Silhouette®

1543
September

Marrying for a Mom

DEANNA TALCOTT

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SILHOUETTE Romance®

Deanna Talcott

Marrying For A Mom

«HarperCollins»

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When dashing single dad Logan Monroe strode into her gift shop seeking a special teddy bear for his foster daughter, Whitney Bloom's heart did a tap dance. Secretly smitten with Logan in her youth, she was irresistibly drawn back into his life– and joined his loving crusade to keep custody of his precious child. But she never expected to propose!Whirled into a fairy-tale wedding to the man of her dreams, instant mom to adorable Amanda, Whitney, who'd long ached for a family of her own, felt as if all her fantasies were finally coming true. Except, those fantasies had never included settling for a platonic union. And deep down, Whitney feared true happiness would always elude her…unless she won Logan's love!

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Содержание

Marrying for a Mom 6
Books by DeAnna Talcott 7
DEANNA TALCOTT 8
Contents 9
Chapter One 10
Chapter Two 17
Chapter Three 21
Chapter Four 28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 30

"I love that kid so much—so damn much—"

Logan said, "that the thought of losing her just…"

A hard, hot lump formed in Whitney's throat. God knows, she'd do anything for Logan Monroe. All he had to do was ask.

"I'll find a replacement for the special teddy bear your little foster daughter lost," she said. "I promise."

"Can you believe I'm looking high and low for a teddy bear?" Logan asked. "Sometimes I think it would be easier just to find myself a wife. Maybe that would make the adoption caseworker happy."

Whitney stared into Logan's blue eyes, and the most unimaginable, awesome thought crossed her mind. She had to bite her lip, and her cheeks ached from trying not to smile as she considered offering herself up as the sacrificial lamb.

But could she bring herself to say it? Could she actually…propose?

Dear Reader,

September is here again, bringing the end of summer—but not the end of relaxing hours spent with a good book. This month Silhouette brings you six new Romance novels that will fill your leisure hours with pleasure. And don't forget to see how Silhouette Books makes you a star!

First, Myrna Mackenzie continues the popular MAITLAND MATERNITY series with A Very Special Delivery, when Laura Maitland is swept off her feet on the way to the delivery room! Then we're off to DESTINY, TEXAS, where, in This Kiss, a former plain Jane returns home to teach the class heartthrob a thing or two about chemistry. Don't miss this second installment of Teresa Southwick's exciting series. Next, in Cinderella After Midnight, the first of Lilian Darcy's charming trilogy THE CINDERELLA CONSPIRACY, we go to a ball with "Lady Catrina"—who hasn't bargained on a handsome millionaire seeing through her disguise….

Whitney Bloom's dreams come true in DeAnna Talcott's Marrying for a Mom, when she marries the man she loves—even if only to keep custody of his daughter. In Wed by a Will, the conclusion of THE WEDDING LEGACY, reader favorite Cara Colter brings together a new family—and reunites us with other members. Then, a prim and proper businesswoman finds she wants a lot more from the carpenter who's remodeling her house than watertight windows in Gail Martin's delightful Her Secret Longing.

Be sure to return next month for Stella Bagwell's conclusion to MAITLAND MATERNITY and the start of a brand-new continuity—HAVING THE BOSS'S BABY! Beloved author Judy Christenberry launches this wonderful series with When the Lights Went Out… Don't miss any of next month's wonderful tales.

Happy reading!

Mary-Theresa Hussey
Senior Editor

Marrying for a Mom
DeAnna Talcott

www.millsandboon.co.uk

Dedicated to the memory of Jeanne Breaugh, and the LaSenorita bunch she mentored—Lisa, Joyce, Dickee, Lana, Diane and Marjorie. They labor over words, plots and GMC while taking a few sneaky time-outs to turn down the volume of the mariachi music.

Books by DeAnna Talcott

Silhouette Romance
The Cowboy and the Christmas Tree #1125
The Bachelor and the Bassinet #1189
To Wed Again? #1206
The Triplet's Wedding Wish #1370
Marrying for a Mom #1543

DEANNA TALCOTT

grew up in rural Nebraska, where her love of reading was fostered in a one-room school. It was there she first dreamed of writing the kinds of books that would touch people's hearts. Her dream became a reality when not one, but two of her Silhouette Romance novels won Readers' Choice Awards. Those books also earned her a slot as a Romantic Times Magazine nominee, while The Bachelor and the Bassinet was named as one of Romantic Times Magazine's Top Picks.

DeAnna claims that a retired husband, three children, two dogs and a matching pair of alley cats make her life in mid-Michigan particularly interesting. When not writing, or talking about writing, she scrounges in flea markets to indulge #1 son's quest for vintage toys, relaxes at #2 son's Eastern Michigan football and baseball games, and insists, to her daughter, that two cats simply do not need to multiply!

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter One

Whitney Bloom paused, then reached over to readjust Byron's handcrafted sweater. Byron, Whitney's favorite teddy bear, occupied the spot next to the cash register in her specialty store, Teddy Bear Heaven. Like a silent partner, he'd spent the last six years listening to all her hopes and dreams, and commiserating with all her disappointments.

"You know what?" she whispered to Byron. "If we work our fingers to the bone this summer, we could be solvent in six months." Levering her elbows against the counter, she threaded her ankles around the stool rungs and raised slightly off the wooden stool she sat on. She picked up another bolt, convinced she'd have the teddy bear-size park bench assembled in record time. "I predict—" she paused for dramatic effect, and waved the screwdriver "—that there will be a bumper crop of tourists in Melville this summer, and every one will want—no, need—a teddy bear to take home to their kids. In fact, right at this very minute, someone, somewhere, is thinking that what they really need is a teddy bear to cuddle and love."

The bell over the front door tinkled. Whitney looked up, astonished to think her prediction had come true, and promptly lost her balance. The bolt she had just picked up skittered across the wide plank flooring.

From across the room, and with the sun at his back, a man's silhouette reached over the hardwood flooring, nearly to the glass case she was sitting behind. As he stepped into her showroom, Whitney recognized the wide shoulders and lean arms, the tapered waist and muscular thighs.

Logan Monroe.

Two heartbeats of dead silence followed, and a million uninvited memories made Whitney's knees buckle.

Suddenly her heart did a little tap dance, just as it did every time she saw him. The heel-toe combination made her go weak all over. Then, Logan flashed her the famous Monroe smile—the same one the Melville Post routinely printed in the Sunday edition of the want ads. The copy beneath his photo never changed, and she should know because she read it faithfully: Logan Monroe, Realtor, specializing in vacation properties for Melville, Lake Justice and the southeastern Tennessee area.

Whitney's composure plummeted. Her stomach turned inside out. Her mouth went dry and her heart pounded. Whitney hadn't seen Logan in twelve years; saying she was tongue-tied would be an understatement.

"Hey, sorry about that," Logan said easily, without really looking at her. When he doubled over to pick the bolt up off the floor, Whitney stared at the smooth arc of his shoulders, aware his clothes looked loose on him, as if he'd lost a little weight. "I didn't mean to startle you." He sidestepped the child-size teddy bear table and chair set that was in the middle of the crowded room, and laid the bolt on the counter.

Whitney gazed at it, half-afraid to pick it up for fear she would drop it all over again. The muscles in her shoulders constricted.

Logan didn't really look at her, his gaze was fixed on the shelves behind her, where the expensive collector bears and one-of-a-kinds were housed. "I'm looking for a bear."

With only six feet between them, Whitney realized Logan still looked the same. Only older. Better.

He still carried his six-foot-four frame with the same self-confidence. His hair—one shade darker than tobacco—was now sheared straight, and closely cropped. His angular face and thick jaw complemented brows that were perfectly matched slashes over cobalt eyes. His nose was narrow at the bridge, his nostrils, wide and thick. His mouth was full, and had a tendency to twitch when amused.

"Then you've come to the right place," Whitney managed to say as Logan started moving around the counter.

He stopped, turning on his heel. From behind a rack of teddy bear barrettes and hair clips, Logan shimmied a glance in her direction.

Whitney noted the faint smile lines fanning from the corners of his eyes and shivered. He was despicably good-looking, that's what he was. Despicably good-looking.

"Whitney…?" he said as a flicker of recognition sparked behind his eyes. His mouth had worked its way around her name, whispering it softly, as if in disbelief. "Oh, my God, Whit…is it you?"

She nodded slowly, her breath shallow. She briefly debated whether she should offer up an apology for what had happened all those years ago or just forget it. She wondered how much he remembered.

"Damn. Why didn't you say something?"

She guiltily lifted both shoulders. "I don't know. When you came in the door, I didn't think you'd ever look at me. Really look, I mean. And then I didn't know if I should…because…"

"Whitney. C'mon," he chided. Then he took her in. From the top of her professionally highlighted, chin-length cut, to the gold bracelet on her wrist, and the pearl studs in her ears. His gaze lingered on the understated elegance of her sweater and matching slacks before his jaw slid off center. "I'm looking," he said. "And I mean really, really looking," he emphasized.

Whitney's smile grew more tentative. "It's been a long time, Logan."

"It has. Too long, Whit."

Still, the uncertainty of their past hung between them. Harsh words, threats, and accusations had all been rolled up into their last goodbye. It had been a nasty scene. Logan had been outraged, Whitney defensive. To make matters worse, her ex-husband had offered up a dozen feeble excuses as to why Logan's books didn't balance and his petty cash was missing. It had been the only time Whitney had ever heard Logan raise his voice; it had been the only time Whitney had ever let anyone but Gram see her cry.

They both stood there, awkwardly, both unsure of what to say.

"Hey, look—"

"I always wanted to—"

They both laughed self-consciously, both biting back apologies.

"Okay. This is crazy. Look. I feel like I should hug you or something…" He lifted his arms, awkwardly, as if he didn't know the correct protocol for when old friends, who were no longer friends, let time patch up their differences.

He glanced down at the glass counter standing between them.

For a second, a long-held fantasy went winging through Whitney's head. Logan, a superhero, would leap over the barriers that separated them, then sweep her into his arms. Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive. He could fix anything, he could move mountains, he could mend hearts.

Shaking herself free of the daydream, Whitney took it upon herself to make something happen: she slid from the stool and extended her hand.

For a moment, everything seemed disjointed. Like pieces that were trying to fit back together again. Her gold bracelet glittered beneath the overhead fluorescent lighting, and her French manicured nails made her fingers appear long and slender and cultured.

They both knew she wasn't. Cultured, that is. In Melville, she'd been raised on the "other" side of the tracks.

His hand reached for hers. The bones in his wrist were thick, his knuckles dimpled. The smattering of dark hair over the back of his hand was sexy, evoking powerful images of strength and wealth and confidence.

They had no business joining hands—and she had no business feeling the way she did about him. Especially after everything that had happened.

"Whitney." Logan clasped her fingers, then covered the back of her hand with his palm as she came around the counter. A liquid warmth spread through her, convincing her the past was forgotten, that he was genuinely pleased to see her. "You look—" his gaze slipped down her front, all the way to her skimmers "—great." When he lifted his eyes, their gaze caught and held. "Wonderful," he amended. "Absolutely, positively stunning."

Whitney's smile softened, and she felt a rush of heat, from the inside out.

"You know," he reminded, "we've got a lot of history together."

"And not all of it good." She couldn't help herself, the truth had to come out.

Logan grimaced, then gave her fingers a light squeeze before reluctantly loosening them. "Hey. Remember the time we connected on that pitching mound at the company picnic, and my watch did a number on your chin?" he asked, intentionally changing the subject.

Her forefinger automatically flicked over the spot. "How could I forget three stitches and a tetanus?"

He critically eyed the tiny white scar, and his hands moved as if they had a will of their own, to capture her jaw between thumb and forefinger, and angle the spot closer for his inspection. "I practically mowed you down, going after that fly ball." Logan distinctly remembered how she'd crumpled beneath him, all soft, in a flurry of fighting limbs. The scent of leather gloves and dirt and diamond dust, and the thwunk as her chin connected with his wrist. But the worst was, after they'd collided, her husband yanked her up off the ground, dusted her off and told Logan not to worry, no damage. He'd had to remind himself to forget it, to tell himself it was none of his business, that she was married and that she belonged to someone else. Then he'd had to beat back the regrets. "The insurance cover three stitches and a tetanus?"

Whitney started to shake her head, but stopped, not wanting to break from his touch. "It doesn't matter. It was a long time ago."

The intensity of his blue gaze held her, as if he were trying to absorb her and look into her soul. A tremulous anxiety clutched Whitney, making her falter, making her breathing erratic.

"Logan?" she finally whispered.

"It…um…it left a mark," he murmured, refocusing on her chin, as his thumb gently flicked over the tiny cleft.

"It barely shows."

His fingers fell away. "Still…the physical evidence remains. We've had more brushes with fate than any two people should have to endure."

The moment—and the references—were awkward.

Whitney's smile thinned. Logan deftly changed the subject. Again.

"Damn, I've driven by this place a hundred times. I can't believe you own it."

"Lease it," Whitney qualified.

"So…" he said softly, considering. "You're the teddy bear lady."

Whitney tipped her head. "Please. Don't you dare say it's cute. I love it, but it's a business and it pays the bills. I have every kind and type of teddy bear you could ever imagine."

"I guess you do." Logan swept the room with an all-inclusive look. It was jam-packed with teddy bears. Teddy bear toothbrushes swung on a revolving display, and teddy bear books were wedged on teddy bear bookshelves. There were teddy bear clocks, jewelry, stationery and stickers. Teddy bear erasers, pencils, pens and rulers. Framed prints, and bath accessories. Even shower curtains, regular curtains, blankets and rugs. He chuckled, his smile riding a tad bit higher on the left. "But I never intended to say 'cute.' I'm impressed. It's a great concept. When I look around, I'm inclined to buy the store out."

"What? And reduce my inventory?" she asked dryly.

"Whitney, this place is great. And it's just like you to think of something this clever."

The praise startled Whitney, putting a pink flush in her cheeks.

"What?" he asked, mimicking her. "Am I embarrassing you?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I mean it. You were the one who always came up with the most creative ideas in high school. You were the one with the interesting slant on life."

"Out of necessity."

"Right. Like the time you suggested that instead of having a formal banquet for the National Honor Society, we have a picnic? That was the best day ever, and you were responsible for it. A whole day at the beach, playing Frisbee, and volleyball, and splashing around."

A shred of guilt crept into Whitney's conscience; she'd suggested the idea because she didn't have the twenty-five dollars for the banquet ticket.

"And what about that idea you had for prom? Fifties night at the Peppermint Lounge? We got by decorating with peppermint sticks, borrowed a jukebox and used the rest of the money in the treasury for catering the senior banquet so it didn't cost any of us a cent." A second guilty flush prickled over the back of Whitney's neck. She'd intended to go, and wear an old fifties formal Gram had tucked away in the attic. "And to top it off," he went on, "after you came up with the idea, you never even went to the prom. I specifically went looking for you, to con you out of one dance."

Whitney shrugged, her smile tight as she minimized the details. "Gram's health was kind of up and down just then."

Logan sobered. "You always did have a lot of responsibility looking after her."

"Logan. She was looking after me."

"I think," he said slowly, "you looked after each other." He chuckled, as another memory hit him. "Your gram was something else, though. I'll never forget how she rode all over Melville on that three-wheel bike of hers."

Whitney shifted uncomfortably; Gram had ridden a bicycle because they couldn't afford a car. The truth was, Whitney and Logan had hung out with different crowds, and had literally been from opposite sides of the have/have-not world.

Logan had lived in a big house on the hill, and spent his summers tanning at the country club. His parents owned several car dealerships, and made sure their only son never lacked for a thing. He'd loved playing the part of the big, brash jock, and had run around Melville in a brand-new sports car, making sure he was noticed on every intersection by revving his engine and waving at all the girls.

Whitney, raised by her grandmother, had lived in a rented bungalow just off of Main. It was a dilapidated little house, with a barren scrap of a front yard, and a painted tractor tire that held a few scraggly petunias. Whitney never invited friends in because they stared at the black spots on the linoleum, the water rings on the drop ceiling, and the peeling wallpaper in the front room. Still, she loved Gram dearly, and it would have cut her to the quick to have anyone say Gram hadn't provided for her.

Without warning, Logan reached across her, to skim the tiny teddy bear charm from around her neck and balance it on the pad of his forefinger. The fine gold chain swayed beneath her chin, pulling slightly.

"Just like this shop…" he said, catching Whitney's eye. This close, the sloe-dark color on her eyelids was fascinating. He leaned closer, thinking she smelled like a crazy mixture of vanilla and fabric softener. The links in the necklace, draped over the hollow of her throat, rolled up and down with every breath she took. "Details. Perfect details, Whit. Only you could pull this off."

"Maybe. But teddy bears aren't as fancy as real estate, or owning car dealerships or a marina, so—"

"No," he said quickly, letting the teddy bear charm fall from the tip of his finger. "It fits. Only you could do something this memorable. Something that would touch people and put a soft spot in their heart."

Whitney shuddered. Matters of the heart were the last thing she wanted to discuss. Especially with Logan Monroe. “Okay, Logan,” she said unsteadily, “I know you didn’t come in here to give me warm fuzzies, and admire my shop. What’s up?”

Logan’s mouth quirked, but the light in his eyes slowly faded. “I came in here to replace a teddy bear,” he said, his tone subtly changing. “I should have done it months ago, but…hey, look,” he went on, his voice suddenly lifting, “I want to show you something. In fact, I’m proud to show you this little something….” Logan reached in his back pocket and pulled out his wallet, flipping through the plastic windows. On the opposite side, a sliver of plastic showed: American Express Platinum.

Whitney blanched, thinking how some things—even a piece of plastic—can put you in your place. In her wallet, she carried only one low-limit credit card to the local discount store. It had been all she could do to get this store off the ground, and every cent she’d had she put back into the business. For a year, she’d slept on a rollaway in the back room and cooked on a hot plate.

“Here,” he announced, pausing at the photo of a little girl perched on a wicker rocker. Her legs were crossed at the ankles, and in her hands, and propped over her shoulder, an exquisite lace parasol framed the tangle of flaxen curls cascading over her shoulders. “I had this taken for my wife two years ago. For Mother’s Day.”

Whitney couldn’t breathe. “Your daughter?” she said numbly. She knew Logan had married a girl from Memphis, but she hadn’t known they’d had a child.

“My foster daughter.”

“The bear’s for her,” Whitney guessed, vaguely hearing his clarification.

He nodded. “See?” he said. “That’s the bear she always used to carry around. The photographer propped it against the chair because Amanda insisted it had to be in the picture. She never went anywhere without it.”

Amanda. Her name was Amanda.

“She’s darling, Logan.”

His smile was full and proud. “Thanks. And I want a teddy bear just like that.”

Whitney started, and swiveled toward Logan. “That may not be possible,” she warned before squinting back at the photo. She wasn’t able to make out any real details, but there were thousands of styles of teddy bears, and hundreds of manufacturers with their own distinctive signature.

“I don’t think it was very unusual, probably the dime-store variety, but I want the exact same thing.” He paused, before going on to explain, “She lost it…the day my wife died.”

Whitney slowly lifted her eyes, pinning him. She tried to detect his grief, but only saw carefully veiled shadows in his faintly lined face. “I’m so sorry, Logan…about your wife. I should have offered my condolences first, before we started talking. The moment you walked in the door, I should have said…”

He held up a hand, stopping her. “No, that’s okay. Two more months and it’ll be a year. I’m getting used to it. No one could have predicted an aneurysm, not in someone that young…It was a shock, but…I don’t talk about it much.”

“Still…I should have sent a card.”

An uncomfortable second of silence slipped away.

“Why didn’t you?” he asked bluntly after a moment.

“I—I didn’t know if you’d want to hear from me,” she said honestly.

He stared at her, as if measuring his response before uttering it. “Whitney. Forget it. The thing with your husband has been over with for a long time.”

“My ex-husband,” she said quietly.

The wallet he held dropped a fraction of an inch. “Oh? I always wondered. I just didn’t think it would be good to—you know…” He didn’t say it, but she knew. It wouldn’t be a good idea to fraternize in any way, shape, or form with the wife of a small town, small time crook. Especially after you threatened to press charges for dipping into the petty cash.

"I found out you weren't the first employer he took advantage of. He worked at the grocery and filched steaks from the freezer. He worked at the gas station and helped himself to gas from the pumps."

"If I could have avoided firing him, I would have, Whitney."

"I know that."

"You don't sound convinced."

She shrugged. "This is hard for me, Logan. You do me a favor by offering him a job, and then he repays you by letting a few twenties attach themselves to his fingers."

"It was a long time ago, Whit," he said brusquely. "We'd both be better off to put it in the past. In the whole scheme of things it really isn't important."

Right. One deplorable incident. Gone, but not entirely forgotten.

Whitney took a deep, cleansing breath, reminding herself that whatever followed between her and Logan was business, and business only. "So," she said, "tell me about this bear."

He pulled the photo back into their line of vision. "I thought maybe you might have something… in the store…"

Whitney shook her head. She should have studied the bear, but instead her gaze was drawn to the child. "I don't think so. But we can look. I'll flip over the Closed sign and, even if it takes all night, you can go through my inventory."

That wheedled a small, sad smile from him. He slowly closed the wallet, as if considering her offer.

"She's a darling little girl, Logan," Whitney said carefully. "I had no idea you were a daddy."

"Yeah. We got her when she was about three years old. So I honestly think of her as my daughter. I love her as if—as if—" Logan's voice dried up, and he suddenly choked over the sentence he couldn't bring himself to say.

As if she were your daughter, Whitney silently finished for him. She studied him, fascinated. For a devil-may-care personality, he had the kindest heart. Always had. "Logan?" she queried, summoning the courage to touch him, to lay her hand on his forearm. "What is it?"

Logan's eyes closed, shutting her out of his pain. He twisted slightly at the waist, and her hand dropped away, as he put the wallet back into his pocket. "We were in the process of adopting her, but there was a lot of red tape. It took us a long time to find the biological parents and when we located them, the father agreed to relinquish his rights—but the mother kept changing her mind. Then, last year, the mother finally signed away her rights and the adoption was in the final stages. But then Jill died, leaving me as a single father, and now the agency is stalling. The caseworker says my company takes too much of my time, and that they feel it's in Amanda's best interest to be raised in a two-parent household. She told me last week they have a couple who inquired about adopting an older child, preferably a girl. She left me with the feeling that they could remove Amanda from the house. Maybe within the next few weeks."

Whitney went limp all over. She knew what is was like to be jerked out of one home and dropped into another. Her mother had experimented with boyfriends, and communes, and middle-of-the-night flights from unpaid landlords and unfortunate affairs. "Oh, Logan, I'm so sorry. If there's anything I can do…."

"You can. Help me get this bear for Amanda before they take her away. I don't want her to think I'm abandoning her. Hell, I'd do anything to keep her."

"Does she have any idea?"

Logan shook his head. "The social worker's intimated things to her, suggested that maybe she would like another house, with a new mommy…"

Whitney groaned, the small of her back sinking against the counter. "No. Tell me she didn't say that?"

"Yeah," he said grimly. "She did. I suppose she meant well. But Amanda will be traumatized if they take her away. She's too young to remember her life prior to living with us. We're all she's ever known."

Whitney's vision blurred. She vividly remembered a grocery sack full of clothes, a nonchalant goodbye and a pat on the head from her mother.

"Sure, as a single dad, I've had a few mishaps along the way," he confided. "But I've learned from them. I've even learned how to make fifteen nutritious variations of canned spaghetti."

"Nutritious canned spaghetti?" She couldn't help it—she laughed.

He lifted an apologetic shoulder. "On the food chain, it's one notch above tuna, or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches."

Whitney had to bite her bottom lip. Her cheeks ached from trying not to smile. Her mother had never even cared enough to even open a can of tuna, let alone slap peanut butter on a slice of bread.

"Whitney, listen to me," he said earnestly. "If I replace that bear, and Amanda's taken away, it'll give her a connection to something she loved. She needs to know that no matter what happens, I'm there for her. I love that kid so much—so damn much—that the thought of losing her, just…."

A hot, hard lump swelled in Whitney's throat; she willed her response to be firm, not shaky. God knows, she'd do anything for Logan. All he had to do was ask. "I can tell you right now I don't have anything like it in the store. But I'll find it," Whitney said. "I promise."

"Can you believe this? Can you believe I'm looking for a teddy bear?" he asked humorlessly. "Sometimes I think it would just be easier to find myself a wife. Maybe that would make the caseworker happy."

Whitney stared into the depths of his ice-blue eyes and the most unimaginable thought crossed her mind. She just couldn't bring herself to say it. Suddenly she was paralyzed by the awesomeness of it all.

She vaguely considered offering herself up as the sacrificial lamb.

"Whitney?"

A second slipped away.

"Yes, Logan?"

"Thank you," he said simply. "For you to do this, especially after everything that's happened… well, it makes me realize I overlooked something very special in high school."

The expression of gratitude took her breath away. His praise was so unexpected. As teenagers, they had shared a few laughs, the same row of seats in study hall, and, on Senior Skip Day, one near kiss…something that, in later years, she'd silently regretted as her "one near miss." Later, when Logan offered her ex a job, and he'd so badly messed that up, she had apologized repeatedly, hoping to redeem herself in Logan's eyes. But Logan had been young and angry, and he'd stalked away.

After years of beating herself up over that horrific parting it seemed inconceivable that all she had to do to make things better was find a teddy bear. It was a small price to pay to be able to put the matter to rest, and get the man and the memories out of her mind.

Still, Whitney would never know what prompted her to say what she did next, maybe it was because she was a new woman and she had come of age, and into her own. She had the security, and the confidence to dare to remind him. "Not something," she corrected quietly. "Someone. You overlooked someone. Someone like me."

Chapter Two

Logan leaned back, as far as his leather desk chair would allow, and pinched the bridge of his nose. It had been a long, wearisome day. He was bone-tired and the house looked like a tornado had struck. Four hours ago, his third housekeeper quit to take care of her grandchildren in California, and he was at his wit's end.

All he'd asked of the woman was to supervise Amanda after school and put a hot meal on the table. She'd accepted his generous paycheck, and done exactly that and no more. The laundry was piled up to the rafters, the sink was overflowing with dirty dishes and the carpets reminded him of one giant lint trap. Amanda had taken to writing her name on the TV screen, and playing tic-tac-toe in the dust on the coffee table. Games and toys, and shoes and socks were scattered in every room in the house, and the counters were a hodgepodge of newspapers, magazines, advertisements and old mail.

How had Jill done it? She'd managed to get Amanda to school on time, and he never remembered her scrambling to find a matching pair of shoes or digging through the couch cushions for lunch money.

This was the worst it had been. The worst.

He couldn't ask his mom to fill in again. This was their busiest time of year at the marina, and his dad was already making noises about clearing cars off the lot to make room for the new ones that would be coming out.

Talk about being between the devil and the deep blue. His folks had already made it clear that he should give it up, that Amanda was too much responsibility for him right now. On top of everything else, he couldn't bear to hear their "I told you so's." He supposed they were thinking of his best interests, but then, when it came to family, they'd always thought with their heads and not their hearts.

Jill's family had never been pleased they had taken in a foster child. They thought she should have her own children—and pointedly emphasized Amanda was "not really theirs." After Jill passed away, he'd heard from them only once.

What the hell was he going to do?

Deep inside, there were moments he could actually feel his heart ache. The empty feeling he had been carrying around for so long had become fatiguing, making his arms hurt and his head muzzy. He knew one thing: he yearned to laugh again. But if he lost his bid to keep Amanda….

"Dammit. Forget that. I'm not thinking like that. I'm not giving it up." Dragging a hand over his face, Logan flopped forward, letting the chair slip into the upright position. Wedging both elbows on the desk, he absently fingered the cards in his Rolodex.

He'd already called everyone he knew, asking about babysitters. His secretary had given him the name of that place in Nashville that provided nannies, but warned this was the poorest possible time to pursue it; it could take weeks.

There was always Aunt June, the old maid schoolteacher on his dad's side of the family. But Amanda said she smelled like camphor and breath mints, and Logan knew her mind was wandering a little. The last time they visited she'd put the roses in the freezer and displayed a frozen leg of lamb on the table, right between the gold filigree candelabras, as the centerpiece.

He tapped the cards in the Rolodex, as if he, like Houdini, could invoke an answer. Suddenly things became crystal clear to him.

Tomorrow morning he'd make arrangements for the cleaning service to come twice a week. He'd start taking everything to the cleaners. Then he'd call the school and get Amanda back in the after-school program. Until then, he'd just have to cut back his hours, that's all. No big deal, he'd done it before.

But he had to get things in order, because he was running out of time. The caseworker from the adoption agency would probably drop in sometime next week. She liked to pop in unannounced, and catch him when everything was in shambles.

Well, this would be a victory for her side.

What a deal. What a raw deal.

If he could just come up with that teddy bear. He'd come to regard the silly thing as a kind of insurance, like an omen, or a talisman that beat back the nasties. But Whitney wasn't optimistic, not about finding it as quickly as he'd hoped.

Whitney. Whitney Thompson Bloom. The name rolled through his mind, inexplicably soothing all the distress and disorder.

He'd been thinking a lot about her lately, and it bothered him because he didn't know why. Probably because he was just so damn obsessed with getting that bear.

She'd changed…yet, it was like the person she'd always been on the inside was coming out. He'd known her as well as anyone in high school, but she'd never let people get too close.

If you looked at Whitney when she didn't know you were watching, she carried the most vulnerable quality in her eyes. Like she'd been hurt. Deeply hurt. Like she was aching to trust, but she was scared at the same time, too.

He was beginning to understand that feeling.

Three days ago, in her shop, it occurred to him he could lose himself in her eyes. Without glasses, her irises were ginger-dark, and speckled with flecks of delft and daffodil. Striking, gorgeous eyes. But now, he severely reminded himself, with the juggling act he was doing, he couldn't afford to even think about them, let alone be distracted by them.

Whitney flipped through the last manufacturer's catalog, pausing to compare one of their featured bears to the open book on her counter. Then she checked it against the picture Logan had taken from his wallet and left with her. It wasn't the same. Not even close.

She ran a fingernail along the dog-eared corners of the photo, wondering how many times Logan's fingers had traced these same edges. She couldn't get him out of her head. His wholesome, tanned appearance nagged at her—like he made khakis and a sport shirt a dress uniform. Eyes so blue, so insightful and clear, that it made her wonder if a few drops of the Atlantic tinted his gaze. The quizzical lift of his mouth that made him look so kissable.

This was awful. It was terrible.

Thinking so much about Logan made her edgy. It made her wish she was someone she wasn't. It made her reconsider the past, and think about the differences that had kept them apart, and made him unattainable. His money, and her lack of it. His country club membership, and her job bagging groceries and pushing carts at the supermarket. His Camaro and her school bus pass.

How many times had she thought about what he'd said about the prom? Ten? Twenty? She'd stretched the truth on that one. She hadn't gone to the prom because her mom promised to send money for the ticket but decided, on a whim, to fly to Bangkok instead. There was great airfare to Bangkok, her mom had written later—a once in a lifetime opportunity. Just like the prom. And Logan had come looking for a dance—just one—and she wasn't even there.

She was thirty-two years old, for heaven's sake. Why was she dwelling on this stuff? Pushing the aggravating memories from her head, Whitney severely reminded herself that she had a life outside the incidents that happened years ago. She was happy and content with all she'd achieved. She knew full well that once she found the bear, her connection to Logan would be severed. He'd go on with his life; she'd go on with hers.

Her only purpose, she told herself firmly, was to find that bear—and that was proving to be difficult. She'd browsed the Internet until four, and still hadn't come up with any leads. The crazy thing was, the bear wasn't even anything out of the ordinary.

Yet, to Amanda, she knew it was priceless and unique. If the child needed something to carry her into the next phase of her life, Whitney could guarantee a teddy bear would do it.

After all, Whitney knew firsthand about losing things. When her mom took off for the last time, the landlord cleaned out their apartment and put everything in the trash. Nothing had been salvaged, and her childhood had been snuffed out in a Dumpster. Whitney had had nightmares for months afterward, knowing her beloved stuffed animals, her dolls, her drawings and books, had been thrown away. Gram had understood her pain, and gone without her arthritis medicine for a whole month so she could buy Whitney a special teddy bear to cuddle and love. That was one of the reasons she'd started this store, kind of like a living memorial to her gram.

Reaching for the phone, Whitney punched in the number, suddenly and inexplicably annoyed with this elusive teddy bear. She'd find this thing, one way or another.

"Monroe Realty," the receptionist intoned.

"Logan Monroe, please."

The receptionist hesitated before issuing her automatic response. "Mr. Monroe is in a meeting right now, may I take a message?"

"My name is Whitney Bloom, from Teddy Bear Heaven. I have some information he requested. I'll be available until five, and the number is—"

"Oh, Miss Bloom. Just a minute. I think he'd like to take this call. In fact, I know he would. I'll put you right through."

Whitney couldn't beat back her surprise; obviously the receptionist had had her instructions. The pause was momentary.

"Whitney. Hello." Logan's voice was just as mellow, just as resonant as she remembered. Fatigue melted away, and she warmed, remembering how he'd looked, framed by her showroom of teddy bears. He'd purchased three coloring books, markers, a barrette and a pricey dresser set before he'd left, claiming he wanted to make her time worthwhile. "Look, I was just stepping out, but I'm glad you caught me."

"I'm sorry, you've probably got a house to show. I only wanted to tell you there's no good news on this end. I'm beginning to call this the 'unbearable teddy bear chase.'" She heard him chuckle.

"You didn't find it."

"No. But I do have a couple of photos of promotional bears you might want to look at. They're definitely not the same, but—" she fingered the flyers, lifting them for another cursory glance "—under the circumstances, they may be close enough."

"Well…I'm sort of tied up till later this afternoon."

Disappointment welled in Whitney. What did she expect, she chided herself? That he was going to run right over? A man couldn't sell eight million dollars of real estate a year and not have a few commitments. "I'll just put this information aside for you," she said. "Whenever it's convenient. Or," she offered, "I could drop it in the mail."

"No, listen, I was thinking about stopping by your place anyway. Amanda's ballet lesson is in forty minutes, and the studio's less than two blocks from your place. You could meet me there and save me some time."

"You're taking her?" Disbelief tainted Whitney's reply.

"Why not?"

"But…but…"Whitney glanced at the clock, thinking of all the resort property in the area hungering for a Sold sign from Monroe Realty. "It's the middle of the afternoon."

"I know. I intentionally schedule appointments around ballet. It doesn't hurt to close up shop for a couple of hours one afternoon a week. You should try it. Knocking off for a few hours in the middle of the day is good for the soul."

Would knocking off in the middle of the day to be with Logan, for even a few fleeting minutes, ease this longing in her soul? "And you want me to try it? To meet you there, and shirk my duties?"

"Absolutely. It's a Thursday. A nice warm day, in the middle of May—" he rhymed, giving her a moment to consider "—I say…it's time for all good shopkeepers to come out and play."

"Cute." That old familiar tap dance started playing through her veins.

"C'mon, Whitney. Join us. We didn't have enough time to talk the other night. Meet Amanda. Judge for yourself, and see why this is so important to me. My life is on hold until this is settled." The invitation was tempting; it might be one of her few chances to spend time with Logan and get to know his daughter. "You'll fall in love with her, Whitney," he predicted.

She didn't need that. No more falling in love with anyone in the Monroe household. "I don't know," she hedged. "The UPS guy sometimes comes on Thursday."

She thought she heard him snicker, and immediately felt like a role model for one of the dumb "blonde" jokes that were circulating. Maybe it had been a mistake to color her hair.

"You ever been to a ballet class, Whitney?"

"No." Her reply was tinged with a certain amount of regret.

She had wanted to take dance lessons—like Carla Simpson, who had pranced around on her toe shoes during the fourth-grade play—but there had never been enough money when she lived with her mom, and then, later, Gram said spending money on that was just plain foolish. It wasn't like she was going to be a ballerina or anything. As it turned out, she had done something better with her life anyway, because every time she saw a toddler walk away hugging one of her teddies her heart melted.

"It's an experience," he said. "One you'd have to see to appreciate."

"I'd imagine," she said dryly.

"It's only forty-five minutes for the lesson," he wheedled. "But it's about two hours worth of fun."

Whitney gazed indecisively at the Closed sign; it wouldn't take that much to turn it over. She wasn't planning to do anything but stock shelves anyway, and they were a good month away from the tourist season. "I could…probably…meet you there. For a few minutes," she qualified, trying not to sound too eager.

"Terrific. Miss Timlin begins promptly at three-fifteen. If you aren't there in time for stretching and warm-ups, I'll save you a seat."

It was the craziest thing. In her mind's eye she saw him grinning, and it made her feel warm all over.

Chapter Three

Miss Timlin's School of Dance was an institution in Melville. Parents sent their daughters to Miss Timlin's for more than ballet or tap or jazz. They sent them because it was the proper thing to do. Young ladies who went through all twelve years of Miss Timlin's carried themselves with a distinguishable grace. They possessed a presence that made their movements smooth, their voices confident and their smiles benign. It was no surprise to Whitney that Logan chose that for his daughter.

The foyer of Miss Timlin's smelled of old wood and lemon oil. The interior of the great hall was cool, and the mahogany banister curving up to the second-story studio was polished to a satin finish. Whitney looked up, over her head. The antique chandelier, suspended from a tin ceiling, hung from a single tarnished chain. It swayed from the staccatoed thump of little feet on the floor above.

A receptionist greeted Whitney, indicating the session had already started, but that she was welcome to observe, provided she found a seat in the back. Quietly, the woman admonished.

Whitney turned to the steps, trying to imagine how Logan felt once a week, as he put his hand to the banister and climbed the magnificent old staircase. She gingerly put her palm across the top of the newel post, then tested the first stair tread. It groaned beneath her weight, like an old woman wearied from raising too many children.

Whitney took the stairs slowly, amazed that Logan had been within blocks of her for months —and yet their paths had never crossed.

At the top, Whitney paused on the landing and peered into the first open doorway. The studio, awash in pink and white leotards, warm-ups and floppy hair bows, teemed with discipline. Miss Timlin, sixty if she was a day, with her gaunt face resembling a road map of wrinkles, and her arms and legs as sinewy as chicken bones, stood sternly at the front of the room. She thumped her staff on the hardwood floor.

"Stretch, Melissa! Hannah! You are not to preen in front of the mirror, you are to reflect upon your position before it." In tights and leotards, Miss Timlin's paunchy middle and sagging breasts were a mere testament to her resilience.

A gaggle of mothers waited, on hard-backed chairs that had been pushed against the wall. Two held magazines, one a book; none of them scanned the copy. Another woman's knitting needles copiously clacked together, but her gaze was riveted to what was happening on the dance floor.

Logan was the only man in the room, and he appeared impervious to be outnumbered by the opposite sex; his attention, too, was directed solely to the activity on the floor.

"Excuse me," Whitney whispered, apologizing to the master knitter as she carefully stepped over a bag of turquoise yarn. She slipped into the chair next to Logan.

His head turned, his eyes rounding into irresistible crescents as he smiled. "Hello," he mouthed. "Glad you could make it."

The chairs were so close that Whitney inadvertently leaned against him as she sat, her shoulder brushing his. The flesh beneath his dress shirt was hard, warm…and definitely bothersome to her senses. Whitney tried to look unaffected. "I hope Miss Timlin doesn't yell at me for making a disturbance," she whispered, as the aura of his aftershave enveloped them.

"I'll protect you if she does," he whispered, sliding an arm to the back of her chair in order to give her more room.

Whitney's smile was taut, self-conscious. Everyone around them had peeled their eyes off the dance floor, to notice that Logan Monroe had welcomed this newcomer.

Whump, whump. "At the bar, ladies!" Miss Timlin directed, wielding her staff like a shepherdess. "Now, please."

A dozen ballerinas scampered to claim their place at the mirrored wall. Logan nudged Whitney. "That's Amanda," he said. "Second from the left."

The child, with round blue eyes and fat cheeks, exuded a Shirley Templesque sparkle. She didn't walk; she pranced. A riot of strawberry-blond curls, bound with a diaphanous pink-and-white scrunchie, and pulled to a curious angle at the top of her head, swung against her nape. She paused long enough to look over her shoulder at her father, then offered up an outrageous wink and an infectious smile.

A chuckle of appreciation rumbled through Logan's chest. Women on either side of them snickered. "She has my comedic sense of timing," he whispered.

"She's darling."

"She's a ham. A darling ham. I know it. And I love it."

Whitney drew a deep, amused breath, and settled back against Logan's arm, to bask in the enthusiasm of a gregarious six-year-old. Another mind-bending matter also weighed heavily on her mind: What brand of cologne did Logan wear?

The lesson ended much too quickly. When it was over, Amanda went flying into Logan's arms.

"Daddy! Did you see it? My plié?"

"I did."

"Much better, don't you think?"

"Without a doubt." He cocked his head, to study her floppy ponytail, then awkwardly tried to pat it back into place. "We still didn't get this hair thing right," he muttered.

Amanda didn't seem to care about that, but her expressive mouth drooped. "I wish Mommy would have been here to see it."

"What?"

"My plié."

"Oh." An uncomfortable moment of silence passed, then Logan pulled her into his arms. "I think, Amanda, that she knows," he said gently. "Mommy loved you so much that she's never really far from you." His forefinger tapped her chest. "She's right here, you know…in your heart."

Amanda nodded bravely, but her eyes were solemn, sad. Whitney's heart wrenched.

"Miss Timlin said I might be a swan in the recital," Amanda announced.

"Really?" Logan pulled back, feigning intrigue.

"If I have another good lesson," she said, dipping her chin as she scooched, uninvited, onto his lap. "That's what she said. The swans get to wear feathers in their hair, you know."

"Ah. Well, either way, feathers or no feathers, I'm proud of you." He gave Amanda a quick, congratulatory hug. "Amanda, there's someone I want you to meet."

Amanda leaned forward. Her gaze, neither friendly nor hostile, unabashedly met Whitney's. "Must be you," she concluded. "You're the only new person here."

"Hi," Whitney said, extending her hand. "I'm Whitney Bloom."

Amanda briefly regarded her, then politely dragged her fingers against Whitney's palm. The greeting was a curious mixture of an infant's patty-cake and an adolescent's high-five. "Like the flower?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" Whitney stopped, perplexed.

"You know. It's a saying. Daddy always says we should bloom where we're planted."

"Oh, he does, does he?" Whitney lifted her eyes, to exchange an amused look with Logan. To her delight, he winked.

"He says it means we have to do our best, no matter where we are or what happens to us."

"I see. Good advice."

"You're lucky to have a name like that," Amanda went on. "Sometime I'm going to get a name I can keep, that's what the social worker says. Of course, I wish I had a name like Daddy's."

Both Logan and Whitney blanched at Amanda's unwitting reference to the muddled adoption.

"Do you have a little girl?" Amanda asked unexpectedly.

The question startled Whitney, and she pulled back, half-afraid of disappointing the child. “No,” she said slowly.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you want to have one?”

“Amanda,” Logan reproved. “That’s kind of a personal question, even for a chatterbox like you. We don’t ask—”

“No, that’s okay,” Whitney said quickly. “I don’t mind. Really.” She paused, wondering how much she could safely reveal. “Someday I’d love to have a little girl. More than anything. But I’m not married and, actually, I’d like to have a daddy for my little girl. I’d want to make sure she was safe, and happy, and loved by her mom and dad.”

“You don’t have a husband?”

An ominous feeling swept over Whitney, making her feel as if she was stepping into something as dangerous as quicksand. “No, not anymore.”

Amanda sat back, and thoughtfully regarded Whitney. “My daddy doesn’t have my mommy anymore, either.”

“I know, and I’m sorry to hear it.”

“She went to heaven,” Amanda matter-of-factly explained. “Where did your husband go?”

Whitney did a stutter-step over her answer. She certainly couldn’t explain to a six-year-old what had led to the breakup of her marriage. For, after Logan caught Kevin skimming money from the petty cash, and threatened to press charges, it had been the last straw for Whitney and her marriage had immediately crumbled. There had never been a blacker, more degrading moment in her life. She suddenly realized how she supported him while he wandered from one job to another, how she’d suffered through his rude behavior and insolence. It had come as an epiphany to her, to realize she had married Kevin for the wrong reasons—and Logan, whether he knew it or not, had had a hand in her decision to move on with her life.

Logan, seeing Whitney’s distress, flushed uncomfortably, then leaned over and sternly whispered in his daughter’s ear.

Suddenly a wry response struck Whitney, and she impulsively offered it up. “My husband,” she announced glibly, “went to California. With a cardboard suitcase, and a beat-up Chevrolet. And, let me tell you, he was a funny sight, going down the highway.”

Logan clamped his lips over an irrepressible smile, his eyes shuttering closed. Amanda’s lips wiggled, even as she looked genuinely confused.

When it hit Whitney, she was appalled at the jingle she’d just concocted. “I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I didn’t explain that very well. And I didn’t mean—” lowering her voice, she caught Logan’s eye “—to make it sound like…”

“It’s okay,” he mouthed over Amanda’s head. Then, he chuckled. “Whitney and I went to school together, Amanda, and for as long as I’ve known her, she has always put an interesting spin on life.”

Nagging embarrassment colored her cheeks, but Whitney took the plunge, determined to be honest with Amanda—and with Logan. “Amanda,” she said seriously, “my ex-husband wasn’t very happy—and he wanted things I didn’t want. So, how it ended up was that he left—and I stayed. We got a divorce because we couldn’t be happy together and agree on how to live our life.”

“Is he ever coming back?”

Whitney shook her head, afraid to look at Logan, afraid of what she’d see in his eyes. “No. Never.”

Amanda’s gaze never wavered. “Then you’re all alone, too. Like us.”

The candid observation knocked the wind out of Whitney. She steeled herself to show no emotion. “Single, and independent,” she confided, leaning closer to Amanda. “It’s not a bad thing for a woman to be. Honest.”

Amanda studied her, quizzically. Then she reached over and carefully touched the gold charm, the teddy bear that Whitney always wore. “I like that,” she said shyly.

"You do?" Whitney's smile reached her eyes. "You know there's a story behind that little bear."

"There is?" Amanda's eyes widened hopefully.

"Mmm-hmm. When I was a little girl, not much bigger than you, we had to move. We were kind of in a hurry, so my mom thought she'd leave some of our stuff and go back and get it later. But there was this mix-up, and everything got lost. All my books, my dolls, all my favorite things. They were all gone. Not one thing was left."

Amanda's face fell. "You must have felt awful," she said soberly, dropping the charm, to awkwardly pat the back of Whitney's hand.

"For a while I did. But then my gram, who had some old scraps of fabric, helped me make a rag doll. It turned out so wonderful that we started thinking we could make a teddy bear." For emphasis, Whitney rolled her eyes. "Well, we had the craziest looking teddy bear you ever did see. My gram said it looked like something the cat dragged in."

Amanda laughed, imagining.

"So my gram went out and bought me a brand-new teddy bear, and I thought it was the best present ever." Whitney glanced up at Logan, but his eyes were brooding, dark. "I…" Whitney hesitated, "I have a little store not far from here, and everything in it has teddy bears on it."

"Really?"

"Really."

Amanda sat back, in the circle of Logan's arms, considering. "Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Is that where you got the coloring books and stuff?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, at Whitney's shop."

"Maybe sometime, Amanda, you'd like to visit me there, and see all the teddy bear things."

"Can we, Daddy? Do you think we can go?"

"What I think, gumdrop," Logan said, carefully avoiding an answer, "is that you've pestered Whitney long enough. Come on. You ready for our weekly pilgrimage?"

"Can Whitney come? Please? This could be the day for the Lollapalooza."

Logan pulled back, baffled. This was a first. Since Jill's death, Amanda had been reluctant to invite people into her life. She didn't warm up to people anymore, not as quickly as she used to. But, with Whitney, he saw vestiges of the old Amanda coming back.

"That's a great idea, to invite Whitney," he agreed. "Well?" he slid Whitney a sideways glance, and didn't bother to explain. Everyone in Melville knew the Lollapalooza was the Ice Crème Shoppe's 27 scoop, thirteen topping treat. "What do you say? Can you join us?"

"Oh…no, I'd feel like I was intruding…" If Whitney could have kicked herself all the way home, she would have. She'd automatically offered up the no, and passed up another rare opportunity to be with Logan.

"Whitney. C'mon. Join us," he insisted. "The Lollapalooza may be a little too much, but maybe another time…for a special occasion…" He lifted one shoulder higher than the other, letting the suggestion hang.

"You're goading me into playing hooky," Whitney chided. "I have rent to pay and shelves to stock."

"And you work too hard. You're too dedicated." He glanced at his watch. "It's almost closing time anyway. A four o'clock sundae is the perfect way to end the day and spoil your supper."

Whitney considered supper. It would be another single serving size eaten in front of the TV.

"My treat," Logan persuaded as Amanda slipped off his lap.

"They have Chocoholics Anonymous," Amanda said, balancing on one foot as she wiggled the other bare one into a sandal. "When I don't get that, I get Mississippi Sludge."

Whitney raised an eyebrow, and squelched a smile over Amanda's Mithithippi Thludge lisp. "Mmm. Sounds yummy."

"Daddy says I'm a chocolate freak."

"A trait I share," Whitney admitted. "I never ever pass up chocolate."

Logan offered Amanda an oversize shirt to slip over her tights and leotards. The shirt, though clean, looked like it had spent the last few weeks forgotten in the bottom of the dryer. "I take it that's a yes," Logan said, as he helped Amanda turn the sleeve right side out.

"Okay. I can't refuse. Besides, the day's shot anyway."

Logan's expression grew pensive, thoughtful. Then he looked at her, and winked. "Somehow, I get the impression it's just beginning."

The Ice Crème Shoppe was rocking. A group of teenagers were celebrating a sixteenth birthday and the jukebox was cranked up full-blast. Amanda, who knew two of the teens as baby-sitters, didn't miss a trick. She was elbow to elbow with them, oohing and aahing as the guest of honor opened her presents.

Seeing she was occupied, Whitney extracted the flyers on the teddy bears and offered them to Logan. They were in a circular back booth, isolated and protected from the noisy crowd. "Here. Look at these. See what you think."

He studied the hot pink flyers, then stopped at the full page advertisement she'd torn from a collector's catalog.

Fascinated by Logan's intensity, Whitney couldn't imagine ever tiring of his focus, his concentration. He'd always been like that. In high school chemistry, Logan could crack jokes one minute, then buckle down and become absorbed in the most complicated lab experiment the next. That part of him had always intrigued her.

"Whitney. I don't think…this is quite what…They aren't right." He shook his head. "How close are they?"

"Not very."

A sinking feeling washed over Whitney. She'd spent three grueling days hunting for this teddy bear, and she knew, from what Logan said, time was short. "Logan," she said carefully, "this could take a while."

He folded up the papers and reluctantly handed them back to her. "I never imagined the world had gone teddy bear crazy. I thought I'd just get another one…for old time's sake—or a fresh start. For her, you know." He shrugged, trying to make it look like it didn't matter. His gaze narrowed, the blue color almost disappearing as he looked over to Amanda, who, at the player piano, sang along with the crowd.

Whitney watched Amanda from the corner of her eye. "Logan, why don't you bring her over to my shop and let her look at the teddy bears? Maybe she'll find something she likes. We could do it later tonight, or…" She let the words trail off, lifting her shoulders.

Logan tapped his thumb against the table's edge, momentarily debating. "I can't tonight. I've got a seven o'clock appointment for a closing."

Whitney chose to ignore his abrupt tone. "Maybe another time?"

A shadow crossed his handsome features. "Maybe."

Whitney knew it would never happen. Not knowing what to say, she feigned interest in all the activity around her, swiping at the perspiration on her water glass.

Logan sighed. "You have to understand, Whit, that I'm being selfish about this. I don't want her to just pick out another toy…it means more to me than that."

"I understand."

The strains of "Happy Birthday to you," faded, then someone tacked on a falsetto version of "and we do…ooo mean you."

"This is stupid. How the hell can you replace something like that?"

Logan's angry words sent chills through Whitney; she knew he wasn't talking about the teddy bear; he was talking about Amanda. When she was six, Whitney would have crawled over hot coals and bargained with the devil to have a daddy like that.

"You can't, Logan," she said softly. "You can't replace this wonderful, precious child you've raised. But…if it helps…I'll find you the bear. I promise."

"Thanks. I…" Logan's attention remained on the partygoers clustered around the piano. Then, with a burst of energy that startled Whitney, he swiveled on the bench beside her, and tossed an arm around her shoulders.

Whitney went weak, feeling too much of him: the warmth, the bone and sinew. She shivered, her mind fast-forwarding to recount how many times he'd thrown an arm around her in high school. Three? Four? She'd cherished every moment of his attention, and every time he made her feel special, she had fallen a little bit more in love with him.

"I don't want you to think I don't appreciate all you're doing," he said, leaning closer and making the words go fuzzy against her ear. "I do."

Whitney's eyes involuntarily closed, and she savored the inexplicable whisper of sexual attraction. "You baffle me," she said without thinking.

"What?" He absently rolled his thumb over the shoulder seam of her sweater. "Why?" he probed.

Whitney opened her eyes, aware Logan's face was only inches from hers. "Because you have it all, Logan. You own a successful company, you have a lovely home, and a standing in the community. Friends. Family. And yet your priority seems to be keeping your little family together."

His thumb stopped stroking the ridge of her shoulder seam. "Why should that surprise you?"

"Because this is your opportunity to walk away without any responsibility."

"You think I'm the kind of man who would do that?"

"Most men would. I've known men who've walked away for a whole lot less." He stared at her, the pressure on her shoulder going heavy.

"That's what doesn't make sense to me. Because you could—and you don't."

"Then you've known the wrong kind of men, Whitney. I guess you've known men who wanted the easy way out."

Whitney grimaced, thinking Logan's appraisal of her ex-husband must be somewhere between a cad and a cheat. What must he think of her for picking him?

"I've never been a man who took—or even wanted—the easy way out." Logan studied her guarded reaction, and realized he'd delved a little too deeply. Her mouth wobbled—just enough to make the words kissable and comforting simultaneously roll through his head. Her eyes had a spark of fear, of vulnerability; one he wanted to douse and soothe. "Whitney?" he asked.

She nodded, but wouldn't look at him. "Hey. I could have used you as a role model," she said tremulously. "You know, the first man in my life, my dad, wasn't ever around. Not ever. I remember my mom used to joke, and refer to him as the 'phantom,' the guy who simply visited in the middle of the night." She hesitated. "And I guess I don't have to tell you about my ex. He was a piece of work, wasn't he?"

Empathy washed through Logan, and he shook his head, imagining the kind of verbal abuse she'd endured. "Whitney," he said finally, "I know the men in your life left a lasting impression, but…" His hand strayed to her temple, to push back a wispy strand of her summer-blond hair and hook it behind her ear. "I'd like to leave one, too. Just a different one."

"Logan—"

"No, listen. You've gone out of your way for me over this bear thing. If you need something, ever, you can always count on me. Okay?" he asked gently, his fingertips drifting down the smooth column of her neck before loosely settling on her shoulders. He leaned toward her, and without waiting for an answer, he impulsively brushed his lips against Whitney's temple.

Against the side of his mouth he felt her eyelashes flutter, and they left tingly butterfly kisses in their wake. Her skin was so soft, and her hair smelled like strawberry shampoo. His lips inched down and he found himself spiraling into a vortex of male need as his mouth hovered near hers.

Yet the moment he felt her tremble, he pulled away.

Her eyes were huge and round, and filled with surprise and trepidation. “That,” she said, her voice jumping off track, “is a count-on-me kiss?”

For a moment Logan was so appalled at what he’d just done—in the middle of the Ice Crème Shoppe, no less—he couldn’t answer. What had gotten into him? Being that familiar with Whitney Bloom? “No, it’s a—” he swallowed “—a thank-you.”

Whitney’s jaw jutted slightly forward, as if she was hurt, and the silvery-white scar quivered as she lifted her chin. The brilliant color of her dark eyes faded between narrowed lids. “I don’t need that kind of a thank-you, Logan,” she said. “Two words will do it.”

Chapter Four

Logan lived on the other side of "the point," in a small cluster of homes that nestled into irregular chunks of land around Lake Justice. The moment her tires bumped over his easement, Whitney's pulse quickened and her breathing grew erratic. What was she doing here in this section of Melville, walking into his life as if she belonged?

She forced herself to pull up next to the three and a half stall garage and climbed out of the car, squinting against the sunshine.

"Hey, Whitney! Down here!"

Whitney spun on her heel. Two hundred feet away, Logan, bare-chested and up to his knees in water, stood next to the dock. A white sand beach, gouged with clogs, and sand pails and lounge chairs, crooked around the uneven shoreline. Moored farther out was a sleek speedboat, a lazy looking pontoon and two jet skis. She waved, an involuntary smile sliding onto her lips.

He lifted a bare arm, and beckoned. "Come on down!"

Her stomach clenched, and her blood ran warm, then hot, as that old familiar tap dance drummed through her veins. Against the glassy water, he was all angles and chiseled planes. The neat wedge of his shoulders. A chunk of sculpted chest over his tapered waist. Lanky arms. Solid legs.

Whitney shivered, staring down at Logan Monroe's near nakedness. He was at least six inches taller than she. How in the heck was she going to come eyeball to chest hair with him and know where to look? Right now her eyes were practically falling out of their sockets.

The hems of his swim trunks were wet, the weight pulling the fabric down from his belly, to expose a pencil-thin patch of white skin. The rest of him—his shoulders, his chest—were nothing but lean, mean bronze.

She started moving down the path to his private beach, crazily thinking that her body worked as if on autopilot: her senses honed in like radar, her ears pitched to the gently lapping water, her sights were set on Logan as if he were a target. A whispery soft sensation struck her, near the temple, where Logan had kissed her barely a week ago.

She had to get her reactions under control soon. Logan Monroe was big trouble, she reminded herself.

Trouble with a capital T.

T as in tall, tanned and teeming with testosterone.

It wasn't her fault, to be thinking like this. There ought to be a law. Men like Logan Monroe should not be permitted to stand around half-naked in Lake Justice. It messed up the female brain wave pattern.

Oh, God have mercy on her aching soul. She shouldn't have come here. It was just like a couple of weeks ago, when he came in the store and intuition told her something was going to happen. Today, she was going to make a fool of herself, she knew it.

She stepped onto the beach, and fine white sand trickled through the straps of her sandals. Down here, two hundred feet from the house, the air stirred up a virtual potpourri of smells. Honeysuckle and sun-baked wood. Fish and suntan lotion. Gas and motor oil. Ripples of water thudded dully against the fiberglass boat. The pontoon bounced awkwardly over them, the aluminum offering up hollow burps of noise.

"Well, hello," Logan greeted, water lapping at his ankles. "This is a nice surprise."

Whitney smiled, and lifted her hand to shield her eyes from the glare off the water.

"I suppose you wanted to see if I'm doing a good job, repairing this dock."

"No," she countered, her protected gaze drifting over his body. "I wanted to come down and see you this bare—" She choked and immediately coughed, momentarily slapping her knuckles against her mouth. "I mean, come down and show you this teddy bear."

Logan raised an eyebrow.

"It, um—"

Logan sauntered nearer. Water droplets glistened like a lure on his shoulders, his chest.

"You're bare. I mean…your teddy bear." She let the explanation dissolve. "You know," she said, going breathless, "maybe I caught you at a bad time…."

Logan chuckled, and grabbed a T-shirt that was hanging over a post at the end of the dock. "No. Not at all." He stretched the hem of his shirt between his fists, then plunged his arms into the sleeves, accordian pleating it to his elbows.

"I stopped by your office and your secretary said I could find you here, that it wouldn't be a problem. But—"

"It isn't." He lifted his arms to pull the shirt over his head.

"I feel like I'm intruding. You probably have a lot of work to do."

His shoulders slumped, and both elbows dropped as he paused. He still hadn't pulled it on, and the T-shirt sagged against his middle as he frowned at her. "Whitney. You're a friend. You're doing me a huge favor. You're making it sound like I wouldn't take time for you." He cocked his head. "By the way, aren't you taking off in the middle of a workweek? Isn't that against your nature, or something?"

She shrugged. "Sort of. But I have someone who helps me out on Tuesdays. It's my day to run errands, go to the bank and the post office, that kind of thing. But today was slow, and it was so nice out, I just thought I'd make this an errand and drop it off."

"Really?"

"Mmm."

"Great. Since you've got the time, then, I've got an errand for you." He intentionally paused, then winked. "Meet me in the middle of Lake Justice."

Whitney stared at him, confused.

"Amanda's got a half day of school, and she's up at the house, getting us lemonade. The sandwiches and chips are already stowed. We were just about to have a lazy afternoon and take the pontoon out. Kick off those sandals and hop on board."

"Oh, I—" Whitney quickly fumbled in the pocket of her slacks, to pull out the copy of the teddy she wanted him to see. She couldn't spend any time with Logan. She couldn't. He'd already upended her hormones, and made her give in to wishful thinking. Paper in hand, she tried to smooth out the creases before extending it.

"Show me later," Logan advised smoothly, glancing up to the back of the house. "We already have company."

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