melanie knew she would have to tackle it soon, but there was one duty she couldn't neglect in her daily ritual. Anyway, she didn't want to. She enjoyed it too much.

Quickly she slid out of the navy suit she had worn for her television debut and into the spare pink uniform she kept for just such occasions. She surveyed herself in the narrow mirror she had hung on the back of her door.

"Oh, lovely." She grimaced, noting the caked lines of eye-shadow and heavy red lipstick. "Wait till the candy stripers see you in this getup."

She grabbed a brush and tugged it through her dark russet curls, allowing them to fall to her shoulders. A few tissues and some cream took off the goop they had plastered on her at the studio, and she cleansed her skin well before applying a light touch of blush and a hint of mascara. She hated a lot of makeup, and anyway, she never remembered to renew it.

Satisfied, Melanie walked out the door and into the group of residents gathered outside.

"Mrs. Christie." She smiled, gathering the woman's blue-veined hands in her own. "I do believe it's a special day for you today."

The toothless old woman squeezed Melanie's hand tightly and nodded. Tears of happiness pooled at the corners of the weary, wrinkled eyes.

"My grandson is coming," she whispered as if afraid to say the words aloud. "He's bringing his fiancée. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes, it is." Melanie smiled at her. "And you look lovely," she told the elderly woman sincerely.

Each resident had something special to say to her, and Melanie allowed them to speak freely. It was so important to them, this time of sharing. Many felt neglected and alone, and they needed someone to listen. It mattered not that she had heard these same stories a hundred times before. What was important was the telling, recalling the happiness of the past. For many it was their only pleasant time in an otherwise bleak existence.

Except for Mrs. Rivers.

"Good morning, Nettie. You look lovely today. As usual."

The old lady sat silently staring out the window, her hands full of contest entries, which she shuffled from one hand to the other. She refused to answer any of the questions Melanie asked. Contrary to the administrator's evaluation, Melanie believed the older woman could understand everything that was said to her. It was merely a problem of finding the right subject or the right person to get her to talk. And heaven knew, Melanie had tried quite a few. Today nothing seemed to budge the woman out of her self-imposed silence.

"Well, Mrs. Rivers, I hope you have a good day today."

Because the stack of work still had to be dealt with, Melanie finally gave in. It was now or never. She returned to her desk, sat down and immersed herself in work, tuning out everything but the unfinished schedules and part-time applications that needed immediate attention.

A disturbance in the outside office alerted her to the possibility of trouble sometime later. Raised in anger, the voice barely carried through the strong metal door. Melanie dropped her pen to listen.

It was a man's voice, she decided. Rather low, but obviously furious. She grinned when Bridget attempted to intercept the flow of angry words with little success.

When her focus would not return, Melanie finally gave in to curiosity, grimacing as she stood. She would settle this and then it was back to the grindstone, she promised herself. No sidetracking.

As she opened the door, a familiar voice ranted at Bridget.

"It's a hospital, for heaven's sake. We can't have people wandering around in areas they shouldn't be, looking for lunch. Someone will get hurt. Don't you feed these people regularly?"

His tones were scathingly critical of her overworked staff, and Melanie surged forward, prepared to do battle.

"Dr. Stewart, we know exactly what we are doing in this facility. Perhaps if the medical staff in your hospital had enough sense to close the doors behind them, our residents would not wander into the hospital."

Mitchel Stewart whirled to face her, his jaw slack with astonishment. He was as good-looking as Melanie remembered. Still formally dressed in the dark suit jacket and matching slacks, he exuded the posh doctor persona.

Only the tie at the neck of his pristine white shirt was loosened and slightly askew. Curling dark hairs peeked out from his throat. He looked every inch a playboy with his rumpled black hair and twinkling azure eyes.

"You!" he gasped, clearly shocked. "What are you doing here?"

"As I told you before, Dr. Stewart, this is where I am employed. Supposedly you are, also, although I must have missed seeing you around." Melanie assumed a haughty look before demanding, "Is there anything else, Doctor?"

"I am not a doctor," he told her loudly. "And yes, there certainly is. May I speak with you privately?"

"Not Dr. Stewart?" Melanie stretched her lips thinly, faking outrage. "You lied deliberately, to try to cheat me out of that money, didn't you?" she accused, hands on her hips.

When a telltale flush of red covered his jutting cheekbones, Melanie felt deep satisfaction. Self-righteous and smug, she delivered the final blow.

"I don't think I want to be part of your charade any longer, whoever you are."

Turning, Melanie flounced into her office in high dudgeon, feeling a virtuous superiority. He had asked for it.

"We're not quite finished, are we?" His deep tones rumbled over her left shoulder.

"I've said everything I'm going to," she announced smugly and flopped into her desk chair.

"Good. Then you can hear me out."

# Chapter Two

"Ms. Stewart, it seems there has been more than one mix-up today."

He had never before seen a woman so furious and yet so determined not to say a word, Mitch decided in amusement. He fully expected her to blow a gasket.

"What do you want?" Her low voice barely masked her frustration.

"Look, I came to say I'm sorry." She looked slightly mollified at his calm, contrite tone, but the glitter of suspicion returned to her eyes when Bridget walked into her office with Sam Sinclair shuffling alongside her. Mitch ignored them.

"And I came to make sure you keep those patients out of the hospital. They could get hurt." She had that look again.

"Ms. Stewart—Melanie—I'm very sorry I accused you wrongly earlier today. Please forgive me." Deliberately, Mitch made his tones sweet as honey.

"Fine. You're forgiven." Her voice was frosty, unwelcoming, with a tinge of bitterness. "Now, please, will you get out of my office. Bridget, would you do the honors?"

Leaning back in her chair, Melanie glared at him. He watched her huge green eyes flicker with something like suspicion as she studied him. Mitch decided the faint pink of her uniform was certainly her color.

Her almost round face, with its dainty nose tipped at that disdainful angle, dared him to try her patience. Her mouth straightened into a thin, disapproving line.

Deliberately Mitch tamped his growing interest and firmed his resolve. He wasn't here looking for a date. He was here to make restitution. Melanie Stewart was going to understand his concerns one way or another.

"Now, if we can discuss this rationally."

"Oh, buzz off—" She stopped short of saying whatever else was on her mind, and Mitch almost laughed at the childish phrase.

Melanie was fiery and determined and willful, but she had a streak of decency in her that forbade the use of cuss words. It was unusual in this day and age and something he admired, Mitch admitted. But he wouldn't tell her that just yet.

Stretching her long legs, Melanie deliberately ignored him. To Mitch, that was the final straw. He opened the door and ordered, "Look, just look.

"They're wandering all over the place," he told her, pointing toward one sprightly old gentleman dressed in an ancient green suit, which bore a striking resemblance to the apparel of a leprechaun. "This place is out of control."

He watched as she spluttered angrily. But as residents watched, Melanie Stewart refused to acknowledge his tenuous grip on her small hand. Smiling and friendly, she greeted each one, losing the smile immediately when they passed.

"The hospital cannot afford to have someone injured or worse, simply because you allow these people to wander around at large. It's my job to ensure we don't get embroiled in any frivolous law suits." He pulled her along behind him through the hallways, past the interested spectators gathered outside their rooms.

"You're a lawyer?" The way she said his profession, Mitch figured it rated pretty low on her scale.

It also brought on another tirade.

"Of all the silly, idiotic, lying tricks…"

Mitch let her rant until they came to a tiny woman sitting quietly on a bench in the hall. Bending his lips to her ear, Mitch teased her.

"If you scare these folks into thinking you're having a conniption fit, they are going to get worked up. Just relax, will you?" He breathed in the soft, light fragrance she wore, enjoying its teasing allure.

"Conniption fit? I haven't heard that phrase for years!" She frowned at him. "Anyway, Mrs. Rivers never says anything."

As they drew nearer, the little woman murmured something. Melanie stared in amazement. In two years, Mrs. Rivers had never been heard to utter more than one word. Suddenly, at the sight of this lawyer, she was speaking?

"I beg your pardon," Melanie said, hoping the old lady would repeat herself.

The woman's bright gray eyes were riveted on them, and she spoke louder.

"It's so romantic," she breathed. "Just like a knight in shining armor. Oh, Melanie, at last you have found your true love."

Mitch bowed as low as possible, a huge grin crinkling his smug face. "Thank you, ma'am."

Turning, he marched Melanie back through the office to her inner sanctum, then gently pressed her stiff, angry body onto the leather couch. As he moved to stand, Mitch gently drew his lips across her soft, angry ones.

"Maybe she's right, Melanie." He grinned cheekily before tossing his jacket across his arm and moving to the door. He slid his dark eyes over her once more before murmuring, "We'll see." The door closed softly on his laughing face.

Melanie hissed with frustration through tightly pursed lips. "No, Mr. Know-It-All Stewart, we definitely will not see."

Her hand swiped across her mouth as she tried without success to erase the feel of his seeking mouth. She clenched her fist as the pool of awareness in her middle refused to go away.

"Cad. Liar. Overbearing male. Rude. Pushy. Thief…oh!" There simply were not enough words, she decided.

"Talking to someone?" Shawna poked her head around the door. "I thought I heard someone calling names." She grinned, eyeing her friend's heightened color.

"Could be," Melanie answered, forcing a smile. "The way today's been going, anything might happen." She looked at her roomie curiously. "What are you doing here?"

Shawna unpinned her glistening hair and shook it free of her confining nurse's cap. She wasn't wearing scrubs, Melanie noticed.

"Not operating today?"

"Oh, Mal is late again. You know, it's getting so that the man never manages to arrive in the operating room until at least an hour after his scheduled time." Mal was her pet name for a doctor on staff she particularly despised. Short for malpractice.

"Doesn't that sort of throw things off?" Melanie knew enough about the tightly funded medical world to know that time is money, especially in an operating room.

"Oh, yeah," Shawna agreed. "And I can tell you that the other doctors are getting pretty tired of hanging around waiting for him to get his act together."

"Did you pick up your check?" Her eyes were big and round with excitement. "Can I see it? The money, I mean."

Melanie sighed deeply. "I didn't get the money." When Shawna's jaw dropped open, Melanie's hand went up, forestalling her comments. "It seems that two invitations went out, both of them to an M. Stewart. Unfortunately there were two M. Stewarts in attendance. One Melanie, one Mitchel. He just left."

The paging system interrupted her.

"I've gotta go. Mal must be here. Why now?" Shawna muttered in frustration. "I can't wait to hear more." Stuffing her long hair under the cap, the operating room nurse left in a flurry, looking model perfect.

It didn't matter how much she tried after that, Melanie could not concentrate on the job. Part of it was her own fault, she acknowledged bitterly. But most of it was due to a certain lawyer and she put in time without accomplishing much.

"I'm calling it a day, Bridget. Can you handle everything?" Melanie watched as Bridget nodded, her face lit with a huge grin. "Don't mention him," she ordered grimly. "This is all his fault!"

Melanie strode out the door, then turned.

"And don't call my mother," she ordered wrathfully. "All I need are the fearsome threesome hanging around trying to nurse me through this illness."

"Melanie! You know Faith and Hope and your mother only want to help. Why, I'm sure if they knew about that handsome man that just left, they'd be very pleased."

"Considering that they've been trying to marry me off for years, I suppose so." Melanie grimaced. "My mother was even trying to set me up with Judge Conroy's grandson the other day." She shook her head in dismay.

"Yes, but—"

"I have to go home, Bridget. My feet are killing me. See you tomorrow." Melanie left, winding through the maze of curious and grinning residents to the parking lot.

"Lawyers!" One last epithet and she was finished thinking about Mitchel Stewart, she decided.

"But they said he was dead! Killed in action." Hope stared at her two best friends in agony. "I pleaded and I begged them to check again and again, but they said they were sure."

"Hope, dear, God still works miracles," Faith murmured, patting the pale, smooth hand. "And He is the final authority. Just calm down and let us think this through."

Charity peered at the two women sitting in her living room and wondered if it was true. Had Hope's fiancé returned from the dead after nearly twenty-five years?

"How did you find all this out?" she asked. "Did someone from the government phone you, Hope?" She remembered the television clip from last evening. "I have heard that they are still finding some MIAs. Perhaps Jean was one of those?"

Hope shook her blond head, dazed.

"No, I don't think so. The lady who phoned said he'd been quite ill. Apparently, during a high fever, he mentioned my name. Lately someone's been searching for him. She asked me all kinds of questions, Faith. Strange questions."

"Questions? Oh, piffle!" Faith's normally sunny face was dark with foreboding. "What kind of questions?"

"Oh, if I was married now. And the year Jean disappeared. If I'd ever heard from him while he was in Vietnam. Things like that."

"There have been some private efforts to investigate claims about MIAs," Charity murmured, watching her friend's sad face. "Perhaps that's it. Maybe a family member?"

"Charity, he didn't have any family. And besides—" Hope winced "—Jean wasn't missing in action. They said he died!" Her voice was full of remembered pain. "How could they make a mistake like that?"

"We don't know, dear. Perhaps we never will. But God knows. And He will use this to bless you, you can be sure of that."

Hope's unlined face was haggard as she stared at her closest friends.

"I don't know what to do," she confessed wearily. "I don't know where to turn."

"Well, I do," Faith declared firmly. "First we turn to the Lord, and then I'm going to give Harry Conroy a call. He's got contacts in Washington. Maybe he can find out something."

"You don't have to phone him, Faith. He's coming over for dinner. And bringing his grandson." Charity smiled slyly. "Melanie's coming, too. Why don't you both stay? Maybe we can figure something out together."

"I can stay." Faith beamed happily, clapping her hands. "I just love fried chicken. And Arthur's away in Denver at that conference."

"Fried chicken," Hope murmured, a look of faint chagrin on her face. "Very well, I suppose one high-cholesterol meal won't hurt. Thank you, Charity. In fact, I'll help you. I can make a salad."

Charity peered at Faith with a look that asked the other woman for help.

"That's a good idea. A nice fresh green Caesar salad with croutons and cheese and lots of dressing. But first we pray," Faith ordered, and led off a heartfelt plea to her heavenly father.

After twenty-three laps, Melanie was definitely winded, but after thirty-two she was relaxed. The huge pool area was one of the apartment's perks she really enjoyed. Some people jogged, and some did aerobics. Melanie had always preferred swimming.

Slowly, she pulled herself out and walked the few steps to the whirling hot tub. She never could stand the overpowering temperature for very long, but it soothed and rejuvenated like no other remedy for stress. Eyes closed, she reclined and let the bubbling waters do their work.

"Miss Stewart, how nice to see you again."

Melanie blinked, almost believing the man standing in front of her was a dream. Goodness knows, he was certainly dream material. Tall and dark, clad in a black swimsuit, he exemplified male macho.

Melanie gulped as she moved her gaze from his strong, muscular legs to his lean hips and tapered waist, across the broad expanse of his golden chest covered in fine whorling black hairs to his sharply featured face. He was hunk material, all right, she told herself, trying to calm her thudding heart.

The time since their last meeting had not dulled her irrational attraction to him in the least.

"Mr. Stewart." It was a miracle anything emerged from her parched throat. For the life of her, Melanie couldn't think of a thing to say.

"Still mad, huh?"

Grinning, Mitchel Stewart walked to the edge of the pool and dove into its still waters. The ripples that spread seemed amazingly like those circles of excitement that rippled through her. She watched him swim with even strokes, broad shoulders and muscular arms cutting cleanly through the water.

Melanie gave herself a mental shake and turned her eager eyes from watching his graceful form. Instead she sank deeper into the hot water, hoping it would ease new tension. She closed her eyes and deliberately blanked out his presence.

"May I join you?" The question was perfunctory. Mitchel Stewart didn't bother to wait for an answer. He sank down beside her, his thigh brushing hers. Melanie edged away, giving him more room.

His dark eyes twinkled at her as he spoke.

"Okay, you win," he declared. "I think you have sufficiently paid me back with Mrs. Strange and her daughter." A rueful look passed over his face. "Some would even say you're points ahead."

Melanie burst out laughing. Agatha Strange was a lonely old soul whose fondest wish was to have her spinster daughter married before the old woman passed on, as she phrased it. When Mrs. Strange had come to her with a problem about her will, Melanie's plan had hatched. Who better to handle the old girl than attorney extraordinaire Mitchel Stewart? Gleefully, she had told the elderly woman about Mitchel, while managing to imply that he was single and desperately looking for love.

Throughout the week, bits and pieces of their exchanges had been relayed to Melanie until even she felt sorry for the man. Deidre Strange, the daughter, was at least twenty years older than Mitchel and about sixty pounds heavier. Truly, a perfect match.

His big blue eyes gazed woefully into hers.

"Could we please start again?" He sounded like a little boy trying to atone for stealing the last chocolate chip cookie. Melanie couldn't help it, she grinned. He thrust out one large, tanned hand.

"Mitchel Stewart. Mitch to my friends. Just moved into the building." He began to list his many attributes. "Single, good health, age thirty-two, six foot four, one hundred eighty-five pounds, legal counsel to corporate accounts." His bright eyes sparkled mischievously. "Same information I gave Mrs. Strange."

Giggling, Melanie shook his hand as she answered.

"Melanie Stewart, no age and definitely no weight."

"Okay." He dragged the word out. "So, Melanie, what's your favorite food?"

She joined in the game easily enough. Mitch appeared to hold no ill feelings, and she had more than paid him back for his high-handedness.

Besides, she was a little embarrassed at her behavior. Her temper had always been a sore spot. Whenever she lost it, she invariably regretted her lack of control. Maybe she could redeem herself. She focused on the conversation.

"Chinese, especially the vegetables. What's yours?"

Mitch lounged comfortably beside her, his long legs stretched out. Dark head tipped back, he thought for a few minutes before answering. "Food."

Melanie frowned. "Pardon?"

"I like just about everything as long as someone else cooks it." His mouth slanted mockingly as he leered at her. "I can make a mean raspberry punch, though."

"Oh. Well, good," Melanie answered lamely, refusing to acknowledge the spark of awareness that flew each time he brushed against her.

It was the heat, she told herself. She should never have remained in the Jacuzzi for so long. The reason she had, of course, was her swimsuit.

It had been a lapse in judgment. She knew that. Her bust was too full and her hips too round to wear something this defining. Nevertheless, the heat was unbearable, and she had to leave. Now!

"Excuse me, I have to get out." Melanie moved slowly and calmly up the stairs, aware of his eyes on her legs. Once out of the heat, she could draw cooling air into her lungs. She reached for her towel and quickly tugged it over her shoulders, trying to ignore him as he sat there watching her.

"Did I drive you out?" His eyebrows tipped downward.

"Oh, no." Melanie cinched her towel a little tighter across her shoulders. "I just can't take the heat." Her face flooded with pink. She rushed to correct herself.

"Of the pool. I mean, the Jacuzzi. After a few minutes, the heat really gets to me."

Mitch knew what she meant. The heat was getting to him, too. He could feel it frying his brain to mush as he admired the lovely Melanie.

He'd seen far skimpier suits on many of the local beaches, but nothing that looked as elegantly attractive as this. Mitch decided he much preferred it over the pink uniform she had worn the other day. Her long auburn hair was curling wildly around her shoulders and face, hugging the wide cheekbones and delicately arched brows.

Flushing brightly, Melanie turned her back to him to gather her belongings. As she did, her towel slipped to the floor.

What was wrong with the men in town, he wondered, watching her. The woman was gorgeous, and apparently had brains, too. Yet here she was, spending her evening alone. Idly, he wondered if there was someone special in her life.

Mitch watched her pull on a white terry covering that just grazed her thighs. When the heat began to addle his brain, he moved out of the swirling hot tub to tug on the baggy jogging pants he had tucked into his sports bag. Something was definitely going on between them, he decided, some spark of interest he'd noticed from the first. And despite his best intentions, he was going to investigate the fiery redhead.

"How about going to dinner with me?" The phrasing wasn't the greatest, he decided, but it was hard to make sense when your brain was the consistency of mashed potatoes.

She was slipping on shorts, and at his question, Melanie stood stock-still, perched like a startled flamingo on one leg. Her tousled hair tumbled around her face, huge green eyes questioning. She had a fresh, clean-scrubbed look he found very attractive.

"I don't—"

He cut her off before she could refuse.

"Please," he cajoled, tugging on a shirt. "You would really be doing me a favor." He tried to look forlorn and alone. "I just moved the last of my stuff in and I can't possibly do any more hard work today. I deserve a break. Please?"

She looked at him steadily, obviously gauging just how reliable he was. He was surprised himself at how anxious he was to get to know her better.

"All right," Melanie agreed finally. "But I think you'd better come with me. I agreed to have dinner with my mother tonight." If she thought she would turn him off by introducing her mother, she had been dead wrong.

"Is she a good cook?" Mitch asked warily, watching her gather her belongings.

"The best. You may need to do a few more laps when you're finished."

He looked affronted as he pulled on his clothes. One hand patted his washboard-flat stomach experimentally.

"I could stand to gain a few pounds. You think?" He cocked his head with that little-boy grace she was coming to recognize.

"No comment." Melanie giggled and went out. "I'll meet you downstairs in half an hour. Don't be late."

He wasn't late, but she was there before him, tapping one foot impatiently against the marble floor.

"I wondered if you'd changed your mind," she murmured, tossing her hair over her shoulders. Melanie stepped through the door and began to stride down the street. Mitch was forced to hurry to keep up with her.

"A woman who's on time," he muttered, huffing as he marched beside her. "Who would believe it?"

"Quite a few people, actually. It's just one of my failings."

"Why are we running when we could have taken the car?" Mitch panted, half-walking, half-jogging across the street.

"We're not running, we're walking. My mother lives only three blocks away. There's hardly any point in driving. Besides—" she grinned at him pointedly "—it's good exercise."

"I prefer swimming." He breathed, trying to look macho while his lungs burned. To his disgust, Melanie seemed totally unaffected by the speed race.

"Most out-of-shape people do prefer exercise that isn't weight bearing," she murmured without losing a step.

"Now just a minute! I am not—" Mitch felt himself collide with the pavement at the same moment his temperature hit boiling. There was a web of stabbing pain radiating from his left knee, and his pants were torn.

"Now look what you've done," he said furiously as he stood with some difficulty, pushing her helping hand away. "I'm not going out for dinner looking like this."

Her green eyes flashed with something he might have thought was sympathy. Except for her next words.

"Mm, lack of coordination, too. Don't ever take up jogging, Mr. Stewart. You're not the type."

"I don't think we have to worry about that," he said through clenched teeth as he brushed bits of gravel from his palms. "And I am not uncoordinated! If you didn't insist on making this the Indy 500…"

"Oh, now it's my fault! If that isn't just like a man! Blame it on me because I keep in shape and you don't. As if I or anyone else could make you exercise more. Men!" She spat the word with a telling glance that relegated him to one of the lower subspecies in the universe.

Mitch smiled grimly.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, limping at a pace that was still far too fast but considerably slower than her former fifty knots. "But I am a man. I wouldn't have come with you if I had known you hated men."

"I don't hate men," she said in exasperation. "I quite appreciate them." Her eyes flickered and he wondered if he could call that stretch of her lips a smile. "Some of you are even quite useful."

It was a put-down, sure as anything, and Mitch refused to let it pass.

"I think I understand why you're not, er, out tonight," he murmured under his breath. "You're a man-hater."

She stopped so quickly he crashed into her, the breath wheezing out of his chest at the contact. Melanie Stewart was mad. He could see it in her glinting green eyes. He could feel it in the tingle of electricity that pulsed through the air around them. But what really gave away her emotional state were the small, pointed fingernails buried in his arm.

"I am not stupid," she enunciated. "You think that if you make all these ridiculous accusations, I'll forget you're trying to swindle me out of that money, don't you? Well, Mr. Mitchel Stewart, or whatever your name is—" she snorted in pretended amusement "—it's not going to work."

Carefully, with extreme patience and not a little wincing, Mitch removed her talons from his shirtsleeve.

"I don't know why you keep saying that," he muttered fiercely. "My name is Mitchel Stewart. And I am not trying to swindle anyone out of anything." He peered at her, noting with interest the high spots of color on her cheeks. "Why is getting this money so important to you, anyway? Do you need cash that badly? I know the bank manager," he said, frowning at her rising color. "There's no need to be embarrassed about needing some help."

Melanie flushed more deeply. Her hands were balled into fists, but she raised her chin defiantly while her eyes hardened to cold intense chips of emerald.

"I don't want it for myself," she enunciated clearly. "I want to use it for some friends. They deserve to have some comfort in life, and this is my one chance to give it to them. If you hadn't interfered, I would have the money by now and I'd be able to take care of them."

"I might have a perfectly good use for that money myself," he told her angrily. "Someone I care about very much could use that cash right about now."

"May the best woman or man win, then." Melanie snapped open a black wrought-iron gate with one hand and stepped through. "Well, are you coming or not?"

"Yes." He sighed. "I'm coming. And I still think you dislike men."

"No, she doesn't," a bright voice chirped. "Piffle! Melanie is just one of those modern career girls who put most of their energies into their work. When she gets married, she'll bury herself in that, too."

Mitch glanced up to see Faith Johnson's beaming face.

"Oh, hello. I didn't know you'd be here tonight." He grinned happily, pleased to see the beaming older woman. "Melanie didn't tell me."

"Melanie didn't know," his companion muttered. She glanced from one to the other. "Do I take it you two know each other?"

"Of course we know each other. I was here for dinner last week with my grandfather. Wait a minute!" He stared at her as the pieces began to fall into place. "You mean Mrs. Flowerday is your mother? But your names—"

"Are different because Melanie is adopted. My own very special daughter." Charity hugged the slim form to her ample bosom and patted Melanie's back. "I'm so glad you could come, darling. And you brought Harry's grandson! How marvelous. Do come in."

"Actually I'm her foster daughter. Harry's grand—" Melanie whirled to stare at Mitch, her eyes wide with dismay. "You mean you're Judge Conroy's grandson?"

Mitch bowed at the waist.

"The one and only."

"Oh, no."

No one else heard the softly breathed moan, Mitch was sure, but he did. And he didn't like it. The female of the species generally appreciated his company. But Melanie Stewart was looking at him as if he was a worm crawling out of the woodwork.

"You knew all about this, didn't you," she asked angrily. "You'd think you would know better than to fall in with the fearsome threesome's plans."

"I don't have a clue—"

"That's for sure," she said, her eyes shooting daggers at him. "Try to act normally. And if you don't make any waves, we may just get out of this early enough to nip their matchmaking in the bud."

She stomped away to talk to the two other women seated in Charity's living room. Mitch shook his head in confusion and headed for the nearest easy chair, only remembering as he sat that this particular chair had a bad spring.

"Oof!"

"Did you say something, boy?" His grandfather emerged from the kitchen chewing on a bit of meat.

"No, Gramps. Well, yes, actually, I said it was good to sit down." Mitch watched as everyone turned to face him. "I meant after the walk over. You know, in the heat and everything." Why were they all staring at him as if he had two heads?

His grandfather looked at him pityingly, eyeing the tear at his pants with some disfavor.

"Practice not doing too well, son?" He reached in his pocket, and Mitch cringed, remembering the habit from long ago. Before the older man could pull out his wallet, Mitch launched into speech.

"No, it's going really well. The hospital was a good start, and I've found a number of new clients this week."

Judge Conroy shook his head.

"Then why wear those things? Doesn't look too good for an up-and-coming young lawyer."

Melanie laughed her light, bubbly laugh, which Mitch hadn't heard for ages.

"He kissed the pavement on the way over here. Tore his pants and cut his knee." She grinned at the judge and winked. "Out of shape, I suspect."

"I am not out of shape." Mitch glared at her, gritting his teeth. "I tripped. It happens to lots of people."

"Oh, my dear! Let me see," Hope murmured, scurrying over to check the skin of his knee. "Come along, Mitchel. That needs cleaning."

The older woman had him firmly by the arm, and there was nothing Mitch could do but follow meekly. She plunked him on a chair and rolled up his pant leg efficiently.

"I remember this from my teaching days." Hope smiled. "How many Band-Aids did I use during those thirty years, I wonder? And the iodine!"

"I, er, I don't think I need iodine," Mitch murmured, trying not to remember his past and how that stuff stung. "Really, it's fine."

Hope looked at him with a knowing smile. “It’s all right,” she whispered, patting his hand. “Nowadays, the new stuff doesn’t hurt nearly as much.”

Mitch subsided, feeling a fool. He sat meekly as she dabbed and cleaned and bandaged him until he looked like a trussed-up turkey. His pant leg wouldn’t go over the massive bandage she had applied, so Hope Langford carefully cut it off, leaving him with one short and one long leg.

He stared at his legs, aghast at the sight of his mutilated trousers. He had never been so thoroughly humiliated in his entire life, and the evening hadn’t even begun yet.

“Well, you couldn’t very well wear them to work with a patch in the knee,” Hope told him kindly, her blond head tipped. “This way you can get the other leg cut off and make shorts out of them.” She waved the scissors thoughtfully. “Would you like me to do it?”

“No, thanks anyway,” he said, backing out of the room. “You’ve done a wonderful job, though.” Of ruining his only pair of designer pants, he added under his breath.

Mitch turned carefully to go to the living room and found Melanie in his path, her gaze wide with disbelief as she studied him. Her mouth tilted in a slash of amusement, and her eyes sparkled with delight.

“Don’t say a word,” he warned her menacingly. “And if there’s anyone who’ll be leaving early, it’s going to be me.”

“How the mighty are fallen.” She giggled, walking behind him as he limped to his chair. Her face cracked up when he jerked upward as the metal prong stabbed him in the rear again. “Shall I call Aunt Hope for you, Mitch?” She chortled.

“Oh, go away,” he told her miserably. His eyes moved to the seniors huddled over the pictures on the coffee table. “What’s going on there?”

“Oh, that. Hope has just received word that the man she was engaged to years ago may not have died in the Vietnam war, as she was told. My mother wants Judge Conroy to help them check into it.” Melanie’s face was sad. “I feel bad because Hope never forgot Jean.”

“But where on earth has he been?”

“I don’t know,” Melanie told him. “Let’s listen in and see what we can find out.”

“But if he wasn’t killed there, why did they think he was?” Hope demanded. “There must have been some proof of identity.” She glanced at the judge for confirmation.

“I don’t know, dear,” the old man murmured, covering her hand with his tenderly. “But I’ll do everything I can to help you find out.” There was a silence while everyone considered the implications.

Moments later the two older ladies went with Melanie into the kitchen and Mitch, his grandfather and Hope sat in the living room. It seemed the other two had forgotten him completely, so Mitch listened to their conversation unashamedly.

“Do you still have feelings for this man, Hope?” his grandfather whispered, his salt-and-pepper head bent near hers.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I feel anymore. Everything has changed, moved out of its familiar pattern. I just wish I knew for sure whether or not Jean was alive.” She stared at the old pictures with tears in her eyes, her face a study in contrasts.

“All those years ago I just gave up,” she whispered regretfully. “Maybe, if I had kept searching, Jean and I would have had a future together.”

Judge Conroy patted the soft white hand with affection.

“It’s in His hands,” he murmured comfortingly. “Let’s leave it there while we do what we can, my dear.”

As he sat at the dinner table, munching on wonderful home-cooked fried chicken and the smoothest mashed potatoes he’d ever eaten, Mitch studied each person carefully.

His grandfather sat next to Hope, and he was paying an inordinate amount of attention to the woman, Mitch noted. They were laughing about the good times they’d shared and their plans for the seniors’ retreat at Lucky Lake.

Hope Langford was a beautiful woman, with her smooth blond hair and clear blue eyes. She was quiet but thoughtful, replying to the comments only after she'd carefully considered her responses. Which was totally unlike her friend Faith, who seemed to bubble with excitement. Mitch knew that the older woman had recently been married, so perhaps that explained her effervescence.

Charity Flowerday sat next to him, insisting that he try seconds of everything and teasing him about his good appetite. But it was her arthritic hands that he noticed most. Although they were bent and worn, they expressed her tender concern in a thousand different ways. She ruffled his hair affectionately, offered a friendly pat to Faith's shoulder, soothed Hope's fears and pinched Melanie's ear. And all with those deformed hands.

And Melanie? Beautiful, remote Melanie sat silent in her chair, watching the other members of the group with love shining in her eyes. Mitch could see the pleasure she took in their company, the careful concerned way she rushed to help her mother, sparing her unnecessary labor.

And later, as they sat around singing old songs, it was Melanie who played for them. Tunes that Mitch recognized from his grandfather's era flowed easily through her fingers as they rippled lovingly over the notes, her voice blending in with a rich, deep harmony.

They're like her family, he thought. That's why she works with old people. A big, happy family that cares and shares their lives with each other.

It was something he'd never known and always thought he wanted. It was something he intended to find out more about, Mitch decided firmly.

With the help of Miss Melanie Stewart, of course.

# Chapter Three

Once his knee had healed, the pain of embarrassment had passed and he'd purchased a new pair of pants, Mitch asked Melanie out for dinner. Chinese food. They sat across from one another in one of the local cafés without speaking as they waited for their meal of stir-fried Chinese vegetables and the deep-fried shrimp he'd insisted on. He figured Melanie could think of nothing to say—unlike their past encounter. Her fingers rolled the edge of her napkin. She took a sip of water.

"I like your dress." Mitch's low voice cut into her thoughts. His magnetic dark eyes gleamed in appreciation at the sweetheart neckline and fitted waist. "Green is certainly your color. That swimsuit was a knockout on you."

Blushing profusely, Melanie thanked him before hurrying to change the topic. "Have you heard anything from the contest people yet?" she asked.

Once more that wicked grin flashed at her, and once more her pulse started that rat-tatting that Mitchel Stewart always seemed to cause.

"Nope, not a word. Maybe they'll decide not to award it or to draw again. How did you enter?"

"I don't know." She laughed—that light, tinkling sound he had come to associate with her. Shrugging, she confessed, "I don't even eat the stuff."

"What?" He gave an exaggerated gasp before he admitted, "Me, neither." His forehead was furrowed in thought. "How do you suppose they got our names, then?"

Melanie blushed again, and he wondered why. Gazing at her hands, she explained.

"A few months ago I was really down. One of our residents had died unexpectedly, and I…I was sort of depressed." Her green eyes were filled with sadness as she stared ahead. "Mrs. Peters was so lonely, you see. Her kids never came to see her except on a duty visit at Christmas that lasted all of five minutes. She needed to talk to them and feel that they still cared." Melanie heard her own voice harden.

"Apparently, all they needed was the check she always handed out. When she died, I phoned them and they were there in thirty minutes. Yet when she had been asking to see them only one week earlier, no one had the time to get away." Melanie waved across the table as she tried to help him understand.

"I remember the last thing she said to me. She wanted to buy a new dress," she told him sadly. Mitch's warm brown hand was wrapped around her clenched fingers. She glanced at him sadly. "She got her dress, but it was too late."

They sat there quietly eating the delicious food. Mitch had done nothing more than listen, but somehow his quiet strength helped, and after a minute or two she continued.

"Anyway, I was working with Mrs. Rivers by then and she was entering these contests. I thought, why not throw in a few of my own entries. Maybe a windfall of some kind could take some of the sting away and provide at least some of the essential equipment that so many need." She grinned self-deprecatingly. "That's been a hobbyhorse of mine for a while now."

"Why don't your pals just buy what they need? Surely some have money?"

Mitch's question was legitimate, and she tried to explain the ways of those greedy families she had become familiar with.

"Well, many of them do have some assets when they enter the residence and they do get the help they need, as well as visits from caring families. But some of these folks are not mobile, and it's difficult for them to do their banking. Usually the family takes it over, and when they see how expensive it is to look after Grandma or Grandpa, many begin to resent every dime they lose."

"But the money isn't theirs," Mitch protested indignantly.

"I know, but when you begin to think of something as part of your inheritance…" Her voice died away. "Mr. Harcourt is one of those fellows who is quite capable of operating a motorized cart. It

would get him out of the residence and to coffee with his friends. He's not wealthy and his family think it's a silly, wasteful expenditure, and so he sits, day after day, gradually growing more depressed."

The conversation had become dull and gloomy, and Melanie suddenly felt guilty for dumping all her problems on him.

"I'm sorry. This isn't a very happy subject, and I tend to harp." She smiled at him, trying to lift the tension. "Exactly what kind of law do you practice?"

He knew she was trying to lighten the atmosphere, and he went along with it. "Corporate. Litigations are my preference, although I do agreements for sale, probate wills, boring stuff like that." He grinned that sexy smile again, and Melanie felt her spirits lift.

"Do you ever practice family law?" Her inquiry was innocent enough, but his reaction was totally unexpected.

"No." Curt and abrupt, his answer did not encourage speculation.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean…"

His charming smile was once again in place, a facade he hid behind, Melanie suddenly realized.

"I hate that end of the business," he told her. "Men and women who swore to love each other suddenly become bitter enemies, each trying to outdo the other in nastiness. Pulling children's lives apart so they can hurt each other." He shook his dark head. "I won't be part of that."

Melanie heard the underlying hurt and suspected that Mitch had been a product of just such a scenario, perhaps as a small child. He wasn't talking about it.

"Don't you want to get married yourself? Have a family someday?" She studied him curiously, noting the flush on his high cheekbones.

"No. Well, yeah. Maybe. I'm not really the type." The words spilled out helter-skelter, and he frowned. "If I ever did, I'd go into it with a no-escape clause. So far I haven't found anyone I want to be tied up that tightly with. What about you?"

"I always thought love and marriage would just happen, but lately work takes up more and more of my time, and truthfully, I just don't know how I could fit a family in with that." She grimaced. "Those residents are important to me. I don't know if I could give them all up for a mere man." She grinned teasingly.

"We're not going into that man thing again, are we?" He groaned. "I already apologized three thousand times."

"And that's not nearly enough." She smiled.

"You should talk! You called me out of shape, remember?"

"And?" She raised one eyebrow meaningfully. "If the shoe fits…"

"Time to go," he muttered, shaking his head. "Before war breaks out."

Melanie gratefully picked up her purse and moved to the door. She felt like a liar, because she knew she'd give up her so-called career in a minute for a loving husband and the warmth and comfort of a family of her own.

As they strolled along the street, Mitch took her hand in his and drew it through his arm.

"I think we'll make good neighbors." He grinned at her. "The really neighborly thing to do would be to invite me in for coffee."

The hint was hard to miss, and surprisingly enough, she didn't want to bid Mitch good-night just yet.

"Well, since you did take me out for dinner, I suppose it is the least I can do." Melanie deliberately made the invitation as unappealing as possible, pretty sure he would jump at it. She didn't want to seem too eager, after all!

They sat among the flickering candles on her patio, sipping the rich Colombian brew Melanie favored. In the dark, it seemed easier to talk.

"My mother often let me stay up in the summer and have chocolate milk on the porch. This reminds me of those times." Her voice was soft and filled with memories, and Mitch seemed loath to break the spell of quiet contentment.

"She probably wished I'd go to bed, but she and Hope and Faith never tried to talk me out of my daydreams. I will always be thankful for their love and care. I guess that's why I choose to work where I do." She smiled happily. "Seniors have so much life and love and knowledge to contribute, if only someone would take the time to listen."

"You were lucky," he told her. That hard tone had frozen the emotion in his rumbly voice. "Some kids never get the chance to experience any of that."

"But you had your grandfather. Didn't you ever come visit?" Melanie searched her mind, trying to remember Mitch from some foggy distant encounter.

"Not very often. We lived too far away, and my parents couldn't afford it. Gramps came to visit us once or twice a year for a week or so, but that's all. After I was on my own, I'd come out as often as I could get away. We kind of developed a bond then."

Melanie could tell the subject was closed, but she longed to ask him about his childhood, his parents, his background. One minute he was so charming and friendly, and the next he had closed up like a clam, cold and hard.

Soft music flowed on the evening air as someone on another patio below them enjoyed the cool evening air.

"Do you dance?" he asked suddenly.

Melanie stuttered over her answer. "Not very well. I, well, it's been ages, and…"

Tall and dark in his denim shirt and pants, he stood before her. She tipped her head to look at him.

"Don't tell me you're uncoordinated, Melanie, or I will be forced to make some remark that will draw the battle lines between us. Again. May I have this dance?" he asked. His eyes glinted in the candlelight. "I have to get my exercise, you know." And then Mitch tugged her gently from her chair without waiting for a response. "Here, put your arms around me like this."

Melanie let Mitch push her bare arms around his neck and then stood silent while he wrapped his around her slender waist. She was nervous and sure he knew it.

"No fancy moves," he reassured her. "Just swaying to the music."

They swayed gently, moving slowly to the music. As he held, she was aware of his warmth and strength, the spicy scent of his cologne and the momentary brush of his beard-roughened cheek on her own. Her skirt swished around her legs as his foot grazed hers. It was wonderful and exciting, and yet they did nothing but move leisurely around the tiny terrace.

She was relaxed, Mitch knew as he inched one hand a fraction lower on her hip. It felt so good to hold her like this, close but not too close, her soft presence filling the night air. His chin fit perfectly on top of her head, and he could just catch the soft, intriguing scent of her perfume. Against his neck, her silky hair caressed and enticed him. He bent his head and pressed the tiniest kiss to the soft skin of her collarbone.

Melanie Stewart was every inch a woman, soft and curvy, yet caring and concerned. She interested him. No one had ever said the things she had and been allowed to get away with it, and yet this fiery woman continued to hold his attention.

"What did you think of Hope's problem?" he asked finally, not wanting to break the companionable silence but needing to bring some reality into the evening.

"I don't know what to think. I'm afraid for her."

"Afraid?" He frowned. "For heaven's sake, why?"

Her finger absently played with the hair that just touched his collar as she moved slowly with him. Her touch bothered him, sending electric currents through his blood.

"Melanie?"

"She's waited so long. She'd almost let herself forget him. Did you know Hope has gone out with your grandfather a few times?"

Mitch jerked backward, staring at her in surprise. Suddenly, the little scene at Charity's made sense.

"You mean she's falling in love with him?" He frowned.

"I don't know, but something was happening between them. She was finally beginning to let go of the past and consider the future." Melanie heaved a sigh. "And now this."

"Makes you wonder who's in control of the universe, doesn't it?" he laughed.

"Oh, I know that God's in control," she told him seriously. "And whatever He has planned is more wonderful than anything we could ever imagine. It's just hard to understand right now."

"I never thought of God as personally interested in our lives," Mitch murmured. "I always think of Him as some far-off entity. In heaven, I guess." He shrugged.

Melanie smiled knowingly. "Well, I'm certain He's there, but He's also here with us, guiding us through our daily lives. I just have to keep praying that Hope won't be too badly hurt by all this."

She snuggled her head against his shoulder, and Mitch stared at the stars. Melanie Stewart made him think of all those things he wanted but could never have. Things like a wife, a home of his own, a family. Things he had no business dreaming about.

Pulling her a little closer, he guided her carefully across the patio as the music died away. His left hand settled on her waist, and he tortured himself with the dream of someday holding someone who was special to him in just this way. In his ear there was a soft whisper.

"What?" he asked, missing the soft words.

"You move that hand any lower and you are in trouble."

Privately, Mitch thought he was in trouble anyway, but he decided to change strategies. His mouth touched hers softly in a whisper of a kiss that was over before it began. When she kissed him back, he followed the curve of her jaw with a tiny, feather-light brush of his mouth. His nose nuzzled the sensitive spot under one ear. That brought a tiny sigh from her. Then she edged away, pressing her palms gently against his chest.

"Thank you for a very nice evening." Her soft voice was primly correct, and he almost burst out laughing.

Nice? Talk about a nonresponse.

"You're more than welcome. And thank you for coming to dinner." He grinned at her, unabashed at the color flooding her face.

Bending, he pressed a kiss to her soft, pink mouth and one on a tiny freckle just below her eye. Then he whispered in her ear, "I enjoyed it. All of it."

When her face colored again, he grinned smugly. "You do blush a lot," he teased her. Then, lest he hurt her feelings, he told her the truth. "I like it on you."

They walked to the door side by side, saying nothing, both feeling the tension of the moment. At the door Mitch took her oval face in his hands and rubbed his thumb along her lips.

"Can we share dinner again?"

Waves of feeling swamped her, and Melanie was unable to think straight. A noncommittal answer, that was the best.

"Maybe," she temporized, unsure of anything but her surging heartbeat. "I don't know if I'll be able to afford it if I don't win that contest. You eat a lot."

He grinned. "Save your allowance then, because I'm going to hold you to it," he promised. Mitch pressed one last kiss to her mouth. Then, sighing, he dragged himself away.

"Good night," he whispered, and pulled the door closed behind his tall figure.

"Good night," Melanie answered to no one at all. One slim hand touched her lips in wonder.

In a trance she moved through her nightly rituals, half dazed. Mitchel Stewart didn't seem nearly as irritating as he had two weeks ago. Nor as angry.

What Melanie recalled was the way his bad-boy looks had made her heart thump. And the black lock of hair that tumbled across his forehead. And his lazy blue eyes with their hidden flames. And the soft, caring touch of his hands.

Yawning widely, Melanie plumped her pillow and promptly fell asleep dreaming of Mitchel Stewart.

"You think this fellow is this Jean guy? The same one that Hope Langford was engaged to?" Mitch stared at his grandfather in dismay.

"Not only do I think he is the one, I'm pretty sure he plans to marry someone else. I've had someone looking into things for me. On the Q. T. of course." Harry Conroy rubbed his hand wearily across his stubbled cheek. "I'm stumped, laddie. I dursn't tell Hope about this. She's got her heart set on a reunion, and if this guy is what he seems, that isn't going to happen."

"What's his name?" Mitch asked curiously, flipping through the reports covering his grandfather's desk. "And where's he been for the past thirty years? Why didn't he let her know he was alive so she could move on?"

"I don't know, son. Those are all good questions that I'd like to ask the man myself. You don't go abandoning a woman like Hope without a darned good reason. Leave those papers be!" Harry sounded furious, and Mitch studied him with new eyes.

"You're pretty fond of Miss Langford, aren't you, Gramps?" he asked quietly.

"Fond of her? I've spent longer than I care to think about trying to get close to the woman. But she has this barrier she always puts up. Won't let people get too close. Leastways, not me." He frowned.

Harry Conroy peered at his grandson. Over the years he'd gained a pretty good knowledge of human nature, and he used it to good advantage now.

"I think you're interested in Charity's daughter, too. Aren't you, boy?" The faded gray eyes sparkled with hidden knowledge. "I was afraid it would never happen," he declared happily.

"It hasn't," Mitch assured him quietly. "I'm not looking to get married, Gramps. You know that. Neither is she. Sure, I like Melanie. She's sharp and witty."

"Not too hard to look at, either," his grandfather added.

"No, she isn't," Mitch agreed with a grin. "But she's dedicated to her career as much as I am to mine."

Harry snorted. "Hogwash," he bellowed with disgust. "You're still thinking about your parents, aren't you, Mitch?" He shook his head. "Those two didn't have a marriage, they had a battle zone. That's not the way it's supposed to work, boy."

"From what I saw at Mercer, Lloyd and Jones, that's the way it usually works," Mitch told him soberly.

"I knew you didn't like Chicago, Mitch, but I always thought you liked your work."

"I hated my work there," Mitch said hoarsely. "Bottom man on the pole wasn't the problem. I had to take whatever they assigned, and it was always family court." He shuddered at the memory. "I still see the looks in the kids' eyes, Gramps. So tired. And scared."

"Well, I'm proud of you for getting yourself out of there, son." Harry wiped a tear away. "It's a sad thing to see a family torn apart, that's for sure. But it doesn't have to happen to you. All marriages aren't bad. Your gran and I shared some pretty happy years." Harry stared across his desk, his eyes focused on some memory Mitch couldn't share.

"You never knew her, Mitch, but she was the kindest, gentlest woman God ever created."

"Sort of like Hope, you mean?" Mitch watched, stunned, as his grandfather's head reared back and his round belly shook with laughter.

"Good heavens, no! Hope is nothing like your grandmother. If she thinks I deserve it, she can tear a strip off me. Most times, it serves me right." He chuckled.

"Mom must have taken after your Anna, then." When Harry frowned, Mitch rushed to make his meaning clear. "You know what Dad was like, Gramps. He never had a decent word to say to anyone, Mom included. Most of the time he was screaming vile things at her. And she took it all without telling him off. Not once as long as I hung around can I remember a time when she would retaliate."

"No, she wouldn't have," Harry whispered sadly. "That was our fault. Anna and I knew your ma saw the court cases come and go, and we were afraid she would learn that retribution often paid. So we taught her that fighting back never solved anything." He stared at the picture of the young laughing girl on his desk. "I regret that now."

"There's no point in regrets, Gramps." Mitch smiled bitterly. "We can only learn from the past, and what I learned from my old man and his successors is that marriage tears people up."

"I'm sorry 'bout that, too, my boy," Harry whispered as the door slammed behind his grandson. "Because I think marriage is the best darn institution God ever invented."

He sat staring at his oak-lined office for a long moment before rousing himself to action.

"I wonder," he murmured, shrugging into his black robes for the last session of the day. He pressed the newfangled speed dial his secretary had shown him how to use.

"Hello, Hope? I need to talk to you about something." He waited for her response, a smile curving his lips. "I thought maybe we could go for a picnic. Haven't had one of those in years."

When she started to protest he cut her off.

"I'm due in court now, my dear. Let's just plan to leave around six. I'll pick you up. Wear pants." Harry hung up the phone with a huge smile on his round face.

Yes, siree, this was going to be an interesting date!

"Jessica, I cannot afford to reprimand you again. This is the last time." Melanie watched as the young woman's face turned sullen.

"But, Melanie, Mrs. Lindstrom was—"

"I cannot condone your actions regardless of what our residents do or say." She cut her trainee off. "Your treatment of Mrs. Lindstrom was callous and disrespectful, and we do not allow that here." She searched Jessica's pretty face for some sign of remorse. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I guess so." The voice was petulant.

Melanie refused to allow herself any softening. The bullying tactics she had just witnessed were unforgivable.

"I'll make it perfectly clear, then, so that we both understand the way things go at Sunset." She waited until Jessica's sullen blue gaze met hers and then she laid down the law.

"This is your last warning, Jessica. Our residents are seniors, yes, and sometimes they need help. But force will not be used on anyone unless he or she is a danger to themselves or someone else. Okay?"

"But she was pulling my hair! Don't I have any rights?"

Melanie sighed, knowing the teenager would have to be relocated.

"Jessica, please. You were forcing her into the bath. She hates water. She's afraid."

"Well, how was I s'posed to know that?" The young woman had shifted from cranky to defiant, her lip curling with disgust. Suddenly, Melanie was tired of the whole thing.

"I guess you would actually have to talk to her, like a real person, and then let her talk back to find it out," she answered acidly, unwilling to go over the same material again.

Melanie knew she was venting some of her foul mood on the trainee, but Jessica deserved it. She would have dumped on Mitchel Stewart, too, if he had been around. He had been at the bottom of a lot of her problems lately!

She waved Jessica away tiredly as she raked a hand through her disheveled curls. Her secretary walked in with a cup of coffee and a commiserating smile.

"What happened to decency and courtesy, Bridget?" She sipped a mouthful of the refreshing brew and closed her eyes. When there was no response, Melanie opened them again. The woman just kept watching her. What now? she wondered.

"I'm sorry, Mel, but Mr. Northrup is slipping away fast. Hospital phoned to say you should come over if you want to talk to him once more."

Melanie got up immediately and moved to the door. Jonathan Northrup had been at Sunset even longer than she had. He had been her inspiration and hope for so long. It would be hard to say goodbye. The only consolation was that they both knew they'd meet again in heaven. Still, it would be tough. She straightened her backbone and strode down the hall, not really hearing Bridget's voice as she gathered her thoughts.

"Mel, there's some fellow from Papa John's Peanut Butter wants to see you immediately. He's at the front desk."

The last few words were hollered at Melanie's disappearing figure. She need not have bothered, Bridget thought. She knew Melanie Stewart had her priorities straight. And Jonathan Northrup was certainly more important than some silly contest!

Half an hour later, Melanie closed the big hospital door. He was gone. Serene to the end, Jonathan had given her his final bit of advice.

"You have to get out and live, my dear. Old folks are selfish and depressing sometimes, and much as we enjoy all your efforts, you have to look after yourself. One day you'll find a man who, if you let him, can give you so much." He had stopped for a painful, wheezing breath. "Make sure you have enough left of yourself to give back. That's all I ask." His frail, veined hand had clasped hers one last time.

"Enjoy your life, my dear. You've given me so much happiness. See you in heaven."

"Yes, in heaven." A tear rolled down her cheek, but Melanie dashed it away angrily. She would not cry. Jonathan wouldn't have wanted it.

A deep voice spoke from behind her left shoulder.

"Are you all right, Melanie?"

Turning, Melanie found Mitch's tall, elegantly dressed figure behind her. He looked very handsome in his navy blue pinstriped suit, but it was his eyes that drew her. Dark and searching, they probed deep within, sharing her sorrow.

"He was someone special, wasn't he?" he asked softly as his arm moved across her shoulder. His hand was gently soothing on her back, and suddenly Melanie gave way.

Turning into his arms, she put her head on his shoulder and bawled like a baby.

"Oh, Mitch. He was my best friend."

He let her cry out her loss and feelings without saying anything. And as she cried, Melanie felt the stress and sadness slowly drain away.

"Thanks," she murmured, accepting the snowy white handkerchief he pulled from his pocket to wipe her eyes. She knew she had smudged her mascara, and her eyes must look like a raccoon's, but Mitch never said a word. Gently, he took the fabric from her and completed the cleanup himself before stuffing the square into his pocket.

Then he tipped her face to look at his.

"Have you time for a coffee?" he asked. "I need to talk to you."

His voice was so serious that Melanie stared at him for a minute before nodding.

"I suppose I can. I'll just tell Bridget I'll be in the cafeteria."

"Actually, I thought maybe we could go outside for some privacy." He pointed to a carafe and two cups. "And she already knows."

Shrugging, Melanie accepted his outstretched hand and walked to the patio that nestled on a tiny bit of green lawn between the hospital and the nursing home. There were lounge chairs spread

around, and she sank gratefully into one in the sun. She needed the warm sunshine and light to banish her gloomy feelings.

When Mitch handed her the steaming cup, his fingers brushed hers, and Melanie felt the sparks his touch always caused in her body. She watched as his intelligent blue eyes studied her face carefully before he sank into a chair.

"Okay," he began, dark eyes probing hers. "I know my timing stinks, but I guess the best way to tell you this is to just get it over with."

Melanie watched his chest expand as he sucked in a lungful of air. A wave of foreboding hung over her. What now, she wondered.

He began.

"A rep from Papa John's was in to the office to see me today." His blue eyes bored into her. "From what I understand, they were also here to see you," he told her sourly. "Apparently they have come to some decision regarding their grand prize." Mitch's face was flushed, and he fidgeted in his chair uncomfortably.

"Say it," she ordered, gripping the armrests. When he didn't speak, she answered for herself. "I don't win, do I?"

"Melanie, just listen to me for—"

She ignored his pleading. All her grand ideas, all her plans. She felt her dreams dissolving around her.

"I thought it was probably too good to be true. After all, I don't even use their product. How could I possibly endorse it?" She turned to him, eyes glittering. "That's it, isn't it?"

"Melanie, can you be quiet for once?" The usually calm, deep voice was hard and strident. "Just let me speak, would you?"

Pursing her lips, Melanie leaned back and folded her arms across her chest. Her soft curls flopped across her cheek, but she was too angry to notice.

Mitch, however, noticed. He noticed only too well.

Thoughts of their evening together flooded his mind until he could almost feel her in his arms, feel her silky hair against his cheek, taste her soft mouth.

Shaking his head sharply, Mitch ignored the heat that was building in his brain and forced himself to concentrate on getting this right. It would not be easy.

"Melanie, they have both our entries now. And the home address you put on yours seems to be my apartment. Number 108. The winner lives at number 108." He waited for her to assimilate the information. When she said nothing, he tried again.

"I said—"

She stopped him immediately.

"I'm not a child, Mitch. I know what it means. It means I don't win, right?"

Her reddish gold head was tilted to the sun. As he watched, a single tear trickled from the corner of her eye.

"Not exactly," he told her.

She studied him curiously, intrigued by his mysterious manner. When he said nothing, she punched him lightly on the shoulder.

"Explain." She gave the command with all the imperious demands of royalty. He smiled at her dictatorial tone.

"I, er, I kind of told them that we lived in the same building. That, uh, we were roommates. Well, almost."

Mitchel Stewart had never seen anyone move that fast. In microseconds she was standing over him, hands on her hips as she glared at him.

"You…you fibber! You cheat! You liar!" Then she stopped. Her huge green eyes blinked twice before crinkling in puzzlement. "Why?"

"It seems that my contest entry has no apartment number on it. My name, however, is on the lease for apartment 108."

"And?" Melanie was completely puzzled by his strange attitude.

"Well, your name does not appear on any lease. Just Shawna's." He met her glittering gaze squarely. "And there is no phone number listed in your name."

"I know that. I only moved in after another of her roommates was married. We share the phone bill." It was clear to Mitch that Melanie didn't understand what he was telling her.

"But your entry says you live in my apartment. If you are not in fact living in apartment 108, your entry is null and void because you have misrepresented yourself."

He watched her absorb the information. Her small hands rested idly on his shoulders as she thought.

"How do you know this?" she demanded.

"I'm a lawyer, remember? Corporate law. Well," he said smugly, "I asked this rep guy for a copy of their contest rules."

He waited for her approval. In vain. Melanie merely glared at him. "And?"

"They must award the prize if we can both be shown to be living in apartment 108." As dismay flooded her beautiful face, Mitch quickly changed his wording. "That is, if you and I are both living in apartment 108."

He was triumphantly pleased with himself. Mitchel had made it his business to find out about Melanie Stewart in the past few days, and he could understand how badly she needed that money. Sunset Retirement Home was an under-funded, overworked nursing home that was following the patterns of business all over the world by cutting back.

Several of his golfing buddies had relayed horror stories about the place before Melanie had taken over, and Mitchel found out she was well respected in her field. The simple, humanitarian changes she had wrought in her tenure as director of care had resulted in Sunset becoming one of the choice locations for those requiring the services they provided.

At the same time, he had watched her surreptitiously with a number of her clients. Melanie was unfailingly polite and courteous with everyone, but her seniors seemed her closest friends. Even Mrs. Strange had spoken glowingly of Melanie's special interest in each resident's needs.

"Don't you see?" he demanded, anxious for her to understand his contribution in all this. "If you move some of your stuff to my spare room and stay there for a few nights, they'll know you're living there, and you'll get your share of the money."

She looked as if he had hit her with a Mack truck, Mitch decided. The color was coming back to her face, but he didn't think that was a good sign. Mostly due to the sharp fingernails digging into his shoulder blades.

He lifted her hands away, careful to keep the lethal pink nails far from his eyes. She looked steamed, and with her temper, she would probably scratch his eyes out.

"Let go of me, you lecherous, manipulating, overbearing…" As the stream of vitriolic descriptives flowed from her soft peach lips, Mitch twisted her arms behind her back.

He disliked using force, but he wanted to preserve the skin on his face, as well. He let her blow off steam, but when she had not stopped a few moments later, his temper peaked.

Using the method he most favored, Mitch pulled her stiff, unyielding body close and pressed his lips against hers, stemming the tide of outrage. And he kept kissing her even when she stopped fighting him. Only when she finally started kissing him back did he pull away.

Women! Why didn't he smarten up? Surely after Sam's dirty tricks, he should be prepared for the way they operated.

"Listen, Ms. Stewart. I don't need a roommate so badly that I would go to these extremes. I've told you before, I don't intend to get married. Not now. Maybe not ever."

Mitch let go of her arms and stood back, furious that he had allowed himself to become so involved in someone else's affairs. That's what he got for trying to help!

"You know," he added, upset with himself for the stupid idea that had streaked into his head an hour ago, "I can use twenty-five grand for a few little schemes of my own. You're not the only person who has things to do, people you want to help out. And if you back out now, they will redraw the names." Mitch's dark eyes glared at her accusingly. "I'll lose out altogether because of your mistake." He told himself to calm down. Useless.

"I know how much you want that money. So do I. And this is the only way I could think of for you to share in it." Turning, he strode away, stopping only to add, "Sorry I interfered in your life," before yanking the door open and walking through it.

Melanie sank into the deck chair, her knees rubbery. Shocked, confused, dazed. Life was a perplexing whirl, and she wasn't sure of anything anymore. He had been trying to help, in a strange, rather unusual way. He wanted her to have the money, or at least some of it. But there was no way she was moving in with the guy. Get real!

"You're still there, directing me, aren't You, Lord?" she murmured brokenly. "Please give a sign. You know how much we need that money."

Glancing at her watch, Melanie decided that nothing made sense anymore and got up to return to work. As she gathered the cups and thermos, she permitted a tiny smile to tilt the corners of her mouth. Actually, Mitchel Stewart was kind of sweet. In a bossy, rude sort of way.

"He invited her to move in with him?" Hope fumed. Her eyes were wide open. "What a horrible young man!"

"He's not horrible at all," Charity murmured, threading the wool through her knitting machine. "Dear Mitchel was just trying to help. In a bizarre, unorthodox sort of way." She slid the carriage back and forth a few times experimentally and then began an even, steady rhythm that soon produced a width of white lacy fabric.

"Melanie was so hurt when her mother abandoned her. It took ages, remember, to get her to open up. That terrible childhood should have toughened her up, but instead she became more withdrawn." Charity smiled in remembrance. "My Melanie was the child who always needed an extra hug or a few extra words of praise."

"I remember," Hope murmured. "She'd work so hard in school, doing far more than was necessary for any project I assigned." Her eyes stared into the past. "She was always the one who lent a helping hand, stuck up for the little kid being bullied."

Charity nodded. "It was almost as if she was too insecure and afraid to believe in the love that Peter and I offered. When he died, I think she felt it was her fault for leaning on him so much."

"Well, I want her to be happy," Hope added stoutly. "But I don't want her to be hurt. And Mitchel will do that. He's had a terrible childhood, you know. Harry told me some of it." She filled them in on the few details she knew. "Melanie needs someone strong with a solid background. Someone she can lean on. Not somebody with problems of his own!"

"I don't know why you're so concerned, Hope." Charity smiled as she started another color. "Melanie is a good girl. She wouldn't allow anything untoward to happen. And they would only be sharing the kitchen."

Hopes eyes were huge with disbelief.

"You mean you condone this crazy idea?" She gasped. "But you're her mother."

"I know that, dear. And I'm not saying I condone anything. I have only her good at heart. But Melanie is too self-contained. She's always pushing everyone but her seniors away. She's missing out on the best parts of life, and I want her to find happiness with someone her own age." She shrugged. "Maybe if she and Mitch do share an apartment, she'll realize the world is full of more than grumpy

old men. It does have two bedrooms, you know." Charity's warm brown eyes twinkled. She delighted in her friend's shocked look.

"Oh, my," Faith breathed, her emerald green eyes glowing with excitement. "And wouldn't it be romantic. Why, they could have a candlelight dinner without the whole town knowing about it." She stared into space, lost in a daydream.

"Well," Hope said, "I'm ashamed of you, Charity Flowerday. And there's no way I'm going to allow Melanie's good reputation to be soiled by such a tawdry situation. I'm going to do my duty by the girl." She picked up her purse and swept regally through the front door, the light of battle gleaming in the depths of her blue eyes. "We'll just see about this…arrangement," she muttered furiously.

When Judge Harry Conroy showed up promptly at six o'clock, Hope was ready for him. She wore a pair of navy slacks and a white blouse with a navy and white cardigan over her shoulders. She could barely control her temper as she waited for Harry to open her car door and her greeting wasn't as welcoming as it could have been.

"Is something the matter, Hope?" he asked at last. He started the car and pulled away from her house, then glanced at her curiously. "I mean, have you heard more about Jean or something?"

"Good heavenly days, no," she snapped irritably. "I hadn't even thought about that. Don't have time." She turned to face him angrily. "Charity is set on sending her daughter traveling down the path of destruction, and I intend to see that she doesn't do it."

"Charity is?" the judge murmured, puzzled. "But I thought…well, never mind that. What's Charity done now?"

"It's all because of that awful grandson of yours," Hope complained. "He flies into town, all handsome and debonair, and sweeps the girl off her feet."

"So you think he's handsome, do you?" Judge Conroy's eyes twinkled.

"Of course he's handsome," Hope spluttered. "You know very well he takes after you, Harry, and you were a heartbreaker at that age. You still are."

"Do tell," Harry murmured with a smile of appreciation, allowing himself to preen.

"But you had some scruples. You would never have up and asked a woman to live with you so cold-bloodedly."

Judge Conroy absently turned down the dirt road that led to the park beside the river where he'd courted his wife years ago. It wasn't much of a river now, of course. And he wasn't as young as he once was. But oh, my, things did sound promising!

"Mitch has asked someone to live with him?" he repeated softly. "That's strange. I didn't think the boy had any intention of getting married."

"He doesn't," Hope shrieked in exasperation. "He wants her to live in sin with him."

The judge stared at her as if she'd lost her marbles, sending Hope's blood pressure soaring.

"I hardly think Mitch would suggest—"

"Oh, yes, he would," she contradicted him. "I was visiting Nettie Rivers. We were sitting in her room, right by the window, and I distinctly heard him ask Melanie to move in with him." She slammed the door of the car and stomped to a clearing beside a tiny waterfall. "Well, I'm not having it," she spluttered, sinking down onto the blanket Harry spread. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes, dear," he murmured, trying to understand. It didn't sound at all like Mitch, but then the boy did have a mind of his own. "I'll talk to him," he promised, patting her hand commiseratingly.

"It won't do any good," Hope murmured, squeezing his hand gently. "But thank you. No, Charity's determined to go along with it all. She thinks Melanie needs to see what she's missing, working with old people all the time."

"Perhaps she's right about that, Hope. She is the girl's mother, after all. Charity wants to see Melanie happily married with her own children. So do I, for that matter." He stared at her. "Let's pray about it, dear. God can do anything. He can certainly handle this."

They bowed their heads, and Judge Conroy murmured a short petition, asking for guidance and help for their friends and relatives.

"Do you feel better now, dear?" he asked, after they'd finished the low-fat potato salad, cold sliced chicken sandwiches with tomato, lettuce and spicy mustard. For dessert, there was fruit salad and hot, fragrant herbal tea.

"A little," Hope conceded. She stared into the woods. "I think I shall keep my eye on that situation. Perhaps I can be of help."

"But won't you be busy contacting the authorities about Jean?" he asked softly, knowing it wouldn't hurt her to discuss her past love. To the judge's immense surprise, Hope shook her head.

"No," she told him firmly. "I've decided to turn that over to the Lord. Jean has been gone for a long time. It's very doubtful that he's survived at all, but if, for some strange reason, he turns up alive, I'll be happy and I'll learn to deal with it. Somehow."

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked with a frown.

"Exactly what I've been doing for the past twenty-five years," Hope told him with a smile. "Take each day as it comes and plan on making it the best yet."

"Good," he agreed after a moment. "And I'll be here to share them with you."

"You have been for a long time now," she murmured, staring at his bald head as if she hadn't noticed it before. "We've had some good times, haven't we, Harry? You and Anna and I. She was my very best friend, you know. I always felt as if she was my sister."

Harry frowned.

"Well, I don't feel like your brother," he muttered. To his delight she giggled, leaning nearer to kiss him on one cheek.

"You don't look like him, either," she assured him, laughing. She jumped to her feet and tugged his arm. "Come on, lazybones. I let you feed me all that delicious food. The least you can do is help me walk it off."

"All right," he agreed meekly. "But I carefully planned a low-fat meal, just as you prefer. You know that. As long as we just walk. I'm too old for anything else."

Hope's blue eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Really?" she asked. "That's too bad."

Harry let her lead him down the path, resisting an urge to kiss her then and there. But no, he decided. He'd bide his time. They were just beginning to get closer, and she was only starting to come to terms with the possibility of Jean's reappearance. Everything looked positive, but he'd keep mentioning things to the Lord, just the same. A little heavenly guidance couldn't hurt, he decided, hearing Hope's sudden burst of laughter.

# Chapter Four

"Have a nice day, folks. Enjoy that sun."

Mitchel Edward Stewart was not having a nice day, despite the radio announcer's bland wish. He had risen with a splitting headache on his first day off in weeks. The coffeemaker had refused to cooperate, and his doughnut supply was tapped out.

It should have been simple. Everything was so carefully planned. He would pick up some supplies from downtown and then he was heading out for a day at the beach. Sun, sand and surf, that's what he needed. Maybe even a cold root beer.

Sighing, he stared balefully at his bright red sports car once more. Apparently, some things were not to be. The expensive engine refused to respond to his orders, and since anything under the hood of an automobile gave him hives, Mitch had called the shop.

"Nope, can't touch it today." The youngster's voice was less than helpful. At least he thought it was. You could barely hear over the crashing of some heavy metal band in the background.

"Pardon?"

"No can do, dude."

"And why is that?" Mitchel had forced a tight rein of control on his temper and prayed for strength. Impudent little brat!

"Mechanic's out sick. Have a good one!" With a click, the kid had hung up on him, leaving Mitchel to bite out a particularly choice epithet that divulged his irritation with the world in general.

"Something I said?"

He groaned, recognizing her voice immediately. Why now, why today? He turned to face Miss Melanie Stewart, a flush of red hinting at his turmoil.

"Hi." There. Let her make something of that.

"Car problems?"

His reply was curt and succinct. "Yeah."

"Can I look?"

He stared at her. "Why?"

Green eyes glared at him as she slapped her hands on her hips. "Gee, I don't know. I thought I could steal a few spark plugs or maybe even the air filter."

Whew, talk about cranky! Without a word Mitch popped the hood and watched Melanie lean over to peer inside. His stomach dropped as his gaze followed her long legs to the white cuffed shorts that covered her shapely bottom. A tiny bit of skin peeked out between her waistline and the cropped red T-shirt she wore. He couldn't stop staring.

"Hmm, distributor cap's shot." She turned her head to glance at him. "You need a mechanic."

"Thank you for your assistance, Miss Stewart," he said sarcastically. "I have already phoned one. He's out sick." Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, he thought grumpily.

She shrugged and slammed the hood shut. Fortunately, she missed his knuckles by at least a millimeter.

"Okay, looks like you've got it covered."

He frowned. Was that supposed to mean something?

"Want a lift?" she offered, bending to pick up a large woven bag and a small cooler. "I'm going to the beach, but I could drop you somewhere."

Like in the river, he mused, well aware of her quick temper. Mitch decided he should not look a gift horse, or a gorgeous woman, in the mouth. Enough things had gone wrong today. Here was opportunity. Opportunity didn't knock that often. He shouldn't turn it down. Besides, she might invite him to share whatever was in that cooler, and he didn't want to miss out on a decent meal.

Mitch assembled his features into his best hangdog look and muttered, “Well, I was going there, too, but now, with no wheels…” He asked deferentially, “Are you sure it would be okay?”

To his delight, she burst out laughing, her green eyes glinting in the sunshine. Seconds later they were hidden behind huge round sunglasses.

“You don’t do humble really well.” She giggled. “In fact, it’s downright pathetic.” She waved. “But I’ll take pity on you anyway. Come on. You can hitch with me for today.”

Mitch watched the animation flood her features as she laughed at him and thought how pretty she was when she wasn’t arguing with him. Of course, even then, with the light of battle turning her eyes that mossy color, Melanie still looked fantastic.

When she motioned to her old beater, his face dropped. Unfortunately, she noticed. Never missing a chance, Melanie poked fun at him.

“I know. It’s a step down for you.” She smirked. “But if you want to get to the beach today, this might be your only chance.”

Embarrassed, Mitch got in while trying to come up with an appropriate apology. When nothing remotely suitable surfaced, he glued his lips shut and studied the dilapidated vehicle.

She read his silence correctly.

“Don’t worry.” She laughed. “Everybody thinks Bessie is gonna give up the ghost, but she always keeps going.” Lovingly, Melanie patted the worn dashboard. “She’s got the innards of a true champion.”

“Champion what?” It wasn’t nice, but she didn’t take offence.

“She may not be pretty but at least she’s running,” she reminded him gently.

Mitchel tried not to stare as her shorts displayed those lovely long legs. He turned and stared straight ahead, trying not to ogle her. Sort of.

“Do you always go to the beach on Saturday?”

Good, Stewart, he congratulated himself. What a stimulating conversation!

“No, only in the summer, when I have time and it isn’t raining.” She laughed. “Other than that, I don’t bother much.”

Her curls were bound up in a ribbon on the top of her head. Mitch decided he’d like to undo that ribbon and run his fingers through the glowing silky mop.

“You are a smart aleck, you know that?” he muttered. His eyes opened wide as he caught sight of her feet. Her toenails were bright pink. Mitch suddenly realized they had an effect on his already racing pulse.

Gosh, he was in a bad way. It was just her toes, for goodness’ sake. He forced himself to look out the window.

“Mitch?”

“Melanie?”

They spoke at the same time, each turning to stare at the other.

“You go first,” he offered gallantly. The words he had wanted to say were stuck in his throat anyway.

“Well, as you know, I have sort of a temper.” Mitch snorted at the obvious understatement, and Melanie had the grace to blush.

“Okay, I have a temper,” she admitted.

“A terrible temper,” Mitchel revised, tongue in cheek.

“Anyway…” She glared at him over her sunglasses. “I wanted to apologize for jumping to conclusions the other day. I know you were trying to help me, and I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

Mitchel Stewart’s mind had wandered to considering whether she would wear that swimsuit again. “Uh-huh,” he muttered, lost in his daydream.

“If you are still offering, I would like to take you up on your offer of a residence. Just for a few weeks,” she added quickly. And then, for his information, “No strings attached.”

Privately grinning with glee, Mitch calmly asked, “What changed your mind?”

Her sea-colored eyes studied him suspiciously before she answered. “Well, I think I’m being evicted.”

His head shot up in surprise. “For what?”

Melanie grinned. He could see that half-hidden little twitch that seemed to say “Gotcha!”

“Shawna eloped with her boyfriend last weekend, and now she wants her husband to move in with her.” She grinned. “Not unreasonable, I suppose, but I think it’s going to be just a little crowded with the three of us.” Melanie shrugged nonchalantly. “Who am I to stand in the way of young love?”

He was getting to know her, and he recognized a put-on when he heard it from her pink glossy lips.

“Come on, Melanie!” Her big green eyes stared at him innocently. Mitch smirked. “What’s the real reason? I know enough about that nurse to know she plans everything ahead. She’d no more elope than you would. And you would no more move in with a man than fly to the moon. I never expected that you’d go for my suggestion.” He stared at her. “What’s changed?”

Melanie sighed in defeat, and he knew she didn’t really want to agree to his plan, at all.

“We got a notice that the owners want the top floor for their children, who will be going to school in the fall. They will pay us two months’rent if we vacate immediately so they can do some renovations before fall.”

She shrugged her slim shoulders before continuing.

“I’ve been praying and praying that God would lead me in this contest thing. Then this came up. Right after you offered to let me stay there.” Her sigh was not encouraging. “I guess God is trying to tell me something.”

Mitch stared. “You think He wants you to have this money so badly He’d force you to move in with me? Wow!” He was teasing, but the laugh stopped in his throat as she turned those expressive eyes on him.

“I think He must be trying to tell me something,” she said quietly. “I’ve been praying for ages and nothing happened. Now suddenly there’s the contest and the opportunity to get some money for Sunset. I get evicted, and there you are offering to share your place.” Her eyes were wide with amazement. “It’s like a small miracle.”

“I’m not sure…”

“Besides, there’s nothing between us. Everyone knows that. And I work all kinds of hours. I just need somewhere as a base until I can find another apartment.” Her head tilted toward him as she careened around a convertible full of rowdy teenagers. “So I gratefully accept your offer.”

“You must know what it’s like to find accommodation in this town.” Mitch added that just to let her know how lucky she was and how magnanimous he was.

They talked terms and conditions all the way to the beach. Melanie could move in immediately. It would be every man for himself. No cooking, no cleaning, she told him. No garbage, no lewd propositions, he promised.

Eyebrows raised, Melanie asked what that meant.

“I only make proper propositions,” he joked, eyeing her heightened color with interest.

Privately, Melanie wondered what the future would hold for them. Especially after an afternoon of Mitch’s company. Her body hummed from the massaging action of his large hands as he obligingly applied sunscreen to her bare back. His big, strong fingers worked the oil into her skin, and she felt supple and exotic as the fragrance of coconuts wafted around them. Mitch had been insistent that she wear sunscreen.

“I’ve seen sun damage,” was all he would say. “It’s not pretty.” She was aware of his appreciation of her swimsuit.

Melanie was flattered that he found her outfit every bit as interesting as before, but she regretted those extra ten pounds she had never shed. Not that they seemed to matter to Mitch. Shortly after rubbing in the oil, he had rushed away for a quick dip in the cold lake.

"Come on in," he had teased, dripping frigid drops of water on her toasty skin. He laughed when she shrieked, then razed her unmercifully about her squeamishness until Melanie could stand his teasing no longer.

"I knew you were a beach baby," he muttered. One dark blue eye had opened as he lazed on his towel. It traveled the course of her body, following the lines of her swimsuit. "I doubt if that thing even withstands more than a dip in the hot tub," he added, disgusted. "Afraid of a little natural water, probably."

When Melanie refused to answer, he continued the goading.

"You can't swim, can you? That bit at the apartment pool was all just a ruse to get my attention, wasn't it?"

Melanie had sat up at that, fury wrinkling her forehead as she glared at him.

"For your information, I don't need to attract anyone's attention." She straightened her spine in haughty disregard. "I would have you know I am an excellent swimmer. I simply refuse to subject myself to that frigid water in order to prove something to you." She arranged her beach chair more comfortably and leaned back, soaking up the sun's rays. "I merely wanted some free time away from the office. I would appreciate it if you could let me enjoy the day."

Melanie thought she had won their war of words until she heard him mutter something under his breath.

"Pardon?" she inquired superciliously.

"I said, you're chicken, just as I thought."

"You know," Melanie said, eyeing him severely, sunglasses pushed to the end of her nose, "if you ever win in court, it must be because of your bulldog tendencies."

She stretched out on her stomach, letting the warming heat of the sun penetrate her skin. There was blissful silence for about sixty seconds.

"What do you mean, bulldog tendencies?" His voice was strident. "Admit it, you are a chicken." Big blue eyes glimmered with excitement. "Bok, bok!" He flapped his arms.

Melanie was getting tired of his ridiculous juvenile games. She looked around the beach and found several pairs of interested eyes trained on them.

"Stop that," she ordered angrily. "Everyone is staring at you."

Mitch continued to chant louder and louder.

There was nothing else to do. He would not leave her alone, and she wouldn't get a moment's peace until she put an end to this stupidity.

Melanie stood gracefully and walked to the water's edge, dipping the end of one big toe into the water.

"Agh!" She sucked in her breath. It was freezing!

But when she turned around, Mitch was looming behind her. His eyes met hers, and he mouthed the word chicken.

Melanie sighed, resigned to her fate and fully aware that he would keep it up until she got wet. She strolled slowly into the water, getting a bit more of her heated skin wet with each step. She turned carefully, trying not to splash, and found Mitch directly behind her.

"I hope you're happy." She glared at him. "I have no feeling below my waist, and my hands are getting numb."

He grinned and dived into the smooth water beside her, splashing her hugely. When he stood up, streaming rivulets of chilly lake water running down his face, Melanie let him have it.

"You did that on purpose, you sadist. I'm soaked and I'm freezing. I do hope you feel better now."

She turned to go back to shore and found him blocking her way.

"I'm sorry, Melanie." His voice was deceptively soft as his chilly hand closed around her arm. Wide and innocent, his baby blues stared at her soulfully. "I really didn't know you couldn't swim."

"Of course I can swim, silly," Melanie told him, trying to stop her teeth from chattering. She wrapped her arms around her midriff, hugging herself for warmth.

Unfortunately the motion pushed her full breasts upward, accentuating the cleavage her suit displayed. She watched Mitch's blue eyes grow rounder in appreciation before she realized the reason. Her hands dropped to her sides in embarrassment.

His laughing gaze met hers. One black lock of hair dangled boyishly over his forehead. A wide smile slashed across his rugged, tanned face.

"You are just going to have to get in there and swim a few strokes to prove it," he whispered in her ear as his hands brushed up and down her arms to warm her.

Melanie glared at him even as her body recognized the heat flowing from his body. She moved closer. Just to get warm, she told herself. When his arms wrapped around her and she was pressed against the heat of his chest, she groaned at the warmth that was beginning to penetrate her skin.

"Come on, Melanie, let's swim."

It was the last thing she heard before Mitch's arms tightened like steel bands and he pulled her under the water.

Icy cold waves slapped against her and left her with two options: move or freeze to death. Melanie moved.

Breaking his tight hold on her, Melanie surprised Mitch with a move she had learned long ago in lifesaving class. In a few seconds he was flat on his back and going under. With one last shove, Melanie pushed him to the sandy bottom before swimming furiously away in a speedy crawl that had won her numerous competitions in high school.

Of course, Mitch demanded retribution. She just had not expected it to be a kiss. And when his cold lips pressed against hers, Melanie found that the fire building between them could not be doused, even by the freezing lake water. She kissed him back, returning his warm embraces until her blood was singing in response.

Mitch was the first to pull away.

"Okay, you win," he teased. "You can swim, and kiss." He grinned that devilish grin at her. "And you do both very well, I might add." Turning, he ducked under the water, surfacing twenty yards away to call out his challenge.

"I'll race you to the buoys," he dared her. His strong arms made a swath through the water. "Loser supplies supper," he told her when she caught up.

And so it had gone for the rest of the day. Teasing, talking, touching each other, but never getting too serious.

The long, lazy afternoon on the crowded beach presented a perfect opportunity for getting to know each other, but regardless of the many ploys she tried, Melanie gained very little personal information about Mitchel. It was frustrating and she was finally forced to admit defeat.

He lost their swimming contest and she left him to arrange their late supper, especially since he'd long ago finished off the sandwiches and pop she'd packed.

Ever resourceful, he'd come up with the very ingenious and inventive idea of hot dogs and chips, with chilled cans of iced tea to drink. As they sat around a campfire, replete with their feast, Melanie sensed he was deliberately shutting her out, refusing to answer her innocent questions. She turned a marshmallow, letting the coals toast it golden brown before popping it into her mouth.

Oh, he hadn't been rude about it. His answers had been polite enough, but, somehow, the subject of family was a closed book with Mitchel Stewart. And although he freely discussed his work, Mitch only let her see bits and pieces of the real man.

Melanie knew that he hailed from the East, that he had gone to school there and come to Mossbank a few weeks ago. She had learned a little about his schoolboy antics and that he loved to swim but wasn't very good at it.

But that was it. Mitch had told her nothing of his family or his past. And she wanted to know.

She gazed into the fire. Maybe a direct approach was the best. Plunge in and take the consequences. Somehow, the enveloping darkness gave her courage.

"Mitch?"

He sat on a log, staring vacantly into the flickering flames. The huge fire he had built had died down to an orange-red bed of coals. Wind danced across it, licking up a flame here or there.

"Hmm," he asked, staring languidly.

"Please, don't think I'm being nosy," she began, knowing darn well that nosy was exactly what she was being. "It's just that I would like to know a little more about you if we are going to be rooming together."

When his dark head jerked, Melanie held up a defensive hand.

"I know your reputation from my friends at the hospital, but…" Melanie hesitated, searching. "I don't know you." Her voice was soft, plaintive, a call for understanding.

Mitch had pulled a pair of tattered blue jean shorts over his swimsuit. Below the frayed cuffs, his long, muscular legs crossed and uncrossed as he fidgeted on the huge log. Finally he stood, towering over her in the gloom. Melanie could feel his blue eyes studying her. When he spoke, his voice was quiet but firm.

"Look. I've offered half of the prize money and a place to stay to make sure you can collect your half. Can we leave the personal histories out of it?"

He squatted in front of her and stared directly into her face. His voice was half-laughing, half-serious, but there was an underlying tenseness that Melanie couldn't ignore.

"I give you my word I'm not an ax murderer, or a psychotic, or any of those other terrible things you've been imagining." His white teeth glittered in the dark. Melanie thought immediately of a wolf and then remonstrated with her overactive imagination, sitting quietly when he continued.

"You are welcome to stay at my place for as long as you need to. But that's it. You go your way and I go mine."

His fingers closed around the soft flesh of her upper arms, drawing her upward. And Melanie allowed herself to be coaxed to his heat. He was like fire, and she a moth, drawn irresistibly to his flame. He attracted her with his hidden secrets and mysterious smile. His past was another facet of a man who occasionally let her see his generosity. And she would probably get burned, but right now Melanie could only concentrate on his touch.

"Don't get me wrong," he muttered as his eyes brushed her body, admiring her figure. "You're a very beautiful woman and I enjoy the view as much as the next red-blooded male." His hands slid down her back to the indentation of her waist, and he urged her closer.

"But I don't play games, and I have no intention of getting married just because I allow you to stay in my apartment."

"I never said I wanted to get married! Mitchel Stewart, you are the most egotistical, pushy, rude, overbearing—"

"You have said all this before," he reminded her. His hands were stuck carelessly into his back pockets as he studied her. "Get to the point."

With every atom of control she possessed, Melanie forced herself to refrain from violence. Curling her fingers into her palms, she sucked in a lungful of air.

"Look, buddy," she told him, poking a finger into his very broad, very bare chest. It confused her, that tingling sensation, so Melanie put her hand down and concentrated on the words.

"I will move into your apartment because I do need that money for my friends."

"We've already agreed on that." He chuckled, then bent to stuff the remains of their meal into the tiny cooler before dousing the fire.

"Right." Melanie tried to focus on her speech. "So I will stay there. But that's it. Not for anything else."

She tried to emphasize the words, but somehow they had little effect on Mitch. He smiled that lazy, sexy smile and agreed with her quietly as he tugged her arm.

"Right, darlin'," he drawled as he pulled her along beside him through the warm sand. When they reached the car, he dropped everything on the pavement beside it and wrapped one lean brown hand around her neck.

"And nothin' anybody can say will change it," he drawled right before his grinning lips closed on hers.

Melanie knew his effusive charm was just a cover. Something that would draw her off course so Mitch would not have to answer any questions. And she would tell him that he couldn't just get away with this.

Soon.

With a sigh, Melanie decided she would tell him so right after she'd kissed him back. For a few delicious minutes she allowed herself to enjoy the feel of his lips tasting hers before she pulled away from his strong embrace and climbed dazedly into the car.

She knew there was something she wanted to say. But right now she couldn't remember what it was. Not on the long drive home, not when Mitch kissed her a very thorough good-night outside her apartment and not when she was lying in her soft bed much later.

"Thanks for the sign, Lord," she whispered. "I'm taking this to mean that I should proceed full steam ahead. Now, if You could just work on his attitude a little."

A smile curved her soft, full lips as she drifted off. Yes, he had a bad attitude, all right. Tomorrow, she decided. She would remember to tell him off tomorrow.

"Oh. Uh, hello. Miss Langford, isn't it?" Mitch stared at the older blond woman in the doorway of his apartment. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Hope pressed past him without a word, her face drawn tight, lips pursed as she motioned to the items scattered at her feet.

"Actually there's quite a lot. But for right now, would you mind bringing in my suitcases? I'll be sharing Melanie's room. You're not going to destroy my best friend's daughter's reputation as long as I can stop it!"

Mitch stared at her, his mind whirling. Was this what Gramps had meant this morning on the phone? What had he said? "Hope has her feathers ruffled." Was that it? Apparently she was angry with him. Mitch groaned at the thought of this straitlaced busybody and her obviously mistaken impression of his and Melanie's unusual arrangement.

"Miss Langford, I assure you that there's nothing like that going on. Melanie and I—"

"Will have a chaperone," she interrupted smartly, straightening the cushions thrown haphazardly on his sofa. Her eyebrows lifted disdainfully at the coffee rings covering the glass surface of the coffee table. "Melanie should be staying with her mother. And if it weren't for the missionaries Charity had already invited, I'm sure that's where she would be."

Mitch watched transfixed as Miss Langford picked up a half-eaten box of doughnuts and dumped the whole lot in the trash.

"Hey! That was my breakfast," he told her, frowning resentfully. He decided to make a show of bravado, even though his knees were shaking. There was something about this woman that brooked no nonsense.

"Now, look here, Miss Langford. I'm letting Melanie use the spare room so she can get her half of the money for that nursing home she's so wrapped up in. That's all there is to it."

"Fine." Hope Langford stared at the carpet, grimacing at the bits of lint and fluff. "And while she's here, I'm here," she told him firmly. "Please bring my things through to Melanie's room. I'd like to get settled in."

Mitch found himself obeying even though the last thing he wanted was this neatness freak in his apartment. Fortunately his spare room had two single beds. He watched transfixed as Hope removed perfectly pressed clothes from the satchels and hung them in the minuscule closet that already housed a few of Melanie's uniforms.

His original houseguest had planned on moving the rest of her stuff tonight. It was going to be a tight squeeze in this dinky apartment, he decided, leaving Hope to pour himself another cup of coffee and contemplate the doughnuts in their box in the garbage can.

A really tight squeeze, if she was going to insist on chucking out his food supply. But how did you throw out an older woman determined to save the reputation of someone who didn't need it?

"Coffee is very hard on your stomach lining," Hope said in a stern voice. "I make a wonderful protein drink with raw eggs and yogurt that would give you lasting energy."

Mitch set down his cup hastily and grabbed his briefcase. He had to get out of here. Quickly.

"Er, uh, no, thanks," he mumbled, grabbing the doorknob like a lifeline. "I have to get to work. Early appointment." At the convenience store across the street, he thought. He almost had the door safely closed behind him.

"Young man?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, debating the propriety of a salute.

"I will need a key to this residence. There are several matters to be taken care of today and I will need to let myself in and out."

"Oh. Yes, of course." He thought. "I made a spare for Melanie yesterday. I think it's in the kitchen. In the drawer beside the sink. I'll get another cut this afternoon." He watched her carefully to see if that was all right with her, and when she nodded, he turned to escape.

"Have a nice day," she told him cheerfully.

No doubt all that happiness came from her power drink. He shuddered and climbed into his red Camaro with relief. Thank goodness it was running properly, at last. At work, Mitch could hardly wait to dial Melanie's work number. When she answered, he almost bellowed at her over the phone.

"Thanks a lot," he shouted angrily.

"Mitch? Is that you?"

"Of course it's me." He tried, really tried to control his temper. "I'm just calling to say thank you."

"You're welcome," she answered politely. A few seconds later her puzzled voice came on the line. "For what?"

"Don't pretend you don't know. She arrived this morning, bag and baggage. All prepared to settle in for the duration."

He waited for her excuse; her plea for understanding for her aunt. He was all ready to shoot her excuses down, one by one.

Instead he heard:

"Have another cup of coffee, Mitchel, and call me back when you're awake and in your right mind. Okay, okay. I'll settle for awake." The telephone line went dead.

"Of all the overbearing, pushy women," he began, stuffing another chocolate-covered doughnut into his mouth.

"Mitch, your nine-thirty is here. Shall I show him in?" His secretary's eyebrows rose as she watched him nod and shove the doughnuts out of view. Amanda chuckled appreciatively. "Pigging out, are we?"

"Just show him in, will you, Amanda?" he muttered in frustration, trying to hide the sticky evidence.

Clarence Palmer had been a private investigator for thirty-five years. If there was a secret to be unearthed, Clarence knew exactly how to go about it. Mitch had known him for years and used his services several times, once for himself, to find the father he'd hated for so long.

He grabbed the older man's hand and slapped the thin back with pleasure.

"Clarence! Gee, it's good to see you again. Come on, sit down. Want a doughnut?"

"Mitch." Clarence nodded, peering at the doughnuts as he carefully wiped his hand on his handkerchief. "You still addicted to these things?" His observant gaze scanned the package. "Must be a bad day." He chuckled.

"Why do you say that?"

"Chocolate ones are all gone." Clarence grinned. He helped himself to a sugared doughnut and settled back in the leather chair. "This a good time?" he asked quietly.

"Yep, perfect." Mitch poured them both a cup of coffee and then leaned back, pen and paper at the ready. "What have you got for me?"

With a swift economy of movement, Clarence whipped open his notepad and began.

"I got a lot of this stuff from your grandfather's contacts. Jean LeClerc. You want age, birthplace, all that?" He waited for Mitch's negative reply, then continued. "Okay. Vietnam vet, killed in action, or so they said. Actually, the other guy was pretty sure this Jean was wounded and kept in an enemy camp for years. The Viet Cong deliberately left some of his stuff to be found so he'd be presumed dead. You know the routine."

Mitch nodded grimly. He did know. Very well, as it happened. He'd worked on a few cases involving fathers who had died in Vietnam. It wasn't pretty.

"Okay. Good old Jean came back but minus a few facts—like who he was. Met a volunteer at the vet hospital and they married. She had money and he put it to good use building an empire. Ever heard of Papa John?" Clarence looked at him through his wire-rimmed glasses and saw Mitch's astonishment.

"This means something to you?"

"Yeah, it does." He stared at Clarence, seeing not him but the elderly white-haired man he'd met at the Bismarck television station. "Let me get this straight. The Papa John's Peanut Butter magnate is Hope Langford's Jean LeClerc?"

"One and the same, we think. Only I'm not sure if he knows it. Legally his name is John Lexington. A nurse at the hospital said they called him that when he couldn't remember his name. He apparently responded to John, and they adlibbed his last name." Clarence left half his doughnut on a napkin as he dug through his notes.

"Nurse Mary said he had lots of nightmares and kept mentioning the same words over and over. One of those words was hope. They didn't realize it could be a name until I offered it as an explanation. Apparently this guy was worried that someone would think he'd reneged on their deal. But whenever he woke up, he remembered nothing and couldn't tell them any more about what he was hoping for."

"And she waited," Mitch muttered to himself. "She held on until she was sure he was dead. All this time she's been mourning his loss, and he's alive and well and married to someone else." He thought. "Have he and his wife any children?"

"Clarence shook his head. The wife's dead. Six years ago. Cancer. Long, drawn out and very painful."

"And children?"

"One. A boy."

"Can we talk to him?" Mitch snatched his pen, prepared to write down the name and address.

"No. He's dead, too. Drive-by shooting. And it almost did the old man in last year. Some of my contacts in his company say he found solace in his loss with some woman. Don't have her name yet."

"Wow!" Mitch sighed, turning it all around and around in his mind, wondering what this new information would do to the prim and proper woman ensconced in his apartment.

"Want me to keep on digging?" Clarence asked diffidently, as if it was none of his business either way.

"Heavens, yes." Mitch exhaled heavily. "The more we know, the better. I'd like to know who he's interested in and where she lives. I'd also like to know if he's remembered everything and is just too much of a coward to come and explain it all or if everything is still a blur."

"Do what I can," Clarence assured him, snapping his notebook closed and rising to his feet in one practiced motion. "I'll check in when I've got something. See you, Mitch." And with those words, Clarence disappeared as silently as he'd shown up.

Mitch snatched his phone and stabbed out his grandfather's number.

"This is Mitch," he told the guardian secretary. "Is he there?" He listened, frowning. "As soon as he gets out of court, have him call me. It's important, Dora." He slammed the phone down in irritation and stood up to pace around his tiny office.

"Oh, Lord, oh, Lord," he groaned. "I know You're omnipotent and in control of everything. And You can make good things happen from bad." This was all so new to him. Mitch tried desperately to remember how the minister had told him to talk to God.

"Like a son talking to his father," Pastor Dave had told him.

Well, he hadn't had the typical father-son relationship, and he wasn't too sure just what that included, but Mitch decided to give it a try anyway.

"Father, I think a lot of people could be hurt by this. Please show me what to do. And help all those involved. Amen." Satisfied that he'd laid it all before the One who could deal with it, he returned to his desk and sat down.

A moment later, his head was bowed once more.

"And help me in this situation with Melanie so that neither of us get hurt. Just friends, that's all I want. Thank You," he murmured quietly.

It had finally happened, Mitch decided three weeks later.

He had begun to lose his sanity.

Thing was, he wasn't surprised. Not really. In fact, he'd half suspected she would be trouble. It had taken her just one week to move in and throw everything out of whack. Melanie Stewart had thoroughly upset his placid life, and now he was going nuts fantasizing about a woman he barely knew.

He tugged the pillow over his head, trying to drown out the sounds of Melanie in the shower. It was impossible. Jumping Jehoshaphat, those two women got up before dawn every blinking morning! And they didn't care who knew it, either.

Resigned, he placed the pillow behind his head and lay back, calmly accepting his fate. The way he figured it, he'd once done something really terrible and now it was payback time. Fine, he would take his punishment, but why did this torture have to begin so early?

It wasn't the panty hose hanging in the laundry room, slapping him in the face every night, that got to him. It wasn't that light but lingering scent she always wore that clung to everything in the apartment and refused to be doused by the strongest room deodorizer.

It wasn't even that she brought some of her residents to his apartment for a meal, a game of cards or just a night out—and more often than not, they conned him into playing crazy eights, too.

He could deal with all that, Mitch told himself firmly. He'd even managed to tolerate Hope's insistence on chaperoning every second of time they spent in the apartment.

But this daily trauma of pretending he wasn't aware when she showered, wasn't waiting for the faint hint of her lemony shampoo to carry to him, wasn't visualizing her rosy cheeks and that fresh-scrubbed look she wore so well—that's what was really getting to him.

"Blast it," he bellowed, without thinking, and then wished he had zipped his lip.

"Mitch?" she called quietly. "Are you okay?"

"I will be if I can ever get into the bathroom," he hollered, stubbing his toe on the nightstand as he reached for his shirt.

"I'm getting darned tired of taking cold showers," Mitch grumbled sourly twenty minutes later. Hope's short, economical showers after her early—emphasis on the early—walks would probably have left enough hot water for him.

But Melanie's extended steam baths left little but the most frigid of showers which were, of necessity, very short. He'd taken to shaving in his room because the mirrors in the bathroom were too steamed up to let him shave properly even if there had been room for his razor among the multicolored little bottles, vials and tubes. He couldn't figure it out. As far as he could tell, neither woman wore much makeup.

When at last Mitch sauntered into the kitchen, he was in no mood for pleasant conversation. He was desperately searching for a cup of coffee. Melanie did make good coffee, he'd give her that. That is, if he got any. More often than not, Hope would pour the "vile black drug" down the drain as soon as her niece was finished.

Today Melanie sat alone at the breakfast bar, staring vacantly out the window. In front of her was an empty cereal bowl testifying that she had already eaten. Bran flakes, no doubt. A shudder tickled Mitch's back.

"How can you eat that stuff?" he demanded.

Melanie stared at him for a moment before answering.

"It's very healthy," she murmured as she strolled with that long-legged grace to the counter to rinse her bowl before bending to place it in the dishwasher.

Her slim, efficient body was immaculately clothed in blush-pink nylon, and she exuded freshness. By contrast, Mitch felt drained, lifeless. And he was beginning to hate the color pink.

"Maybe, but it tastes like dog food," he said grumpily, stuffing one of the doughnuts he'd bought the night before into his mouth. He glanced around to make sure Hope hadn't seen his secret stash.

"I wouldn't know." Her clear gaze surveyed his tired face. "I have never tasted dog food." She smirked at him. "It's a treat I'll leave you to savor."

Mitch wanted to stick his tongue out, but he managed to control the urge. Barely.

"Boy, are you cranky. Something bothering you, Mitch?"

Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. He scowled. Miss Perfect Stewart was no doubt well refreshed after her night on the town with pretty-boy Jeff, the blond doctor. No doubt they had gone out for a healthy meal of sushi, Mitch told himself jealously.

He was getting fed up with the parade of men who frequented his apartment. "Friends," she said, but Mitch wondered. Most of them phoned to ask her out for coffee, to take her for pizza or to a movie. A few even ended up in his living room getting advice about a birthday gift for their newest love. Young and old, they came to ask her advice about a new girlfriend. The kids took her to dinner, baseball games and all the church socials in town while they plied her with questions about the best way to handle their totally uncool parents. He never got a moment alone with her.

Mostly Mitch was really sick of the tall, ever-charming fellow from the television studio. Neal Landt was becoming a frequent visitor on the weekends. Charming and personable, he had openly admitted his interest in Melanie. The man had even asked Mitch for advice about her favorite meal!

"I want to make a good impression. You know how it is, old son. She's one very foxy lady."

Old son, indeed! Could the woman not see that Neal must have bleached his hair and his teeth to get them that white? Mitch forced his mind back to reality. That same woman was now sitting in his kitchen. Alone. Waiting.

"I was going to tell you—"

He turned toward the counter just as Melanie's elbow connected with his cup. The hot, sweet coffee splashed down the pristine white of his shirt. It was just enough to ignite his already red-hot temper.

"Blast it, woman, can't you be careful? It's not enough that you take over my apartment, use up all the hot water, constantly invite your seniors over and expect me to entertain them and run your Dear Melanie Advice Service from my telephone, now you've ruined my best white shirt."

Mitch's dark eyes flew to her face in time to catch the cascade of red suffusing it. Her jade eyes glittered sparks at him. He watched, mesmerized, as her temper flared and then he waited for the explosion.

Melanie jabbed her pink-tipped fingernail into the air, her voice betraying a tiny wobble, which she quickly corrected.

"What, exactly, is your problem?" she demanded. Her foot moved as if to whack him in the shin. He jumped back. "You are the biggest dolt I've ever known. And the grumpiest. I'm terribly sorry I woke you, bear face. And I didn't intentionally ruin your shirt."

Mitch was pretty sure she wanted to stick her tongue out at him, but she didn't.

"Crawl back into your den till spring and sleep it off," she advised him angrily. "By then I'll be gone, thank goodness!" She rushed out the door.

Berating himself for his rotten attitude, Mitch moved after her. He hadn't really meant to say it. It was just…

"No, wait, Melanie." His voice was loud and strident, but she was gone. Only Mrs. Green from 106 stood in the hallway, frowning at him darkly.

"A den of iniquity, that's what it is," the elderly woman groused. "People coming and going at all hours. It's a good thing Hope Langford is watching out for that girl. Otherwise…" She shook her head doubtfully at Mitch's coffee-stained shirt and red face before returning to her apartment.

Slowly Mitch walked inside, pushing Melanie's strappy black heels out of his way. He remembered how great she had looked last night. Black stockings, black leather jacket and skirt, and these bits of leather on her feet. It had been a fifties car thing downtown, he remembered. She'd ridden with some punks in a convertible.

Mitchel kicked the heels away viciously. Didn't the woman pick anything up?

"Forget it, will you?" he ordered himself. "You're an idiot. A stupid, blithering idiot!"

His fist connected with the door frame in frustration as he realized he was thinking about her again and wishing he hadn't been so rude. When the throbbing pain finally translated itself to his brain, Mitchel Stewart decided it was time to do some serious regrouping. He stuffed another doughnut into his mouth and poured a fresh cup of coffee as he pondered his situation.

Okay, he admitted to his niggling conscience. He liked her brash attitude and quick comebacks. A lot. And he wanted to get to know her. But after this morning's little fiasco, he doubted she wanted much to do with him, prize money or not. And he was going to have to figure a way to get past the hordes of people that always seemed to be around her.

"It's gonna take a lot of sucking up, Stewart," he told himself, then grinned. He knew he was feeling the sugar doughnuts hit his bloodstream, but suddenly he felt happier than he had in days. He had a plan, by George, and he was going to put it into practice today.

Whistling merrily, Mitch removed his sodden, coffee-stained shirt and replaced it with another.

"Fine." He grinned cheekily at himself in the mirror. "If she wants polite and restrained, that's what I will be. Decent. Upstanding. I can do that." At least he thought he could.

Melanie wasn't going to goad him into doing anything that would put her beloved money in danger. And if she didn't get that blasted cash for her old friends, nobody would lay it at his door.

There was a tiny voice in the back of his mind demanding to be heard. Was it really for the money that he'd talked her into staying here?

Mitch ignored the question. He straightened his shoulders. He had to get this cleared up. If she was staying, and he wasn't too sure about that, then he had some serious apologizing to do.

A gift, that was it. He'd give her something. He remembered something she had said about pets and old people being a natural. They weren't allowed here, but maybe at Sunset…Maybe that was the answer.

"Prepare for battle," he muttered to that little voice before grabbing his overstuffed briefcase and stomping out the door. His fingers snicked up the last doughnut on the way.

"Bran flakes, indeed!"

# Chapter Five

"Junk-food junkie," Melanie muttered through tightly clenched teeth. Her heart sank as she spied Hope standing on the corner, waving madly. "Just what I need to make a lousy morning really complete," she muttered, staring at the woman's smiling face.

"Hi, Hope. Boy, you're up early."

She tried to infuse some enthusiasm into her voice while swallowing the little prick of conscience that reminded her that Hope had risen at precisely four fifty-eight, a full half hour before her own alarm went off.

"Yes, I had some thinking to do," Hope murmured, buckling herself in carefully after arching one eyebrow, then daintily removing a chocolate-bar wrapper from the seat with two perfectly shaped oval nails. "Could you give me a lift to the home, Melanie? It's my day to volunteer and I thought I'd get an early start."

"Yes, of course." Melanie steered into what passed for rush hour traffic in Mossbank and drove furiously through town.

"What did you say, dear?"

"Oh, nothing, Hope," Melanie lied, knowing perfectly well what she had said and hoping against all the odds that her former Sunday school teacher wouldn't call her on it.

"You said, 'The man is a neat freak,'" Hope repeated, her voice serious. "I take it you're talking about Mitchel?"

"Oh, yeah." Melanie breathed, trying to stall all the unlovely things that begged release. "He was nattering at me again this morning. I accidentally bumped his arm and spilled his coffee. He's so rude!"

There was no point in holding back and getting ulcers, Melanie decided finally. Might as well lay it on the line.

"If I so much as put my feet up on the edge of the coffee table, he's there with a cloth, cleaning up." Melanie flicked the signal with more power than necessary and winced at Bessie's protest.

"If I have a glass of water, he waits, suspended at my side, ready to pounce the moment I set it down. Then he marches into the kitchen to put the glass in the dishwasher. As if I have some contagious disease!"

"Yes, he's become quite particular about things lately." Hope nodded, smiling happily. "And you could take a lesson from that, dear."

"I'm not messy," Melanie protested, her face flushed and angry. "I just like to relax for a while after work. It's not my fault he stepped on my keys last night. I didn't deliberately put them on the floor."

"He didn't say you had! He just asked you to be more careful. With the three of us, it is rather crowded, and you do tend toward accidents, my dear."

"I do not!" Melanie refused to back down when Hope's raised eyebrows begged her to reconsider. "Like what?"

"You left the lid off the blender two days ago, dear. When you started it, that tomato sauce flew everywhere. It took a long time to clean up." Hope's face was pensive. "I'm not sure it will ever come off the ceiling. Stipple is so dreadfully hard to clean, isn't it?"

"All right! One little accident. You're making it sound like a whole string of problems."

"Well, there was that business with the can of whipped cream, dear."

"I was trying to fix it! I didn't know he'd try to use it before I'd got the top back on properly." Melanie giggled in remembrance. "At least now we know what he'll look like when he gets old."

"And the barbecue? I don't think he'll be able to use the balcony without having some repairs done, Melanie. He also fell on your wet floor after the soap bottle broke. I'm glad he didn't break

anything." Hope ticked an item off on her fingers. "You washed that white silk shirt of his with your red vest and put his watch down the garbage disposal." Hope looked sad. "There have been several problems, Melanie."

"And not all of them are my fault," Melanie complained, pulling into a parking spot. "That pizza last night, for instance. I'm allergic to shrimp, and yet he got it loaded."

"He didn't know, dear." Hope gathered her purse and sweater before brushing one hand over her hair. "You two always seem to be at loggerheads, and yet, really, I think if you'd admit it, you like each other."

"He hangs around in clothes a bag lady would reject and eats those horrible doughnuts nonstop," Melanie seethed. "And if I had a dollar for every file he's left strewn on the coffee table, or a quarter for the number of times he left his half-full coffee cup on the dishwasher instead of inside it, I could retire quite happily."

"Well, yes, it does seem to be the perfect case of a bachelor in a rut," Hope murmured. "Are you sure this money really means that much to you, dear? I mean, sometimes we ask the Lord for a sign and then we misinterpret things to our own benefit."

"But Hope," Melanie protested. "I've prayed and prayed about Sunset's needs, and every time I turn around, the answer is right there. Get that prize money and you can fill some of those needs." She stared at her friend. "Do you think I'm wrong?"

"I think you have to be very sure that this is God directing Melanie and not you misconstruing what might just be chance."

Melanie shook her head vehemently.

"I don't think that's what I'm doing, Hope. I've prayed so hard, and everything just seems to have fallen into place."

"Not quite," Hope murmured dryly. "I mean you two are only sharing the apartment to get the prize money, right?" She opened the door and got out, straightening her skirt carefully. "But I daresay all of that could all be corrected. In time."

Melanie wasn't sure whether to agree or not but was forestalled from answering by the simple expedient of Hope's departure. She strode toward the nursing home in long, determined steps. Sighing, Melanie gathered her briefcase and purse from the back seat, her mind replaying the scene in the apartment.

So he wanted to be alone, did he? Well, tough. He had asked her to stay and, nasty as he was, she wasn't moving until that check came. As she stared at her white fingers clenching the handle of her briefcase, Melanie just wished the money would come today. She released each finger, one by one.

Breathing deeply, she tried to view their situation from a distance. What was it about Mitch that made her so nervous? she asked herself.

Well, for one thing, his hands were constantly touching her, under her elbow, on her hand, brushing her waist. He made the blood flow hot and sweet through her body and then left her wanting more.

"But I detest him," she muttered, and knew that she lied. No man had ever made her feel so vulnerable. It scared her. In her world of old people, she was in control. Even her dates allowed her to set the tone of the evening. But when Mitch touched her, control moved out the window.

Control, she decided. That's what she really needed. An abundance of control. Unfortunately, it had never been her forte. She grimaced as the morning scene flashed through her mind.

No, she considered ruefully, there hadn't been much control there. She resolved to think happy thoughts. Mitch Stewart was not going to get under her skin again.

She hoped.

"I could use a little help with this decision, Lord," she murmured.

Once she entered the nursing home, Melanie tried to focus entirely on her clients. The shock came when she opened her office door after morning rounds with the doctors. Immediately her eyes

began to water. She blew her nose several times before her senses cleared enough to spy the frail little woman seated on her sofa, cuddling a pure white angora kitten.

"Look, Melanie, a wonderful present arrived for you." Mrs. Rivers's soft voice was perfectly clear, and Melanie marveled at the sudden change in the woman.

The dim gray eyes were bright with excitement as Nettie stroked the cat's fur, cooing gently. Melanie wiped her eyes again, trying to stifle a sneeze.

"Just waid dere, Bissus Ribers. A'll be ride…achoo—bagk." Melanie hurried out the door to find Bridget. "Youb god to ged id oud ob here, Bwidget. I can'd bweade."

Melanie left her secretary to deal with the problem and strode quickly down the hall to the patio. Once in the fresh air, she sank into a chair, breathing deeply. Eventually, her nose began to drain and her eyes stopped watering.

It was there that Mitch found her ten minutes later.

"Taking a break?" he asked, eyeing her red eyes with curiosity. "What's the matter, Melanie? I'm sorry for what I said. I didn't mean to make you cry."

His voice was concerned, and Melanie was touched. After his angry diatribe earlier, she didn't expect him to be so solicitous. It made her feel even more guilty. He bent on his haunches, peering into her face, his long fingers brushing over her hand.

"You didn't," she muttered, trying to find that elusive control she had ordered herself to exert. "I'm fine, actually. It's just that somebody foolishly brought a cat into my office. I'm allergic to cats," she enlightened him, curious about the red stain that was flooding his face.

"It's too bad, too, because Mrs. Rivers is talking a mile a minute. That's something she's never done the whole time I've been here. Now I'll have to have the dratted thing taken away." She grimaced. "That'll set her back but good!"

Melanie was less than thrilled with having to handle such a touchy situation. The extra time and patience it would take to convince Mrs. Rivers of the unsuitability of the cat in a nursing home would probably not erase the loss she would feel when the animal went.

"Honestly! If people would only ask before they do something silly like this."

Mitch turned away to stare at the nearby flower bed. He seemed utterly absorbed in it, and Melanie wondered if he had heard a thing she had said. She was surprised when his low voice rumbled quietly.

"Maybe she could keep it in her room. You wouldn't have to go in there, and she would still have her companion."

Melanie stared at him.

"A cat in a nursing home?" she scoffed. "We're trying to keep a sterile atmosphere so our residents don't catch every bug that's going around. Do you know the diseases a cat carries?"

It was clearly not an option, Melanie decided, but Mitch pressed on, trying to convince her that he had a feasible solution to the problem.

"Maybe it's too sterile. Maybe those people would enjoy having someone else to be concerned about and care for." His dark eyes dared her to deny it.

It was a convincing argument, and Melanie knew it. The trade journals were full of articles about experiments involving pets in nursing homes that had been tried with excellent results. In fact, Sunset Home already had a parrot, exotic fish and a gerbil. But a cat?

"If it makes such a difference in her life, maybe it would help some of the other residents too," he coaxed, anxiously watching her face.

"I suppose it might work," Melanie conceded, considering options. "The litter box will have to stay in her room, though." She sneezed once more, shaking her head.

"There must still be some of those fibers on my clothes." She wiped her red nose and then leaned over to pluck one from Mitch's dark jacket. "Look, I've even spread them to you," she muttered in disgust.

Melanie sneezed one last time. “I only hope it doesn’t cross my path again,” she added grimly. Her wide green eyes perused Mitch’s formally suited figure with a frown.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” she demanded, suddenly suspicious. Mitch held out a long white envelope.

“This came just after you left. By messenger. It’s from Papa John,” he told her, smiling sympathetically as she blew her nose in the fresh handkerchief he handed her.

“Well, what do they want now?” Melanie asked, tired of all the delays.

Her fingers tore open the envelope and she pulled out the single sheet of paper. Her face lit up with pleasure, eyes sparkling and pink lips grinning.

“Finally. They’re going to award the prizes within two weeks,” she told Mitch. “We’ll be given the final decision within two weeks.” She couldn’t believe it.

Melanie jumped to her feet and, grabbing Mitch’s hands, whirled around him like a top, spinning crazily out of control.

“Twenty-five thousand dollars! It’s more than I ever dreamed of.” Melanie hugged him happily before dancing off.

“Melanie.” Mitch’s low voice broke into her fanciful musings. Wide and green, her hazel eyes turned to study him curiously. “Things might not turn out the way you hoped.”

Mitch kept his voice lightly cautious, hoping she would see the possibilities the company had left open in their letter. In fact, his legal brain had been perturbed at the gaps in the information Papa John had conveyed, but he didn’t want to be the one to burst her bubble of joy.

Her arched brows quirked upward as her eyes opened wide to stare at him. He could see the awareness in her eyes and knew she was feeling the current snapping between them. Her pupils were dilated, but still she focused on him, allowing him to see into her soul.

“But it says right here,” she said, reading the letter once more. Her eyes flew upward. “Don’t you believe them?”

“Yes, of course.” He felt constrained to agree. “It’s just that I’ll feel better when it’s all settled.” A lot better, he thought.

“So will I,” Melanie burst out excitedly. Her eyes were glowing.

Mitch felt his heart drop to his highly polished loafers. She was too trusting, he decided. Melanie counted on that prize money to help her friends. She couldn’t imagine not receiving it after all this time.

He, on the other hand, was well aware of just how swiftly her fortune could be rescinded in light of the errors that appeared on her application. Mitch made his decision. He wasn’t going to be the one to erase the joy from her glowing face. His heart began its thudding beat as he stared into her rapt gaze. She was so beautiful. And so far beyond his reach.

The paging system disturbed their self-analysis, jolting each back to reality.

“I have got to get moving,” Melanie told him. Her voice seemed breathy. She slipped around him to edge inside the building but his long legs caught up to her immediately.

“I’ll walk you there,” he offered, still dumbfounded by the depth of emotion he had seen in those deep eyes.

In her office, Melanie turned to call Bridget, allowing Mitch just enough time to scoop up the card he had included with the cat. It would not do to let her know the truth, he decided. Stuffing it into his pocket, he turned and came face to face with a grinning Bridget. She flicked her bright red nail at his lapel.

“Not such a good idea,” she teased, laughing. “Next time try flowers.”

Mitch tried to look nonchalant when Melanie called his name.

“Yes?” he answered, his blue eyes thoughtfully studying her.

“Aren’t you going to work?” Melanie’s impatient voice was like a douse of cold water. Glancing at his watch, Mitch strode to the door.

"Lord, yes. I've got to be in court in ten minutes. Gramps will probably cite me for contempt," he admitted. "See you later." With a wave he was gone, leaving Melanie to stare curiously after him.

She wasn't sure what it was all about, or even why he'd come. But, somehow, she felt as if Mitch had seen into her soul. Which probably was not good, given that Melanie seemed constantly attracted to his lean good looks.

Sighing, she turned to smile at a hovering Bridget, who stood inside the door with a box of tissues and a small vacuum. Now, for the cat.

Eight hours later, Melanie wished the cat was the sum total of her problems. She forced herself to sit and listen to the angry man deriding her and her staff for their inconsiderate lack of attention to the plight of families who came to visit the residents.

"Yes, Mr. Johnson, I realize that everyone works nowadays, but our clients need to eat their meals at a regularly scheduled time each day. We encourage them to come to the dining rooms on time, to eat with the others and to limit their snack foods." She waited for the next onslaught.

The blustering man's whining voice grew louder.

"But surely when we have made the effort to get here to see our mother, you could adjust the dinner hour somewhat?" His soulful brown eyes drooped with sadness.

Melanie's temper was wearing thin after forty minutes of his griping. There was still so much to be done before her daily to-do list was even halfway complete. She decided to set him straight and make her point without any pussyfooting around.

"Mr. Johnson," she said, her soft voice firm. "You have been to see your mother, what?" She consulted the open book in front of her. "Two times in the past month."

The man had the grace to turn red, but Melanie was relentless.

"Your mother is here every day of every week, all year long. She is hypoglycemic, which means that she has to eat regularly to maintain her blood sugar levels." She gave him her most severe nurse look. "Please don't ask me to adjust the routine of your mother and the other eighty-six residents, thirty-odd staff and an entire kitchen just so you can drop in for a visit once in a blue moon." She closed the big binder with a thud and stood in dismissal.

"I'm sorry, but you will have to wait until Mrs. Johnson is finished her meal or return at another time." Her tone suggested that she didn't particularly care which.

Grumbling and complaining, the man took his leave. Melanie sank into her chair with a groan.

"I didn't know we kept track of the residents' visitors." Bridget smirked from the doorway.

Grinning, Melanie held up the accounts ledger for housekeeping. "We don't, but it worked, so don't knock it." They giggled together for a few moments before Bridget spoke.

"You still need to call Mr. Richards's family about his clothes," she chided, glancing at her watch. "Or should I say lack of!" Bridget's round face beamed with mirth. "And then get out of here. It's after seven." She clucked at Melanie like a mother hen guarding her chick.

Two and a half hours later, at the end of a killer fourteen-hour day, Melanie reluctantly dragged her aching body into the apartment she shared with Mitch and Hope. Tossing her purse and sweater on the sofa, Melanie sprawled on the soft, cool comfort of Mitch's leather sofa, dreaming of a bubble bath.

"That's all I want," she mumbled wearily. "That and someone to cook me a wonderful dinner," she elaborated, closing her eyes for just a moment.

"Melanie." A big hand was shaking her and Melanie wished it would go away. She pulled one eye open with the maximum effort and saw a pair of huge blue eyes peering into hers.

Not now, she prayed. She couldn't deal with a sexily rumpled corporate type right now. She shut her eye and resumed her fantasy.

"Oh, boy, you look bad." Mitch's deep voice rumbled beside her right ear, bringing her awake.

"I know, don't even say it," Melanie ordered halfheartedly. "I've been doing CPR on a resident." She glanced into his dark eyes. Tiredness caused the tears to course down her wan cheeks. "We lost him."

To his credit, Mitch never said a word. He just tugged her gently into his arms and let her bawl on his new blue shirt. When she was finished, he wiped her eyes gently and then sat on the sofa behind her, propping her up.

"Come on, lady." He urged her forward a little, his hands moving to her shoulders. "I'll give you a massage." His long, lean fingers kneaded the tensely knotted muscles in her shoulders. "You're dead on your feet."

Melanie was too tired to do anything but relax against him and let him do all the work.

"Mmm," she moaned, unable to move an inch. "I guess dreams really do come true." She tipped her head and peered at him from beneath lowered lids. "Did you bring dinner? Something yummy like chicken chop suey or moo goo gai pan?"

"You don't want much, do you?" he chuckled, squeezing the knots in her shoulder a little harder. "A masseuse, a meal. Can I get milady anything else?" His voice had assumed a butlerish English accent.

"That fifty thousand dollars would be nice," she muttered drowsily, arching as his strong thumbs found a particularly sensitive spot by her neck.

"I'm working on that," he told her, grinning. "But we need to talk first." He grunted as he probed the aching muscles of her upper arms.

"You are as strung out as a cat on a thin wire," Mitch muttered, kneading the tight knots of tension from her shoulders. "This is some stressful reaction coming from a nursing home."

Melanie wished he wouldn't mention cats, but she was too tired to lecture him so she eased into the sofa and sighed deeply.

"Melanie, what happened today to cause all this?" Mitch's quiet voice demanded a reply.

"The list is endless," she muttered. "One of the residents shed his clothes and took a stroll out-of-doors." Melanie could feel his knuckles manipulating the vertebrae in her back, and she curled her spine accommodatingly. "Unfortunately, several old dears had just completed a tea party with some of their friends, and the friends, members of the board, actually, were leaving the premises at the time. He flashed them."

The calm, sensible way she told the tale had Mitch nodding in agreement until he absorbed what she had said.

"Flashed them? You mean…" She didn't know why, but he sounded shocked.

"Uh-huh," she replied, stretching a little. "Could you move a bit to the right? Yes, that's it. Oh."

Mitch, to his credit, kept on working the muscles in her back as he appreciated the view. It wasn't every day he got this close to Melanie and he was pretty sure she wasn't about to stop him now. Not when her eyes were closed like that and she was breathing so deeply.

He had been dreaming about her for weeks, and he had no desire to end this contact with her, even if she was half-asleep. He was enjoying bringing her relief, he decided, as his fingers kneaded and manipulated the knotted muscles in her shoulders. She didn't seem to be protesting. He leaned forward for a better look and grinned.

Melanie lay asleep on the sofa, hair sprawled across her shoulders and over her face. Carefully, hoping not to wake her, Mitch slipped the silky strands off her cheek. A slow, satisfied smile tipped the corners of her wide mouth as she breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"Thanks for the massage," she murmured. "I feel so much better."

Her mouth touched a tiny caress to the side of his neck in appreciation before her slim arms fell to her side. Curling like a sensuous kitten, Melanie nudged her foot against the end of the sofa, finding a more comfortable spot, before her huge eyes blinked shut. Seconds later she was blissfully snoring.

Mitch decided he could spend the evening just sitting there and watching her. She looked so peaceful, and there were none of those biting little witticisms coming out of her full pink lips. She looked adorable with her hair all mussed and her makeup completely gone.

He was in the process of easing a blanket over her, when he heard the key in the door. With a groan Mitch recalled Hope and her ridiculous assumptions about this arrangement. He knew he was going to have to move fast.

Mitch pushed Melanie up and propped her against the end of the sofa while he rearranged the cushions and smoothed the blanket over her. He had just straightened when Hope breezed through the door, a casserole in her arms and his grandfather following close behind.

"Hello," she greeted him happily. "I made my special tofu surprise this afternoon and I thought perhaps we could all share it." She trundled to the kitchen with the bowl held high.

"I suppose she wants us to eat our Wheaties and will serve spinach with it, too?" Mitch complained, glaring at his grandfather. "I'm not eating that stuff."

"You don't have to," Harry murmured. "Just pretend you're enjoying it and smile. I need some time to explain about Jean, and I was hoping it would be tonight." He stared at Melanie's slumped figure speculatively. "Will she wake up anytime soon?"

"I don't know." Mitch grinned. "She was pretty out of it after I gave her that mass—she was pretty tired," he amended. But his grandfather's eyes were glowing, and Mitch knew the old man had caught the slip.

"A massage? How kind of you. Never knew you to be so concerned about someone before," Harry murmured slyly.

The doorbell rang, signaling the arrival of Faith and Charity, who immediately began fussing over a groggy Melanie.

"My goodness, Melanie, you do look tired," Faith chirped cheerfully. "You should try some of that new tonic Arthur just got in. Liver tonic, I think it is." She shuddered. "Tastes vile but really restores your energy."

"Baloney!" Charity's brisk, no-nonsense tones were neither hushed nor quiet. "She doesn't need a tonic. Just some fresh air and a decent meal. Wake up, dear." She shook her daughter's shoulder briskly.

"Oh, is Melanie awake now?" Hope asked brightly from the kitchen doorway. Her spotless white apron was just as immaculate as the dress she wore beneath it. "My casserole will be ready in about fifteen minutes. We can all enjoy it together."

"Piffle! I hate—"

Charity's firm voice cut off Faith's protests.

"Mitch is taking Melanie out for dinner, Hope. Then they're going for a walk in the park or something. And Faith and I have already eaten." Mitch grinned at the frown Melanie's mother gave Faith. "But you and Harry go ahead. We'll just sit with you and visit."

Mitch was sure only he heard the whispered complaints between the two old ladies.

"You lied, Charity! I didn't have dinner yet."

"I didn't say you had." Charity's voice was cool. "I merely said we'd already eaten. Didn't you have breakfast and lunch today?" She waited while Faith nodded. "Then you've already eaten."

"But, Charity, I'm hungry," Faith wailed. "I've been weeding in your garden all afternoon, and I want my dinner."

"Badly enough to swallow her tofu casserole?" Charity muttered grimly. As enlightenment spread across Faith's countenance, Charity patted her hand. "We'll stop at Burger Heaven on the way home."

"Can I have fries?" Faith asked slyly, her nose curling as a strange odor wafted through the apartment.

Mitch wheeled and whispered in Faith's ear. When she nodded, he pressed a twenty into her hand.

Surprisingly, it took Melanie about five minutes to shower and change into a pair of white slacks and a cool blue top. Her hair was wreathed around her head in a coronet style that left the air free to caress her long, slim neck. Mitch decided he liked that style almost as much as he liked it when she left it loose and long.

"What did you give Faith twenty dollars for?" she demanded as soon as they left the apartment, the good wishes of the three ladies ringing behind them.

"To get rid of any of that stuff that's left," he told her. "You may be some kind of health nut, but I am not, repeat not, eating tofu casserole."

Quick as a wink, Melanie whipped open her tan leather bag and pulled out a ten, which she handed to him with a grin.

"Good thinking." She laughed. "I can't stand tofu myself. Particularly not after wading through those awful poached chicken breasts last night. They had no taste."

"Tell me about it." He chuckled. "Well, what's it to be? Artery-clogging fried chicken? Thirty fat grams of pizza? Or Faith's favorite—Burger Heaven?"

When Melanie beamed at him like that, Mitch wondered if it wasn't just about time to renounce his long-held beliefs on marriage and his aversion to it. Just about.

"None of the above. Let's try some lean, healthful Chinese food."

"Good idea! Like sweet and sour ribs and deep-fried chicken balls. Health food! Now that's my style." He pulled away from the curb with a roar and steered off down the street.

He couldn't help but join in her hoot of laughter. Nor could he avoid the sense of camaraderie that being with her brought. It was almost as if he belonged.

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