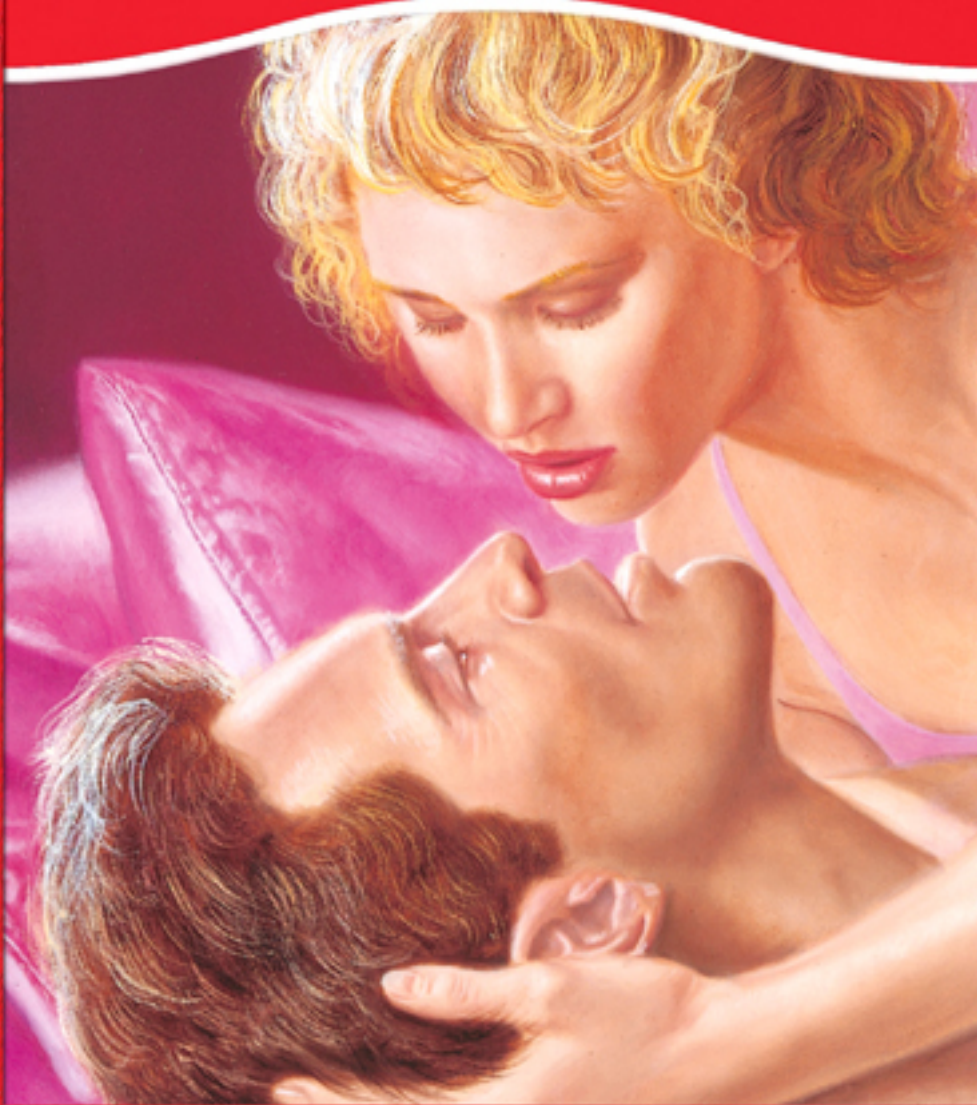


MILLS & BOON®

Lucy And The Stone

Dixie Browning



Vintage 90s

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Lucy And The Stone

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Mr. MayIrresistible Man: Stone McCloud couldn't let a big-mouthed floozy ruin a family's good name! Unattainable Woman: Having bad taste in husbands and being trapped in a femme fatale's body were only two of Lucy Dooley's problems.Unexpected Happening: Hah! They've both been hoodwinked! When Stone was sent to North Carolina's Outer Banks to spy on Lucy, a big-mouthed floozy was nowhere to be found on Coronoke Island. Seemingly sweet and wonderful, Lucy was obviously planning to wrap him around her ringless finger and then do him in!

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Lucy and the Stone

Dixie Browning



www.millsandboon.co.uk

This book is dedicated to two writers' groups that provided great ideas and even greater hospitality: First, my daughter Sarah and her fifth-grade class at the University School. And second, Peg McCool and her Friday critique group in Tacoma—Carol, Micky, Mary, Melinda and Anita... and Charlie, of course. Many thanks!

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Prologue

Boston

He caught the phone on the fifth ring, breathing heavily, swearing silently. “Yeah, McCloud here!”

“John Stone, is that you?” Aunt Alice. Alice Hardisson was the only person in the world who called him John Stone.

“How are you, Aunt Alice? It’s been a long time.”

“I’m right well, thank you. I understand you were in the hospital. I hope you’re feelin’ better now.” The quiet, well-bred Southern voice waited politely for him to fill her in on all the pertinent details.

Now, how the hell could she have known that? Other than the occasional family funeral, when he happened to be in the country, and the basket of jams and jellies she ordered sent to his mail drop every year at Christmas, there had been little contact between them for years.

Unless there’d been something in the news. He’d been in no condition to know or care at the time. “I’m fine, Aunt Alice. Or as fine as a man can be after overdosing on hospital food. How’s Liam? Still hunting rabbits on his day off?” Liam was the Hardissons’ butler. He was seventy-five if he was a day, and he’d been Stone’s mainstay in the years he had spent in the old Hardisson mansion after his parents had been killed.

“Liam’s retired now. Mellie died last year, and I thought it best to let him spend his last days with his grandchildren.”

Best for whom, Aunt Alice? Stone thought wryly. Despite the code of noblesse oblige that was bred into the bones of women like Alice Hardisson, his aunt seldom put herself out to any great extent for any interest but her own. Unless it was for her only child.

Stone himself was a case in point. His mother and Alice had been sisters. Stone’s parents had been killed by a drunk driver when he was six and a half years old, and Alice had taken him in. Noblesse oblige. Her own son, his cousin Billy, had been five then.

But while Alice, accompanied occasionally by Billy and his nanny, had traveled to Scotland for the salmon fishing, to Paris for the fashion hunting or to some spa in Arizona twice a year for whatever benefits she derived there, Stone had invariably been left with Liam and Mellie.

Noblesse oblige. Take in needy kinfolk, put food in their mouths, a roof over their heads and inquire graciously once or twice a year to be sure there’s nothing more they need.

And as soon as they’re weaned, pack them off to boarding school.

“Are you in town, Aunt Alice?” Stone asked, hoping she wasn’t.

“No, I’m still down here in Atlanna.”

She always called it Atlanna. With her gentle, unconscious arrogance, she probably spelled it that way.

“How’s Billy? Still thinking about making a run for the senate one of these days?”

“Well now, that’s what I called you about, John Stone. I reckon you heard Billy got hisself mixed up with this perfectly awful woman a while back and ended up married to her.”

Stone lowered himself carefully onto the sofa and tucked the phone against his neck. “I seem to remember seeing an announcement.”

“I had Ella Louise mail out announcements so it wouldn’t look like such a hole-in-the-wall affair, but I knew it wouldn’t last. Naturally, I made the best of it for Billy’s sake, but she just wasn’t Our Kind of People.”

Stone smiled grimly. Very few people made Alice’s list of Our Kind of People. He himself had certainly fallen far short, despite their kinship.

“I took her in hand for poor Billy’s sake. The girl had no more sense of how to go on than a stray cat. All that hair, and those cheap clothes! Naturally I did my best to show her how to dress and speak and how to act around decent folk without embarrassing herself.”

Without embarrassing Alice Hardisson, Stone interpreted, making a noncommittal murmur. Alice would be the mother-in-law from hell, no matter who Billy married. Stone could almost find it in his heart to be sorry for the poor girl, but then, any female with no more sense than to marry Bill Hardisson probably deserved what she got.

He picked up the monologue still in progress. “Been hearin’ these awful rumors. Nothing in the papers yet, thank goodness, but I’m afraid she’s out to make mischief. I can’t think of anyone else who would do such a thing.” She sighed. “John Stone, I’m worried.”

“Why’d he marry her? Was she pregnant?”

“Good heavens, certainly not! Billy has better sense than to get hisself involved with a tramp like Lucy Dooley!”

“I thought you said he married her. That’s about as involved as you can get.”

“He’s just too trustin’ for his own good. Poor Billy. When a flashy tramp like that Dooley woman keeps flauntin’ herself at the club pool, wearin’ little more than she came into the world with—”

“That’s where he met her? The club?”

“That’s what I said, didn’t I? Oh, I’ll admit the girl has a common type of looks that men seem to like—she certainly took my poor boy in, but before they’d even been married six months, she showed her true colors. Poor Billy, he pleaded with her to behave herself. But when she started carryin’ on in front of all their friends—why, he had to ask her to leave.”

“They’re divorced now, I take it. So what’s the problem?”

“Well, naturally he divorced her. At least she had the decency to leave town, but we’re afraid now that he’s runnin’ for the state senate, she’ll come back and cause trouble.”

“Why?”

“Well, for goodness’ sake, John Stone, for money! What else would her kind want?”

“You mean that flock of tame lawyers you keep on a leash didn’t sew her fingers together before they let Billy marry her?”

“I was out of the country at the time, and that girl had poor Billy so besotted he just up and married her without makin’ her sign doodlysquats! Lord knows what she threatened to do, but he ended up paying her two hundred thousand dollars a year for three years just to stay out of Georgia. Poor Billy, he’s always been too softhearted for his own good.”

Or too softheaded. Six hundred thousand was a lot of loot!

“Now that the payments have ended, we’re afraid she’s goin’ to try and get more by threatenin’ to go to the papers with her vicious lies. She knows good and well he’s lookin’ to go to Washin’ton after one or two terms in Atlanna. That’s just the sort of thing her kind would do. Like all those hussies who end up on the television by threatenin’ decent men in high places. You know who I mean, John Stone?”

“I seem to recall a few such incidents, but why would you—”

“I just told you—there are already rumors circulatin’ around town. They can’t have come from any other source, because everybody here loves Billy. He’s always been a good boy.”

Stone grimaced. Billy loved Billy. Aunt Alice loved Billy. The rest of the world probably knew him for what he was—the spoiled, immature product of privilege and neglect. Not for the first time, Stone was glad he’d broken with the family at the age of fourteen, when he’d been shipped off to military school, and that it had never been “convenient” for him to spend much time with his aunt after that.

“Exactly what is it you think I can do?” he asked.

She didn’t beat around the bush. “I understand you’ve been hurt right bad, and you’re goin’ to be laid up for a while. I thought you might like to—”

“You thought I might like to go down to Atlanta and take her out for you?”

“What? Don’t be foolish, John Stone. If you want to take her out, that’s your concern, but I warn you, she’s not Our Kind of People.”

“I didn’t mean— That is, take her out means—” He gave up. He spoke three languages fluently and got by in a couple more. He had never spoken his aunt’s language, and probably never would.

“It just so happens that I’ve arranged for this woman to spend the summer at a place called Coronoke—it’s a little speck of an island off the North Carolina coast. I understand there aren’t any telephones there, and certainly no reporters, so I thought if you could go along and kind of keep an eye on her, just make sure she doesn’t get up to any more mischief—”

“Whoa! Aunt Alice, I don’t even know this woman, and you want me to be her jailer?”

“Don’t raise your voice to me, John Stone. I didn’t say that. All I ask is that you go down there and take advantage of the cottage I’ve leased in your name. You don’t have to let her know who you are—in fact, it’s probably better if you don’t—but you can keep her entertained so she’ll forget about causin’ trouble for Billy, at least until after his weddin’.”

“His *wedding*?”

“Oh. Did I forget to mention that Billy’s gettin’ married again in August? This lovely girl—she’s the granddaughter of old Senator Houghton—”

“In other words, you want me to pen this woman up on a deserted island— What did you call it?”

“Coronoke, and it’s certainly not deserted.”

“Right. Pen her up, don’t let her near a phone, and if she makes any suspicious moves, sic the *federales* on her, right?”

By the time he finished, Alice had very politely hung up on him. Feeling worse than he had when he’d come out of the hospital five days earlier, Stone called her back and, after apologizing, found himself reluctantly agreeing to finish up his recuperation on the island of Coronoke.

And, incidentally, to do his best to distract the greedy little hustler who was out to ruin Billy’s chances for marital happiness and political success.

Actually, he’d sort of had other plans, but...

“How’d you find out I’d been in the hospital, Aunt Alice?”

“Carrie Lee Hunsucker’s great nephew works for the *Constitution*. Carrie Lee belongs to the Wednesday Morning Music Club.”

And he’d thought *he* had contacts.

“I’m doing this partly for your sake, John Stone, because I understand you don’t even have a decent place to live. This way, you can just lie around until you’re feelin’ well enough to go back to work doin’ whatever it is you do these days.”

Whatever it was he did. As if she didn’t know. Why else had she tracked him down and sicced him on some bimbo who was out to ruin her son’s political career before it even got off the ground? Which just might, incidentally, be the best thing that could happen to the state of Georgia.

On the other hand, he did need a vacation. Gazing around at the hotel room he had taken when he’d left the hospital, Stone compared it to a cottage on a small island somewhere down South. The room was about average for a residential hotel. He’d bunked in far worse, under far worse conditions, but now that he thought about it, soaking up the sun on a private beach didn’t sound half bad, either.

“I guess I can do that,” he’d said finally, adding a halfhearted thanks.

“You don’t have to thank me, John Stone. It’s the least I can do for my own sister’s boy.”

Stone hung up the phone with the uncomfortable feeling that he’d just been hooked, gaffed and landed.

Noblesse oblige.

One

The first day belonged to Stone, and he was determined not to waste a single salt-cured, sun-soaked minute of it. By tomorrow the Dooley woman would probably be here. Which meant his baby-sitting duties would begin. But for now there was nothing to keep him from lying on an inflated inner tube, his naked feet dangling in the cool waters of Pamlico Sound, while a half-empty beer bottle rested on the bright pink scar on his belly.

Coronoke. Translated, it had to mean paradise. Stone had never heard of the place. It wasn't even on the map! But now that he'd discovered it, he fully intended to spend some serious downtime here. Inhaling, exhaling—quietly growing moss on his north side.

Not to mention keeping the Dooley woman from embarrassing his aunt and bleeding her dry. As far as Stone was concerned, Billy could clean up his own messes, but Billy wasn't the only one who stood to get hurt this time. Women of his aunt's generation were poorly equipped to deal with the tabloid press and sleaze TV. It would kill her to have the Hardisson name dragged through that kind of mire. If it was in his power to prevent it, he would.

Saltwater dried on his shoulders, and he flexed them, liking the contrast between the sun's heat and the water's coolness. Liking the feeling of utter and complete relaxation that had begun seeping into his bones even before he'd checked into his cottage, stashed his gear and stepped out of his shoes.

Stone was an accredited journalist. Affiliated for the past nine years with IPA, he had covered most of the major conflicts and natural disasters around the globe. Although he tried to avoid political campaigns—most of which were natural disasters of major proportions. A guy had to draw the line somewhere.

He'd been covering a humanitarian aid convoy in East Africa when a stray bullet from a sniper's gun had struck the gas tank of the vehicle he was riding in. His photographer had been killed outright in the explosion. His driver, who'd been thrown clear, had broken his little finger. Stone ended up with a severe concussion, several broken ribs, a torn lung and an assortment of scrap steel embedded in various parts of his anatomy.

He'd been incredibly lucky. He could have ended up spread over several acres of desert. Instead, here he was a few months later, armed with nothing more lethal than a pair of binoculars and a birding guide, floating around on an inner tube, soaking up Carolina sunshine and watching a squadron of pelicans flap past.

At least, he thought they were pelicans. He was going to have to bone up on his Audubon if he didn't want to blow his cover. He'd considered bringing along his laptop to work on the series of articles he'd been doing on spec. One of the major syndicates had put out a few feelers after his series on archaeological piracy, and he'd been flattered...and interested.

At the last minute he'd decided against it. He wasn't ready to go back to work. His brain was still lagging about two beats behind his body, possibly because he hadn't had a real vacation in more years than he could remember.

Or possibly because he'd come so damned close to checking out permanently, he'd been forced to face up to what his life had become.

Which was empty. No ties, no commitments, nothing to show for his thirty-seven years other than a few yellowed scrapbooks and a few awards packed away in storage with his old tennis racquet.

In that frame of mind, he had impulsively put a call through to a guy he hadn't heard from in over a year. Reece was the brother of the woman Stone had almost married once upon a time. A woman who'd finally had the good sense to marry some decent nine-to-fiver who had offered her the home and kids she wanted. Stone had lost touch with Shirley Stocks, but from time to time he still heard from her brother. The kid had thought Stone was some kind of hero, always flying off to the world's hot spots at a moment's notice.

Reece was currently studying journalism at UNC. As it appeared that Stone would soon be headed south to the Old North State, it had seemed like a good opportunity to get together.

Bird-watching! Thank God Reece didn't know the depths to which his hero had sunk. It had been his aunt's idea, the bird-watching cover. Evidently she'd mentioned it when she'd reserved the cottage for the summer, and the real estate agent had mailed him a bundle of birding data along with directions for finding the place. Rather than bother to explain that he didn't know a hummingbird from a hammerlock, and couldn't care less, he'd let it stand. But this whole drill was beginning to strike him as slightly bizarre. Not to mention slightly distasteful.

Reluctantly, Stone began paddling himself back to shore. His shoulders, his thighs and his belly were starting to tingle. Sun had never been a particular problem before, but a few months of holding down a hospital bed had a way of thinning a guy's skin right down to the nerve endings.

The cottage wasn't luxurious, but it was comfortable. Better yet, it was quiet. Best of all, it was his alone for the next two months—books on the shelf, cigarette burn on the pine table, rust-stained bathtub and all.

All it lacked was a Home Sweet Home sampler nailed to the wall. He'd already taken the liberty of rearranging some of the furniture and was considering dragging a cedar chaise longue into the living room from the deck, just because he liked the way it smelled.

Home sweet home. Maybe it was time he thought about getting himself something more permanent than a mail drop, a storage shed and a series of hotel rooms. The last real home he could remember—and the memory was fading like a cheap postcard—was a white frame house with a wraparound porch and three pecan trees in the backyard that were home to several platoons of squirrels.

Decatur, Georgia. They had moved there when his father had gotten a promotion, just in time for Stone to enter the first grade. Before the year was out, that portion of his life had come to an abrupt end.

As for the Hardissons' Buckhead mansion, the only time he had felt at home there had been when his aunt was off on one of her jaunts and Mellie had let him eat in the kitchen with the help. He could still remember sitting on an overturned dishpan in a chair and stuffing himself with her Brunswick stew and blackberry dumplings.

Jeez! When was the last time he'd thought of all that? This was what happened when a guy had too much time on his hands, Stone told himself. Ancient history had never been his bag.

After making himself a couple of sardine sandwiches and forking his fingers around a cold beer, he wandered out onto the screened deck. Still wearing his trunks, he took a hefty bite of sandwich and turned his thoughts to his unlikely assignment. He'd been in the hospital when Billy had won the primary last month, else he might have heard something. Not that Georgia politicians were of any great interest at IPA. At least, not since the Carter days.

Senator Billy?

God, the mind boggled. Stone hadn't seen his cousin since their great-uncle Chauncey Stone's funeral in Calhoun, several years ago. Billy had been flushed and smelling of bourbon at eleven in the morning. He had escorted his mother into the church, but Stone had seen the bimbo waiting in his red Corvette farther down the street.

Family. Funny how it could influence you in ways you never even suspected. He didn't particularly like his cousin. He didn't know if he loved his aunt or not, but he'd always recognized her strength, and strength was something Stone had been taught to admire. Strength of character. Strength of purpose. His aunt had both. And when he thought about her at all, he admired her for what she was, and didn't dwell too long on what she wasn't.

Sipping his beer, Stone let his mind wander unfettered across the tapestry of the past thirty-seven years. After a while the empty bottle slipped to the floor and he began to snore softly in counterpoint to the cheerful sound of screeching gulls, scolding crows and gently lapping water.

* * *

Lucy watched the odometer roll over a major milestone. She flexed her arms one at a time, then flexed her tired back and wondered how far it was to the next rest area. She'd been driving for eight solid hours, stopping only for gas and junk food, and to wolf down a bacon cheeseburger and a large diet drink for lunch. By the time she'd gotten as far as Kernersville, she was already having second thoughts, but it was too late to turn back, even if she'd wanted to. Her gas was turned off, her mail and paper deliveries stopped.

Alice Hardisson didn't owe her a thing. Lucy knew she should have had more pride than to accept the offer, but one didn't argue with a Hardisson. Not argue and win, at any rate. Fortunately, she had learned early on to be a gracious loser. Or, at the very least, to know when the game was lost.

And the game *was* lost. Alice had won. Surrendering to the inevitable, Lucy vowed to enjoy every minute of her unexpected free vacation, and if that made her a parasite, she'd just have to grin and bear it. She couldn't even remember the last vacation she had taken. Her honeymoon trip with Billy didn't count. That had been a revelation, not a vacation.

Guiltily, she knew she was looking forward to it, too. A whole summer of swimming, sleeping late, staying up all night to read all those juicy escapist books she never had time to read during the school year.

And no more frozen dinners. No more school cafeteria! She was going to eat fried corned-beef hash with catsup and onions for breakfast and fried banana sandwiches for supper, and work off all the calories by walking and swimming.

Who said you can't have it all?

What's more, she was going to play her guitar until she built up a set of calluses that would shatter bricks. And she'd sing along, even if she couldn't carry a tune. Which she couldn't.

The night Alice had called, Lucy had been feeling mildewy. Rain always depressed her, and it had been raining for over a week. Studying the help-wanted ads for a summer job hadn't improved her mood, either.

When she'd picked up the phone, expecting to hear Frank's familiar voice, and heard Alice Hardisson's instead, she'd been so shocked she inhaled a piece of popcorn. It was minutes before she could speak coherently. Even now she wasn't sure she'd been thinking coherently. "Goodness, you're the last person in the world I ever expected to hear from," she'd managed to say.

They had been friends while Lucy was married to Billy, or at least as much as two women of different generations and totally different backgrounds could ever be friends. Alice had been quietly furious about the marriage, but she'd covered it well. Every inch the gracious lady, she had never let on by so much as a single cross word. Instead, she'd had her secretary mail out announcements and then hustled Lucy off to do some serious shopping, tactfully avoiding comment on the flowing shirts and tight pants she'd favored back then.

Alice *always* wore dresses. Gradually Lucy had begun to notice that her clothes never looked quite new—never looked quite fashionable, either—yet they never looked really *unfashionable*. Understatement, she came to learn, was a fashion statement all its own.

She also learned that Alice's particular brand of understatement could cost a mint.

She had learned much more than that from Mother Hardisson. Gradually she had come to admire the woman, emulating the way she dressed, the way she expressed herself—even the way she smiled.

Grins were vulgar, loud laughter quite beyond the pale.

Lucy hadn't even known what a pale was.

But by the time she had learned to cover her five-foot-eleven, one-hundred-forty-pound frame in suitably understated fashions, to wear modest pearl buttons in her ears instead of three-inch gold-plated hoops with dangles and to drink watery iced tea instead of diet cola with her meals, her marriage was already foundering.

By the time Alice had left for Scotland, Lucy had been wondering how long she could go on hiding the truth about the wretched state of affairs at 11 Tennis Court Road. Billy began drinking soon after breakfast, and when he drank, he was mean. Lucy had tried repeatedly to make him seek help, which had only made him meaner.

Alice had gone from Scotland to France and then directly back to Scotland, almost as if she didn't want to come home. Lucy could have used her support at the time—particularly after she lost the baby. But Alice would have been devastated, and Lucy couldn't wish that for her. Alice had still been visiting friends abroad when the divorce had become final.

It had been a quick one. At least Billy had agreed to that much, paying for her requisite six weeks' residency. Afterwards, Lucy had sold her wedding and engagement rings, and the diamond and sapphire guard ring Billy had given her for her birthday, a week after their wedding, for enough to relocate. She'd been intending to try Richmond, but she'd missed a turnoff and ended up taking I-40 through Winston-Salem. Just north of town, her car had broken down, and by the time she'd had it repaired, she had only enough money left to rent a cheap room and look for a job. It was a way of life which was all too familiar. Unscheduled moves, unscheduled stops.

But the job had turned out to be a good one, waitressing at a popular restaurant. She'd attended night school, finished her teaching degree and was now in her second year of teaching sixth grade. Not half bad under the circumstances, she thought proudly.

"Lucy, my dear," Alice had said that rainy night nearly two weeks ago. "Why didn't you ever write? You knew I'd be concerned."

"I'm sorry, Mother Hardisson" was all Lucy could think of to say. *Sorry your son turned out to be such a bastard, sorry he robbed you of your grandchild and sorry you can't divorce him, too. You'd be better off, believe me!*

"Oh, please, my dear. I'm the one who's sorry I wasn't here when you needed me. I'm sure if I'd been able to reason with you both, we could have worked things out. Now I reckon it's too late."

It had been too late the first time Billy had struck her. It had been too late the first time he'd brought one of his floozies home and she had found them in the hot tub together, jaybird-naked.

It had been over the day she found his private stash in the celadon vase on the mantel. She had flushed it down the john and threatened to tell his mother if he didn't straighten out. Wild with anger, he had struck her on the side of the head, knocking her halfway down the stairs. A few hours later she had miscarried.

But Lucy hadn't said any of that. It wasn't the sort of thing one said to a woman like Alice Hardisson. Billy's mother had always been kind to her, even though Lucy knew she'd been shocked right down to her patrician toenails when her precious son had run off and married a nobody who'd been migrating north from Mobile, Alabama—a part-time student, part-time lifeguard, with no more background than a swamp rat.

Alice had graciously refrained from offering to buy her off. Instead, she had made the best of her son's unfortunate marriage, and Lucy would always love her for that. Her father hadn't left her much—a battered old twelve-string and a lot of wonderful memories—but he had left her a legacy of pride.

When, after three years, her ex-mother-in-law had called to tell her about the cottage she had leased for her companion, Ella Louise, to vacation in while Alice went on a two-month cruise with friends, Lucy's first impulse had been to hang up.

But then Alice had gone on to tell her about Ella Louise's tripping over a dog and breaking her hip. "Naturally, a place like that would be out of the question. She's gone to stay with her sister down in some little town in Florida. So you see, if you don't take the cottage, it will just go to waste. It was too late to cancel by the time I thought about it."

"But why me? My goodness, surely you know someone else who would like to use it."

“My dear child, you must allow me to soothe my conscience by providin’ you with a little vacation, else I’ll never forgive myself for bein’ away when you needed me most.”

And so Lucy, having been taught by the grande dame herself, had graciously allowed herself to be persuaded. There was no real reason why she shouldn’t accept a gift from a friend, she rationalized. The friend could afford it, and obviously wanted to do it. Why else had she gone to the trouble of tracking her down after all this time?

Come to think of it, how *had* she tracked her down? A forwarding address? Medical records?

Lucy was too tired even to wonder about it now. And too hot. Her backside was permanently bonded to the vinyl seat cover of her car. At least she was a whole lot closer to the end of her journey than when she had set out this morning shortly after daybreak.

Frank had risen early and come over to help her load the car. He’d promised to water her plants and air her apartment when and if the rain ever stopped. She had hugged his two daughters, one of whom was her student, and then hugged Frank, avoiding the question in his eyes the same way she had been avoiding it all year.

She didn’t love Frank Beane. Liked him enormously, adored his motherless children, but as much as she longed for a home and a family, she wasn’t about to take another chance. She had excellent taste in friends, lousy taste in husbands, but at least she had sense enough to learn from her mistakes.

Reaching over, Lucy patted the scuffed hard-shell case that held Pawpaw’s old twelve-string. She had strapped it into the passenger seat with the seat belt, having filled the back seat with books, linens, clothes and groceries.

“One of these days, Pawpaw, I’ll have music on my own back porch and a garden full of okra and tomatoes for gumbo, and maybe even a few cats. One of these days...”

She sighed. Lucy had no use for nostalgia. It was a nonproductive exercise, brought on, no doubt, by smelling salt air again after all these years. This was different from the Gulf Coast, but salt air was salt air, and Lucy was tired.

Pawpaw had been a roughneck. He had worked the oil fields, moving from place to place, but never too far from the Gulf Coast. Lucy, motherless for as long as she could recall, could remember piling into what they used to call the Dooley Trolley, an old camper truck held together with duct tape and baling wire, and setting out in the middle of the night for a new job, a new town—new friends.

Lucy could barely remember her mother, but there’d always been women in her life. Pawpaw—tanned and handsome, with his black-dyed hair and his broad grin, the metallic scent of crude oil that clung to his clothes, usually tempered by a mixture of sweat, bourbon and bay rum—had been like a magnet to women. A good-looking, good-natured man, Clarence Dooley’s only weakness had been an itchy foot and a deep-seated aversion to long-term commitment.

Nearing the tall, spiral-striped lighthouse, where the highway turned west, Lucy squinted against the glare of afternoon sun and thought about Pawpaw and Ollie Mae, one of Pawpaw’s lady friends, sitting on the back stoop after supper, Pawpaw playing his guitar and singing, and Ollie Mae sawing away at her fiddle, the sagging flesh of her upper arm swaying in time with each stroke. Pawpaw had been dead nearly eighteen years now, and Lucy had long since lost track of Ollie Mae and Lillian and the rest of Clarence Dooley’s mistresses.

For one isolated moment she felt utterly alone. And then she shrugged and put it down to no more than being in a strange place, among strangers. Something she should be used to by now.

It would pass. Everything passed, good and bad.

* * *

“You’ll like Maudie and Rich,” said Jerry, the boy from the marina where Lucy had been instructed to leave her car and take a boat out to Coronoke. “Maudie—she’s my cousin on my mother’s side. Well, I reckon if you go back a little ways, on my daddy’s side, too. She used to be—Maudie, that is—she used to caretake over to Coronoke, but then this guy—”

Lucy clutched her guitar case in both arms, wondering if there was going to be much spray. She'd brought her raincoat, but like an idiot, she'd left it in the trunk of her car.

Watch where you're going! she wanted to say, but didn't because he was only a boy. Still, she'd feel a whole lot safer if he would keep his mind on what he was doing instead of staring at her as if she were some kind of freak and filling her in on the pedigree of people she had never heard of and would probably never meet.

There was no spray. In fact, they were barely making a wake. Lucy could have swum faster than this if she hadn't been so blessed tired. The boy—he couldn't be more than sixteen or so—was looking at her in a certain way that made her feel like the butterfat champion at the county fair.

After thirty-four years she ought to be used to it. Towering over everyone in sight, having men make lewd propositions without even getting to know her first. It was all part of the curse that had befallen her at the age of twelve, when she'd shot up to five feet eight and her breasts had burst out of her training bra.

"Sugar, there's not a blessed thing you can do about it, less'n you was to get fat as a sausage all over," her father's lady friend, Lillian, had told her. "Even then, it prob'ly wouldn't do you no good. Girls with your looks's got a hard row to hoe, and being big just makes you stand out more." Lillian had been one of Lucy's favorites. A blowsy redhead, she'd been kind enough to take a motherly interest in Lucy at a time when Lucy was undergoing a lot of frightening changes in her body and in her emotions.

"Don't you never let a boy lay a hand on you, you hear me? They'll try. Lord knows they'll try to make you think they're a-hurtin' somethin' fierce and you're their only hope o' salvation. But you tell 'em you got the curse real bad, and your Pawpaw just sent you out to get some gun oil, 'cause he's a-cleaning up his shotgun. If that don't shrivel up what ails 'em, you use your knee where it'll do the most good, y'hear?"

Lucy sighed. Nostalgia. It had to be the smell of all this salt air. She'd never been one for looking back. "Big adventures ahead, li'l sugar," Pawpaw always used to say when they'd load up the trolley and light out in the middle of the night for a new town, a new job. "That ol' highway's unrollin' right in front of your pretty brown eyes. You just keep on a-lookin' straight ahead."

The narrow beach was striped with coral sunlight and lavender shadows when Jerry pulled up to the pier on Coronoke. He clanged the tarnished brass bell that was attached to the side of a shed and within minutes, a woman came jogging down through the woods.

"Hi, you must be Mrs. Dooley. I'm Maudie Keegan."

"It's *Ms.* That is, I was married, but I took back my own name so—"

"I know what you mean. Neither fish nor fowl. Me, either, until I solved my problem by becoming Mrs. Keegan."

By which Lucy concluded that Maudie Keegan had been married before and had shed her first husband's name at the same time she'd shed him.

Lucy had gone from Dooley to Hardisson and back to Dooley so fast, even the IRS had trouble keeping up with her. She only hoped her social security would make it through the maze by the time she was old enough to need it.

"I see you stocked up on canned things. Good." Maudie reached for the box of groceries Jerry was lifting out, and the three of them relayed everything up from the pier, along a winding path through shadowy, fragrant woods, to a small cottage perched a hundred-odd feet from the edge of the sound.

"Is that it?" Maudie Keegan asked when the last of the load was transported. "Okay, then here's the rundown. Your closest neighbor is a birder named McCloud. He'll be here all summer. There's a novelist installed in Blackbeard's Hole, but you won't see much of him. He comes every year and holes up until Labor Day, working on the Great American Novel. There's a couple from Michigan due in tomorrow and two family groups coming the next weekend. Eventually you'll probably meet

everybody, but no one's obliged to socialize. Rich and I are on the other side of the island in the old lodge.”

Her small hands moved constantly while she spoke, and Lucy watched, mesmerized, murmuring an appropriate response when necessary.

“One of us will pick up mail and messages every day or so, and we have a radio for emergencies. The boats at the pier are for the guests. When we're full up, we sign up a day in advance so everyone can make plans accordingly, but when there're only a few people in residence, feel free to take one out. Rich keeps them fueled up. Meanwhile, if you need anything at all, one of us is usually available. Just follow the trail around the island until you come to a place that looks as if it ought to be condemned. That's ours.”

Bemused, Lucy watched the woman jog through the woods until the lengthening shadows swallowed her up. Turning, she met an all-too-familiar look in the eyes of the young man from the marina.

Evidently, Jerry appreciated king-size blondes with brown eyes, wild hair and big mouths.

She sighed, knowing she would have to make certain things clear to avoid any future misunderstanding. Lucy got along well with people of all ages and sexes, but with the male variety, she had long since learned to get across a subtle message right from the first.

Accessible she was; available she was not.

Two

Stone, once more half-asleep on a drifting inner tube, roused at the sound of voices. Evidently, Lucy Dooley had emerged from her cottage. La Dooley, as he had taken to calling her in his mind. The ex-Mrs. William Carruthers Hardisson.

His quarry, he thought reluctantly.

She had arrived late the previous evening. Stone had heard the sound of an outboard from the screened deck of his own cottage. A few minutes later, he'd seen Maudie Keegan emerge from the woods, followed by the kid from the marina and a tall, shaggy-haired blonde, all carrying boxes, bags and baggage.

Alice hadn't told him what she looked like, only that she had a common type of prettiness that appealed to some men. Evidently, it had appealed to Billy. The woman had waited until Alice was conveniently out of the way before she'd put the moves on poor Billy.

Poor Billy? Hell, now he was starting to sound like Alice!

Stone had considered wandering over to meet his new neighbor last evening. He'd decided against it. She wasn't going to do anything the first day or so. Maybe not at all. And as long as she behaved herself, she wouldn't even have to know he was there.

He continued to watch her from a safe distance, feeling pleasantly relaxed after a half hour spent walking the sandy perimeter of the island. Idly he wondered, without putting any great degree of effort into it, what a woman of her sort was doing coming out to a nowhere place like Coronoke. If her plan was to blackmail the Hardissons now that her ex-husband was in a particularly vulnerable position, it would seem to him that she'd have moved back to Atlanta to be closer to the action. But then, maybe she was just more subtle than the usual run of opportunists.

The devil take La Dooley! Alice had offered him a place to recuperate, and unless the big blonde went into action and called a press conference right here on the island—about as likely as Stone's winning a Pulitzer prize for the series he'd done on archaeological piracy—he was damned well going to do just that. Recuperate.

With that end in mind, he had selected a book from the cottage's shelves of dog-eared paperbacks and read until he'd fallen asleep on the sofa last night. He'd wakened just before dawn, at which time he had gone to bed to sleep another few hours.

Quiet. It was a luxury he could easily become addicted to.

He'd checked her cottage first thing upon awakening and seen no sign of life. But then, La Dooley was probably the type who played all night and slept until the sun was well over the yardarm. Which meant the mornings, at least, would belong to him.

At nine he had made himself a sandwich and a pot of coffee for breakfast. At 9:37, feeling remarkably fit considering the bloody and broken mess he'd been when they had hauled his carcass out of Africa a few months ago, he strolled down to the water and launched himself on the inner tube.

Approximately half an hour later, Stone got his first good look at the woman he'd been sent down to Coronoke Island to keep under surveillance.

He'd expected her to be attractive. His aunt had prepared him for that. Billy's taste in women usually ran to showy types, which was why Stone hadn't expected a little oatmeal-faced debutante.

But La Dooley wasn't a little anything. What she was, was...well, *big*. Big frame, narrow waist, full breasts, generous hips. Legs that started at ground level and steeped all the way up to the stratosphere. Las Vegas showgirl big. Triple-dip, sugar-cone big.

A mullet jumped not three feet away and Stone ignored it, still staring at the big blonde who had taken his little cousin for over half a million and was threatening to come back for seconds. It wasn't going to take a pair of binoculars and any cloak-and-dagger activity to keep up with La Dooley. If there was one thing she was, it was visible!

Her hairstyle, if you could call it a style, was kinky, streaky and blond, looking as if it hadn't seen a comb in six months. From this distance, it looked almost natural, but then, on what she'd gouged out of Billy, she could afford the best salon treatment. If what Alice Hardisson had told him was even partially true, she could afford to fly to Paris once a week to have her legs waxed!

Evidently, she'd figured on a bit of privacy to recharge her batteries and work on her story. She wasn't dressed for an audience. Instead, she was wearing baggy sweats, a pair of shades and, unless he was mistaken, that was an apple she had clutched in her teeth. The symbolism of it suddenly struck him and he began to chuckle. Still grinning at his small private joke, he began paddling toward the shore. The layer of pink on his shoulders, thighs and belly that he'd collected the day before had soaked in overnight, but Stone didn't kid himself that he was in any condition to stay out through the middle of the day, sunscreen or no sunscreen. From his mother, who'd been Alice Hardisson's sister, he'd inherited his height and his dark hair. The paternal side of his heritage was pure Highland Scot. Gray eyes, stainless-steel backbone, a taste for Celtic music and a hide that, without some preliminary weathering, tended to burn.

He had lost his weathering, along with a few quarts of blood and more than a few pounds, but he was working on it.

Besides, it wouldn't hurt to take a closer look at his quarry. As distasteful as he found the whole business, he had given Alice his word that he'd keep the woman away from the gutter press. Alice had done her part by isolating La Dooley in a place with no phones, no fax, limited mail service and no reporters. The rest was up to him.

The trouble was, he hadn't even started yet and already he was beginning to feel a little bit foolish. He was a journalist. He'd done his share of investigative journalism, but something about this assignment stuck in his craw.

By the time Stone reached shore, La Dooley had disappeared. He figured she'd probably wanted to scope out the territory—maybe drop in on the Keegans and check on the radio link to the outside world. If she was smart—and most predators were—she'd be wanting to get her bearings before she made her move.

If she made her move. Even steel magnolias like Alice Hardisson had been known to make a mistake.

* * *

Reluctantly, Lucy turned to go back inside. In spite of her dark glasses, the sun was blinding. She'd forgotten just how bright it could be near the water, even with the sky beginning to haze over. At the door to her cottage, she yawned, stretched and marveled all over again that she was actually here instead of back in her own sweltering apartment poring over the help wanteds and listening with one ear for the commode to stop running. It took three jiggles after each flush, and she did it so automatically that she couldn't always remember whether or not she'd forgotten.

She made a pitcher of iced tea and carried it out onto the screened deck. That and the apple she had consumed earlier constituted breakfast. Maybe tomorrow she would fry up a can of corned-beef hash with onions and catsup for breakfast. That had been Pawpaw's favorite. Familiar foods and familiar music always gave her a safe, comfortable feeling. Maybe she would write to Lillian and Ollie Mae, for old times' sake.

Or maybe she'd simply vegetate. This was a vacation. Vacations were for being lazy and indulging whims. No telling when she'd get another one.

The trouble was, she was just too excited to vegetate. After showering, she unpacked a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and set off to explore her new surroundings, luxuriating in the raw-silk feel of pine straw under her bare feet and the total absence of traffic noises.

The only sign of life at any of the other cottages was a lineful of towels and bathing suits. Earlier, she'd heard the sound of an outboard heading over to Hatteras. So be it. She liked privacy.

And really, she wasn't lonely. There were plenty of other people around if she got tired of her own company. The Keegans, for instance. And the reclusive bird-watcher, who was supposed to be her closest neighbor.

All the same, by early afternoon, having walked around the entire island, pausing to watch birds, distant fishermen, even more distant windsurfers, and to examine a set of footprints in the sand—long, fairly narrow, naked and probably male—she was beginning to feel a bit like Robinson Crusoe.

Her stomach growled. She breathed deeply of the fragrance of sun-warmed cedars and salt marsh as she reluctantly turned back toward Heron's Rest. Funny—when she had accepted this windfall vacation from her ex-mother-in-law, after the first few minutes of shock, all she'd been able to think about was having an entire summer with no clock to punch and no one to fuss at her for playing her music too loud at night. As guilty as she'd felt for accepting anything at all from a Hardisson, she hadn't been able to resist the lure of a few lazy, idyllic weeks all to herself. But already she was getting restless.

Not only that, she felt guilty. She despised Billy Hardisson, partly because he was a despicable person, but mostly because, with his courtly manners and his easygoing charm, he had made her feel like a lady. And it had all been a lie.

Alice was a lady. Billy was Nothing dressed up like Something. But for a little while he had made her feel special, made her feel beautiful, made her feel wanted as a person and not just for her body.

Of course, he'd wanted that, too, but when she'd refused to go to bed with him, he hadn't called her names. Instead, he'd turned up the charm another notch.

The creep. The only decent thing about Billy Hardisson was his mother, and Lucy felt sorry for the poor woman. According to Lucy's father, a lady was a woman who served his beer in a glass. Lucy had learned from Alice Hardisson that there was a bit more to being a lady than that, which was why she had quietly left town three years ago without telling anyone how she had come to lose her baby. The only other person in the house the day it had happened had been the maid, but she wouldn't talk. She was Liam and Mellie's niece. She owed her allegiance to the Hardissons.

Someday poor Alice was going to have her heart broken, but at least Lucy wouldn't be a part of it.

Yawning, she shucked off unpleasant thoughts of the past. Last night she had read an entire paperback romance, and she intended to read another one tonight. But with the sun shining, the birds singing and all those endless acres of saltwater beckoning, she wasn't about to spend the daylight hours reading, too.

"Time for a new adventure, li'l sugar." She could hear Pawpaw now. That ol' highway wasn't a-rollin' out before her, but all that water surely was. So why not take out one of the boats tied up at the pier for the use of the renters? It had been years since she had handled a boat. If she was going to make a fool of herself, she'd just as soon do it without an audience.

Lucy made herself a peanut butter sandwich and ate it as she sauntered down to the pier, where a tall, rugged-looking man with a distinctly military bearing greeted her from the stern of a red inboard.

He introduced himself as Maudie Keegan's husband, Rich, and told her he was on his way over to Hatteras. "But if you need me to check you out on a boat, that's what I'm here for." As good as his word, he took time to show her the basics after clamping an outboard motor on the stern of one of the smaller boats.

Dressed in a pair of paint-stained khakis and little else, Rich Keegan exuded a potent brand of masculinity. Lucy's instinctive wariness rose up defensively, but so far as she could see, there wasn't even a hint of speculation in his bright blue eyes as he handed her down into the aluminum skiff. She wished she'd kept on her sweats, but in the heat of the day, they were just too hot. Her shorts and camp shirt were old, loose and deliberately designed to disguise her natural attributes. Even Alice

would have approved of their faded modesty. Besides, she wasn't in purdah. Not even Alice and her blue-haired, old-moned friends would expect her to suffocate.

Forgetting her self-consciousness, Lucy concentrated on Keegan's instructions. He made her go through the routine until he was satisfied she had it down pat, and then he pointed out the channel markers. "Hang to the left of the red ones if you're headed over to Hatteras, to the right on the way back out. Watch out for shoals. The tide's about slack now, but it'll turn within the half hour. Don't go out of sight of land in case the weather closes in. And, Ms. Dooley, I understand you're a certified lifeguard, but do me a favor? Wear this thing, anyway." He reached past her, and Lucy stepped back suddenly. The boat lurched, and she would have gone over the side if he hadn't grabbed her.

"Whoops! Sorry," she said breathlessly when he released her shoulders and handed her an orange life vest. "No sea legs."

"You'll get the hang of it. These aluminum boats are durable, but they're a little like a canoe until you get used to them. Fortunately, the water's shallow around these parts—you can't get in a whole lot of trouble if you use some common sense. But we have these rules, so wear the thing for me, will you?"

"Scout's honor." When Lucy grinned, Rich grinned back, and she was suddenly glad he was spoken for. With a man like Rich Keegan, she just might be tempted to forget how rotten her judgment was where men were concerned.

Rich had his rules, and well, Lucy had hers, too. And survival rule number one was to avoid anything that even *looked* like temptation.

After waving him off, she repeated his instructions—or rather, her interpretation of his instructions—until she was certain she had it grooved into her brain. It was pretty much like her father's instructions for starting the old Dooley Trolley. She had learned to drive that when she was twelve.

"Pull the whoosie halfway out, set the whatsit, push the do-jigger, shove the whoosie back a third and pray." Wrinkling her nose in concentration, she mumbled the incantation, went through the motions, and miraculously—it worked!

Pulling away from the pier at a sedate three knots, Lucy wished her sixth-graders could see her now. They teased her unmercifully about the clunker she drove. She teased right back by telling them that it took far more skill to drive a *real* car than it did to operate any one of the sleek new computerized models that were designed by robots for robots.

By the time she had circled the island twice, Lucy was high on the sheer exhilaration of accomplishment. Taking dead aim at a channel marker, she was following the deep green water, steering close to a high shoal that ran along the southwest tip of Hatteras Island, when it occurred to her the sun was no longer blazing down on the back of her neck.

Blazing? It was no longer even visible! While she'd been busy learning to navigate, a thick bank of black clouds had snuck up and swallowed every visible scrap of blue.

Uneasily, Lucy peered at the sky again. She'd been skirting the landward edge of the channel, marveling at the way the water magnified the size of the few shells hugging the side of the steep shoal. Scallop shells looked like dinner plates. That oyster shell was easily a foot long, and—

And then she saw the conch shell. Only a few yards ahead, it was as big as a basketball. She reminded herself that it was only an illusion, but all the same, it was tempting. Half a minute more and she could snare it for her class. They might even make a study of the magnifying powers of water.

Having rationalized the collecting of her souvenir, Lucy adjusted the throttle and idled closer, careful to stay just over into the deep water. The moment she came within reach, she grabbed an oar with one hand, meaning to work the tip of the blade into the opening of the shell and lift it aboard. Carefully balancing, she leaned over the side of the unsteady craft.

Lightning flashed. A split second later there was a blast of thunder. Jerking around to glance over her shoulder, Lucy gasped at the angry mass roiling directly overhead. Cold sweat broke out on

her back and she swore under her breath. A single moment's inattention was all it took. Before she could gather her wits, several things happened at once. The blade of the oar dipped under the water, causing the boat to swerve into the shoal. Before she could shove off again, the outboard sputtered and died.

"Oh, no!" Lucy lunged for the choke, then grabbed the throttle. Too late. "Oh, damn and blast!" she wailed as another burst of lightning split the tarnished sky.

A splash of rain struck the back of her neck and channeled down under her damp shirt. Sweat prickled under the life vest. "All right now, Lucinda, calm down," she muttered. "First push the— No, pull the whoosie halfway out, then push the whatsit and— Oh, *rats!*"

On the raw edge of panic, she worked the throttle several times, stabbing the starter button in between. Nothing happened.

Lightning flashed again. The thunder was almost constant now. A bloom of iridescence spread swiftly around the stern of the boat, and Lucy stared at it in resignation.

She had flooded the blasted motor. Which meant she would have to wait for it to cool off before she could even try it again. Which meant she was going to get soaked, at the very least. Possibly fried.

Lightning flickered green against a black sky. Cats' paws ruffled the dark surface of the water, and she buried her face in her crossed arms and swore softly. Was it just her, or was it something in the Dooley family gene pool that inhibited the development of ordinary common sense?

She should've suspected something was wrong when, after growing up like a gypsy, she'd been so eager for a real home and a real family that she'd nearly run off and married a charming rat whose idea of fidelity was never sleeping with more than one woman at the same time.

That had been in Baton Rouge. She'd been seventeen when she had fallen in love with Hamm Sheppard's family, which had consisted of parents, a grandmother and seven brothers and sisters, all of whom had lived in the same house for three generations.

Fortunately, Pawpaw had loaded up the Dooley Trolley and lit out for Galveston before she could get into too much trouble.

That had been her first near miss, but certainly not her last. How many times had she mistaken lust for something more lasting, more meaningful? Not that she'd ever been promiscuous, but even that had been due more to an innate sense of self-respect than any sense of self-preservation.

When it came to brains, Lucy thought as she attempted to row herself back to Coronoke and safety, hers were about as reliable as a two-dollar watch. At this rate, she might as well just grab a live wire and be done with it.

* * *

Stone had been watching through the binoculars when his neighbor sauntered down the path toward the pier earlier that day, minus the sweats. The woman had legs, all right. The kind of legs a man woke up in the middle of the night dreaming about. Long, golden, silky confections with flawlessly turned ankles and calves designed expressly to fit a man's palms.

And then there were her thighs....

Slowly, he lowered the binoculars and exhaled in a soft whistle. So that was La Dooley. In the flesh! If the rest of her lived up to those legs at closer inspection, he could easily see how Billy might have lost his perspective. No wonder she'd been able to twist him and a whole damned law firm around her little finger. If Alice hadn't been off on one of her constant jaunts, it never would have happened. But when the cat was away, all hell usually broke loose.

Stone just hoped she'd been worth it, especially since she was reportedly trying to elbow her way back up to the trough. His worn mocs silent on the sandy, leaf-strewn path, he followed her down to the pier in time to watch her give Keegan the business.

She was good, all right—he had to hand it to her. First the smile. Roughly a thousand watts, he figured. Easily enough to stun a full-grown ox. Somewhere along the line, she had cultivated this way of standing with her toes turned in like a barefoot kid, and scratching her thigh in a way that

was obviously designed to call attention to her assets. In a centerfold type like La Dooley, the effect was lethal.

Billy, poor devil, had never stood a chance.

Stone watched as she pretended to trip, forcing Keegan to catch her by the shoulders. A pretty shopworn ploy, but Keegan didn't seem to mind.

Having known a few women who made a profession of preying on men, Stone felt anger begin to curdle inside him. He'd been too smart to fall into that particular trap, but more than one of his friends had been ripped up pretty badly by women like Lucy Dooley.

As for Stone, he'd once had a shot at a good relationship a long time ago. He'd blown it all by himself, but that didn't mean he was going to stand by and let La Dooley mess up another life. Keegan and Maudie seemed to be pretty decent people. The first time the ex-Mrs. Hardisson tried anything there, Stone was going to take her aside and quietly drive home a few basic rules.

In fact, he was beginning to look forward to it.

Keegan's runabout pulled away first, heading east toward Hatteras. La Dooley went next and took a different direction. Stone felt some of the tension bleed away. Then, having nothing better to do with his time, he collected his field guide to Eastern birds from the cottage and, binoculars around his neck, made himself comfortable in the shade of a sprawling live oak.

She circled the island a few times. He followed her by sound. A pelican—a brown pelican, to be more specific—flapped by, lumbering along like a C-130 cargo plane. He followed it out of sight and then picked up La Dooley as she rounded a wooded point on the southwest side of the island. From there she cut a figure eight and then headed toward Hatteras Inlet.

The sun was gone, taking the edge off the heat, but the humidity still hovered in the high nineties. Leaving his book and his glasses behind, Stone loped back up the path and returned a few minutes later with a cold beer and a slab of cheese. A little ways out from shore, a flock of black, white and orange birds were hammering on something just under the surface of the water. Dutifully, he identified them as oyster catchers. At this rate, he could qualify for a whole new area of reporting. In which case he might be bored out of his gourd, but he probably wouldn't get blown up with any great regularity.

He watched a flock of crows worry the hell out of a sea gull, noticing as he did that the storm was almost overhead. By the time the first jagged streak of lightning sliced across the sky, he was already racing toward the pier. In the preternatural darkness, he could barely make out the low profile of an aluminum boat with a single passenger. It was about a mile out, and the boat wasn't moving.

Was she *crazy*? Did she have some kind of a death wish? Leaving her to her fate might solve a few of the Hardisson's more pressing problems, but Stone didn't think his aunt Alice would want that on her conscience.

* * *

By the time the second blister had formed and burst on her palm, Lucy was chilled to the bone. She couldn't remember the last time she had rowed a boat, but she did know it had been a wooden one, not one of these blasted tippy aluminum jobs!

Wasn't metal an excellent conductor of electricity? Oh, God....

Lightning was almost continuous now, the rain blowing in soft, horizontal sheets. It wasn't really cold, yet she couldn't seem to stop shivering. Whoever had designed these blasted life vests ought to have to dance naked in one of the things! She wasn't in danger of drowning, dammit, she was in danger of being chafed to death! If she didn't get blown out of the water first.

"Thirty-four—unh!—years old, and—unh!—don't even have the brains to—unh!—come in out of the—" Clamping one oar between elbow and knee, she shoved her hair out of her eyes. Rain, salt air and naturally curly hair were a disastrous combination. She'd been trying to let her hair grow out so she could braid it, pin it up and thereby achieve some degree of neatness, but the first thing she was going to do when she got in—if she got in—was shave her head!

With rain pounding the surface of the water, drumming on the battered metal boat, Lucy didn't even hear the outboard until it was right on top of her.

"Hi, there! Ahoy!"

Shoving the tangle of sodden hair from her eyes once more, she looked up to see the man just as he grabbed hold of her boat. "You're speaking to me?" The look he gave her didn't bear analysis, but it was not lust she saw in those chilly gray eyes. "Sorry. I didn't hear you drive up."

"You didn't hear me drive up. Right," Stone repeated, unsure whether she was mocking him or he was mocking her. "Unless you've got a death wish, ship your oars, tilt your motor and throw me your towline."

In the end, Stone boarded her skiff and carried out his own commands. It seemed to be the only way to get them moving. The woman was either brain dead or paralyzed. Her legs were covered with goose bumps, and even that, he noted with disgust, didn't lessen their impact. His fingers were itching to tangle themselves in that mop of kinky, streaky hair and jerk some sense into her devious little brain, but he was distracted by a streak of lightning, followed almost immediately by a blast of thunder.

"Get into my boat," he snapped. "Yours'll tow faster light. Come on, lady, just move it, will you? I'm in no mood to risk my neck just to save yours!"

And despite his surliness, Lucy was in no mood to argue. As stiff as she was from rowing and shivering, one glance at the stern, dripping wet face looming over her was enough to force her reluctant muscles to cooperate.

Stone didn't waste time. While she huddled on the center thwart, hugging her wet, goose-bumpy knees with equally wet, goose-bumpy arms, he piloted them toward shore. The worst of the storm had already passed overhead and was headed for the northern villages on Hatteras Island.

The rain continued to fall.

And Lucy continued to shiver.

Neither of them spoke. Even if he'd been inclined to yell over all the noise, Stone didn't think she wanted to hear anything he might have to say at the moment.

Besides, he had come to the island for a purpose. Driving her away wasn't going to do the job. If she left, he'd feel obligated to follow her, and he wasn't ready to quit this place yet.

With swift efficiency, he secured both boats and then reached out to help her up onto the pier. Lucy couldn't repress a gasp when his hard, salty palm grasped hers.

He narrowed those icy gray eyes at her. "You got a problem?"

Lucy shook her head. She had a problem—she had a lot of problems, but she didn't think he really wanted to hear them. "No, b-b-but thanks for rescuing me. I th-think I must have fl-flooded the c-c-carburator."

Stone's wide, mobile mouth turned down at the corners. He didn't want her thanks. He didn't want anything to do with her. He sure as hell didn't want to start feeling sorry for her just because she was wet and cold and maybe a little bit scared—if she had sense enough to be scared. If she had sense enough even to know what might have happened to her out there.

At the moment she looked more like a big-eyed, waterlogged, oversize waif than a man-eating witch with a cash register for a heart. In spite of what he knew about her, Stone felt a growing urge to gather her into his arms and hold her there until her teeth stopped chattering.

He told himself that the concussion he'd suffered back in March must have shaken loose a few too many gray cells. "Better get out of those wet things," he muttered. "Go have a hot soak and a stiff drink—make you feel better."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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