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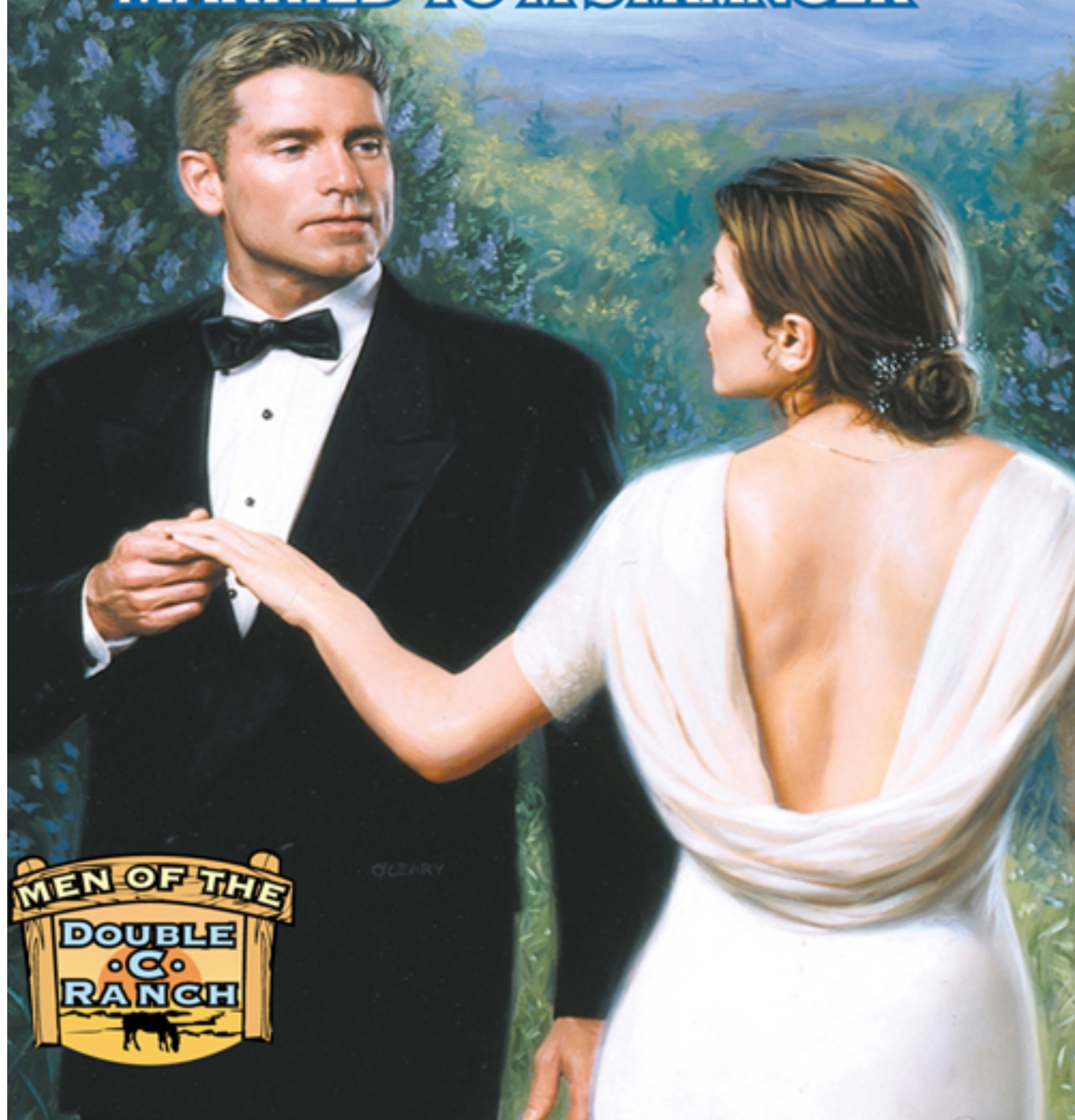
SPECIAL EDITION[®]

July



ALLISON LEIGH

MARRIED TO A STRANGER



Allison Leigh

Married To A Stranger

«HarperCollins»

Leigh A.

Married To A Stranger / A. Leigh — «HarperCollins»,

Back in sleepy Weaver, Wyoming, for his father's wedding, rich and handsome Tristan Clay found himself unaccountably attracted to bespectacled Hope Leoni—a homespun, hometown schoolmarm! With every fiber of his astonished being, he craved her innocent kiss. Just a kiss—nothing more. Tristan knew better to flirt further with such a sweet, virginal temptation... especially in this town. Yet in one short week his sensual attention compromised Hope's hard-won reputation, jeopardizing her job. And suddenly—though wedding bells gave him the willies—the only way to make things right...was to make Hope his wife!

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“Oh, God. What have we done?” Hope gasped.

Tristan would have been amused at the panic rounding her violet eyes if he hadn't been wondering the same thing himself.

He rarely acted impulsively. He trusted his instincts, which seldom failed him. But this time his instincts had fully deserted him.

All because of this virginal, violet-eyed temptress.

“What have we done?” he repeated.

The irony burned. A week ago he'd started out thinking he'd like to taste Hope Leoni's soft-looking lips. That was all.

He hadn't gotten a kiss. He hadn't “gotten” anything that everybody in town seemed to think he'd been “getting.”

No, he hadn't gotten a kiss....

He'd gotten a wife!

Dear Reader,

During the warm days of July, what better way to kick back and enjoy the best of summer reading than with six stellar stories from Special Edition as we continue to celebrate Silhouette's 20th Anniversary all year long!

With *The Pint-Sized Secret*, Sherryl Woods continues to delight her readers with another winning installment of her popular miniseries *AND BABY MAKES THREE: THE DELACOURTS OF TEXAS*. Reader favorite Lindsay McKenna starts her new miniseries, *MORGAN'S MERCENARIES: MAVERICK HEARTS*, with *Man of Passion*, her fiftieth book. A stolen identity leads to true love in Patricia Thayer's compelling *Whose Baby Is This?* And a marriage of convenience proves to be anything but in rising star Allison Leigh's *Married to a Stranger* in her *MEN OF THE DOUBLE-C RANCH* miniseries. Rounding off the month is celebrated author Pat Warren's *Doctor and the Debutante*, where the healthy dose of romance is just what the physician ordered, while for the heroine in Beth Henderson's *Maternal Instincts*, a baby-sitting assignment turns into a practice run for motherhood—and marriage.

Hope you enjoy this book and the other unforgettable stories Special Edition is happy to bring you this month!

All the best,

Karen Taylor Richman,

Senior Editor

Married to a Stranger

Allison Leigh



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Books by Allison Leigh

Silhouette Special Edition

*Stay... #1170

*The Rancher and the Redhead #1212

*A Wedding for Maggie #1241

*A Child for Christmas #1290

Millionaire's Instant Baby #1312

*Married to a Stranger #1336

ALLISON LEIGH

started early by writing a Halloween play that her grade-school class performed for her school. Since then, though her tastes have changed, her love for reading has not. And her writing appetite simply grows more voracious by the day.

Born in Southern California, she has lived in eight different cities in four different states. She has been, at one time or another, a cosmetologist, a computer programmer and an administrative assistant.

Allison and her husband currently make their home in Arizona, where their time is thoroughly filled with two very active daughters, full-time jobs, pets, church, family and friends. In order to give herself the precious writing time she craves, she burns a lot of midnight oil.

A great believer in the power of love—her parents still hold hands—she cannot imagine anything more exciting to write about than the miracle of two hearts coming together.

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Prologue

All he'd wanted was a kiss. A simple kiss.

So how on God's green earth had his life gotten so out of control in just one week over something so simple?

Tris rolled his head against the cushioned seat and looked across the aisle of the custom-fitted jet. Hope was still asleep. She certainly had no head for alcohol.

His jaw was so tight it ached. He had earned himself a doozy of a headache, too. But he knew it wasn't from champagne, or whiskey or anything even remotely alcoholic. He'd barely choked down the few toasts they'd had at the reception—half a glass of champagne wasn't anywhere near enough to set this pain in his head to throbbing.

No, his headache had begun a little over a week ago, he knew. Brought on strictly by himself.

He shoved his fingers through his hair and closed his eyes. But the sight of the woman stretched out on the long seat across from him was firmly burned into his brain.

Hope's toffee-colored hair had fallen loose at some point on the drive to the airport. When he'd carried her onto the private jet, the long, thick waves had clung to his shirt, flowed over his arm and streamed behind them in the night breeze. Now, they lay tangled and gleaming over her shoulders, off the couch, nearly touching the carpeted floor.

He'd slipped off her narrow-heeled shoes and set them on the floor beside her. Her dress—so obviously an antique that he knew women who'd have given their eyeteeth for the ankle-length garment—had worked its way up her shapely calves. With one knee drawn upward, the fabric pulled in a taut stretch of beige-tinted lace over the back of her thighs and her derriere.

She was a total innocent, and lying there, so soundly asleep, she was temptation personified.

Temptation. That's what had gotten them into this mess in the first place. Tris should have known better than to flirt with temptation. God knows she didn't have enough experience to fight the blistering sparks between them.

But he was experienced. And older. And he should have known better. His heart might not be programmed for love and happily-ever-after, but he was on a first-name basis with the desires of the flesh.

Tris could feel the plane banking. There was no point in looking out the little oval windows. It was pitch-dark out there. Dark above, dark below, dark all around.

Even this luxurious main cabin of the plane was dark, except for one small lamp burning near him. It cast enough glow to highlight the lace dress and glossy hair of the woman across from him.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there, legs sprawled out before him, his chin resting on his steepled fingers. It could have been one hour or three. But finally, Hope sighed deeply and shifted. Her hand tumbled off the cushion and grazed the carpet. The light glinted on the platinum rings—one plain and one studded with a trio of excruciatingly perfect diamonds—circling her ring finger.

The rings he had put there.

She turned her head and pushed her thick hair out of her eyes. She blinked drowsily and he figured her vision was probably blurry, because her eyeglasses were sitting on the round side table beside his seat.

Comprehension slowly dawned in her eyes. He waited, knowing just when that memory clicked into place, because she breathed in sharply and yanked her feet off the cushion to sit up.

"Where are we?" Hope pressed a trembling hand to her head.

"More than halfway to Paris."

Her shoulders seemed to sag. "I drank too much," she murmured. "I've never—Oh, God. What have we done?"

Tris would have been amused at the panic rounding her violet eyes if he hadn't been wondering the same thing. He rarely acted impulsively. And even his actions over the last few days had been fairly deliberate. He trusted his instincts, listened to his gut because it rarely failed him.

But now, sitting here in this private jet equipped with every comfort known to man, from a whirlpool tub and a down-covered bed, to a fully equipped kitchen, to an array of computerized equipment that could run a small country if need be, his instincts had fully deserted him.

All because of this violet-eyed temptress.

"What have we done?" he repeated. He'd taken the easiest path of solving her problem. "We've stopped the gossip about us, effectively removing any reason for you to lose your teaching job."

That's all they'd done.

The irony burned. He'd started out thinking he'd like to taste her soft-looking lips. That was all.

He still hadn't kissed her. Not really. That quick, off-centered glancing of lips earlier that day didn't count.

He hadn't gotten a kiss. He hadn't "gotten" anything that everybody in town and beyond seemed to think he'd been "getting." It was almost laughable.

Tris picked up her eyeglasses and leaned forward, handing them to her. But in the end, nothing about this situation was laughable.

Particularly the fact that the young woman slipping the gold-rimmed glasses on her nose had—less than twelve hours ago, stood where he'd long ago vowed never to stand—in front of a minister, promising to "love, honor and cherish."

He hadn't gotten a kiss.

He'd gotten a wife.

Chapter One

Eight days earlier.

"I think that's plenty, darlin'. If you don't mind." Hope Leoni blinked, dragged her eyes from the deep blue gaze of the man sitting at the counter across from her. And realized she was pouring coffee all across the counter.

Well, not precisely across the counter. But it was overflowing the thick white coffee cup, the utilitarian saucer beneath it, quickly pooling around the base. Worse, it flowed into a rich brown river that ran straight to the edge of the counter and into the smoky gray sweater the man wore, creating a large spot where he'd been leaning against the counter edge. Now he sat back with a muffled comment.

Her cheeks burned and she hastily set down the glass coffee carafe and grabbed a cloth from behind the counter, mopping up her mess. "I'm so sorry." She mopped, sopped, wiped and tried not to stare when, with a spare movement, he yanked the sweater over his head and tossed it onto the stool beside him. She dragged her attention from the plain white T-shirt that remained, hugging his broad shoulders, only to realize she was equally distracted by the thick gold hair that tumbled over his forehead. "I don't know what I was thinking—"

He, the man...the blond god with a face that could make angels weep...put one hand over hers, stopping her motions. "No sweat, darlin'."

She didn't know which made her blood flow faster until it zipped along her veins with a fevered frenzy—the touch of his hand atop hers, or the casual endearment murmured in his low voice. The schoolgirl fantasies in which he'd been the star seemed as recent as yesterday. "I, uh, I'm not usually so clumsy. I can't believe I—"

"Hey." His long, long fingers encircled hers. Slid around her hand, beneath it; square, warm palm meeting hers. Warm. Dry. Hard.

Every sound faded—the dog that had been barking half the morning from where it was tied up outside the sheriff's office a few doors down, the tractor mower that somebody was running over at the high school, the music from the radio on the shelf in the corner.

All of that faded. She could hear her pulse, thundering in her ears. Could hear her breath, slowly easing past her lips. She could hear the soft chink of his gold wristwatch as it bumped the counter beneath their hands.

"Relax," he said in that voice that hypnotized. "Nobody's going to fire you over a little spilled coffee. Certainly not Ruby, who's got a heart bigger than Wyoming."

At the mention of Ruby, owner of Ruby's Café and, more importantly, Hope's grandmother, some of Hope's scattered senses returned. She tugged her hand, relieved and disappointed all at once when their hands separated. She picked up the damp cloth, rubbing her palm against the wet, rough, terry cloth. "I'm well aware of Gram's generosity."

"Gram?"

Hope pulled her gaze from his mouth. From the way it tilted at the corner when he spoke as if he were perpetually amused. "Ah...Ruby. You know...she's my grandmother. I'm Hope. Hope... Leoni."

He nodded, giving her the impression that he was absorbing every nonsensical syllable she uttered. Which was, of course, ridiculous.

Men who looked like this man didn't hang on every syllable of the very ordinary Hope Leoni. Only he was nodding, his eyes thoughtful. "That's right," he said. "Ruby did have a little granddaughter she was raising."

"I didn't think you'd remember that." Again, she forced herself to look beyond the mesmerizing way his lips shaped his words—to take in the thick, burnished blond hair, the sapphire-colored eyes

that even dark circles beneath couldn't dim, the sharply angled jaw. The astounding width of his shoulders. "You, um, don't visit Weaver very often." Hope felt her cheeks heat all over again.

When he'd moved away from Wyoming, she truly had been Ruby's "little" granddaughter. But that hadn't kept her or any other girl growing up in Weaver from developing a crush on the Wyoming boy who'd made good.

"Well, I'm here now and it's nice to meet you, officially, Hope Leoni. Tristan Clay." He shifted and stuck out his hand, obviously waiting.

Hope swallowed, placing her hand in his. She was almost prepared for the jolt, but still her breath audibly caught and her cheeks burned. "You, too, Mr—ah, Clay."

His smile widened gently but there was something daunting about his impossibly steady gaze, so intensely blue among thick lashes that were surprisingly dark for someone so blond and golden. "Tristan'll do."

She swallowed, far too aware that he still held her hand engulfed in his much larger one. "I suppose you're here for your father's wedding. The whole town is buzzing with excitement."

Finally, finally, his lashes lowered. His thumb brushed across the back of her hand. "This town buzzes with excitement when the lone traffic signal turns red. Do you work here all the time, Hope?"

She knew she should pull away her hand. But his thumb made that gentle little swirl again and she couldn't bring herself to move. "Yes," she breathed. "No. I mean, I work here during the summer. When school starts, I'll—"

His expression didn't change. "School?"

"I teach at the elementary school. Kindergarten through third."

"Lucky kids. Married? Engaged? Going steady?"

She swallowed, nearly choking. "No."

Again that smooth, gentle swirl against her hand, the faint tilt at the corner of his mouth. "Why not?"

Her fingers curved. She tugged again and had the impression that he wanted to smile when she pushed her hands into the front pockets of her pink waitress uniform. "No particular reason," she answered, hoping that her trembling nerves didn't show in her voice as badly as she suspected. Except she'd have to be asked on a date again before she could worry about marriage proposals. "You?" His smile widened a bit, and he shook his head. Her cheeks flamed hotly. Of course, in a town as small as Weaver, news would have spread like wildfire if he had settled down with one woman.

He was Tristan Clay, the youngest of the Clay brothers of the enormous Double-C cattle ranch located some twenty miles away from town. He was rich, golden-beautiful and successful even without his family's holdings, which were reportedly the largest in the state. He'd developed some type of software when he'd been younger than she was now that had revolutionized the industry. Had dated famous women, danced in Europe with princesses and slept in the White House.

When Hope had been in school, every girl in town had dreamed of capturing the interest of Tristan Clay on his rare visits to his family's ranch. It didn't matter that he was grown and gone and the schoolgirls were just that—girls. The articles about him in the newspapers or magazines years ago had been clipped, savored in scrapbooks or tacked up on bedroom walls.

Hope had so envied her friend, Jolie, who had been allowed to pin up her favorite articles about her latest heartthrob. Gram had refused to let Hope attach anything to her bedroom walls other than a landscape or a print of the Last Supper. As if by doing so she'd be able to prevent Hope from turning into the wild child her sister Justine had been.

But Gram hadn't known about the clipping Hope had had inside her geometry book. The one of Tristan, when he'd made the papers about some high-tech espionage he'd foiled. His appearances in the news had dwindled to nothing over the last six or seven years—a fact that had roused its own share of curiosity—but Hope knew, to her everlasting embarrassment, that her private hoard of clippings were still packed away somewhere in her closet.

And now, here he sat, across the counter from where she stood, with his intense blue gaze steady on her face as if there was no place else in the world he wanted to be.

Ridiculous, of course. Tristan Clay was just killing time until he headed out to his family's place.

Yet, he was here in her grandmother's café, wearing blue jeans that were washed soft and nearly white. The dark gray crew-neck sweater he'd worn had looked like cashmere. But he'd dumped it on the stool with no regard for the coffee soaking it. And if she wasn't mistaken, there'd even been a small hole in one of the cuffs that had been pushed halfway up his golden-brown, sinewy forearms.

For a self-professed computer geek, his body looked both lean and hard. Her cheeks heated once again at her wayward thoughts. Since when did she speculate on the hardness of a man's body? Not since you were a silly teenager, mooning over an article clipping about a man completely out of your league.

Now her ears were burning, too. She swiped a loose strand of hair away from her cheek, nudged up the nose piece of her glasses and made a production of looking at the round clock high on the wall at the end of the counter.

It was three-thirty and the café was supposed to close at two every day until it reopened at six. But Hope had left the front and back doors propped open to take advantage of the lovely June afternoon while she prepared for the supper crowd.

It wasn't the first summer she'd spent working in her grandmother's café. It wasn't likely to be the last. But come the fall, Hope would begin her second year of teaching at Weaver Elementary and her mind had been filled with plans of that. And the relief of it, because she'd known the vote of the three-person school board to keep the school open at all had been terribly close.

She'd come out of the kitchen, her head filled with school projects and ideas, only to find Tristan sitting at one of the counter stools. His arms had been folded across the shining surface, his wide shoulders hunched tiredly. She'd begun telling him they were closed, but he'd looked up and Hope had been lost in the intensity of his eyes.

Tristan had been gone from the area for so long that he probably didn't remember that Ruby's Café closed after lunch. Yet telling him that was quite possibly the last thing on this earth that she'd wanted to do.

She now cast around for something intelligent to say. But could only think of the same topic she'd brought up earlier. "So, you're here for your father's wedding next Saturday?"

He nodded and shifted on the stool, finally blinking his eyes and glancing away. But only for a moment. One moment when she could breathe normally, and then he looked at her again, and she simply forgot how. She nudged at her slipping glasses, then pushed her hands into her pockets once more. "I've met Gloria Day." She felt the tips of her ears go hot at the way the words seemed to blurt out of her. "She's very nice. I, uh, hope your father and she are very happy."

He nodded, not replying. His long fingers wrapped around the cup and he tilted it, as if to drink. Hope automatically reached for the coffee pot and refilled his cup. "Did you want to see a menu?" She ignored the fact that she was due at her friend's house in less than ten minutes. She'd promised to watch Evan, Jolie's son, while Jolie and Drew Taggart drove to Gillette.

"I remember when Ruby used to just write the specials on that chalkboard over there." Tristan glanced at the square board that was propped on a high corner shelf.

"She still puts the specials on the board." Hope pulled a menu from beneath the counter and slid it across to him. "But we offer more these days. I could fix you a sandwich or something."

"Coffee, tea or me?" Tris wanted to retract the suggestive words as soon as he said them. But they were already out there and hectic color was staining the waitress-teacher's cheeks. Personally, he found the blush charming. How many women did he know anymore who blushed?

But he'd obviously embarrassed her.

“No. I guess not.” He was oddly disappointed. She wasn’t at all his type of woman. Hell, she looked barely old enough to vote, much less be a teacher. Besides, the only energy he had right now was expended simply by lifting the coffee cup to drain it of its life-giving liquid. He set the empty cup down, closed the menu and pushed to his feet, dropping a few bills on the counter as he did so.

He wondered when he’d become so jaded that he couldn’t recognize a naive girl when he met one. Not that he expected to see her again. He had a week to catch up on his brothers’ lives, then there was the wedding to get through. After that, he was due to meet Dom to finish up the case that had kept them all occupied far longer than anyone had expected, thanks to the mess made by a love-sick fool on their very own team. He didn’t have time to dwell on Hope’s innocent appeal. “Thanks for the java.” He headed to the open door. “It was just what I needed.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

He looked back at her painfully polite words. Her ivory cheeks were nearly as pink as the uniform-dress thing she wore. Behind her gold-rimmed glasses, her eyes were wide and so violet they looked like crushed flowers from the lilac bushes that bloomed around the big house at the ranch. If it weren’t for the glasses, he’d have figured that she was wearing some colored contact lenses to achieve that vivid color. But they were obviously the genuine article.

He cupped his hand tightly around the metal edge of the glass door as his attention drifted from her eyes to the rosy fullness of her lips. To the gentle, rounded curve of her jaw and the smooth line of her throat where the delicate links of a fine gold chain disappeared beneath the ill-fitting uniform. Behind him, a dog barked and he reeled in thoughts that could get him arrested in some states. Apparently, he wasn’t as beat from the last week as he’d thought. “Give my regards to your grandmother.”

“I will.” Her tongue peeped out, leaving a distracting glint on her lower lip. “It was nice meeting you.”

“You too. Hope.”

The color in her cheeks flared again, but she smiled. And he found himself smiling back.

Then he heard his name being called, and turned to see his oldest brother, Sawyer, standing on the street a few yards down. He absently waved at his brother, still looking back inside the café. Feeling disappointed that Hope had turned away, busy with something at the counter.

“Thought you were coming in next week.”

Realizing that he was wondering how far her toffee-brown hair would reach down her back if it weren’t twisted into that thick, roping braid, Tris deliberately stepped away from the doorway toward Sawyer. Okay, so he took one more look into the café before he did. What was the harm in looking? He was a man. She was a woman.

And his brother was the law now. Tris felt a smile growing on his face as his brother walked closer. The only indication of Sawyer’s new status as the sheriff was the star fastened unobtrusively to his leather belt. Except for the billed cap with a naval insignia that he wore, Sawyer looked much the same as the other men in the small rural town he now served. Well-worn blue jeans and a work shirt. “I was,” Tris finally answered with a grin. “You’re missing the Stetson and spurs.”

Sawyer shrugged, tucking the bow of his dark sunglasses in the collar of his shirt. “Left the spurs at home. Rebecca likes ’em, you know,” he said blandly.

Tris chuckled. “You wish. How is my newest doctor-in-law?”

“My wife is beautiful and totally in love with me. You can save your charms for someone else.” Sawyer leaned his back against the hood of a pickup parked at the curb. “You’re early.”

“So you already mentioned.” Tris looked back toward the café when he heard the soft jingle of a bell. All he saw, though, was the door closing. The blinds had been drawn across all the windows. “Cafe still closed during the afternoons?”

“Regular as rain.”

“She didn’t tell me,” he murmured.

“Ruby?”

“Hope.” He felt his brother’s look. “What?”

Sawyer just shook his head. “What do you do? Some kind of chant that brings women running?”

“All I had was a cup of coffee.” Ordinarily, Tris would have shrugged off his brother’s taunt without feeling a shred of defensiveness.

“Yeah, well, I know you. Hope teaches at the elementary school. Everyone in this town looks on her as their daughter, or their sister. So keep your mitts off.”

The fact that his brother seemed to think he needed the warning burned. “Thanks for the enthusiastic welcome home, bro.”

Sawyer’s expression didn’t change. Because he was the oldest of his brothers? Because he was the sheriff? Because he was one of Squire Clay’s sons and had picked up an endless amount of Clay nosiness along the way?

“Hope Leoni is,” sweet, unbearably sexy and way too innocent, “of no interest to me,” Tris said dismissively. Maybe if he said it with enough conviction, he’d make it true.

Hope’s fingers crushed the paper bag holding the rolls she was taking out to the Taggarts, when she heard Tristan’s voice, easily carried around the side of the café on the warm summer breeze.

She yanked open the door of her little green car and tossed the sack onto the passenger seat. “Of course you’re of no interest to him,” she muttered under her breath. She tossed her braid over her shoulder and pushed the key into the ignition, starting the engine with a roar. She threw it into gear and zipped around the side of the café, jouncing out onto Main.

In her rearview mirror she could see Tristan and the sheriff standing on the sidewalk talking. “Men like Tristan Clay don’t have interest in women like you.” Men in general don’t have interest in you. Most of the town still considered her Ruby’s “little” granddaughter.

She was a fully qualified teacher. She’d moved into her own house and, despite the barely hidden reluctance of the school board, obtained the teaching position at Weaver Elementary. She didn’t know what was worse—still being thought of as a teenager, or knowing that every move she made was measured and compared against the actions of her mother who’d had the temerity to be an unwed mother, twice, or her sister, who’d had to leave high school because of her wild ways.

Maybe she should accept the next time Larry Pope asked her out. He wasn’t a bad guy, after all. In fact, as the math teacher at the high school, he was respected and well liked. Maybe if she dated him a time or two, the town would see that she wasn’t her mother or her sister.

But surely that wasn’t a good enough reason to go out with a man? To prove she could date without bringing shame to her grandmother the way people seemed to believe her mother and sister had? Larry was nice, yes. He just didn’t make her forget her own name when she looked into his... his... what color were Larry’s eyes? Whatever color they were, they weren’t the deep blue that Tristan Clay’s were.

She made an impatient sound. Yes. The next time Larry Pope asked her out, she’d accept. It wasn’t as if there was a line of men beating down her door. It wasn’t as if she was “of interest” to any male other than Larry Pope.

She hit the brakes abruptly, nearly passing the turn-off to the Taggarts’ place.

Several minutes later, she pulled up in front of the partially completed log home that her friends were building. As soon as she stopped the car, the door flew open and Evan tumbled out, racing toward her. “Auntie Hope,” he squealed, launching his five-year-old self with considerable enthusiasm at her legs. Hope laughed, swinging the boy in a circle, before settling him back on his feet.

He beamed, gap-toothed, back at her. There was another male who was interested in her after all, Hope thought wryly. Only he was seventeen years her junior and had a seven o’clock bedtime. “Come on, you,” she said cheerfully. “Let’s hustle your folks along so we can finish writing your surprise story for your mom’s birthday.”

And maybe, while they were at it, she could rid herself of foolish thoughts about Tristan Clay.

Chapter Two

“Here. Hang these bows from the banister there.”

Tris heaved a sigh and lowered his arm that he’d laid across his eyes in a vain attempt to block out the light. “I didn’t think it possible, but marriage has actually made you more bossy,” he complained, looking up at his sister-in-law, Emily Clay. She’d been raised with Tris and his brothers after her parents had been killed when she was little. But she’d legally become a Clay when she’d married his brother, Jefferson. And now they even had two kids.

“And time has only made you more lazy. Move it.” Emily nudged him with her foot. “What are you doing lying here in the living room on the floor, anyway?”

“Trying to sleep,” he muttered. “So stop sticking your foot in my ribs.”

She crouched down beside him, propping her arms on her knees. Her long brown hair slid over her shoulder, rich and dark as coffee. A thought which immediately brought to mind Hope Leoni of the pink cheeks and sweet smile. He squelched a groan and concentrated on Emily, who was speaking to him, her eyebrows raised with curiosity. “You’re trying to sleep on the floor here in the living room because...?”

“The couch is hard as a rock.” He yawned and dropped his arm over his face again. “And because Gloria’s daughters are using the guest suite downstairs.”

“What about your old bedroom upstairs?”

“Full up with packing boxes from Gloria’s house. I’m told they were going to be gone by the time I was expected to arrive next week, but I have my doubts.”

“The couch in Matthew’s office?”

“Too short. And the rec room downstairs has paper doves and bells on every surface.” He flexed his fingers. “Doves, for God’s sake.”

“It’s for a wedding shower, ding dong. You could have stayed with Jefferson and me, you know. We’ve got room, even for a big dope like you.”

Tris knew that. He also knew that he could have bunked with Daniel or Sawyer, too. But staying at the main house of the ranch, the “big house,” as they all called it, had seemed the easiest choice. Whether or not his father ever said so, Tris knew that staying at the big house was what Squire expected. Available bed or not.

He sat up, rubbing a hand across his jaw. He needed a shave. He’d stayed at Sawyer and Rebecca’s place in town until nearly midnight. “What time is it? Where’s Squire?”

“Nearly two in the afternoon and he better be in town visiting the barber. Jaimie says you came in late last night, crashed out here and haven’t risen since. Hung over?”

“Listen runt, I haven’t had a hangover in a month of Sundays.” Hell, he rarely drank more than an occasional beer anymore. His days of excess had long passed.

“Then what? You sick?”

“No,” he said tolerantly. Em had been his best friend since they were bitty, so he made allowances for her that he ordinarily wouldn’t have. “Sleepy. It’s not a crime, last I checked.”

Her pansy-brown eyes narrowed. “I also heard you’ve been circling Hope Leoni. She’s a little—”

His “allowances” only went so far. “I don’t go around jumping the town virgins,” he said abruptly. “You know, if my love life was as active as everyone seems to think, I’d never get any work done.”

“And that work is...?” Her expression softened and she smiled peaceably. “Never mind. I learned just how close-mouthed you Hollins-Winword dudes are from my darling husband. Now, about these bows.”

Tris shook his head. “No wonder Jefferson finally succumbed to you. You’re worse than water torture.”

Her eyes danced. “That’s right. And only because I love you will I warn you that the dove-decorated shower is set to begin in less than an hour. There’ll be about twenty-five women trooping through this house, and I really don’t want to explain your presence on the floor. Might ruin your classy image.”

Tris made a face, but rolled to his feet. He rubbed Emily’s head, deliberately messing up her hair the way he’d done when they were kids, and headed upstairs, grabbing his duffel from where it still sat inside the dining room doorway.

He’d take a shower, then dive into a gallon of coffee. Then he’d consider hanging damned bows from the banister for his sister-in-law. Maybe.

Only, when he came out of the shower, considerably more alert and marginally more presentable in clean jeans and shirt, he could hear a horde of women chattering and laughing as they arrived. If he wanted coffee, he had to go down there among all of them to get it.

Not that he was ever averse to being among women. As far as Tris was concerned, it was one of the more pleasurable places to be. But this was a wedding shower.

Frankly, the whole notion made his skin itch.

He waited an interminable twenty caffeine-deprived minutes before he went downstairs to the now-empty kitchen, and the coffee pot that he prayed would be hot and full, as usual.

It was, and he stood there at the counter, singeing his tongue as he downed two fast cups, frowning at the playpen that sat on the floor on the other side of the table next to the wall. For now, it was empty of babies even though the family was full of them these days. Emily, Jaimie and Maggie had all had a baby within the last six months.

He shuddered, poured a third cup of coffee and carried it with him through the mudroom and outside.

The sun was bright. Warm. The air filled with the rich scent of mown grass. Across the gravel road separating the big house from the outbuildings and corrals, horses grazed and Matthew’s retriever chased a butterfly.

He squinted and poured more coffee down his throat. He was glad his brothers were busy with the hundred chores required every day to keep the place running. It meant that they were thoroughly busy, and Tris could find another place to grab a few more z’s, undisturbed.

He slowly wandered around the side of the house, past lilac bushes heavy with blossoms and immediately thought of Hope’s striking eyes. He stifled an oath. He’d learned a lot about Miss Hope Leoni while he’d been hanging out at Sawyer’s place the evening before. She was a paragon of virtue; an apparent candidate for sainthood.

Which meant the vivid dream he’d had about her that had awakened him around two in the morning was even more ill-advised.

He went up the front steps of the wide porch. Sighing with anticipation, he lowered himself onto the swing, propped his feet on the railing across from him, and dropped his head onto the wooden swing back.

Oh yeah. This was it. He yawned, scratched his jaw, and closed his eyes. This was the kind of break he needed. No noise, no tourists, no unexpected disasters at work. No wedding nonsense.

No damned dreams about innocent school teachers with violet eyes.

“Shhh.”

“Is he sleeping or is he dead?”

“His feet are big. They’re even bigger than Daddy’s, and I can put both my feet in his boot!”

“Girls, quiet down. You’ll wake him.”

“Do we have to share our juice with him? I don’t think we have enough for him. My mommy says Unca Twistin has a ’normous appa...appa—”

“Appetite.”

“Yeah. That.”

"I'm sure he doesn't want any juice. Come on now, we're going to have our picnic over there by those three trees. Remember?"

"But what if he does want some?"

"If he does, we'll share with him. It would be impolite not to."

"But—"

"Sshh. Over to the trees before we wake him."

Tris gritted his teeth, staring at the group of little girls, and one big girl through slitted eyes. "Too late."

The little girls, his nieces, jumped and scattered as if he'd grown three heads. The big girl, however, nudged up her gold-rimmed glasses and blinked with dismay. "I'm sorry. I didn't expect you to be out here sleeping, or I'd have talked the girls into having our picnic elsewhere."

His coffee was cold. He finished it off, anyway, then pulled his feet off the rail and sat forward. "I didn't expect to see you here, either."

Hope moistened her lips. "Well. Sorry to have wakened you." She hefted her caramel-colored wicker basket more firmly between her arms.

He was wakened all right. "What are you doing here?"

"Having a picnic with the girls."

"No, I mean why are you with the kids and not at Gloria's shower?"

"I'm watching the children. Well, these guys, anyway. The babies are with their moms."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because I was asked to." She shook her head as if the answer was obvious.

"How old are you, Hope?"

She looked over her shoulder at the children who were crossing the gravel drive toward the grass on the other side. "Nearly twenty-three. Sarah, honey, wait until you get to the grass before you take off your shoes," she called.

Nearly twenty-three. Hell. How many women did he know who claimed to be nearly any age but one at least a decade younger than was true? And now he had the hots for the babysitter. Had he ever had a babysitter? He tried to remember. Couldn't. Not enough coffee in him yet.

"I'll watch the girls," he said abruptly. They were sweet little things, and he liked playing the uncle. It was as close a relationship to kids as he intended to get. "You go join the women," he finished telling Hope.

"I'm hardly dressed for a wedding shower."

Which only brought his attention to the golden length of calf she displayed below the fringe of her knee-length, cut-off blue jeans. He'd have remembered if he'd ever had a babysitter with legs like that.

"Go on back and go to sleep," she was saying, and he dragged his attention upward, over denim worn thin and...did she have to wear such a baggy T-shirt? The obnoxious lime-green cotton hung around her hips, frustratingly loose and boxy. The babysitter, for cryin' out loud!

"But, um, thank you for the offer anyway." She smiled shyly and turned to follow the children.

He gave himself a mental shake. Sleep. That's what he needed. Then he wouldn't feel so...hell, what did he feel? Off balance?

He yawned again, watching the graceful sway of her long braid as she walked away, joining the children.

J.D. and Angeline belonged to Daniel and Maggie. Leandra was Jefferson and Emily's. And Sarah, the youngest, was Matthew and Jaimie's. They all circled around Hope as she joined them and set them to work, spreading a bright yellow sheet.

He smiled faintly, though, when the girls didn't dig into the feast—they were too far away for him to see exactly what it was. But he recognized what the little girls preferred over the food when

dozens and dozens of small, opalescent bubbles started floating over their heads, bobbing, swaying, popping.

Even Hope was blowing bubbles. He rested his arms on the rail and watched her purse her lips, blow and set a wiggling, wobbling train of soap bubbles into the afternoon breeze. She certainly wasn't shy when she dealt with the children.

He narrowed his eyes and pictured her face should he follow them. She'd probably stare at his feet or his left ear, and she'd turn white, then red. And all the while he'd be thinking he'd like to see her when she wasn't wearing that baggy T-shirt that hid her curves from prying eyes like his.

God. He sat back in his chair and pressed the heels of his palms against his eye sockets. He was every bit the lech that his family seemed to think he was.

But even that knowledge didn't take him back inside the house. No, he propped his feet back on the rail and continued watching Hope. If the way she kept sneaking looks back toward the house now and again was any indication, she was doing some of her own watching, too.

"I thought I saw you driving a green car yesterday."

Hope whirled around at the voice behind her. She was waiting in the kitchen of the ranch house for her ride back to Weaver. By the time she'd shepherded the girls back to the big house, the shower guests had departed. That's what she got for letting the little ones talk her into walking all over creation—and the Double-C had plenty of interesting places to explore.

Now, Tristan was looking at her with his incredible eyes, waiting for an answer and she wished, cowardly, that the children were still with her instead of their parents.

"Yes, I have a car," she admitted. "But I rode out here with Dr. Rebecca."

"And where is Dr. Rebecca now?"

Hope curled her fingers over the back of one of the chairs at the enormous oval table that sat in the center of the big kitchen. "She was called away on a house call."

"So you need a ride home, then."

"Jaimie is going to drive me."

"Jaimie drives like a bat out of hell. I'll take you."

Hope's stomach jolted. He was far more harmless when he was sleeping. When he was wide awake and watching her from beneath heavy lids, he was totally devastating. Totally daunting. Why would he offer to drive her? It wasn't as if she was "of interest" to him. "Jaimie has already offered."

"You really prefer to ride with the speed demon?"

Hope swallowed. "I—"

"Stop tormenting our guest," Jaimie chided sailing into the kitchen and poking her brother-in-law in the back. "And I haven't gotten a speeding ticket in months."

"That's 'cause your daughter calls the sheriff uncle," Tris countered dryly. "I want to go by and see Drew Taggart anyway. There's no point in all of us driving into town."

Hope folded her hands together and wished she'd driven herself. But Jaimie looked her way, eyebrows lifting. And Hope forced herself to shrug as if it didn't matter in the least how she got back home.

So she found herself sitting beside him in the close confines of his rental car as he drove along the gravel drive toward the main gate of his family's ranch. With each vibrating turn of the tires, Hope felt herself growing more uncomfortable. She was wrinkled and sweaty and her unmanageable hair was working loose from its ordinarily tidy braid. He, on the other hand, made his faded jeans seem like a sinful sight; and she swore she could still smell the freshness of his shower on that golden skin.

She stared out the window and banished thoughts of Tristan and showers.

He hadn't turned on the radio. It was just the two of them and the sound of the tires. And Hope felt more tongue-tied than she'd ever felt in her life.

Considering she'd spent most of her life tongue-tied, that was quite a feat.

"Would you like to grab some dinner?"

She turned and looked at him, her lips parting soundlessly.

“Is that a yes or a no?”

He wasn’t asking her for dinner. He couldn’t be. Why would he? He was only driving her home because he’d been going by to see Drew anyway. “I don’t...ah, no. Thank you.”

“Why?”

She stared fixedly out at the passing landscape. “Excuse me?”

“Why won’t you have dinner with me? We could grab a steak at Colbys.”

“Why?” She glanced at him long enough to see the corner of his lips deepen.

“That was my question.”

She folded her arms. She didn’t like being teased. “I have plans.”

“Big date?”

Her cheeks burned. “Is that so hard to believe?”

He smiled faintly. “Not at all.”

It ought to be, she thought silently. The last time Hope had been on a date, she’d still been in college. And she may have entertained thoughts of agreeing if Larry Pope asked her out again, but that occasion hadn’t actually occurred. “I have to wash my hair.”

He raised his eyebrows. “In other words, you’re not interested.”

“No,” she blurted. “I mean, I...I do have to wash my hair. Church is tomorrow.”

His smile widened wryly. “Naturally. It’s been a while since I’ve been thrown over for shampoo and conditioner.”

Hope closed her eyes and wished for the drive to be over.

When they finally entered the official outskirts of town, Hope started to tell him where she lived, but without any prompting at all, he drove straight to the cozy little house she rented across the street from the park and the high school.

“Sawyer told me,” he said, as he parked in her narrow driveway.

Hope shoved open the car door, just glad to be home and certainly not willing to wonder why Tristan and his brother had even discussed the whereabouts of her home, but Tristan caught her arm before she could escape. Her throat tightened and she looked over her shoulder at him. “I appreciate the ride.”

Because he couldn’t help himself, Tris looked into her eyes.

They were the purest violet he’d ever seen, so dark he could barely distinguish the pupil from the iris. And the whites were whiter than any white that had ever existed. Annoyance and amazement churned inside him. A few days’ dalliance with this girl-woman was out of the question. He knew it. So why did he ask her for dinner? And why did it bug him to his core that she’d refused? “Eyes as clear as yours just don’t exist,” he murmured.

Her eyebrows popped up. “Excuse me?”

“I’ll bet you’ve never had a hangover. Never crossed the street against the light. Never stayed up later than you should.”

Color suffused her cheeks. “I have been to college.”

“Sweet pea, compared to the places I’ve been, that doesn’t mean diddly.” His voice lowered. “Never had an impure thought.”

Her eyes flickered and she hurriedly climbed from the car. Her thick braid bounced in counterpoint to her hasty steps as she walked away from him.

Let her go.

He swallowed an oath along with the common sense that told him to leave well enough alone. He caught up to her as she pushed open the front door of her little white house. The place was as neat and tidy as she was, with precise rows of summer flowers in the beds lining the sidewalk. He closed his hand around her elbow, pulling her up short before she could shut the door in his face.

“Wait.”

Her chin tilted, but her eyes wouldn't meet his.

"Why? So you can make fun of me some more?"

"I wasn't."

She didn't answer. The way her soft lips twisted was answer enough.

He frowned. The bones in her elbow felt fragile. He slid his hand up her arm, curving around the taut flesh, feeling the flex of healthy muscle. Of skin that was smooth as satin against his fingertips.

"I have to go back to Paris after the wedding."

She blinked. Hesitated. "Congratulations."

"It's business," he dismissed. "I travel a lot." Too much, he thought vaguely. "I'm not going to be here for long. Why won't you have dinner with me? I'm harmless."

Hope's lips parted and she looked down at his fingers circling her arm. Harmless? Hardly. This man was built for harm. Harm of the heart. "I don't—"

"Want steak. That's okay. Pizza, then."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Man's gotta eat." He didn't smile. "Woman's gotta eat, too. What's your favorite food?"

She frowned. "Chinese. I don't—"

"We'd have to drive a ways to get that."

His thumb swirled against her arm. She looked up at him. "Tristan—"

"Maybe I like the way you say my name."

Her throat knotted. Shivers crept down her spine and broke out on her arm where he would surely feel them. He probably thought she was insane standing there shivering in the warm early evening. "I'm a mess from this afternoon," she whispered thoughtlessly.

Tris looked at her lips. They were perfectly sculpted, impossibly soft-looking. Everything about her was soft. Her voice, her eyes, her skin. "Take a shower," he murmured. "I'll wash your back." He wasn't entirely joking, he realized. But he grinned, trying to look harmless despite his thoughts which were miles away from harmless.

"Colbys," she said abruptly, tugging her arm out of his grasp. "It'll be a zoo at the pizza place. I'll meet you there in a half hour." Then she hastily stepped into the house and shut the door right in his face.

Tris stared at the closed door. "I'll be damned," he murmured. Then he laughed softly, feeling better than he had in weeks, and turned around on her postage-stamp-sized porch. Across the street, the park stretched out, vibrantly green. The high school looked the same as always. And down the street and around the corner was the old elementary school. Where, among her students, shy Hope would laugh and smile and teach.

Too bad he'd be long gone from Weaver by then. He'd have enjoyed seeing Hope in her element.

He'd just have to figure a way in the next few days to get her to look him in the eye with those incredible eyes of hers. To scale that mile-high shyness of hers so that when he kissed her—he wasn't sure when he'd decided it was something he was going to do—she wouldn't run away.

She'd kiss him back.

The kiss was definitely something he looked forward to. Probably more than was good for either of them. But it would be just a kiss. What would be the harm in that?

Chapter Three

“Would you like wine?”

Beneath the cover of the varnished wood table top, Hope’s fingers twisted together. “No, thank you.” She didn’t drink. Hadn’t ever had a hangover, just as he’d said earlier.

She watched Tristan, who sat across from her in the dimly lit booth. He showed no surprise that she’d declined the drink. Of course he wasn’t surprised.

The only surprise was that she was sitting here in Colbys, which served food but which everyone still considered a bar, with Tristan Clay. Hope had been to Colbys dozens of times in her lifetime. Never once had the booths seemed so cramped. So shadowy. So intimate.

Tristan was reading the menu he held open between his hands. His fingers idly tapped the corner of the padded vinyl folder and Hope closed her eyes for a moment before focusing on her own menu. She shifted and her knee bumped something solid and immovable beneath the table. It wasn’t the table. It was him. She quickly angled her knees away from his and stared blindly at the menu. What was she doing here?

“Decided yet?”

She looked up as Tristan closed his menu and sat back in the booth. “Excuse me?”

His eyebrow peaked. “Do you know what you want to order?”

She nodded and shut her menu with a snap. She didn’t. But she wasn’t going to sit there like an idiot staring at words that her distracted mind wouldn’t read. She chewed at the inside of her lip. Rearranged her flatware and drained her water glass.

He closed the menu and set it to the side of the table, folding his arms over the surface of the table. He seemed suddenly to loom over her from his side, but the portion of her brain that still functioned knew it only seemed that way because he was so tall and his shoulders so wide that he easily filled more than half of the bench on his side of the booth.

A fact that did nothing to prevent her from pressing her spine more firmly against the seat behind her. Or from reaching for the chain at her throat and running an inch of it back and forth between her thumb and forefinger.

His gaze was unwavering, but she was certain that he wanted to smile. She felt her entire body go hot with embarrassment. She dropped her hand to her lap.

She wished that Newt Rasmusson, the owner of the place, would hurry up and take their orders—despite the fact that she didn’t know what she wanted—so at least that interruption would draw Tristan’s focus away from her.

“Want to dance?”

The jangle that shot through her was not a leaping, internal YES! It simply wasn’t. “No one is dancing,” she pointed out faintly. Her fingers sought the chain necklace once again.

“So?”

“There’s no music.”

He glanced down at the table. “If you don’t want to, Hope, just say so.”

“I didn’t mean—”

His lashes lifted and she saw, then, the amusement there. Her lips tightened and she angled her chin up a notch. She gathered up her purse and started to slide from the bench. No matter how breathless she became just from looking at him, she wasn’t going to sit there and be his evening’s entertainment. He’d already found more than enough about her to tease. “This was a bad idea,” she said aloud. Her voice shook, but at least she’d spoken up. “Thank you for the ride back to town earlier.”

Without looking his way, she hurried toward the entrance, bumping her hip against an empty table as she went. She tugged the strap of her shoulder bag higher on her shoulder and blinked rapidly.

She pushed through the door, nearly crying with relief when she made it out onto the street without embarrassing herself even more than she already had.

Though how that would be possible, she couldn't be sure. "Idiot," she muttered under her breath. She drew in a long breath and started down the street in the direction of her house. It wouldn't take but a few minutes to walk. No longer than it would have taken her to walk to Colbys in the first place if Tristan hadn't been sitting on her little porch when she came out, ready to drive them despite her assertion that she'd meet him there.

"I guess you weren't hungry, after all."

She whirled, her braid flying. Her lips parted, but no words came. And that frustrated her even more. She shook her head and turned again, but Tristan caught her arm. His fingers circled her elbow; not tightly, but with enough insistence that she stopped again. Or maybe it was the tingling heat spreading out from her elbow along the rest of her arm. Her voice broke free. "Tristan, don't."

He stepped in front of her, oblivious to the two cars that slowly drove down the main street. His shoulders blocked the red glow of the setting sun. "Am I so objectionable that you couldn't stand one more minute of my company?"

Her fingers curled around her purse strap. "I don't like being laughed at."

"Nobody does, sweet pea." He let go of her elbow and brushed his thumb over her white knuckles. "The only one I was laughing at was myself," he said quietly. "Please. Come back in and have dinner with me. I won't ask you to dance if you don't want me to, but I can't promise not to try talking you into a game of pool."

She didn't want to be charmed by him, knowing how easily he could accomplish it. Was accomplishing it. "What about Drew Taggart?" she asked, faintly desperate.

"What about him?"

"You wanted to look him up."

"I'll catch up to him later. There's plenty of time."

"But you told Jaimie—"

"You'd have been racing down the road with her at the wheel if I'd just told you, flat out, what my reasons were for offering you that ride."

He didn't wear boots like most of the men in Weaver did. Not cowboy boots nor heavy work boots. He wore scuffed athletic shoes. She stared at them so fiercely that she spotted the tiny place at the toe of one shoe where the leather had begun to wear through. "And what were they? These reasons that would terrify me so?"

"I'll tell you, but you have to look at me first."

Her cheeks heated. She darted a look into his face.

He tsked, and she jumped when he tucked his knuckles under her chin and lifted it. Nervousness knotted in her chest. "I'm looking at you."

"At my chin," he murmured. He touched the nose piece of her glasses, inching them back up her nose, and surprise lifted her gaze to his for the briefest of moments.

But it was long enough for her to be caught, unable to pull her gaze from his. They were so blue, his eyes. As if a midnight sky had been trapped in his irises. She suddenly felt warm, her senses trapped in some odd time warp where everything moved slowly. She didn't even blink when he took a step closer, wrapping his other hand around her free elbow. Her hands brushed his hips and she pulled them back, clasping them together against her chest.

"That's why," he murmured.

His thumb was doing that maddening swirl-thing on her elbow. "I d-don't know."

"Yes, you do, Hope."

"No—"

"Don't be afraid of me."

"I'm...not." She swallowed. "I'm not."

“You’re trembling.”

“I—”

“So am I.”

“Stop this. You’re making fun. You told your brother you weren’t interested in me. I overheard you.”

“I’m interested all right,” he murmured.

She shook her head abruptly. Her protest was as ineffectual as her mushy resistance when he drew his fingertips along her forearms, capturing her hands. He pressed her palms to his chest. And, oh God, she felt his heart. Thundering through the fine cotton of his Hawaiian print shirt as fiercely as her own heart pounded.

“You’re doing that to me, sweet pea.” His soft words stirred the loose tendrils of hair at her temples. “You have been since the coffee in the café. Maybe I didn’t see that it was any of my brother’s business, but that doesn’t mean it’s not so.”

“No.”

“Yes. That’s why I was laughing at myself. I come home expecting nothing but enduring my old man’s long-awaited wedding, and find myself meeting a teacher whose violet eyes could make me forget my own name.”

She felt his breath on her forehead, then closed her eyes and held back a gasp when his warm lips touched her temple. Her fingers curled against his chest, grabbing loose fabric. “We’re standing on Main Street.”

His jaw grazed hers, then he lifted his head, untangling her fingers from his shirt front. “If it bothers you, come back inside with me and have dinner.”

“You said you were harmless. I knew you were lying.” She frowned as another car pulled along the street and turned into the parking lot behind her. “What do you want with me?”

He laughed abruptly. “Are you kidding?”

“You used to date Serena Stevenson.” She pushed out the words.

His eyes narrowed. “So? It was a long time ago.”

“She’s a famous model!”

“Who is now happily married with two kids, neither of whom are mine, thank the good Lord. What’s your point?”

“My face has never stopped traffic.”

“That’s because you’ve probably always been in Weaver where there is no traffic.” He let go of her hands and took a step back. The cool fingers of the evening air slipped between them and Hope shivered.

She hadn’t always been in Weaver and she knew good and well that guys who looked this good didn’t seek out Hope Leoni because of her physical attributes. Only she couldn’t for the life of her think what Tristan hoped to gain by pursuing this.

Which brought her squarely back to the assumption that he was merely amusing himself. His heart may have seemed to thunder in tempo with hers. But in all likelihood it had just been her muddled senses. Which were quickly clearing again, thank goodness.

“I think you should go see Drew,” Hope suggested. “He and Jolie are building a place a few minutes outside of town. I watch their little boy on—”

“Good evening, Hope. Tristan. I’d heard you were back. For the wedding, I presume?”

Hope looked desperately at the sidewalk underneath her feet, wishing it would open up and swallow her. But it stayed dismayingly solid. She wrapped her hands once more around her purse strap and turned around to face Bennett Ludlow, the head of the school board. The man had left his parked car and stood on the sidewalk behind them.

“Yes,” Tristan said abruptly, barely sparing the other man a glance. “I’ll drive you home, Hope.”

His hand touched the small of her back, igniting a warm, melting glow.

“You mean you two were here together?” Bennett’s white teeth smiled, but Hope knew the older man too well not to see the wheels clicking inside his brain. He was undoubtedly wondering the same thing Hope was. Why?

“Not really,” Hope answered quickly. “And I think I’ll walk home. It’s such a lovely evening.” She didn’t dare look up into Tristan’s face again. Every time she looked into his eyes, her sensible brain simply ground to a halt. And the last thing she needed was to look as muddled as she felt with Bennett there to witness it.

She wondered if she’d ever be able to forget that she’d been hired last year as a last resort because no other more qualified teacher had been available.

She smiled vaguely at both men and hurried across the street.

“She’s not your usual type, is she, old boy?”

Irritation bubbled beneath Tristan’s calm as he watched Hope reach the sidewalk on the other side of the street. He looked at Bennett. The attorney was as much a part of Weaver and the surrounding community as the Clays. More so than Tris, in fact. Because Bennett had returned to Weaver after college and Tris had not. Not that they’d ever had a lot to do with each other since Bennett was more Sawyer’s age than Tristan’s. “Should I be flattered you think you know my ‘type,’ Bennett?” he asked lazily. “Didn’t think you cared.”

Bennett’s face tightened. “Before they moved away from Weaver, Gerri and Justine Leoni always were after a nice meal ticket, but I’d hoped that Hope had more sense than her mother and—”

“Go on inside and enjoy a steak,” Tris smoothly interrupted. “Double-C beef, you know,” he added as he started after Hope. “Can’t be beat.”

Certainly not by the failing spread that Bennett’s parents had once run, long ago. They’d sold out to the Double-C more than twenty years earlier. As far as Tris knew, Bennett had hated the Clays ever since. And though Tris didn’t give two hoots and a holler what Bennett thought or said about them, having that cap-toothed blowhard look down his nose at the Leonis—Hope in particular—was more than Tris could stand.

Hope. She was running away from him like the dogs of hell were at her heels. He wasn’t so conceited that he believed all women found him irresistible. But he was wholly aware that Hope felt the same drugging attraction that he did, whether she admitted it or not.

He wanted her. Badly.

Seducing virgins was the one thing over which Tris drew the line. But a kiss was not a seduction.

He wanted to kiss her, and he knew she wanted it, too. But what had him going after her now was not the irrefutable urge to taste her lips, but the hurt in her eyes she hadn’t been able to hide.

He quickened his step and caught up with her just as she was turning the corner toward her house. The hem of her white and purple flowered dress flared out behind her.

“Hold up there, sweet pea.”

She looked over her shoulder once, but kept walking.

He swore silently and lengthened his stride, stepping in her path. She sidestepped, but he wasn’t dancing. He closed his hands over her shoulder and she stopped cold. His gut tightened even more at the silvery trail wending its way down her sculpted cheekbones. “I’m sorry.”

Her chin angled. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

He thumbed away a tear drop. “What are they for?”

“My shoes are pinching my feet,” she said flatly. Red color flooded her cheeks.

Little liar. He hoped she never played poker. That milky pale skin of hers would give her away every time. He looked down at the confection of narrow straps and tiny heels gracing her feet. They were shamelessly feminine, sexy shoes and not at all what he’d expect her to wear with that ill-fitting sack of a dress. He crouched down, circling her ankle with his palm.

“What are you doing?” She pressed her palm to his shoulder, but he still managed to lift her foot and slide off the supposedly offending shoe. That was the nice thing about the element of surprise. He confiscated the other shoe, too, then swept her up into his arms.

She gasped, her eyes as wide as a child’s. “What are you doing?”

“It’s my fault your feet are hurting,” he explained reasonably, looking down into her shocked face. “I said I’d give you a lift.”

“A ride,” she sputtered faintly.

He shrugged and turned up her street. He didn’t dare think about how comfortable she felt in his arms, even squirming and kicking her legs the way she was. “What’s the difference?”

“Well, one is in a car,” she hissed. “Put me down before someone sees us—oh, fabulous.”

“Hope? Is everything all right here?”

Hope smiled back at the openly curious question issued from a very pregnant woman who was watering a row of flowers in her yard. Tris noticed, however, that Hope’s smile was frantic around the edges. “How are you feeling, Brenda? Your baby should be here any day now, right?”

“Next week,” the other woman said. Her eyes were suspicious. “You sure you’re okay?”

“She’s fine,” Tris said easily. “Stepped on a stone.” He kept right on walking.

Even though he held Hope squarely in his arms, he could feel her straining as if to reduce the contact between their bodies. “Brenda Wyatt is one of the biggest gossips in the county,” she muttered. “She’s probably already heading to her phone to spread the word.”

Tris cut across the corner of Hope’s green lawn and carried her up the steps. A glance over his shoulder told him that Hope was probably right. Brenda-the-Blab was gone, and the screen door at the front of her house was swinging in the faint breeze because it hadn’t caught the latch. “People in this town have always gossiped.”

“Yes,” Hope agreed tightly. “And half the time it’s been about one of the infamous Leoni women, whether it was my mother or my sister.” She leaned over and pushed open her front door. “Put me down.”

Tris turned sideways and carried her into her living room. The furnishings were as uncomplicated as he’d expected: long lines and soft pillows, all in soft colors that reminded him of deliciously cool ice cream cones. “The only gossip I ever heard about your mother or your sister was that they were beautiful.” He settled her on the couch where an enormous orange cat slept in a ball. “There. You’re down.”

“They were beautiful. Justine is beautiful. She’s the kind of woman you should take out for steak.”

“How is Justine, anyway? I haven’t seen her in years.” What he remembered about Justine was that she’d been, well, popular was the polite term. Before Justine and her mother had left town, she’d been ahead of him in school several years, but that hadn’t meant that Tris hadn’t appreciated her sultry appeal.

“She’s in Washington State, now.”

“Married?”

“Three times. And the people of this town thought she’d never find a husband with her wild, wicked ways,” Hope quipped, but the sarcastic tone failed and she just sounded defensive. “Of course, she’s divorcing number three, so maybe they had a point.”

Tris sat on the couch, too, and Hope popped up like a golden-crisp slice of bread flying out of a toaster. He stretch his legs comfortably. “What does she do there?”

“She works in a bank. We don’t talk much. She’s older than you are.” Hope had walked across the floor to look through the sheer, butter-yellow curtains that covered the big picture window overlooking her front yard. “Oh, nuts.” She abruptly turned away from the window, drawing her eyebrows together.

“What’s wrong?”

She shook her head and turned on the floor lamp that stood near the window. Bright light flooded the room, banishing the lengthening shadows. “Gram is driving up.”

“Ruby? I haven’t seen her in ages.”

Hope glared at his left ear. “You don’t understand at all, do you?”

Whatever was turning Hope’s eyes to panic, he couldn’t guess. But he understood all too well that the light was shining from behind Hope, turning her white sack dress with the tiny purple flowers into a translucent sack, barely veiling the long legs and hourglass curves beneath.

He ordered his heart to start beating again and inhaled slowly.

Hope’s wiry grandmother walked right into the house without knocking. Her sharp eyes focused on Tris, then turned to Hope. But that one look left him feeling like he was fifteen again and had been caught making out with Suzette Lipton in the alley behind Ruby’s Café. He was relieved he was sitting on the couch with the distance of the entire living room between him and Hope.

“I’ve had five calls at the café, young lady,” Ruby said briskly, “all wanting to impart the news that my granddaughter was seen dancing down the middle of the streets with him. Now, I want to know what is going on!”

Tris laughed abruptly, which earned him another stern look from Ruby. He waited for Hope to explain, to defend herself, to tell her grandmother she was a grown woman who could do what she wanted if she chose, but Hope said nothing. She just stood there, looking at her grandmother with dismay emanating from every pore.

He rose and joined Hope, automatically sliding an arm around her shoulders, instinctively trying to support her. To alleviate the expression of dread darkening her eyes. “I carried her from the corner to this house,” he said evenly. “Her feet were hurting her.” He’d never felt strongly about explaining himself, and he didn’t, even now. But he really hated the look on Hope’s face. Really, really hated it.

It wasn’t a comfortable realization. Because Tris never hated anything. He never hated and he never loved. He never felt that strongly one way or the other about anything. Except, maybe, his work. He was certainly a believer of the passion of the body, but he left all that passion of the heart to others.

Ruby’s lips tightened. She propped her aging hands on her hips and ignored Tris. “Hope, you know how people in this town talk. Why would you do such a thing—right out in the street like that?”

“Ruby,” Tris interrupted. He knew good and well that Hope’s feet had been just fine. “Forget about it. There’s no harm done.”

Hope shook her head and turned away from her grandmother, pulling away from the arm that Tristan had tucked disturbingly around her shoulder.

“Young man,” Ruby said sternly, “have you been gone from this town for so long you’ve forgotten how it operates? The only thing my granddaughter has is her reputation, and you come blowing into town for a few minutes of entertainment and destroy it without blinking.”

“Gram!” Hope fastened her hands around her grandmother’s arm and tugged her gently to the door. “Tristan was only being...kind,” she said. “But he’s going home, now. So you can go back to the café and tell everyone that nothing is going on.”

“Hope, you’re so innocent, girl. You wouldn’t know a wolf in sheep’s clothing if he bit you on the nose.”

“Gram!” She couldn’t bring herself to look at Tristan. She pulled her grandmother out the front door. “You are embarrassing me,” she whispered under her breath.

“Everyone knows he lives in the fast lane—has ever since he earned all that money making fancy computer things,” her grandmother said sternly. “If you’re not careful he could take advantage of you just the way Justine and Gerri were.”

“Tristan Clay’s not the least bit interested in me that way.”

“Ha!” Ruby headed down the path. “Open your eyes, girl. That man has got one thing on his mind, and sore feet is not it!”

Hope groaned and turned toward the door. She chewed the inside of her lip and prayed fervently that Tristan hadn't been able to hear her grandmother's outlandish worries.

She reached for the screen door and pulled it open, catching her breath when Tristan stepped right in front of her. Her fingers clenched over the door handle.

"Your grandmother is right." His face was hard, his jaw tight. And there was no trace of amusement in his heavy-lidded blue gaze. None at all. "I'm not interested in sore feet."

"Tristan, please. My grandmother is being ridiculous, I know that. I know you don't feel that way about—"

"I didn't say I didn't want to have you in my bed, Hope. I do. But no matter how much I want that, sweet pea, I don't intend to...deflower you. You're safe from me."

Chapter Four

Nothing was going right today.

Hope's blow dryer blew a gasket or something, which meant that her hair was wet when she twisted it into a knot at the back of her head. She knew it looked even more unappealing than usual.

Of course, if she'd stuck to her guns the evening before and refused to join Tristan for dinner, Hope's hair would have been dry by the time she needed to leave for Sunday worship.

Even afterward, if she hadn't spent half the night swinging on a pendulum, she would have tended to business. But no, she'd paced around her small house, feeling astonishment. She'd rearranged her living room furniture twice, feeling disbelief. She'd yanked weeds under the moonlight in her backyard, feeling a fearful excitement.

So, her house was spotless, her furniture ended up right where it had been when she'd started and her garden was immaculate. But her hair was still a mess until morning.

Now, it was a wet, albeit clean, mess.

After the blow dryer had died, her iron—apparently sympathetic to the dryer—had shorted out, too. Her cotton dress was still presentable. Barely. Having to chase after Simon, her cat, at the last minute hadn't helped the dress. She'd been hot and frustrated by the time she finally coaxed him out from the bushes where he liked to hide.

At least she'd caught him before he'd prowled down to Brenda Wyatt's house. Brenda's husband hated cats, and Hope wasn't sure if her runaway cat would escape unscathed the next time he was caught eating Brenda's nasturtiums.

She could have driven her little car to church, but she knew there would be no parking left. And now, by the time she'd cut through the neighborhood and walked up the front steps of the church, she could hear the congregation inside already singing and she quietly slipped into the empty pew in the rear, fumbling a hymnal out of the rack. She dropped it and it thudded loudly on the floor just as the music ended.

It seemed as if half the town turned to look and see who'd made the racket. She smiled weakly and sat, feeling around with her hand for the hymnal, but it seemed to have scooted up under the pew ahead of her.

She still felt eyes watching her, and she wished that she'd just taken the hint when the dryer died and stayed home.

Except if she hadn't shown up at church the way she had done every Sunday of every month of every year she'd lived in Weaver, she'd have ten people trooping by her house later to find out why.

After she'd come down with the flu last year when Ruby was in Washington visiting Justine, Hope's visitors had brought homemade soup and fresh flowers and crossword puzzles. She didn't think having visitors this time would be such a blessing.

The hairs on her neck prickled.

She blinked and saw Jolie staring at her pointedly from her seat on the aisle a few pews ahead. Hope frowned, shaking her head slightly.

Jolie rolled her eyes and subtly jabbed her thumb out. Hope followed the direction and stared, stunned at the sight of Tristan sitting there in church. There was no mistaking the back of his head; she'd never known anyone with hair that brilliantly golden.

She hurriedly closed her mouth and glanced at Jolie. Her friend was smiling, knowingly. Hope frowned at her, hoping Jolie could read her expression that there was no earthly reason to connect Hope with Tristan's once-in-a-blue-moon appearance at worship.

Feet shuffled and Hope dragged her attention to the service, as she stood with the rest of the congregation and read the gospel lesson. But her mind wasn't on the words. It was on the man three rows ahead of her.

When the service was winding down nearly an hour later, Hope's attention still remained on Tristan. He hadn't turned around once to see her, and she told herself that she was relieved.

But she was sitting in church, and the lie tore at her. When the congregation rose once again to sing the last hymn, Hope quietly backed out of the church. If she ended up with calls from Gram and others that afternoon, it would be better than standing there visiting after the service, pretending that she didn't care two hoots that Tristan was around.

She pressed her hand to her forehead. She was a blooming fool, that's what she was. Creating ridiculous fantasies in her head.

Standing just outside the church doors, Tris watched Hope scurry away. It was definitely becoming too familiar a sight, he decided. He stopped and greeted the minister briefly, complimenting the man on his sermon even though he would've been pressed to recall the topic. He'd been too preoccupied with the young woman who'd sneaked in late to sit a few rows behind him.

"Guess no good deed goes unpunished," Sawyer said softly, mockingly, behind him.

Tris slid his sunglasses on and ignored his brother. So what if he'd come to church only in the hopes of catching Hope for a minute or two? What was more above-board than running into each other at church?

"Tristan, you're welcome to join us for dinner this afternoon," said Rebecca, repeating the invitation that he'd already declined once. "I know Ryan wants to have a chance to talk your ear off about his new computer."

Tris tugged on the bill of Ryan's ball cap. "Maybe later. But don't hold up the meal if I don't show."

Ryan grinned and darted off to join his friend. Sawyer slid his arm around Rebecca's shoulders and snorted softly. "Tris, if your rental car is seen in town anywhere this afternoon other than at our place, the remaining half of this town that hasn't been talking about your stroll down the street with Hope yesterday, will be. Leave her alone."

"Sawyer, don't pick on Tristan like that."

"He's a big boy, Bec, and you don't know what he's like with women."

Tristan's good humor was fading fast. "And you're so sure you know?" he asked Sawyer. "I thought you were a big believer in the innocent-'til-proven theory."

"You haven't been innocent since you were fifteen," Sawyer replied dryly. "You're gonna do what you're gonna do no matter what anyone says. Just...remember where you are."

Rebecca was making a face. "Sawyer's a fine one to talk." She stretched up and kissed Tristan's cheek. "Maybe we'll see you later," she said calmly, then looked at her husband. "Ryan is going home with Eric for a while," she said softly.

Despite his annoyance, Tris felt a smile tug at him as Sawyer cast his wife a long look, then smiled slowly as they walked away. He pulled the car keys out of his pocket and started toward the small, still-congested lot. Most of the cars belonged to people who'd driven in from the outlying areas, since the town itself was small enough to walk pretty well anywhere.

But, as he approached his car, he realized that a van parked crookedly in the lot was responsible for the holdup. He shook his head faintly and cut between two pickups. He wanted to go by Hope's place. Maybe he could talk her into going for a drive. They could invite Drew and his wife if it would put Hope more at ease. He knew she and Jolie were friends—

"Mr. Clay, is it true that you and Ms. Leoni are living together?"

He jerked around, gravel grinding under his boot and came face-to-face with a microphone and an enormous camera. "What the hell?" The microphone shoved closer and he pushed it away. "Get out of my face."

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