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Marriage On His Mind

Susan Crosby



Vintage 90s

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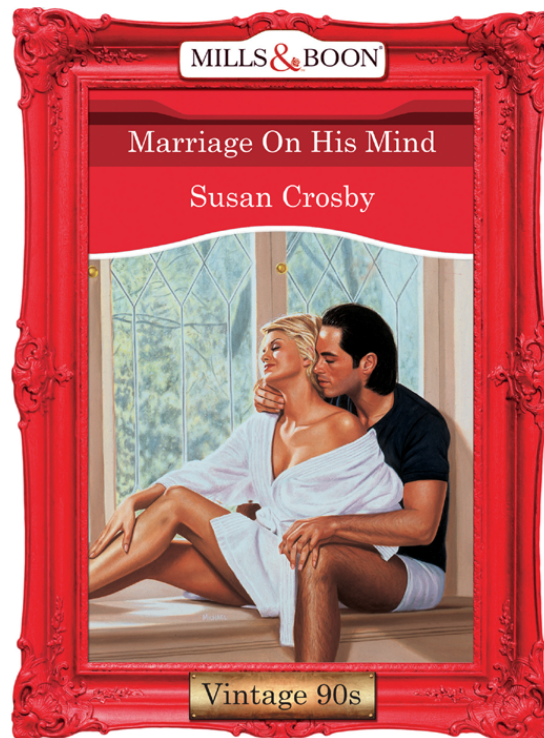
Marriage On His Mind

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CINDERELLA IN WAITING With just one look Jack Stone could tell that Mickey was a princess living in a self-imposed ivory tower. But he wasn't one to let a few flights of stairs keep him from what he wanted. And he most definitely wanted the reluctant Cinderella next door. Melting her icy reserve would be his pleasure. Men had pursued Mickey before, but never with such a fervor as her enticing neighbor. How was a woman with her turbulent past supposed to resist Jack's tempting caresses? Especially when her sexy suitor began talking about... marriage! Was it enough to make a girl toss her glass slipper and run for the preacher?



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“Exasperating Woman,” He Growled, Hauling Her To Him For A Final Stormy Kiss.

Reluctantly Jack let her go, then watched as she slowly walked away. He shook his head, irritated with himself. He wouldn’t blame Mickey for shying away from him now. He’d told her they would play by her rules; then he’d forced the issue when he shouldn’t have. He was the one with the marriage timetable, after all.

Okay, so she hadn’t resisted. Okay, so she had pushed him as much as he had pushed her. Still, it was his responsibility to be in control. A true Prince Charming would be the epitome of patience, wouldn’t he? And a true Prince Charming would never lose control.

He just had to stay patient and keep control. Simple, right?

But Jack didn’t think his life would ever be simple again.

Dear Reader,

The celebration of Silhouette Desire’s 15th anniversary continues this month! First, there’s a wonderful treat in store for you as Ann Major continues her fantastic CHILDREN OF DESTINY series with November’s MAN OF THE MONTH, Nobody’s Child Not only is this the latest volume in this popular miniseries, but Ann will have a Silhouette Single Title, also part of CHILDREN OF DESTINY, in February 1998, called Secret Child Don’t miss either one of these unforgettable love stories.

BJ James’s popular BLACK WATCH series also continues with Journey’s End, the latest installment in the stories of the men—and the women—of the secret agency.

This wonderful lineup is completed with delicious love stories by Lass Small, Susan Crosby, Eileen Wilks and Shawna Delacorte. And next month, look for six more Silhouette Desire books, including a MAN OF THE MONTH by Dixie Browning!

Desire...it's the name you can trust for dramatic, sensuous, engrossing stories written by your bestselling favorites and terrific newcomers. We guarantee handsome heroes, likable heroines...and happily-ever-after endings. So read, and enjoy!

Melissa Senate

Senior Editor

Please address questions and book requests to:

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Marriage on his Mind

Susan Crosby



www.millsandboon.co.uk

SUSAN CROSBY

is fascinated by the special and complex communication of courtship, and so she burrows in her office to dream up warm, strong heroes and good-hearted, self-reliant heroines to satisfy her own love of happy endings.

She and her husband have two grown sons and live in the Central Valley of California. She spent a mere seven-and-a-half years getting through college and finally earned a B.A. in English a few years ago. She has worked as a synchronized swimming instructor, a personnel interviewer at a toy factory and a trucking company manager. Involved for many years behind the scenes in a local community theater, she has made only one stage appearance—as the rear end of a camel! Variety, she says, makes for more interesting novels.

Readers are welcome to write to her at P.O. Box 1836, Lodi, CA 95241.

To Linda and Lee, whose friendship caught fire.

We should all be so blessed.

One

Crack!

“Foul!” the umpire called.

Jack Stone heaved a sigh of relief from his position at shortstop on the baseball diamond. One less catch muffed. What the hell am I doing here? he asked himself for the hundredth time. Midlife crisis, remember? his mind whispered back.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he muttered as the pitcher tossed another softball underhanded to the batter.

Crack!

Oh, God, it was headed toward him. Please, let me catch it. Please. Otherwise, The Mouth—

The ball hit the hard infield once before magically bouncing into his glove. Stunned at his luck, he stared at the white orb nestled in oiled leather until the second baseman yelled at him to throw it to first. Jack cranked up his arm and threw—and missed the first baseman by six feet, the ball skittering to the fence as the runner chugged into second standing up.

“Hey, Ponytail, whaddaya need, a map?” a woman yelled from the stands of the small stadium hosting the men’s recreational league game.

The short, neat ponytail Jack sported suddenly felt as inconspicuous as Rapunzel’s hair, but he wouldn’t let The Mouth provoke him into cutting it, not after he’d gotten it long enough to stop using gel to hold it in place. After a year’s time, he could finally just pull it back and fasten it.

The ponytail served as a symbol, an important one. He saw it as a sign of his new independence and a reminder to be patient with the world, and he refused to buckle under to some loudmouthed, self-appointed bleacher coach who’d decided to make him her cause. This was only the fifth game of baseball he’d played in twenty-two years, since being thrust into the role of provider for his seven-year-old brother, Dan, when Jack had been only seventeen himself.

He hadn’t had time to play. Not just baseball, but anything. He’d been changing that, though. If only The Mouth—

“Strike three, you’re out!” the umpire called, ending the inning and Jack’s mental wandering.

“Sorry,” he said to the first baseman as they shuffled into the screened dugout.

“Turned out okay,” his teammate Scott Lansing replied. “They didn’t get any runs out of it. That woman in the stands making you nervous?”

“I don’t know what The Mouth’s making me feel. If she’d yell at someone else once in a while, it probably wouldn’t bother me so much. I just can’t figure out why she’s chosen me as her personal project. Stacy said she’d try to talk to her tonight.” Envy burrowed in as he watched a teammate knock the first pitch deep into left field, a skill Jack hadn’t mastered yet. “The woman was right about my switching positions with Drew. I’m more effective at short than I was at third. I needed that extra split second of reaction time. And I’ve almost gotten two hits since she told me to drop my front shoulder before I swing. I just wish she’d kept on passing instructions through Stacy instead of yelling at me on the field.”

“I give you credit for rising to the occasion, Jack. Most guys wouldn’t.”

He pulled on an earlobe as his gaze wandered to where The Mouth sat. “Unfortunately, she’s right too often to ignore.”

“And you abhor mediocrity, especially in yourself.”

Jack grinned as he stood and hefted a metal bat over his shoulder. “Some things I can’t change.”

Mickey Morrison watched the man she’d dubbed Ponytail stroll from the dugout to home plate. Keep your shoulder down, she ordered him telepathically as he sliced the air with the bat a couple of times. She tugged the bill of her L.A. Seagulls baseball cap a little lower on her forehead, grasped the wooden bench under her tightly with both hands and leaned forward in concentration, ignoring the person taking a seat beside her, jostling the bench.

“Strike one!”

Mickey groaned. “Both eyes, Ponytail. Watch the ball with both eyes,” she yelled at her self-appointed protégé. She saw him flinch, then bear down, his lanky frame hardening visibly as he focused on her instructions.

“Strike two!”

He’d missed the ball by a mile, she thought, frustrated. She’d seen such potential in him. A few weeks ago he’d been raw—the rookie of all rookies, doing everything wrong. But he’d obviously been working hard in the interim. That pickup he’d made in the field last inning proved he was keeping his eye on the ball more. Now if he would just focus as hard on the one being pitched to him.

Crack!

Mickey sprang up. He’d hit it! He’d actually hit the darn thing!

The ball caromed off an invisible divot in the field and angled past the center fielder’s legs.

“Crank it up, Ponytail. Take second,” she hollered as he hit first at full stride. She watched approvingly as he made a wide swing and pumped toward second. The outfielder snagged the errant ball, then fired it to the infield.

“Slide! Slide!” Mickey screamed, crouching, her arms extended in front of her as if she were on the field coaching him.

An explosion of dirt rocketed above the heads of the players near second. When the dust cleared, Ponytail lay stretched along the base line spitting dirt, his fingers digging into the base.

“Out!” the umpire shouted.

The call brought raucous cheers from the opposing team and supporters, and cries of outrage from those who thought “Blue” needed glasses. The man sprawled in the settling dust dragged himself to his knees, then uncurled slowly upward, wobbling a bit before taking a step. He brushed off his hands, Chung Li’s Pizza T-shirt and filthy jeans as he started a slow jog to the dugout.

“Hey, Ponytail! Real men slide feet first!”

Silence descended. She’d gone too far this time. She hadn’t only maligned his athletic ability but his masculinity, as well. Holding her breath, Mickey watched as he stopped, swept off his cap to whack dust against his leg, then pinned her to the bench with his direct look, his chest heaving from the exertion of the run. He changed direction and headed straight toward her, not stopping until he stood at the base of the stands, ten feet from where she sat.

“Why?” he queried, panting.

Mickey gulped, grateful she could read the single word on his lips, because the sound was swallowed up by her thundering pulse. “Why what?”

“Why should I slide feet first?”

The question penetrated the rhythm section in her head, and she straightened a little in relief. She’d been afraid he was asking why she was picking on him, and she didn’t have an answer to that, except that she admired his grit—and he seemed self-confident enough to take it. “Because you can ruin your hands going head first, either by jamming them into the base or by the baseman stepping on ’em.”

His fists propped low on his hips, the hat dangling from his little finger, he cocked his head as if considering her words. When his gaze—deep blue, she noted, a nice contrast to his ebony-colored hair—bored into hers, she tugged her cap down even farther.

“Can you teach as well as criticize?” he asked.

“What?”

“Can you teach me to slide?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “I guess—”

“Monday at six o’clock, here?”

“I’m sure many of your teammates could give you the same instructions—”

“I’m asking you.”

“Play ball!” the umpire called.

“Monday at six,” he repeated, a man obviously accustomed to having orders obeyed. “Be here.”

Mickey watched him trot into the dugout, then make a comment to a teammate who laughed uproariously.

Well, she didn’t have to obey his command, she thought militantly. She hadn’t committed herself to anything. But if she didn’t show up, she couldn’t come to any more games, she argued with herself. And she wanted to keep coming. Needed to. She hadn’t felt so alive in years. Two years, to be exact.

“Hi.”

At the simple greeting, Mickey turned her head toward the young woman seated beside her. She recognized her as the one she’d spoken to the first game she’d observed, last month when she’d been in town looking for a place to rent. Always drawn to baseball games, whether professional or little league, she had found a seat and watched, then had become increasingly frustrated at the third baseman’s ineptness. She had sent him suggestions on how to improve, using the young woman as intermediary.

Mickey eyed her now, noting she wore a summer shift, as she always did, this one a tiny flowered print. Mickey returned the greeting, then asked, "Have you been sent to question my intentions?"

"How'd you guess?"

"The male ego is a fragile thing," she said, drawing a grin and a nod from her companion.

"My name's Stacy."

A soft, feminine name to match her clothes and long, silky hair, Mickey thought with an inward sigh. The kind of woman every tomboy dreads. "I don't have answers for you, Stacy."

"Not even a name?"

"My name would mean nothing to him."

"I see. You just dispense advice to the baseball-lorn. Sort of a Dear Yogi Berra."

Mickey smiled. "Actually, this is the first time I've given advice uninvited."

"Why won't you at least tell us who you are?"

Because I'm trying not to lean on anyone. I need to find happiness alone, she thought. She forced herself to ignore Stacy's friendly overture. Standing, she looked at the field briefly, then returned her gaze to the curious woman seated beside her. "Tell Ponytail—"

"His name is—"

"I don't want to know his name. Just tell him to lose the jeans and buy some baseball pants by Monday."

"That's it? That's all you could get out of her?" Jack queried Stacy, his voice rising above the din at Chung Li's Pizza Parlor, where the team had gone after their losing effort. "Buy some baseball pants?"

"I'm not skilled at interrogation like you, Jack. She obviously doesn't want to make friends."

He drummed his fingers on the lacquered wood tabletop. "How old is she, can you tell?"

"Around thirty, I guess."

"Wedding ring?"

Stacy smiled. "No-o-o."

"She uses that baseball cap like a shield over her face."

"Are you asking if she's pretty?"

He turned to face her directly and noted the humor sparkling in her eyes. "All right. I'm humbling myself. I want to know everything you can tell me."

"I've never seen her without sunglasses, but from what I can tell, she's passably attractive in that woman-jock kind of way."

Jack leaned back, resting an ankle over the opposite thigh. "You're enjoying the hell out of this, aren't you, Stacey?"

Her glee-filled laugh made him frown.

"I've just never seen you thwarted," Stacy said, the grin not leaving her face. "Or frazzled. To be honest, it fascinates me. In all the time we were married, I rarely saw you not in control. Impatient maybe, but in control. Not that I saw a whole lot of you, given your obsession with work."

"I'm changing," he said, gritting out the words.

"Yes, you are. Okay, I can tell you this much. Her hair is almost as military short as you used to wear yours. It's kind of palomino blond, looks pretty straight around the edge of the cap. Her front teeth are white and even. I didn't ask her to open her mouth—"

"Stacy," he warned.

"Well, gosh, Jack. If I'd known I was supposed to be inspecting her like a horse at auction, I would have attempted to get more information."

"Do you have any idea why she's singled me out?"

"Could be your hunky body."

Jack snorted. "Yeah. All five-eleven, one hundred and eighty pounds of me."

"And she's about five-four. Perfect height difference. In bed and out," she added.

He straightened. "I'm not interested in her as a bed partner."

"Aren't you?"

"I'm curious. And I don't like unanswered questions."

"Ha! You're attracted. You've never been challenged by a woman before, and it intrigues the heck out of you."

He sipped from his mug of beer before responding. "Maybe."

At a signal from her husband, Drew, the team's third baseman, Stacy stood. "We've got to relieve the babysitter. Good luck Monday."

"Thanks. Give Dani a kiss from me."

Mickey's decision to rent the cabin she now occupied had been based on several factors, the first being the town itself, Gold Creek, which was a forty-five-minute drive from the community college where she would soon be teaching algebra. Nestled in the foothills of Northern California's mother lode country, Gold Creek was large enough to offer reasonable anonymity and small enough to feel like a home, not just a place.

Another lure was the stream that backed the property about fifty yards from the cabin. More than a trickle, less than a fisherman's paradise, its appeal lay in the soothing sounds of nature, at rest and at play. Having lived her thirty-two years in the city, the adjustment had been a challenge, especially since she couldn't hear traffic or sirens or even children playing. Her only neighbor within earshot was her landlord, who owned a huge log house just out of sight from her smaller version, his guest house.

The cabin itself shone in the natural setting like a topaz in gold. Newly remodeled by the owner, it was a house designed for easy living, amounting to a large studio apartment, with rooms hinted at by creative use of furniture or cabinets. A big pine bed sitting atop a raised platform pretended to be a bedroom, the bed cocooned by curtains on a ceiling runner, blocking it from the living quarters, although she never bothered pulling the curtains. She looked forward to winter, when she could enjoy watching the fireplace while she lay cozy in her bed. The bathroom, a rustically elegant large room containing not only a shower but a whirlpool tub as well, was tucked away on the sunset side of the building.

But the deciding factor in her choosing the cabin had been the window seat. Built into the back wall overlooking the stream and pine trees, it was a huge half circle of crystal clear glass that started two feet from the floor and ended at the ten-foot knotty pine ceiling. The pillows stacked on the oversize wooden seat invited snuggling. It had become her refuge, the place where she prepared her syllabus for class, wrote letters, daydreamed, escaped nightmares and faced her aloneness.

She burrowed there an hour after the game, watching the early-August sky darken and wondering what to do about Monday. She hadn't wanted to get involved, with anything or anyone. This would force involvement when for the first time in her life she so wanted to be wholly responsible for herself.

She'd lost so much, and she needed to be free to grieve. She'd also given up a lot to embark on this quest for self-forgiveness and acceptance.

Eyes closed, she leaned her head against the window frame and pictured the tall, dark man whose ponytail proclaimed him a rebel. She didn't want to find him attractive, or desirable, or even interesting—but he'd challenged her when she'd been a verbal tyrant to him, and that intrigued her.

She didn't want to be drawn to him, and she wondered how she could stop the wheels she had unintentionally set in motion.

Two

Okay, his pride was stung. He admitted that much to himself. Jack glanced at his watch again and frowned. Ten after six. He'd made assumptions from a minuscule amount of contact. Assumption number one, she was gutsy. Two, she genuinely wanted to help improve his game. Three, and he

acknowledged this as wishful thinking, she was drawn to him in a way she could neither understand nor control.

Over the past four days, he'd gradually come to feel flattered at her interest. Now—at eleven minutes after six—he realized his mistake. He brushed an imaginary speck of dust from his generic gray polyester baseball pants and ignored the unfamiliar feel of cleats under his feet. A pair of lightweight leather gloves burned through his back pocket. He had invested time and money preparing for his lesson, and she had the nerve not to show up?

He crouched at first base, or rather where first base would be if a game were on. Scooping up a handful of dirt, he rubbed the gritty stuff between his fingers as he debated how long to give her.

Plop! He looked up as a heavy white square cushion with a rigid tube attached landed beside him, shooting up a halo of dirt.

“Ram that into the pipe at second,” she called. “Can’t practice without a base.”

Jack fought to control his relief, which came swift and unapologetic at the teacherlike sound of her voice and the sight of her ever-present L.A. Seagulls cap. He trotted down to second and shoved in the square, then walked back. “I’d about given up on you,” he said toward where she stood leaning against a railing, obviously as close as she planned to get to him.

“I debated,” she admitted. “I decided your team needs you to learn this.”

“So, you’re doing it for the team, not me?”

“I’m doing this for baseball, Ponytail.”

He repressed a chuckle. “Ah. I’ve lowered the standards of the whole game, have I?”

“I think there’s hope, or I wouldn’t be here.”

He wandered closer, noting how she tugged her cap down defensively the nearer he got. When he saw she was about to take flight, he stopped. “I can’t keep calling you The Mouth. What’s your name?”

She seemed to grab a smile back just before it could escape. “Coach.”

He shook his head slowly. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“Ready to get to work, Ponytail?”

“I think I’m going to regret this,” he muttered as he returned to first base and awaited her instructions.

“First of all, move to the outfield so you can practice on the grass. When you’ve teamed how to slide where you can’t kill yourself, you’ll move onto the dirt.”

“You gonna just stand there and yell instructions to me?” he called over his shoulder as he jogged out to the grass.

“Yep.”

“How do I know you can do this if you don’t demonstrate it?”

“A person doesn’t have to be able to do in order to teach, Ponytail.” She walked parallel to him, one hand on the railing, stopping when he did. “Close your eyes. Visualize what I’m describing. Go through it in your head. If a part isn’t clear, we’ll do it again until it is. Don’t hesitate to stop me and ask questions. Okay?”

Jack closed his eyes. “You want to know if I can touch my nose with my finger?”

Her sigh was both loud and dramatic. “Let me guess. You’re in law enforcement.”

“Close. Lawyer.”

She groaned audibly. “And I said you could stop me anytime and ask questions. We won’t get out of here until dark.”

He grinned. “We have to be out of here by about 6:50. League takes over then.”

She looked at her watch. “Okay, we’ve got half an hour. Let’s go. Close your eyes.” She talked him through the steps, meticulously explaining the reasons for every action, then made him practice again and again on the grass until he could consistently slide while keeping his torso almost upright, trailing his left hand, his left leg tucked under him.

“You’re ready to move onto dirt, Ponytail.”

“Am I?” Every muscle complained as he walked to first base.

“Ready as you’ll ever be.”

“Somehow I don’t find that comforting, Coach.” He liked the sound of her laugh, a little wicked, a little playful. “You think I can master this in one lesson?”

“Sure. Remember to keep your right foot up so you don’t catch your spikes, then hit the bag with your heel, push off with your left leg, and you’ll be standing.”

“Can’t I just slide into it?”

“It’s going to depend on how much time you think you have. If you can stay on the ground and sort of slide around the base and catch it as you go by, that’s okay. Usually, there isn’t enough time. And, of course, if you’re needed to break up a double play—”

“One step at a time, Coach.”

Concentrating, he stood for a few seconds just staring at second base, then he took off at a dead run and dropped into a slide when she yelled, “Now!”

His cleat caught the edge of the bag and held before he could push himself upright, the impact jarring him from toe to head. He lay there swearing for fifteen seconds before her voice penetrated the buzz in his ears.

“Try it again.”

“I don’t think I can even walk.”

“You just learned what not to do, Ponytail. This time keep your foot up a little higher.”

Jack rolled over and pushed himself up, fighting the pain vibrating through his body. He hobbled back to first. “How is it you know so much about this game?” he asked.

“Baseball is my life.”

Her droll tone drew a laugh from him.

“You’re doing great, Ponytail.”

At her praise, a resurgence of energy numbed his pain. “You’re a good teacher.”

“Thanks. So, do you have a law practice here in town?”

He shook his finger at her. “No fair. I won’t answer personal questions if you won’t.”

She tipped her head to one side. “I’ll bet you’re dynamite.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re willing to work harder than the average person. You wouldn’t be content being anything less than best.”

They stared at each other, making some kind of connection that Jack couldn’t describe, only feel. He turned away when some people entered the stadium.

“Twice more,” she announced. “Then we’ll call it a night.”

Each attempt got easier and better. He yanked up the base after the last slide and headed toward her.

“Keep it,” she said, backing away. “Use it to practice.”

“Will you work with me again?”

“You don’t need me.”

“Will you come watch the game Thursday?”

She hesitated. “I’ll be there,” she said finally. “One last word of advice.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you got a hot tub or Jacuzzi?”

“Yeah.”

“Go home and soak. Take a couple of Ibuprofens. Or by tomorrow morning you won’t be able to move.”

“Thanks. I’ll do that.” He wanted to see her eyes, which couldn’t lie like words could, but she never stopped hiding. His gaze lingered on her lips, then blazed a trail down her throat and beyond,

taking a detour at the nicely rounded breasts her loose T-shirt couldn't hide. Baggy shorts revealed slender thighs and drew attention to her legs, lightly muscled and delicately tanned. When he sent his gaze on a return trip, he sensed her cataloging him, as well. His muscles tightened in response.

People milled around them, in the stands and on the field, but he paid little attention to them, his gaze locked with hers.

He found his voice only after someone asked him to move. "See you Thursday, Coach." Hefting the base over his shoulder, he watched her jog up the stairs and out of the stadium. "Thursday," he repeated to himself. Three days. It might as well be a month.

From the dugout, Jack surveyed the stands. She usually arrived fifteen minutes or so after the game started—to avoid pregame conversation with anyone, he guessed—but he thought she might be there for the entire game this time, to watch his progress.

His ex-wife's husband plopped onto the bench beside him.

"Have you met your tenant yet?" Drew asked.

"Nope. I was in Chicago the weekend he moved in, but I left a note telling him to give me a call. Since I hadn't heard from him, I walked over the other day to introduce myself but his truck was gone."

"What's the guy's name again?"

"Mickey Morrison. He's supposed to start teaching math at the community college next week."

"Any regrets about renting the place out?"

Jack shrugged. "It was cozy enough while I was remodeling the big house, but no. It served its purpose."

"Except Dani's furious that you gave her 'dollhouse' away."

Jack smiled, remembering how his daughter had declared the guest house her playroom and that he absolutely could not let anyone else live there. "There's nothing quite like a scorned four-year-old," he said to Drew.

"She's a special little girl, Jack. You and Stacy have done a great job raising her."

"You're contributing your share." He continued his perusal of the stands as Drew tapped the ground repeatedly with his bat.

"I wanted to thank you for letting her call me Dad. It means a lot to me," Drew said after clearing his throat.

Jack shifted on the bench, hammering down the flash of insecurity he'd been struggling to control ever since Dani had broached the subject with him. "She seemed concerned that when her new sibling arrives he or she would be confused by big sister not calling you Dad. She calls me Daddy, so it's different."

"She's always been particularly sensitive to people's feelings. Amazingly so, for a child."

"My brother was like that. God, I miss him so much. If Dan had lived—"

"Life would have been different for all of us, Jack. Immeasurably different."

Unwilling to step back in time, Jack tuned in to the noise and activity around them, catching snippets of conversation and laughter until he spotted The Mou—Coach sliding into a vacant seat. He raised a hand to her and was rewarded with a quick wave in return. Inordinately glad that she'd already singled him out from so far away, his confidence rose. Maybe he'd hit a home run today, or start a double play, or—

He struck out once, flied out twice and got on first because of a fielder's error. Not exactly the shining example he'd wanted to present. Plus he'd never even had a chance to slide. On the other hand, he'd gotten three runners out at second and had thrown right on target to the first baseman.

Coach had been uncharacteristically quiet during the game, as if she sensed his disappointment over his performance. He missed the badgering. He wanted to hear, "Hey, Ponytail," followed by a caustically given instruction—or even an insult. Wondering where her gruff exterior had fled, he kept an eye on her as he shook hands with the opposing team members after the game. He saw her

descend the stairs to stand by the railing, and he walked over, gauging how close to get by observing her body language, a skill at which he was becoming entirely too competent.

“Your fielding’s improving,” she said.

“My hitting stinks.”

She shrugged. “It could use some work.”

“I’m willing to put my ego aside again, if you’re willing to teach me.”

He watched her ponder his words. The old Jack would have pushed. The newer, improved model dug deep within himself for patience.

“Bring a couple of bats and as many softballs as you can borrow,” she said after a long debate.

“Monday at six?” Why do you look so sad? he wanted to ask, noting weariness in her posture, as if she’d been defeated in battle and needed to mend.

She nodded, then pushed away from the railing.

“You okay, Coach?” he asked as she turned away.

Mickey shoved her hands into her pockets. I need a hug, she wanted to say. I’m lonely and I’m tired of not sleeping. And I get scared of the noises in the woods.

“Coach?”

She shifted to face him again. He had a nice face, a face with character—deep blue eyes dark with obvious concern for her, a jaw that held an edge of stubbornness, a mouth that looked as if it could utter soothing words or deliver hot, arousing kisses, both of which she could have used, neither of which she dared accept. He projected self-confidence and strength. He wasn’t afraid to take chances. He wasn’t afraid to fail. She wondered if he could teach her that as easily as she’d taught him how to slide.

“I’m fine, Ponytail. I was just thinking about the Help Wanted sign I saw hanging on the snack bar. You might keep that in mind as an option.”

He looked relieved that she teased him, seemed her old self again. She’d gotten good at bluffing. Too good, she realized. She’d had a difficult week, had missed her family more than she ever could have imagined. Aside from her lesson with Ponytail and polite exchanges with clerks in stores, she hadn’t spoken to anyone except a dog that joined her by the stream one day this week. He’d laid his head in her lap and let her pet him for a few minutes, then after one lick of her face he’d loped away, his golden coat gleaming in the sunlight, his tags jangling.

“We’re all headed to Chung Li’s Pizza. Would you like to come?” Ponytail asked, moving a few steps closer, as if he thought he needed to catch her as she fainted.

“Thanks, but I’ve got to get home. I’ll see you Monday.”

“I hope it’s going to hurt less than the first lesson,” he called as she jogged up the stairs.

“No guarantees,” she yelled back. “No guarantees,” she repeated softly to herself. Not in baseball. Not in life.

“Keep your weight on your back foot, then step into the swing,” Mickey instructed him as he stood at home plate. “And—”

“I know. Keep my shoulder down and both eyes on the ball.”

“Right.” She pitched the ball, which landed in a poof of dirt two feet in front of the plate.

He stared at it, then lifted his head, his mouth clamped against a smile. “That was just to see if I was paying attention, right?”

“I’m a little rusty,” she said in apology, fighting a returning smile. Add a sense of humor to the list of appealing things about him, she thought. She’d looked forward to today more than she’d wanted to, more than was healthy to achieve her goals. She’d forsaken leaning on her family for a while, until she came to terms with herself as an independent person. Now she was in danger of leaning on this man, who was a tempting combination of character, sexiness and, she suspected, comfort.

“Glad to know you’re not perfect, Coach.”

He hit the next pitch—almost straight up.

“Didn’t anyone teach you to call ‘fore,’ Ponytail?”

“Get the pitch up over the plate and I won’t have to golf it,” he chided.

The next pitch sailed over the plate—ten feet off the ground.

“Very funny,” he said, grinning. “You got that out of your system?”

“Maybe.”

“You like a challenge, don’t you?”

Mickey pictured her three brothers and the constant competition they’d all given one another while growing up. She’d learned early to play hard—or tricky—or else be left behind. And being left behind was worse than occasionally putting on a dress to please her mother.

Ponytail showed steady improvement over the half hour they practiced, learning to level out his swing and concentrate just on connecting, not always going for home runs. They had to stop every so often to gather the balls from the outfield, otherwise she worked him constantly.

“Thursday will be the last game for the season,” he told her as they collected balls for the last time.

“Really? So soon?” Now what? When will I see you again?

“The town’s not large enough to support more than five teams. We play each other twice, then we’re done.”

“I take it you hadn’t played much baseball before this.”

“What was your first clue, Sherlock?” he asked as he approached, carrying an armload of balls.

Jack leaned toward her; most of the balls spilled into the sack she held, some dropped to the ground. They crouched simultaneously, their heads almost colliding, their hands grasping the same ball. She tried to pull back; he tightened his grip on her hand.

“What’s your name?” he asked quietly, intently-

She shook her head as she jerked her hand away.

“Why won’t you tell me?”

“I—I’m going through a transition right now. I need...I need to handle it alone.” She stood, then backed away, watching him as if she thought he’d lunge after her.

The last thing he needed right now was a woman with problems, but he also recognized fear when he saw it, and unwillingly decided he’d give just about anything to identify the source and chase it away. How could someone he knew nothing about have become so important, so fast? Why had her well-being superseded everything else in his life? He’d barely been able to concentrate on the textbook he was writing, and his deadline threatened imminently. He couldn’t afford the time his mind had been giving her. “You don’t need friends?” he asked before she could run off.

“I need to be a friend to myself,” she said quietly, turning her head toward a group of people just entering the stadium.

His lawyer’s instincts sprang to attention. A hundred questions crossed his mind. Had she been abused? Had she run away from someone or something? Was she hiding out? How could he help her?

“Without the baseball games, you’re going to disappear from my life,” he said. “That would be a mistake.”

She looked back at him. “Why?”

Jack took three steps toward her, stopping when her shoulders tensed. “There’s a connection between us. Something that made you pick me out of a crowd even though you didn’t know anything about me. The things you yelled to me would have brought some men to their knees. How did you know I wouldn’t fall apart, or strangle you?”

She shrugged, as if she hadn’t spent a minute analyzing it. “Your posture, your smile. I don’t know. You project confidence. The guys on your team gave you a bad time. You laughed it off and kept plugging away.” She tugged the bill of her cap. “Well, I guess I’d better get going. See you Thursday.” She started up the stairs, then suddenly spun around again. “You did really well today.”

“Thanks. You made it easy.” He wanted to follow her, force her to take off the damned sunglasses and cap, look him in the eye—tell him how he could help her. He’d been making a concerted effort in the past year to be more spontaneous, but he’d also discovered that spontaneity sometimes took some planning, a paradoxical idea he’d never uttered aloud to anyone.

He’d have to think about planning something spontaneous for Thursday night.

They were down by four runs in the top of the fifth inning. A base hit and two walks loaded the bases for Ponytail, his third at bat this game. He’d connected with solid singles his first two times at the plate. If his luck held this time, the lead would probably be cut in half.

He didn’t even swing at the first pitch. In fact, he looked frozen in place, the pressure too much to take.

“Thataway, Ponytail. Wait for your pitch,” Mickey yelled.

He dropped the bat, miming comic amazement that she was calling out encouragement. She noted people around her smiling amongst themselves over her lack of nastiness to him, and she heaved a huge internal sigh. For someone who had wanted anonymity, she’d sure earned a reputation in a short time. Since she’d never been content to sit on the sidelines before, she didn’t know why she had expected herself capable of it now.

She watched him scoop up a handful of dirt to absorb the sweat off his palms, then settle in at the plate again.

Crack!

The ball sailed over the shortstop’s head and dropped between the center and left fielders. The stands erupted with cheering; Mickey knew he couldn’t possibly hear her yelling instructions to him as she watched the progress of the ball and the outfielders chasing it. His teammates shouted and motioned for him to keep running.

One runner scored. Two. Three. He rounded third and headed to home. The ball soared in to the cutoff man at second base.

“Slide!” Mickey screamed, cupping her hands into a human megaphone. “Slide!”

Whoosh! Down he went, streaking into home amidst a rooster tail of dirt and dust at the same moment the ball landed with a pop in the catcher’s mitt.

“Safe!” the umpire bellowed.

His teammates mobbed him at the plate where he lay gasping, their voices rumbling with congratulations and surprise at the in-the-park home run. The only thing Jack could hear distinctly was Coach’s voice, an octave higher than the men’s and clearly thrilled at his success.

“All right, Ponytail! You did it! You did it!”

Someone stuck out a helping hand. Jack grasped it and was pulled to his feet. “Which one of you dropped that piano on my back as I got to third?” he asked, doubled over, eliciting laughter from the team as he was swept into their circle of celebration. Finding an unexpected well of energy, he broke out of the group and jogged away from them, toward the stands, toward Coach.

Across the field, past the opponent’s dugout, up the stairs he trotted, until he stood in front of her and could see her delayed reaction to his presence. Lifting a hand to her cap, he spun it around until the bill pointed backward. Gently, he pulled off her sunglasses and passed them to the person beside her. He settled his hands on her shoulders, and he could feel imminent flight within her and see caution in her eyes. Brown eyes, he noted, clear as aged brandy.

“I’ve won a lot of cases in court, Coach, but nothing ever made me feel as good as this. Thanks. I couldn’t have done it without you.” That said, he dipped his head and pressed his lips to hers.

Spontaneous combustion. The words raced through his mind as what he’d planned as a friendly kiss of gratitude exploded into something much more. Stunned, more winded than he’d been after the run around the bases, he pulled back after five seconds on a roller coaster that had reached the top of the first hill instantly and started a swift descent into frenzied madness.

Mickey opened her eyes slowly as Ponytail pulled back; she looked into eyes as startled as her own must be. Knowing this moment was all she would ever have of this man, she grabbed his T-shirt with both fists and held him there.

The familiar odors of sweat, dirt and glove leather assailed her, sending her careening back to adolescence, to a happy and carefree time. For an instant she was transported into the dugout at the spring training camp of the L.A. Seagulls, the major league baseball team her father had managed for the past fourteen years. Comfort, familiarity, homecoming—she felt all this as she twisted his T-shirt in her hands and dragged him back to her.

“You’re welcome,” she murmured. Standing on tiptoe, she looped her arms around his neck and tugged. Amidst catcalls and whistles all around them, she kissed him back, reveling in the arousing taste of his mouth and the solid comfort of his body.

She wandered aimlessly, lost in a storm of feeling that obliterated everything from thought. For two years she’d been dead, worse than dead—lifeless. Now there was just him, and her, and their embrace—life’s most glorious celebration. Then from below her a tiny, high-pitched voice sliced into the maelstrom.

“Mommy, why is that lady kissing my daddy?”

Three

Ice water. Someone had dumped a fifty-five-gallon drum of frigid liquid on her, Mickey thought as she jerked herself out of his arms.

“Shh, Dani,” she heard a woman say.

“But, Mommy—”

Mickey realized it was Stacy who spoke to the child, a little girl dressed in a summer shift like her mother always wore. A little girl with long, silky brown hair like her mother and dark blue eyes like...Ponytail. Her father.

Mickey’s hands flew up to cover her mouth as she realized what it all meant. He was married. Married to Stacy, the only person Mickey had spoken to at the games, the person she’d passed instructions to Ponytail through. They were a family.

And she’d kissed him. He’d given her a friendly kiss. Well, sort of. It had escalated into something else. But she’d pulled him back for another longer, hotter, deeper kiss. He could have stopped her, though. Couldn’t he?

Furious and embarrassed, Mickey snatched back her sunglasses and leapt onto the bench behind her, then the one beyond that. Another. Another. Lord, for a small stadium, it seemed endless. She couldn’t get out fast enough.

Jack watched her take off. A few seconds passed before he interpreted the look of horror on her face. Realizing the conclusion she’d jumped to, he scrambled to follow her.

“Coach, wait!” He had the advantage of longer legs, but she was being chased by a demon. He gave up trying to explain in private. “We’re divorced, Coach! I’m not married!” he yelled as she hit the top of the stadium, ready to take flight.

His plastic cleats spun on the concrete stairs and he tripped just as he pulled within arm’s reach, calling out as he stumbled, and fell with a thud.

“Jack!” She dropped down beside him, her hands fluttering over him.

“You know my name,” he said in surprise, pain welling as he sought her eyes through the sunglasses she’d shoved back on to free her hands.

“Well, of course I know your name.” She growled the words impatiently. “I’ve been sitting in the stands for weeks. How could I not know your name. Where do you hurt?”

“My right ankle.”

A crowd migrated up the stadium steps. Jack grabbed her hand as she started to move aside when the first baseman, Scott, knelt beside him. “Don’t go,” Jack said to her. “I need to talk to you.”

“You’re in pain.”

“Please. You misunderstood.”

“How’re you doing?” Scott asked as he ran efficient hands down Jack’s leg and ankle.

“Go away,” Jack ordered. “I need to talk to Coach first.”

“Could be broken, buddy. We should get you to the hospital ER.”

“A few minutes’ delay won’t hurt. Back off, Scott. Coach?”

She hovered over him, her expression serious. “I’m really proud of you, Ponytail. You did great.”

“Not Ponytail. Jack.”

She swallowed. “Jack.”

“Now tell me yours.”

“Coach. It’s Coach.”

“I’m not going to see you again, am I?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“I don’t know. It’s a small town.”

“So, we may run into each other, but you’ll still avoid anything more personal.”

“I have to,” she whispered. “I’m sorry. I can’t change it.”

He squeezed her hand; his eyes closed briefly as a wave of pain washed over him. He couldn’t decide which hurt the most—his ankle or the fact he may never see her again. “I can’t ever remember feeling like that about a kiss. And you...you pulled me back for more.”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated helplessly, and he gathered she meant for more than the kiss.

Scott knelt beside him again. “Let’s go.”

He sat up, wincing as his leg was jostled. “Stacy can take me. You go back to the game.”

“Who’s the doctor here?” Scott asked.

Jack’s brows lifted.

“Gynecologists are allowed to treat broken bones, you know.”

“I’ll go with you,” said the third baseman, Drew, leaning over Scott’s shoulder. “You finish the game, Scotty.”

“Oh, great,” Jack muttered. “Will you give me a sucker if I don’t cry?”

“It was patients like you that made me settle on pediatrics,” Drew said, shaking his finger at Jack.

Jack eyed the woman beside him suppressing a smile. “Don’t you dare laugh, Coach.”

She raised her hands, palms out, and shook her head solemnly, although the curve of her mouth belied the attempt at seriousness.

He turned back to the men. “Look, if two of us leave, we’ll have to forfeit the game. If only I go, the game’s legal. It’d be nice to have one in the win column.”

“One of your two entirely competent physician-teammates will accompany you,” Scott said, brooking no argument “Choose.”

Jack focused on Coach. “Fill in, will you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. You can play, I gather.”

“Well, yes, but it’s been a long time—”

“Come on, sub for me. We can bring the outfield rover in to cover first for Scott.”

The umpire announced they had two minutes to get the game started again or he’d call a forfeit. All three men turned to the woman known only as Coach.

“The game’s forfeited if I play. This is a men’s league,” she said.

Jack looked at Scott. “Is that true?”

“I hadn’t thought about it. Yeah, I suppose it is.”

“Look, I was responsible. Why don’t I take him?” she asked.

Once again she was the focus of their appraisal.

“I don’t have my car with me, but I imagine one of you would let me borrow—”

“Mine,” Jack said. “We’ll take mine.” He wasn’t going to give anyone else the opportunity to offer.

After being assured that Scott would call ahead to the ER on his cellular phone, Jack was helped out to the parking lot and into his Jeep by two spectators. He rested his foot carefully on the floorboard and leaned back stiffly. Coach had disappeared while they had negotiated the parking lot, then reappeared beside him before the car door was shut. Carefully, she set an ice-filled towel over his ankle.

“Scott thought it would help,” she said, looking up at him. “Is it too heavy?”

“It’s all right.” Forcing himself to relax, he slumped as she scrambled around the front of the car, climbed in and adjusted the driver’s seat for her shorter legs.

“Can you handle a manual transmission?” he asked as she started the engine, then regretted the question when she turned a you’ve-got-to-be-kidding expression on him. “Sorry. Do you know where the hospital is?”

“On Allendale, isn’t it? Across the street from the minimall?”

“Right.” The question in her voice confirmed his assumption—she hadn’t lived in Gold Creek long. He winced as she hit a speed bump.

Mickey glanced at him after she heard his quickly indrawn breath. “Sorry. Does it hurt a lot?”

He clenched the dashboard. “Let’s see. Should I be a real man and say, ‘Aw, it’s nothing’? Or should I tell you the truth?”

“It hurts like hell?” she ventured, risking a quick look his way as she slowed for a red light.

He closed his eyes. “The ice helps. Thanks.”

She negotiated the streets as slowly as traffic would allow, wishing he would talk more. After all, she was a captive audience. He could ask all the questions he’d been dying to ask. He remained quiet. It drove her crazy.

“Are you furious with me?” she asked finally.

Jack didn’t open his eyes. His silence had accomplished what he had intended: the conversational ball was in her court.

“Should I be?” he asked.

She groaned. “I forgot you were a lawyer. Answer a question with a question. What a lovely tactic.”

He kept his voice deliberately calm. “Do I seem furious with you?”

“I don’t know, Jack. What do you look like when you’re furious?”

He laughed softly at her retort. “The ploy usually works, you know.” He opened his eyes to a squint and enjoyed the sight of her, so close he could touch her if he chose.

“Give it your best shot, Ponytail. I grew up with three exceptionally tricky brothers. I’m prepared for anything.”

“Did they teach you to play baseball?”

“Nope.”

“You said you were out of practice. Does that mean you used to play a lot?”

“Yep.”

One corner of his mouth twitched. Oh, yes, she was tough. And smart, and quick. She’d turned the tables on him very nicely.

Mickey grinned his direction, trying not to gloat. She’d managed to outmaneuver him, but he was being a good sport about it. “Jack—”

“Look out!” he yelled.

She hit the brakes, barely avoiding crashing into the car that had come to a quick stop in front of them. “Are you all right?” she asked hurriedly as he moaned and shifted. She knew he’d hit a phantom brake pedal instinctively, ramming his injured foot against the floorboard.

“Yeah.”

No, she decided, hearing the grittiness of the single word. “Real men can say ‘ow,’ you know.”

He rubbed his chest. “I think you inflicted more pain throwing your arm across me than I did myself with my foot. Are you used to a child sitting next to you or something?”

“No,” she said abruptly, not realizing she’d put an arm protectively, automatically, in front of him. Not anymore, she added in silence. “Once again, I apologize for causing you pain.”

“Want to kiss it and make it better?”

She smiled at the windshield, grateful there wasn’t time to relive the past. “You wish,” she said, tossing a grin his way.

The hospital came into view.

“Coach—”

“I’m going to stop at the emergency entrance and find someone with a wheelchair,” she said, swinging into the well-marked driveway.

“Before you go—”

“Don’t.” She shifted into neutral, and pulled up the emergency brake, then turned to look at him. “It can’t go any further than this. I’m sorry. More sorry than you can imagine.”

“Just tell me why.”

“It’s too complicated.”

“Are you married?”

“Of course not.”

“Significant other?”

“None. I meant it when I said I’m in transition. There’s just me. There can only be me. I’ve really enjoyed the time we’ve shared, though. I hope I wasn’t too hard on you.”

“On the contrary, I’m grateful for your prodding.” He touched her shoulder lightly and trailed his fingers down her arm, crossing from fabric to skin on his journey, then locked his fingers over hers as she clenched the gearshift. “A favor?”

Her body reacted to his touch in ways she had thought dead and forgotten. Breath became hard to control; her pulse went from zero to sixty in less than five seconds; even her breasts swelled. She watched him take note of her response, one visible reaction at a time, which served only to make her breathing more shallow, her pulse speed uninhibited down an empty freeway and the tips of her breasts harden painfully.

His voice turned to velvet. “Could we share one kiss in private?”

She didn’t want to give him permission, but to relinquish responsibility to him and not be able to blame herself later. She wanted him just to take. He waited patiently for her to answer.

Jack heard the whisper of a yes only because he was watching her mouth. Not in any hurry, he pushed the bill of her cap around and pulled off her sunglasses. The pupils of her eyes constricted in the sunlight as he watched; her lips parted. Slowing his need, he pressed his mouth to the tender skin below her ear and felt her quivering response. Sliding his mouth along her jaw, he heard her whispered encouragement.

“Yes. Oh, God. Yes,” she breathed, exciting him beyond his dreams with her need.

First came the arousing feel of her lips against his, soft and fiery, then a sudden stillness as she held her breath, then a slow exhale accompanied by the slightest taste of an inquisitive tongue. She glided a shaking hand up his arm to his shoulder; her fingers dug into him. Oh, yes, this was heaven, he thought, curiosity somersaulting into desire as he slanted their mouths differently to deepen the kiss. We fit perfectly. The revelation meandered through his mind as they pulled each other closer across the center console. He slid his palm to her throat, felt the hammering pulse, then glided down—

Someone knocked on the windshield.

“You the one Doc Lansing called about?” a uniformed attendant asked through the glass.

Murder came to mind. Jack nodded in the affirmative, but his gaze stayed on Coach, who seemed to be taking a long time drifting down from her own clouds. “Who are you?” he asked her as the attendant pushed a wheelchair around to the passenger side of the car.

Her hands shaking, she fitted her sunglasses back in place and lifted her cap to turn it around and resettle it. “I’ll park your car and leave your keys with the ER receptionist.”

He couldn’t say goodbye, so he brushed a hand down her cheek and turned from her to shift himself into the wheelchair. He never looked back.

Mickey watched him disappear through the electric doors, then leaned her forehead against the steering wheel for a minute to get her bearings.

His kiss should be labeled by the government as hazardous to one’s health, for surely her temperature had elevated to a life-threatening degree. She leaned back and blew out a breath, her arms stiff, her hands locked on the steering wheel. He would be a significant roadblock in her need for independence. Too significant. She shoved the car into first gear.

After finding a parking place nearby, she sat on a bench under a tree for more than half an hour, giving him a chance to be taken into a room, then she climbed the ramp and entered the hospital. She glanced furtively around her but the waiting room yawned empty. She swept off her hat as she approached the reception window. “Excuse me,” she said to the woman working at a computer behind the counter.

“Yes? May I help you?”

“I, ah, I wanted to know about a patient who was just brought in with an ankle injury.”

“Are you a relative?”

“No. Just a...friend. Is he all right?”

“Let me check. Have a seat, okay?”

Mickey sank onto a bench. Dropping her cap on the table beside her, she picked up a magazine and flipped through it, seeing only a blur of words and pictures. Stark images of her last visit to a hospital emergency room flashed before her eyes. I’m sorry. There’s nothing we can do. Sorry... Nothing... Sorry...

Nothing.

The door from the ER parking lot whooshed open, startling her. She brushed a weary hand down her face and stood as Scott Lansing approached.

“How’s he doing?” he asked, his eyes asking questions he must have sensed she wouldn’t answer.

“I don’t know. He’s inside. Did you win?”

“Amazingly, we did. I’ll go check on him.”

“Wait.” Mickey caught his arm. From her pocket she dug out a set of keys. “Give these to him, please. I’ll be on my way.”

He hefted the keys lightly. “Hang tight. I’ll see how he is.”

After a few minutes, he returned. “We haven’t been introduced.” He extended his hand in greeting. “I’m Scott Lansing.”

“Yes, I know. How is he?”

“Ornery.”

“Please.” She realized how pathetic she sounded when the man dropped his attempt at humor and started speaking in soothing doctor tones.

“He’s going to be just fine. No break, just a bad sprain. You can go see him, if you want. He’s having his crutches fitted, then he can leave.”

She had to get out of here, away from the reminders, away from the past. “I...can’t stay. Tell him...tell him I’m glad he’s all right. And I’m sorry I caused him to be hurt.”

“Why don’t you tell him yourself?”

She could hear Jack’s voice as he called thanks to someone, then the sound of the electric doors swinging open. She took three steps back, turned and ran.

Jack concentrated on negotiating the metal crutches through the door, and looked up only in time to catch a glimpse of Coach's tempting backside. He glanced at Scott.

"Stubborn as you, Jack, old buddy. Do you want to go to Chung Li's or home?"

Jack moved toward the glass exit door, but she was already out of sight. "Pizza, I guess."

"Sit down for a second while I pick up your prescription. Elevate that foot."

Jack maneuvered himself to a cushioned bench. Beside him on the low table laden with well-used magazines sat an L.A. Seagulls baseball cap. He picked it up and turned it in his hands. Coach's? It had to be. He checked it for a name tag; finding none, he lifted it to his face and breathed in the sweet, subtle fragrance of shampoo that lingered in the fabric. His body reacted with lightning speed to the scent, to the remembered taste of her mouth and her uncontrolled response. If they'd just had a little more time alone in the car, maybe he could have convinced her to trust him, or at least to meet with him again.

He spun the cap that his reluctant Cinderella had left behind. Folding it, he jammed it into his waistband, knowing he had to find her. Ignoring his long-trusted intuition, which told him he was inviting trouble by searching her out, he decided she was a woman in need of a happy ending. And he'd make a helluva Prince Charming.

Four

Mickey stood in the courtyard absorbing the beauty of the community college campus, an award-winning school praised for its overall design and lush landscaping. Climbing ivy and leafy trees cleverly screened concrete and stucco buildings; flowering shrubs edged brick pathways weaving through the campus grounds. No city sounds intruded. The college was a community unto itself.

The frantic, disorganized first week of the semester was over; her second week of teaching had begun. Last Monday, she'd been able to look forward to the batting lesson with Jack at the end of her first day of teaching. Now all that faced her was her new Monday, Wednesday and Friday routine: four classes of algebra, followed by an hour for lunch, then two hours tutoring in the math lab. She would have papers to grade in the evening, lessons to plan and individual counseling where needed—nothing overly demanding, nothing that would too quickly awaken long-dead emotions, just a gradual return to life.

She had forgotten how much she enjoyed teaching, had forgotten the pleasure of communicating with curious students, how satisfying it was to see awareness dawn on the face of someone who grasped a concept that a moment earlier had been a puzzle.

"Hey, Ms. Morrison," someone called, coming up behind her as she stared at the koi swimming in the fish pond, the showcase of the school's courtyard.

She lifted her head and turned, then recognized the young man she'd just tutored in the lab. "Hey, Greg," she responded, smiling at the infectious grin on his face. "Good work today."

"It clicked, you know?"

"Drop by again on Wednesday, if you can. I think you can catch up in a hurry." Her gaze shifted to a man making his way on crutches past them. He looked up from focusing on the path before him and stared at her, surprised.

"I'll be there," Greg said, walking backward. "Thanks a lot."

Mickey blinked, breaking the intensity of the gaze with the man who had haunted her dreams for days. Haltingly, she said goodbye to Greg and watched as he jogged across the courtyard. He had been out of sight for seconds before she reluctantly faced forward again. "Jack," she whispered.

Jack positioned a crutch on each side of her, trapping her between him and the koi pond. His head an inch from hers, he breathed in the now-familiar scent of her shampoo. His gaze took in her blond pixie hair and startled brandy-colored eyes. Even without touching her, he could feel the tautness of her body, clothed this time in a blue-and-white striped tailored blouse and matching blue slacks. "You work here," he stated, noting the briefcase she carried.

He saw her glance in silent question at his own soft-sided satchel tied to the handle of his right crutch. "I volunteer legal aid, and I occasionally speak to classes on topics that I have some expertise in," he told her. "How about you?"

"I teach algebra," she replied, clearly uncomfortable at having to answer.

He pulled back in surprise and studied her face, her identity becoming blindingly clear. "Your name wouldn't happen to be Mickey Morrison, would it?"

Her eyes widened in obvious shock. "How do you know that?"

His tenant! All these weeks, and she'd been living a hundred yards from him. Damn it all, what luck! He grinned. "I thought you knew my name."

"I know your first name."

"I'm Jack Stone."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"It should."

"Why?"

"The name Jack Stone doesn't ring any bells?" he pressed.

"Tell me why it should."

Ignoring her demand, he slid a hand into his satchel and withdrew her L.A. Seagulls baseball cap. She started to take it from him, but he yanked it out of reach. "Not so fast. You stayed at the hospital for almost an hour. Obviously, you were worried about me. Why didn't you at least stay long enough to talk to me?"

"I told you. There can't be anything between us. Don't keep forcing the issue."

He used his most soothing voice, one he'd cultivated to pull information from reluctant clients and witnesses. "I know you're in some kind of trouble. Whatever it is, let me help you."

Mickey dipped her head. Lord, spare me from chauvinistic men, she thought, suddenly finding her sense of humor now that the shock of his knowing who she was had settled in. "Look, you can't tell anyone, okay?" she said, her voice hushed and deep.

He leaned closer. "Of course."

She glanced around surreptitiously. "I escaped a white slavery ring."

"What?!"

"There were twenty of us, being guarded by a eunuch. He fell in love with me." She sighed dramatically. "He helped me—"

Jack laughed, then plopped her cap backward on her head. "I get the message, loud and clear, Coach."

"Do you?"

"Whatever's bothering you isn't criminal, right?"

"What made you think otherwise?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"Call it jumping to conclusions after years in a business where being suspicious is part of the job description."

"Yet you were willing to help me, even if I'd done something—"

"I didn't think you'd done anything. I just thought you were in some kind of trouble." He backed up, providing her an escape route. "I can see you want to get on your way."

Mickey frowned. He was giving up far too easily. She pulled the baseball cap off her head and ran her fingers through her hair. She was mesmerized by the intensity of the beautiful dark blue eyes directed on her, holding her hostage even after granting her freedom. "Thanks for returning this."

"I've carried that with me everywhere I've gone these past four days. I went to the grocery store and opened shampoo bottles until found which one matched the scent in your cap, just because I needed to know. Even getting caught was worth the embarrassment."

"You...you got caught? Sniffing shampoos in the store?" She tried very hard not to laugh.

He grinned. “Yeah, by a smug teenaged boy who stood there with his arms folded across his chest until I loaded every bottle I’d opened into a shopping cart and then followed me to make sure I bought them. But I needed to know everything I could about you. This cap was all I had. It’s hard now to give it up.”

She swallowed. No one had ever laid siege to her before. She wasn’t the kind of woman men saw as a sex object. She was just Mickey, the woman whom people asked directions of, whom weekend daddies trusted to take their daughters safely into public rest rooms. She looked harmless. She was harmless. She was not the femme fatale that Jack seemed to be projecting her to be.

Jack could see he’d flustered her, although he was mature enough not to gloat. He knew who she was. He knew how to find her. He could let her go—for now. “So long, Coach,” he said, maneuvering his crutches past her.

“Wait a minute, Jack Stone,” she called. “Tell me why I should know you.”

“You just think about it,” he called back, grinning. “I’ll be seeing you.”

Mickey wrenched open the jar of fish bait and sniffed. Ugh! What an atrocious odor. Fish Love It! Guaranteed To Attract Even The Most Elusive, the store display had promised, while the jar label warned it was not for human consumption. As if anyone in their right mind would want to taste it!

She held the jar at arm’s length, her nose wrinkling and eyes squinting. Dipping her thumb and two fingers into the jar, she extracted a smidgen of bait. The texture of clay, it rolled easily into a ball she could press onto the hook. She stared at her hand when the task was done, then dipped it in the water before resolutely wiping it on the ground, hoping the dirt would mask any lingering scent.

Inexpertly, she cast the lure into the pool. Not happy with the location, she reeled it back in and tried again, twice, until she was satisfied with where it fell. She settled down on the bank, leaned against a boulder and finally relaxed enough to let her mind wander.

Jack Stone. Why should his name be familiar to her? What did he know that she didn’t? He hadn’t been off her mind all afternoon, not as she had driven home from work, or changed into denim cutoffs, T-shirt and slip-on sneakers, or gathered up her brand-new fishing gear before hiking down to the stream behind her house.

He knew her name now, and where she worked. She waited for the trepidation to come with the knowledge that he could find her easily. She felt only a glow spreading through her body. It wasn’t thoughts of Jack, she rationalized, but the five o’clock summer sun spilling through the leafy shelter of trees that was warming her. She closed her eyes and let the heat seep into her, relaxing, healing and even a little arousing. Her body began to tingle, much like a leg that has fallen asleep coming back to life with pinpricks of pleasure-pain.

As she heard the jangle of dog tags and the patter of paws, she opened her eyes slowly, reluctant to stop her body’s awakening.

“Woof!” The golden retriever barked in greeting as he nuzzled her neck with his wet nose and gave her a slow doggie kiss up her cheek.

“Woof to you, too, Flee,” Mickey said, smiling and fending off his affectionate caresses. She’d made friends with the beautiful dog over the past couple of weeks, discovering his name on one of his tags, his address identifying him as her landlord’s pet.

She really should go over and introduce herself, she thought for probably the twentieth time. But the woman at the property management company that had handled her lease said he was gone frequently, which was why he’d contracted the company to take care of the details. If Mickey had any problems, she was to direct them to the company, not to her landlord. She figured he wanted as much privacy as she did.

She liked his dog, though, who offered undemanding companionship.

“Flee, you mangy mutt!” a man’s voice called, accompanied by the sound of leaves being crushed underfoot in a slow, awkward cadence. “If you knock me down one more time, I swear I’ll—”

Mickey dropped her fishing pole and scrambled to her feet as the man about to issue a dire threat came into view. “Jack!” she gasped, watching as he caught sight of her and grinned. He negotiated his crutches over and around rocks, twigs and bumpy terrain to come up beside her.

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