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# SGT. BILLY'S BRIDE

Bonnie Gardner

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# Sgt. Billy's Bride

«HarperCollins»

**Gardner B.**

Sgt. Billy's Bride / B. Gardner — «HarperCollins»,

Desperate times call for desperate measures!So when general's daughter Darcy Stanton abruptly balked at marrying a macho military man, she shamelessly fled her wedding and hit the road running. But fickle fate delivered Darcy into the arms of irresistible air force sergeant Billy Hays, whose Southern charm and gentle embrace nearly hijacked her heart!Fortunately, this sergeant was a confirmed bachelor. Unfortunately, his beloved, ailing, Alabama mama dearly wished to see him wed. So in a twinkling Darcy was back at the altar–conveniently pretending to be Billy's bride. Trouble was, his sizzling kiss and tenderness made Darcy secretly long for a real happily-ever-after…as Sgt. Billy's wife!

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# Содержание

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 6
Books by Bonnie Gardner 7
Contents 8
Prologue 9
Chapter One 11
Chapter Two 19
Chapter Three 26
Chapter Four 33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 35

"Sergeant Hays, you may kiss your bride."

Darcy's breath caught in her throat. She hadn't bargained for this. This was only supposed to be a pretend wedding. But the handsome military man leaning in to kiss her was all too real.

Billy's lips touched her mouth, landing feather soft, like a butterfly lighting on a flower.

She should have let him lift off and be done, and that would have been that.

But Darcy kissed him back.

Then Billy pulled her closer, pressing her against his hard, strong chest. And Darcy felt almost… loved.

Heavens, she couldn't help wondering, what would it be like if they weren't pretending?

Dear Reader,

Mills & Boon American Romance has rounded up the best romantic reading to help you celebrate Valentine's Day. Start off with the final installment in the MAITLAND MATERNITY: TRIPLETS, QUADS & QUINTS series. The McCallum Quintuplets is a special three-in-one volume featuring New York Times bestselling author Kasey Michaels, Mindy Neff and Mary Anne Wilson.

BILLION-DOLLAR BRADDOCKS, Karen Toller Whittenburg's new family-connected miniseries, premiers this month with The C.E.O.'s Unplanned Proposal. In this Cinderella story, a small-town waitress is swept into the Braddock world of wealth and power and puts eldest brother Adam Braddock's bachelor status to the test. Next, in Bonnie Gardner's Sgt. Billy's Bride, an air force controller is in desperate need of a fiancée to appease his beloved, ailing mother, so he asks a beautiful stranger to become his wife. Can love bloom and turn their pretend engagement into wedded bliss? Finally, we welcome another new author to the Mills & Boon American family. Sharon Swan makes her irresistible debut with Cowboys and Cradles.

Enjoy this month's offerings, and be sure to return next month when Mills & Boon American Romance launches a new cross-line continuity, THE CARRADIGNES: AMERICAN ROYALTY, with The Improperly Pregnant Princess by Jacqueline Diamond.

Wishing you happy reading,

Melissa Jeglinski

Associate Senior Editor

Mills & Boon American Romance

Sgt. Billy's Bride

Bonnie Gardner

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Mud, as always.

To Sue, who reminds me that I am woman and can roar, and Kathie and Kathy and Brenda. You know why.

To all the combat controllers and their families I have known through the years and even those I haven't. You all have tough jobs and manage to do them well.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**BONNIE GARDNER** has finally figured out what she wants to do when she grows up. After a varied career that included such jobs as switchboard operator, draftsman and exercise instructor, she went back to college and became an English teacher. As a teacher, she took a course on how to teach writing to high school students and caught the bug herself.

She lives in northern Alabama with her husband of over thirty years, her own military hero. After following him around from air force base to air force base, she has finally gotten to settle down. They have two grown sons, one of which is now serving in the air force. She loves to read, cook, garden and, of course, write.

She would love to hear from her readers. You can write to her at P.O. Box 442, Meridianville, AL 35759.

# Books by Bonnie Gardner

MILLS & BOON AMERICAN ROMANCE
876—UNCLE SARGE
911—SGT. BILLY'S BRIDE

# Contents

Prologue
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
Author Note

# Prologue

Darcy Stanton sat in the bride's room in the chapel at Hurlburt Air Force Base and clenched her hands in her lap with a grip of death. She couldn't believe she was really going through with it.

She wasn't ready to be a bride. She didn't know what she was doing in this room getting ready to marry First Lieutenant Richard Harris III, a man she'd known all her life but wasn't sure she knew at all. At this moment, she wasn't sure she liked Dick, much less loved him.

She didn't want to be Mrs. Dick Harris, the daughter of General and Mrs. Harrington Stanton. She didn't want to play the role of the prim and proper niece of Colonel John Harbeson, the commander of the Special Tactics Squadron at Hurlburt. She wanted to be just plain Darcy. Not Tracy D'Arcy Harbeson Stanton, the namesake of four decorated generals.

She wanted to know how it would feel to work for a living, not to have to worry about protocol and which fork to use and what the other officers' wives were wearing and what they would think of her. She'd planned to put her degree from Duke University in North Carolina to good use after graduation, but Dick would hear none of it.

Darcy drew in a deep, shuddering breath and tried to still her racing heart. She was a registered nurse as of last Tuesday, and she knew the signs. She was in severe stress, verging on a full-fledged panic attack.

"Mom," Darcy whispered, her voice coming out in short, breathy gasps. "I'm not sure I can do this." There, she'd finally said it, she'd voiced the doubts she'd been harboring for weeks, months—almost from the moment she'd let her mother convince her that accepting Dick's proposal was the right thing to do.

Since her parents were out of the country because of Daddy's posting at NATO Headquarters in Belgium, Mom had transferred much of the mother-of-the-bride wedding planning duties to Aunt Marianne. However, even from long distance and via e-mail, Mom had ruled with an iron hand.

Mom had enumerated a list of reasons for marrying Dick Harris and joining the Harris family. The Stantons had had a long history of military service. Though Darcy was their only child—and not a son, much to Daddy's dismay—her parents believed that the Stanton military tradition, if not the name, would live on if their daughter married into another long-standing military family.

But Darcy wasn't ready for offspring to carry on the family tradition. The thought of bearing any man's child, much less Dick's, set her into a panic.

Her mother, just in from Europe, took Darcy by the hands and turned her away from the mirror. She brushed a flyaway strand of hair away from Darcy's face and looked into her eyes. "It's normal to have jitters, Tracy. I felt that way before my wedding. Once it's over, you'll be fine."

Darcy just looked at her and tried to blink the tears of frustration and panic out of her eyes. How could she explain that the wedding wasn't making her nervous? It was the prospect of marriage… that was scaring the bejesus out of her.

Swallowing, Darcy forced herself to sit still in front of the makeup mirror. She had to do something before she made the biggest mistake of her life. She moistened her lips gone suddenly dry as the Sahara and looked at her mom. "May I have a few minutes to compose myself?"

Her mother nodded and shooed the bridesmaids out, then stepped out of the small room.

No sooner had the door closed behind them than Darcy leapt to action. She shot to her feet and locked the door. She knew what she had to do.

And it wasn't marry Dick.

Darcy rummaged through the drawers of the makeup table for paper and a pen or pencil. Finding none, she grabbed an eyebrow pencil from the new makeup case her mother had insisted she use and scrawled a note on the mirror.

She hated that she'd let it go this far, but it wasn't too late. There would be no wedding. She removed the engagement ring that had always weighed too heavy on her hand and left it on the dressing table.

Then, leaving her mother's bridal veil hanging on a hook on the wall beside the mirror, she grabbed the backpack that contained her wallet and her other important papers and stuffed her jeans and T-shirt inside. Then she pushed open the window.

Taking a deep breath, Darcy unhooked the screen, hiked up her long skirt and perched on the windowsill. Then she swung her legs up over the edge. It wasn't that far to the ground, and the bride's room was on the blind side of the chapel so nobody would see. She could be in her car, still in the parking lot from the rehearsal the night before, and on the road before anyone missed her. A quick change at an out-of-the-way gas station would remove any evidence of the wedding that wasn't to be.

Breathing a silent prayer, Darcy lowered herself to the ground and made her getaway.

# Chapter One

In the sinking afternoon sunlight, Technical Sergeant Bill Hays pulled out of the parking lot of his apartment complex. As he drove onto Highway 98, he glanced at the clock on the new dashboard and frowned. Eight o'clock.

Surely the clock hadn't been properly set before he'd taken possession of his new Jeep. He glanced at the government-issue dive watch on his wrist and muttered a curse. He was running even later than he'd thought.

It was bad enough that the two-week field exercise with his Special Tactics Squadron's Silver Team had made him miss his regular trip to his family home in Alabama, but a maintenance problem on the C-130 transport plane bringing him back yesterday had delayed his departure for a week's leave by yet another day. And the long debriefing had made him even later.

Hurlburt Air Force Base might have been the closest Special Tactics Base to his home in Mattison, Alabama, but he might as well have been at his last assignment in California, as difficult as it had been to get home lately. Since he'd been in Florida, it seemed as if circumstances had contrived to keep him away from home.

His late start would keep him from arriving before his mother went to bed. And the fifty miles or so of country road he had to traverse before he crossed the state line would make it impossible to save time. The roads wound and twisted enough in the daylight, but in the dark they were treacherous. He'd traveled these roads plenty of times, but as night had fallen, a thick, clinging fog had formed, making visibility next to nothing.

Hoping that each curve in the road would reveal a break in the fog and clearer conditions, he inched along.

Just after Bill drove into Alabama, he rounded a curve in the road and had to swerve sharply to avoid hitting something barely visible through the mist.

Muttering a curse, Bill slammed on the brakes and skidded to a halt some twenty or thirty feet beyond the apparition. He blinked and looked back over his shoulder to see what he had missed. A girl materialized and loped toward him with a duffel bag in one hand and a backpack slung over her shoulder.

"What the hell do you think you're doing out here in the middle of the road in the dead of the night?" Bill yelled as she reached the car. "I could have hit you."

She yanked open the passenger door without waiting for an invitation and tossed her bags over the seat to the back. "My old Volkswagen Beetle got me all the way through high school and nursing school, but it finally gave up a mile or so back. I was beginning to think that another car would never come along," she said breathlessly.

"You can't—" Billy stopped himself. It was late, and they were in the middle of nowhere. "Get in," he muttered.

"Hi, I'm Darcy," she said, sticking out her hand as she slid onto the seat. "You aren't a serial killer, are you?"

"Bill Hays," he said, then laughed. "Hell, no," he finally managed between chuckles. "I'm one of the good guys according to Uncle Sam."

"Your uncle's recommendation works for me," Darcy said as she buckled herself in. "Where're you heading?"

Bill didn't know what to make of this unexpected passenger, and he wondered what had made her throw caution aside and hop into his car in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night. "Mattison, Alabama," he said. "About three hours up the road."

"You came from Florida, then? Me, too."

He nodded, then glanced sideways at her. Darcy might have said she'd been through college, but she didn't look much older than fourteen in that T-shirt and jeans.

Her hair was short, wispy, and flew around her face as she spoke using animated gestures and expressions. She was clean-scrubbed and fresh-looking, with a delicate mouth that seemed very kissable.

Now, where the hell had that thought come from?

Hadn't he just assured her that she could trust him? It might have been a long time since he'd been out with a woman, but he wasn't that hard up that he'd get the hots for the first one he came upon. The first one close enough to allow him to smell her perfume.

He had a hard-and-fast rule about remaining free of complications while he was in Special Ops, and this girl—woman—looked like a keeper. He had no room for a woman in his life. Hadn't he seen enough families torn apart because of the demands of the job? Not to mention families broken apart when the service member didn't come home. He would never leave a woman in the same desperate situation his mother had found herself in when his father had died too young and too poor. Or in the same dire straits his sister Lougenia was in when that skunk of a husband had left her.

Women were to be loved, protected, cherished. A man couldn't do a decent job of that if he was off attending to hot spots on the other side of the world.

He shook his head. If he continued to think about kissing her, he might not be able to trust himself. He drew a deep breath and cleared his throat, if not his thoughts. "Where were you going?" he finally managed after he realized that she hadn't said. She hadn't told him much other than that her car had broken down.

"Don't really know," she told him after what seemed to be a long, pregnant silence. "I just graduated nursing school, and I haven't quite figured out what to do with my life. I just knew I had to get away from my family and be on my own for a while."

Bill thought about that for a minute. Maybe her reluctance to talk about herself told him volumes more than if she'd prattled on. He shrugged. "I can take you to the next town," he allowed. "You can get a motel and somebody to tow and fix your car."

He wondered about this small woman who had apparently climbed into a stranger's car without a second thought. She was either desperate or stupid.

He glanced at her and decided that desperate was more the thing. He'd bet she was escaping an abusive family, and climbing into a car with a man she didn't know was probably preferable to going back to a situation she did.

"You sure you want to ride with me?" he wondered out loud before he put the car into gear.

She did what almost seemed to be a double take, then flashed a grin that seemed impossibly large from that small mouth. "I'm game," she said. "It beats walking."

Darcy settled against the seat and breathed in the wonderful, new-car scent. She had worried that she'd be picked up by some Friday-night liquored-up weirdo, and that she'd have to fight for her virtue, if not her life. But the minute she'd seen the clean-cut man in the driver's seat, she'd known she'd be fine. As soon as her gaze had settled on his face, her doubts had vanished.

One look and she knew she'd be safe in his arms.

In his arms?

What had made her think that? The last thing she needed was to be thinking about another man, considering the close call she'd just had. No, as soon as they reached civilization, she was going to thank Bill Hays sweetly for picking her up, then she'd get out of his car and do her best to get on with the rest of her life.

Darcy risked a glance at the man driving, his eyes trained steadfastly on the dark road ahead. It was hard to tell much in the dim glow of the dashboard lights, but what she could see was pleasing to the eye.

He was young, maybe a few years older than she. His clothes were clean, and he smelled like he'd just come from a shower. Was he hurrying to meet a sweetheart?

If he was, Darcy thought, she was one lucky girl.

Though he'd made that remark about Uncle Sam, he didn't look much like a soldier. He looked like the college boys she'd known in school, a little bigger, maybe, and rougher around the edges. He wore jeans, faded but not too worn. His pullover shirt stretched tight across a broad chest, not too muscled, but lean and taut. Physical activities were obviously a regular part of his life.

"Say, Darcy," Bill said, interrupting Darcy's thoughts. "I took off without eating. I could sure use a burger or something. What say we stop in Brewton for some eats?"

Why was he asking her? Darcy wondered as they rolled into the marginally congested area of a small, country town. He was the one doing her the favor. She spotted the brightly lit sign of a familiar fast-food chain looming above the trees. Though she'd recognized the fast-food logo, she had yet to see a chain motel she was familiar with. After all, he was just supposed to take her to a motel so she could arrange to have her car towed.

There was no harm in stopping for a bite, though. Sure, she wanted to get as far away from Hurlburt and Dick as she could, but a ten-minute delay to grab a burger wouldn't make that much difference in the scheme of things.

"Thank you. I'd like that," she finally said. "I skipped dinner, too." And breakfast and lunch, thanks to pre-wedding jitters, she didn't say. Darcy pressed her hand against her stomach to silence the rumbling that Bill surely must have heard. Maybe that's why he'd decided to stop.

She felt her face grow hot, and Darcy thanked the powers that be that the car was dark, and Bill wouldn't see her red face. Maybe he wasn't hungry at all, and he'd only decided to stop because of her noisy stomach.

"Let me buy your meal," Darcy suggested. "My way of thanking you for rescuing me. It's the least I can do."

She glanced over at him as they pulled into the parking lot. Hoo boy. His expression looked like a thundercloud on a sultry summer afternoon. She must have wounded his sense of macho. She shrugged. Tough. If he wanted to pay for his dinner, she couldn't stop him. But she wouldn't let him pay for hers.

Truthfully, she was too hungry to argue. She just wanted to eat. Anything to quell that empty feeling in her belly, not to mention her heart.

BILL WATCHED Darcy from over the rim of his cup. Now that he could see her in the bright light of the restaurant, he could see that she was old enough to have graduated from nursing school. She carried a certain degree of confidence that the girls he'd known in Mattison didn't.

He could see, however, how he could have mistaken her for a teenaged runaway in the dark. She was small and slight and wore a short-cropped do that seemed more pixie-like than sophisticated. He'd thought she was blond when he'd first seen her, but in the brightness inside, he could see that her hair was light brown.

Though she wore the uniform common to teenagers and college students—one that he favored, too—the figure that lay beneath the worn T-shirt appeared mature and well-developed. Darcy was tiny, but she wasn't skinny. She must be closer to his age than he'd originally thought.

Not that it mattered that much. He would never see her again after tonight.

In spite of his fatigue, he felt a stirring in his lower regions, but shrugged it away. He'd just met the woman, it was late, and he had promised that she had nothing to fear from him. He raised his cup to his mouth.

He wondered, though, if he should be careful of her. She seemed safe enough on the outside, but it was what you couldn't see that was the problem.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Bill looked up, startled by the intrusion into his mental meanderings. "What?"

Darcy grinned, the expression making her look as young as he'd judged her to be. "Just wondering what you were thinking about." She nodded toward his drink. "You emptied your cup and didn't even seem to notice."

He put the cup down. Well, he damn sure couldn't tell her what he'd really been thinking about. "Nothing, I guess. And everything."

"Everything?" She arched an eyebrow. "That's heavy. Have you solved the problems of the world?"

Bill shrugged. "Hell. I don't even have a solution for my own," he said, grimacing. "I'd settle for that."

Darcy leaned against the red plastic booth back and gave him an assessing look that made Bill want to squirm. "You don't look like you could possibly have a care in the world," she said finally. "You look healthy, you've recently bought a new car—judging from the smell—and you're just back from Florida."

"It damned sure wasn't a vacation," Bill chuckled dryly. "I'm stationed there and just back from two glorious weeks playing war in the sand in Nevada on a field exercise with my air force combat control team. Now I'm on my way home to visit my dying mother."

Maybe the statement seemed harsh, but he'd had to say it that way at least a thousand times before he could do it without breaking down. It might seem hardhearted, but he had forced himself to face the reality. He was going to have to deal with it sooner or later. Might as well get a head start on it.

Darcy gasped, started to say something, but snapped her mouth shut. Bill wondered what had stopped her. Was it the cold way he had spoken about his mother's illness, or was it that he wasn't the kind of man she'd wanted him to be? Who had she expected him to be?

Darcy looked down and selected a cold, limp French fry, dragged it through a puddle of ketchup on the paper from her burger, then put it slowly into her mouth. She chewed thoughtfully as if she were using the exercise as a stalling tactic. Was she trying to decide what to say, or was she trying to avoid putting her foot in her mouth again?

Or was he just reading too damned much into the whole thing?

The silence between them grew awkwardly long.

It was hard not having anyone to talk to about it. It sure wasn't anything he could discuss with any of the guys on the team. Not even his roommate, Ski Warsinski, knew how he felt. He'd tried talking with the chaplain, but he'd only mouthed the standard platitudes. Bill didn't want comfort. He wanted to yell, to shout, to curse God. He couldn't do that with the chaplain. Maybe he could unload on Darcy, because after tonight, he'd never see her again.

He reached across the table and snagged one of Darcy's French fries. He wanted to talk about it, but he didn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry about your mother," she said softly. "Are you in Florida to be closer to home?"

Bill swallowed, then swallowed again. This time it was a lump of emotion he forced down his throat, not a morsel of potato. "Yeah," he said, his voice thick and husky. "We don't know how much time she has."

Darcy reached across the table and placed her hand over his and squeezed. It was such a simple gesture, but so warm, so giving that it touched something deep inside him. "I'm sorry," she said simply. "Cancer?"

Bill shook his head. "Congestive heart failure. Every time I see her, she's weaker."

Nodding, Darcy spoke. "I understand. Sometimes, heart patients seem so healthy, it's hard to believe that they're sick. Other times, they can appear so fragile that you wonder how they've held on as long as they have. It must be quite a burden for your dad."

Bill drew a deep breath and let it slowly out. "Dad died when I was five. Momma worked hard to keep my older brothers and sisters and me fed and clothed, and now I want to make her last days easier," he said, his voice hoarse. He paused and swallowed, then moistened his dry lips.

“She used to be such a loving, giving person,” Bill went on. “It so hard to see her this way.” He looked down at Darcy’s hand, still covering his. Her skin was so soft, the fingers so delicate, he should hardly have noticed that it was there. But the comfort she provided was enormous.

Darcy didn’t respond. Maybe she knew that words weren’t necessary. There was nothing to say, but her silence seemed to tell more than a Sunday sermon.

Bill glanced at the clock over the pickup counter. Almost ten. At the rate he was going, he wouldn’t get home until midnight. He cleared his throat. “I reckon we’d best get on, then,” he finally said, his voice strained, thick.

“Yeah. I guess so.” Darcy lifted her hand, and in spite of the negligible weight she’d removed, his hand felt cold without it there resting on his.

DARCY GAZED OUT the window and tried to stay awake and on the lookout for a motel. So far, all she’d seen were local places that looked none too reputable. She might be eager to get away from Dick, but she wasn’t that desperate. And Bill had agreed to let her ride along as far as Montgomery where there were more to choose from and the choices were likely cleaner.

In the meantime, she had to keep her eyes open. That had been easy when they were driving through the countryside on the small, back roads. She’d been riding shotgun, helping Bill to guide them through the dense fog, and the constant motion and the stops and turns had kept her alert. Now that Bill had pulled onto I-65 and the fog was gone, the never-changing scenery, unbroken by bright lights or towns, and the comfortable seat seemed to hypnotize her.

Bill turned up the radio and opened a window, to keep from going to sleep himself, she supposed. As it was, her long, sleepless pre-wedding night and even longer day, began to catch up with her. Darcy found herself nodding off and, she tried to think of something to keep her awake.

She yawned. “Do you have a girl waiting for you at home?” she said, trying to make conversation.

Bill shrugged. “Nope.”

She didn’t know why she cared, considering she was hitchhiking and she’d never see him again after tonight, but that small bit of information about him seemed sad. “Do you have other family in Mattison?”

“Yeah.”

Darcy shrugged. Of course, he did. He’d already mentioned siblings. Obviously, he wasn’t in the mood to talk. “Would you rather I be quiet or do you need me to talk to help you stay awake?”

“Naw, I’m fine. It isn’t that late yet, and we’re trained to do without sleep. It’s part of the job.”

“Oh. I’ll just shut up then. When we get to town, you can drop me off, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

“No problem.”

Darcy wondered how much company she could be, sitting there like a bump on a log. She felt about as useful as training wheels on a tricycle, but she was grateful not to have to make idle conversation. Just being in Bill’s strong, silent presence was comforting.

The quiet companionship would be over too soon, she thought as they passed a road sign announcing that Montgomery was thirty-eight miles away.

Thirty-eight miles. At seventy miles an hour, that meant about thirty more minutes in his company. Thirty-eight miles and Bill would drop her off at some motel. Thirty-eight miles and she could get a good night’s sleep and then figure out what to do with the rest of her life.

Montgomery was big enough to have several hospitals, she supposed. Hospitals were always short of nurses. Maybe she could get a job at one of them and start over free from pressure from her family. Free of Dick.

Then she wondered if it wouldn’t be better to just keep going without letting anybody know where she was. Even Bill Hays knowing that she had ended up in Montgomery might bring Dick and her family to her.

No, she wasn't trying to hide from them. She just didn't want to deal with them for a while. She needed time to get her head together. She wasn't ready to face Dick, her parents, or even Uncle John right now.

She wanted to be just plain Darcy and to have the luxury of time to explore who that really was. Dick Harris and the Stanton family with their long military tradition couldn't seem to understand that.

Darcy leaned back against the seat, pillowed her head with her bent arm against the window frame, and closed her eyes.

THE LIGHTS of the city loomed ahead of him, and Bill sighed. In just a few minutes, Darcy would be gone.

The roadside information signs indicated a wide selection of discount motels at the first exit, and he sighed again. He engaged the turn signal and started to ease into the right lane.

Then Bill looked across the seat to Darcy, sleeping on the seat beside him. Yes, he knew she expected him to stop at a motel in Montgomery, but she looked so peaceful curled up there that he didn't have the heart to wake her. What had made her so tired that she dropped off next to a stranger? He flipped the turn signal off and remained on the highway.

There were plenty of other motels on the road ahead before they got through Montgomery. Who said they had to stop at the first one? Darcy hadn't. She could get a room at the last one out of town just as easily.

Bill drove on through the sleeping city, then he drove past the last Montgomery exit, crossed the Alabama River and approached the first off-ramp for Pittsville just a few miles from Mattison. There were fewer motels here, but they were close.

Close to what? he asked himself. Or maybe to whom?

And why was he attracted to this woman he'd just met? It wasn't as if he were looking for a woman, even if he had time for one. Duty, physical training, night school and his mother kept him busy enough for three men. The last thing he needed was any distraction from his goals.

But what a distraction Darcy would be, he couldn't help thinking. He'd practically been a monk since he'd left high school and home. He'd wanted so much to pull himself out of the near-poverty he'd been raised in that he'd devoted all his time to the air force, to getting the education his mother couldn't afford to give him, to making something of himself.

If he could just get his degree, he could obtain an appointment to Officer Training School, become an officer and gain respect in the world. After almost ten years, the degree was in sight.

But there were times when he had a few minutes to himself that he couldn't help realizing just how lonely that climb toward the top had been. He looked at Darcy and wondered how it would be if….

No. He shook his head. He didn't have the time.

He realized suddenly that as he'd been woolgathering, he'd driven right through Pittsville. Now what? He looked at Darcy asleep on the seat and shrugged. He could save her the cost of a night's stay in a motel and put her up at Momma's. There might be a time later on when she would need that money.

He could drive her to Montgomery in the morning.

He yawned and stretched and looked for the familiar landmarks near his home. He saw the old Shell station on the corner, closed now, but still bearing the familiar orange sign. The station had once been adjacent to a motel, but the motel had been closed since before he was born. The interstate had gone through, and the traffic on the Mattison highway had dwindled to nothing.

There was Mrs. Scarborough's house three miles down the road from the little farm where he had grown up. He passed the Popwell's place and Maggie Montoya's restored house, then he saw the dirt road home. He eased on the brakes and steered onto the lane.

Darcy stirred. "Are we in Montgomery yet?" she said through a yawn.

“Hush, Darcy,” he said. “We’re home.” And that simple statement seemed so right, that it needed almost no explanation; although he knew he owed her one. “You were sleeping so soundly, I didn’t want to wake you. Momma’ll have a bed for you, and we can figure out what to do tomorrow.”

Darcy seemed to have heard his explanation, but she didn’t react. Was he going to have to explain again? Would she be angry that he had taken her home? Now, he wondered if he’d made a mistake by not dropping her off in Montgomery as they’d planned.

“Oh. Okay,” she mumbled, confirming his suspicion that she wasn’t fully awake.

Bill wondered again what had exhausted her so that she’d succumbed so completely to sleep. Had there really been a car broken down by the road? Or had she hitchhiked all the way? That would explain her exhaustion.

As he parked in front of the house, he realized with alarm that the lights were still on. Was Momma sick? Or had she simply fallen asleep in front of the television?

The family had tried to get her to accept live-in help, but she always brushed them off, saying she didn’t want a stranger in her house rearranging things, making it not her own. When she was ready for help, she’d tell them. Bill wondered if she was finally ready.

Then he looked up, surprised, when his mother flung open the screen door and stood at the top of the porch steps. She looked better than she had in months. Was she improving?

He knew better than to believe that, but a guy could always hope. He turned off the engine and climbed out of the car. He had to explain about Darcy before he brought her in to spend the night.

Darcy felt, more than heard, the car door slam. She struggled to rouse herself from the depths of exhaustion, but her mind refused to clear. Had Bill said they were home? She’d started to correct him, but it wasn’t worth the effort.

She rubbed her eyes and looked around. They seemed to be in somebody’s yard. Had Bill’s car broken down, too? Had he had to stop to ask help from a stranger?

No. He seemed to know the woman, dressed in a worn housecoat, coming slowly down the steps from the homey-looking front porch complete with an inviting swing and a profusion of potted plants.

Then Bill’s comment about being home started to make sense. This wasn’t Montgomery, and it sure wasn’t a motel.

He had taken her home to his mother’s house.

Darcy stretched and yawned, then fumbled to release her seat belt. She had to get out and move around. She’d been sitting on this seat too long, and her neck was stiff. She needed to work the kinks out of her back and to get the blood circulating again. Maybe then she could think.

She and Bill could sort everything else out later. Or tomorrow, she supposed. She glanced at her watch. It was almost midnight. He’d said his mother would have a bed, and that’s all she cared about for now.

She looked toward the house and couldn’t help being touched by the mother and son reunion.

“What are you doing up so late?” Bill called as he hurried up the dirt walk to the house.

Mrs. Hays laughed, her merry tone belying her serious condition. She looked well enough, but Darcy’s training allowed her to recognize the subtle signs that indicated her illness. “You said you were bringing me a surprise, Billy boy. You had my curiosity running so fast, I couldn’t sleep.”

Bill had forgotten about the comment he’d made when he’d called to say he’d be later than usual. He’d told her about ordering the new Jeep some time ago, but he hadn’t told her that he’d finally gotten it. He’d said he was bringing home a surprise.

A brilliant smile lit up Momma’s face, and Bill turned to see Darcy push open the passenger-side door and climb out, stretching after hours in the car.

“Oh son. It’s the best surprise you ever could give me,” Momma said, hurrying down the steps, her gait more steady than he’d seen in months. “I didn’t think you’d find a bride before…before…. Well, you know.” She smiled again and, arms outstretched, hurried toward Darcy.

He realized with horror what his mother must be thinking. Now, what was he supposed to do? Tell her the truth and break her heart?

# Chapter Two

Bill's mother folded Darcy into a warm embrace. "Welcome to the family, daughter," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "It makes an old lady happy to know that her youngest son is finally going to settle down."

Fortunately for Darcy, the fact that she was enveloped in Mrs. Hays's frail embrace kept her from displaying her shock at what the woman had just said. Had she really just called her daughter?

What's going on here?

She glanced over Mrs. Hays's shoulder and saw the panicked look on Bill's face. At least he was as startled about this as she was. Darcy started to push herself out of Mrs. Hays's embrace and explain, but Bill shook his head and silently mouthed the word, please.

Darcy signaled her objection, but Bill just shook his head again. Considering the woman's health and the terribly late hour, she tacitly agreed to go on with the ruse. At least until morning.

They would have to explain then and make sure Mrs. Hays understood her mistake. As if she didn't have enough sorting out of her own to do.

She patted Mrs. Hays gently on the back and pushed herself out of the woman's embrace. "It's so nice to meet you, Mrs. Hays. Bill has told me so much about you."

"Well, Billy surely hasn't said anything at all about you," Mrs. Hays said, shaking her head. "If you're going to be in the family, you can call me Momma. Or, at least, Nettie. Mrs. Hays sounds so unfriendly, don't you think?"

"Yes, ma'am, I suppose it does. I'll be happy to call you Nettie." There was absolutely no way Darcy was going to call the woman Momma. That would just be too cruel.

It was bad enough that she and Bill were going to have to burst her bubble in the morning. She glanced up at Bill and raised an eyebrow and hoped he got the message.

She wasn't sure what the message was, but she did want him to know that she wasn't happy with the turn of events.

After all, she'd just escaped from one fiancé. She certainly did not need another one.

Darcy smiled at Mrs. Hays. "It's awfully late, Mrs. H—I mean, Nettie. Why don't we get you settled, and we can chat in the morning."

"I do look forward to that, hon. And you are right. I am tired. I guess all this excitement's done worn me out." She turned toward Bill. "Help me up the stairs, son, so I can go to bed. I'll leave you to settle your fiancée in—Why, I do declare, you have not introduced me to my future daughter-in-law."

"It's Darcy Stanton, Nettie," Darcy said, forcing a smile. She waved and Nettie smiled back, then took Bill's arm and allowed him to help her up the short flight of steps.

Wondering how they were going to talk their way out of this charade without hurting the woman struggling up the stairs, Darcy stood outside in the glare of the security lamp and took stock of her surroundings.

The house was small, and Darcy wondered how the woman could have raised five kids in it. But the lawn was trimmed and the flower beds neat and cared for. Obviously, Bill's brothers and sisters were coming around to help. She thought about the strong love they must share and weighed it against her family's feelings about duty and tradition. They didn't compare.

She could see a couple of outbuildings beyond the small house: a chicken house, she supposed, and a shed or a small barn. Mrs. Hays might have kept some chickens and a few cows at one time, but Darcy doubted she was up to keeping them now.

It reminded her of something out of the Laura Ingalls Wilder books she'd loved as a child. Darcy suspected that it had been fun growing up here where the kids could run free and grow like weeds. Not like her own heavily restricted upbringing on military bases all over the world. She'd often had to be escorted to school by armed guards and had only dreamed of running free. The Hays family

might have been poor, but her upbringing hadn't been any better. At least, Bill and his siblings had the roots and stability she'd always craved.

"What do you think?"

Darcy turned, startled, at the sound of Bill's voice behind her. "About what?"

She looked so much like an angel, Bill thought as he hurried down the porch steps to where Darcy waited outside in the yard. He shouldn't have left her there, but he had to take care of Momma first. Hell, he shouldn't have gotten Darcy in this mess in the first place.

He drew in a long breath and answered her question. "The Hays homestead, I suppose," Bill said. "It's gone to seed some since Momma's been sick, but it was a nice place to grow up." And for the first time in his life, Bill realized that it had been.

"That's exactly what I was thinking. I always dreamed of living in a place like this. I bet you had chickens and cows when you were growing up and had chores and everything."

"Didn't you?"

"Didn't I what? Have chickens and cows?"

"No, chores," Bill corrected.

"Oh, sure. Clean up my room. Dishes. I always wondered what it would be like to feed chickens, gather the eggs, and milk cows."

Bill shrugged. "Feeding chickens is no big thing. You just toss out feed, and the chickens come running. It was a little more exciting to get the eggs. Sometimes an ol' hen wouldn't want to part with hers, and I'd have to shoo her off. She'd go with feathers flying and clucking fit to beat the band." He chuckled and headed for his Jeep. "Can't tell you much about milking, though. We just had steers."

"Steers?" Darcy asked as Bill opened the back door to the Jeep.

Bill handed her the backpack and hoisted her duffel bag out along with his own, then slammed the door shut. "Yeah, we got bull calves free from the dairy farm down the road toward Pittsville and raised them for beef."

He smiled inwardly as Darcy grimaced.

"How can you eat anything that you've looked in the face?" she said, horror written all over hers.

"You can eat anything if you're hungry enough, I reckon," Bill said as he turned toward the house. "You comin'?" He strode up the stairs. "It's been a helluva long day, and I'd just as soon hit the sack than stand out here and talk about butchering beef." He could stand around and talk with her as long as she could, but Bill could see that she was just as tired as he was. She might be wide awake right now, but he'd bet she'd drop off as soon as her head hit the pillow. Just as he would.

Just not together.

Why did he keep thinking about that?

He wouldn't mind sleeping with her, but he'd only known Darcy for a few hours, and tomorrow they'd say goodbye. It was nice to dream about, but in the morning he would wake up and face reality.

Bill stopped at the front door to reach for the knob, and Darcy collided with him. He paused, enjoying the feeling of her soft form against him, but she drew away quickly enough. He turned around. "I want to thank you for what you did back there," he said. "I know we're going to have to come clean with Momma in the morning, but it was more important to get her to bed tonight. It'll be easier for her to take when she's rested," he said.

"You're probably right," Darcy said. "But you will explain it to her first thing, won't you?" She yawned and rubbed her eyes. "And you'll drive me back to Montgomery?"

"I'll take you anywhere you want," he told her, but the only place he could think about taking her was to bed. His, not one in his sisters' room where Momma'd said to put her. He figured it wouldn't hurt anything to think about it. He was realistic enough to know it wasn't going to happen anytime soon. No, he told himself, firmly. It wasn't ever going to happen.

"Thank you," Darcy said and yawned again. "Now, could you show me where to sleep before I curl up on that porch swing over there?"

Bill chuckled. “I think I can show you something softer than that old porch swing. Come on inside. Momma said you could have Lougenia and Earline’s room.” He pulled open the screen door and ushered Darcy inside.

A ROOSTER CROWED, and Darcy roused briefly from deep sleep. She looked around the room, still colorless in the gray morning light, and listened for any sounds to indicate anyone in the house was up. Hearing none, she rolled over and burrowed her face into the pillow.

The next time Darcy woke, daylight was streaming in through windows unshuttered against the morning sun. She smelled bacon and coffee, and suddenly she was wide awake.

She was in Bill Hays’s mother’s house, and on top of that, she was pretending to be his fiancée. But only for a few minutes longer. Bill had promised to straighten it all out with his mother. Maybe he already had.

A girl could hope.

Darcy pushed herself up on her elbows and looked around the room she’d been too tired to study last night. It had obviously been a girl’s room. Two girls. Hadn’t Bill mentioned two names last night? There was another twin bed, the mate to the one she was in. Both were draped with pink chenille bedspreads, and a collection of dolls and stuffed animals watched her from the tops of both dressers and shelves on the wall. The toys were as dusty as the curling posters on the wall were worn.

Bill had mentioned that he was the youngest, so these sisters must have preceded him by five or ten years. The posters were from the eighties. She recognized Kirk Cameron and a young John Travolta. She smiled with the realization that teenaged girls were pretty much the same no matter where or when they grew up.

A light tapping on the door caused her to jerk the chenille cover up over her chest. She hadn’t packed a nightgown in her duffle bag and had slept in a T-shirt minus her bra. “Yes?” she managed, after her heart stopped beating a mile a minute.

“I’ve got breakfast ready. I didn’t wake you, did I?” Bill asked from outside the door.

“No, I was up. I’ll just be a minute.” Darcy threw off the covers and tumbled out of the bed. She found her duffle and rummaged through it until she located fresh underwear and a clean T-shirt. She wished they weren’t so wrinkled, but it couldn’t be helped. She hadn’t expected to be meeting her fiancé’s mother.

She hadn’t expected to acquire another fiancé on the same day she’d dumped the last one.

No, she reminded herself. In ten minutes or so, they’d straighten it out, and she wouldn’t have to pretend anymore.

She pulled on the T-shirt, slipped on her shoes, then grabbed her toothbrush and headed toward the bathroom. She might as well put her best face forward when she faced the music. The best one she could, considering.

She just hoped that Mrs. Hays wouldn’t be too upset about the truth.

BILL POURED his mother a glass of orange juice and watched as she drank it. It saddened him to see her so weak, and he felt so helpless not to be able to do anything about it. She’d been so strong when he was growing up, and now she seemed so frail.

“Happy Birthday, son,” Momma said. “In all the excitement last night I plumb forgot about it. We’ll have your party tonight. Along with your birthday, we’ll have something else to celebrate.”

“Something else?”

“Well, surely you want to announce your engagement,” she said. “I called Lougenia first thing this morning and told her all about it. She was so excited.”

Damn, Bill thought. Now what do I do? Why in the hell did I think we could get away with it? We should’ve told her the truth last night. “Momma, I wish you hadn’t done that,” he said, tempering his anger. After all, he wasn’t mad at Momma. He was mad at himself.

“Oh, did you want to save it till the party this evenin’?” She looked apologetic. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to steal your thunder by telling your sister.”

"It's all right, Momma. We'll sort it out later." The sooner it happened, the better it would be for everyone, Bill couldn't help thinking. At least, Momma hadn't told his sister Earline. If she had, everyone in Pitt County would know by now.

"Why didn't you tell us about your sweetheart, son?"

Bill drew in a deep breath. Why didn't he just get it over with now? He looked up and saw Darcy coming down the hallway toward the kitchen. Might as well wait until they could do it together. "We haven't known each other very long. She's been away in school." It was the truth, as far as it went.

"Why, good morning, Darcy. Did you sleep good?" Momma's face lit up like a runway strobe light when Darcy entered the room.

Darcy looked so fresh and beautiful in a well-scrubbed way, even after their late, late night and sleeping in a strange bed. Bill knew he couldn't have her, but he sure wished he could. Listen to him. He sounded like he was talking about a stray puppy, not a person with real feelings and needs.

"Yes, ma'am. Like a baby." Darcy shot a questioning glance Bill's way, and he shook his head slightly in answer to her unspoken question.

"Bacon's ready, and I'll have eggs scrambled in a couple of minutes," Bill said. Anything to change the subject.

Darcy smiled at Momma, then hurried over to Bill. She spoke to him in a low whisper. "Should your mother be eating eggs and bacon, considering her condition?"

Bill started to answer, but Momma answered for him. "Ain't nothing wrong with my hearing. I know I can't eat that high c'lesterol stuff, but I keep it on hand for Bill when he comes. Already had my oatmeal."

"Darcy just graduated from nursing school," Bill volunteered, perhaps as a way of explaining her…what? Concern?

"Well, that is so wonderful. Earline wanted to go to nursing school, but she married Edd instead. Did get her Licensed Practical Nurse Certificate at the vocational school. But she don't use it since the kids come along."

"Yes, ma'am." Darcy stood awkwardly between the table and the stove and hooked her thumbs in her belt loops while Bill scrambled the eggs. "Can I help with anything?"

At least he could give her something to do. "Here, put the bacon on the table." Bill didn't wait for her to do it, but poured the beaten eggs into the skillet. The eggs sizzled as they hit the hot surface, and he quickly stirred them up. "Coffee and mugs are on the counter."

"Will you be staying here the whole time of Bill's leave?"

"No, ma'am," Darcy said as she put the bacon down and reached for a mug and coffee.

"Please, hon. You make me sound like an old school teacher or something. Call me Nettie if you can't call me Momma."

"Yes, ma—I mean, Nettie. No, ma'am. I have to look for a place in Montgomery." She stirred some powdered creamer into her coffee from a jar on the counter, then settled at the table across from Momma. "I thought there might be some hospitals in town with openings for nurses, so I thought I'd apply. I'm so ready to get a job and live on my own after all the rules and restrictions of school."

He had to hand it to her, Bill thought. She was covering herself well. So far, she hadn't lied, but she hadn't said anything that would get him in any serious trouble, either. He scraped the eggs onto two plates and carried them to the table.

"Thank you," Darcy said. "I could get used to being waited on."

"Well, you'd best get what you can now," Momma said. "Once you start at a hospital, I reckon you'll be waiting on everybody else." She turned to Bill. "Son, get some silverware and set down before everything turns to rubber."

Darcy smiled. Bill had seemed so in command when she'd met him on the road. When they'd talked in the car and at the restaurant, even when he had allowed her that brief glimpse of his

vulnerable side, she'd had the feeling that he was in charge. Now, she could see that his mother had him wrapped around her little finger.

"What's so funny?" Bill said as he plopped a fork down in front of her and took another chair.

"Nothing. I was just enjoying watching your mother boss you around."

Bill grimaced, the wry expression softening the angular lines of his face and making him look briefly boyish. "Believe me, I have people telling me what to do every day." He scooped up a forkful of eggs.

"You know something, hon," Nettie said abruptly, interrupting the pleasant banter. "Doctor Williamson in Pittsville is looking for a new nurse. I'd bet he'd hire you in a minute."

Darcy swallowed her eggs, almost choking on them. Every time she thought she was about to extricate herself from this mess, she found herself in deeper. "I was really looking forward to hospital work," she said. "They pay better. I do have to support myself, you know."

"Don't be silly. You can stay here with me. After all, you're going to be part of the family. Doc's my doctor, and he's just about ten miles down the road. You'd have much better hours, and you could save what you earn toward your weddin'."

"You think you have it all figured out. Don't you, Momma?" Bill said. "Darcy wants to live on her own for a while before she gets tied down with marriage."

"Psh. It's lonely livin' by yourself. I should know. And I know too darn much about working odd shifts. I did enough of that at the cotton gin when you were growing up." She smiled at Darcy. "At least, think about it, hon. I could surely use the company."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll think about it."

"Well, if you don't mind, I'm going to go on and set on the porch for a while. I do love to swing and smell the flowers while it's cool in the mornings." She pushed herself up out of her chair and slowly made her way toward the front door.

"I thought we were going to straighten out this mess first thing in the morning," Darcy hissed, the minute she thought Nettie was out of hearing range. "You can't keep lying to your mother like this. The longer it goes on, the harder it'll be for us to explain our way out of it."

"I know," Bill said slowly. "I tried this morning before you got up, but damn it, she's already gone and told Lougenia about it. Lou'll probably tell somebody else, and so on and so on. If she's told Earline, it'll be all over the county by nightfall. I don't know what to do."

"You tell your sister the truth," Darcy said firmly. "She's not old and sick. She can handle it."

As much as she hated lying, Darcy hated hurting Bill's mother more. She liked this gentle woman who, in spite of her obvious poor health, had welcomed Darcy into her home with open arms. She'd offered Darcy her home, her love, and Darcy felt like a number-one heel for leading Nettie on like this. "We have to straighten this thing out, now."

Bill just sat there, an impassive look hardening his face and making him look more like the trained military man he was than the farm boy she'd first supposed him to be. Had he even heard anything she'd said?

Darcy wanted to hit him.

His face brightening, he looked up and grinned. "Think about this," he said. "And I want you to listen to my entire proposition before you say anything."

"Something tells me I'm not going to like this," Darcy said warily.

"Just hear me out. It's important to me."

"Go ahead." Bill had done her a big favor; she might as well listen.

"You know about my mother's health problem. As a nurse, you know how precarious her situation can be." He took Darcy's hand, sending a tremor of…excitement?…running through her. "You with me so far?"

Darcy nodded, still wondering where he was going with this. "Go on."

"My family has been trying to get Momma to allow somebody to come in and help her out, but she will have nothing to do with the idea. Says she doesn't want some stranger in her house messing with her things. Earline does what she can, but she has her own family. She stops by on her way to work, and her daughter Leah—she's twelve—comes in to sit with her and do some light chores after school, but there's nobody here with Momma at night. Even with Leah here all day in the summer, we worry." He met her eyes. "As you may not have noticed last night when we came in…."

Darcy blushed, remembering how she had fallen asleep and slept all the way through Montgomery.

"Anyway, we live a good ways from town. If Momma needed help, it would be a long time coming from Pittsville. And then she'd probably have to be transferred to Montgomery anyway." He paused and looked at her as if trying to gauge her reactions.

"What are you getting at?"

"It would sure take a load off my mind if you stayed here. Momma wouldn't have a stranger messing with her things, and you would have a place to stay until you got on your feet." He looked at her, his face radiating hope. "What do you say?"

Darcy stared at him, speechless. How could she possibly respond to this? Bill had promised her that they'd untangle this mess in the morning, not make it even worse.

"I know it's a lot to ask, but think about Momma. She needs you, even if she won't admit it."

"I…" Darcy struggled for some kind of response. The thing he was asking her to do was… was…preposterous. "I'd feel like a heel for deceiving her. She deserves better than that."

"She deserves to be well and healthy enough to enjoy retirement after working two or three jobs to feed us." Bill drew in a ragged breath. "But she won't get that." His voice broke. "At least, make her last days easier."

Talk about a guilt trip. But why should she feel guilty about this? Nettie wasn't her mother. Why should she get involved at all? The last thing she needed was another fiancé when she'd just gotten rid of the last one. Even if Bill was only a pretend one.

Darcy tried to consider all the angles, not easy to do with Bill sitting just across the table looking at her. He'd given her some of the most compelling reasons to stay. But they couldn't justify lying.

She'd been living a lie for the last six months. She'd been pretending to be someone she was not. Darcy did not want to have to do it again.

Then she thought about Nettie Hays who had been so kind to her, so welcoming. The woman was ill. She didn't have much longer to live. If it would make Nettie's last days easier, maybe she could do it. After all, Bill would know that it wasn't real.

She knew it wasn't real. Nobody was fooling anybody.

Except Nettie.

And, the reality was that Nettie needed someone to be with her, and Darcy needed a place to stay. A place to think about what she wanted to do with the rest of her life without the distraction of her parents, her uncle and aunt and Dick. Maybe Mattison was the perfect place to hide while she got her head together.

She glanced out the kitchen window to where Nettie Hays sat swaying gently back and forth on the porch swing, humming a tune that Darcy couldn't quite catch. She looked across the table to Bill.

He must have sensed her wavering thoughts, for he reached across the table and captured her hand in his large, strong one. He squeezed it gently, almost seeming to telegraph his feelings through his touch. That's when Darcy knew she'd agree to do this foolhardy thing. Bill seemed to understand her unasked question. "I promise it will be nothing more than a business arrangement. I won't expect anything of you except to help Momma," he said huskily.

Bill needed her.

He needed her to be his eyes and ears and to take care of his mother when he couldn't. To be here for him when times were rough and he couldn't come. Bill had helped her out when she needed him. What else could she do?

Knowing she would probably regret this, she swallowed hard and looked at him. "All right," she said, feeling the warmth of his hand on hers. "We can try it. After all, who could it hurt?"

# Chapter Three

Darcy hung up the phone and sighed gustily. What had made her think that she'd be able to find someone to tow her car out of that roadside ditch and repair it, when she didn't know the name of a single garage and tow company in south Alabama? And it didn't help that she wasn't exactly sure where the ditch containing her car was.

She'd already spent a huge amount of time calling long distance trying to get somebody to take care of the problem, but she'd gotten the royal runaround. And she'd thought military bureaucracy was hard to circumvent. She'd never tried to work within the system of a small Alabama town, and she was doing it blind from a hundred miles away.

At least she had been successful in getting an appointment for an interview with Dr. Williamson for the opening he had. It amazed her that he still kept his office open on Saturday mornings.

Darcy wondered if landing the job would be as easy as landing the interview. No, she told herself. Nothing had ever come easy for her before. She might as well be prepared for a long, hard haul. Still, it would be nice to have a job lined up right away.

She started to try again to find someone to tow her car, but stopped when she heard the sound of a car pulling into the drive. Had Bill returned from Barney's General Store, or had the first of the party guests begun to arrive?

When she'd agreed to pretend to be engaged to Bill, she hadn't known that the family was planning a party tonight. If they were really in love, she would have known that Bill had celebrated his twenty-eighth birthday alone while he'd been in Nevada on the last training exercise. It might be a birthday party, but it was too much to hope that the "engagement" would not come up.

Still, she hoped for a miracle because it was going to be hard to lie to his friends and relatives without having her partner in crime standing at her elbow. After all, they had to be able to keep their stories straight.

At least, for a little while.

Darcy breathed a relieved sigh as she heard Bill call from outside. "Come open the door. My hands are full."

She scurried to the door and let her "fiancé" in. She had been trying to force herself to keep thinking of Bill as her intended so she wouldn't slip up in front of his guests, but when she was alone it was hard to do. Now that she could see him again in the flesh, her breath caught in her throat. Any woman would be proud to be engaged to him. She could stare all day at his broad chest, showed off to perfection by the form-fitting T-shirt the color of Carolina blue skies. And those faded, snug jeans were bleached out in the most interesting places and made her wonder what lay beneath.

She almost wished she really was.

Darcy drew a deep breath and forced herself to speak. "How did that short list grow to three full grocery sacks?" she asked as she took the bag dangling precariously from Bill's right hand and headed with it to the kitchen. "I thought you were getting milk and ice."

"Got two more bags in the Cherokee," he said as he lowered the two he carried onto the kitchen table. He shrugged. "You know how it is. You see stuff you need…." He paused and grinned. "And you see stuff you don't really need but you kinda want, and pretty soon your short list has grown a foot long." He turned to go back to the car, but looked back over his shoulder. "I saw Earline at the store."

"And…?" Darcy asked, hoping the comment wasn't prefacing bad news.

"She'd heard the news from Lou and was already blabbing to Barney. Who knows how many other folks she'd already spread the word to by then? Don't reckon we'll have to make much of an announcement tonight. Pretty much everybody in the county's gonna know."

Darcy sighed. "That's what I was afraid of."

FOR SOME REASON everyone was late this time. Bill stood by the front window watching for the first car to arrive. The lateness of the guests, family mostly, had given him a little more time to get his story straight with Darcy, he supposed, and it saved Momma from the stress and commotion of all the kids so soon.

Still, he couldn't help thinking that he wanted to get this over with as soon as he could. It was one thing to stretch the truth to his mother for a good reason, but another thing to announce it to half the town. If they weren't careful, they would find it in the local paper, and he sure wanted to prevent that.

And was it really a white lie?

It was one thing to let Momma think what she thought, it was another thing to carry it on as if it were true. Damn, when did life get so complicated?

"How do I look?"

He turned to see Darcy standing in the hallway to the back of the house.

"I don't have any party clothes with me," she said, smiling apologetically. "I wasn't expecting to be engaged quite so soon." She struck a pose, holding her arms out and doing a slow turn. "This was the best I could do."

Billy whistled, long and low. If that was short notice, he'd like to see what she looked like when she was really trying.

No. He wouldn't. This was make-believe, he reminded himself. They were pretending for Momma's sake.

Darcy was wearing jeans, and he wondered if she had any other clothes. This pair was newer, and instead of a T-shirt, she had on a sweater set in a soft blue that hugged her curves, yet looked delicate and demure. How'd she manage that? And why did he keep thinking about her as if she really were his fiancée?

"Oh, you look fine," he murmured, shaking his head appreciatively. "More than fine."

"Thank you," Darcy answered primly. "I didn't have anything dressy with me. I thought I'd be able to send for the rest of my clothes when I got where I was going and before I needed anything special."

She hadn't really thought that, consciously anyway, but she had sent most of her things ahead—to Dick's place—and had only brought the bare minimum with her. Mother and Aunt Marianne had enjoyed shopping for the honeymoon trousseau she hadn't really wanted, and she'd left that behind when she'd taken off. All she had were the clothes in the duffle bag she'd left in the car.

Strange, she thought, that she'd packed enough in her bag for the trip from school in North Carolina to keep her going until she landed on her feet. Even when she hadn't known she was going to run. Or had she?

She had an oyster-colored linen suit, badly in need of ironing now, her best uniform left from nursing training, and some jeans and T-shirts. She certainly had packed much more than she needed for the trip to Hurlburt Field.

"Will I pass inspection?" she asked him.

Bill whistled again. "You will do just fine. I might have to fight the other guys off my gir—" He suddenly realized what he'd said. "I'm sorry." Bill shrugged. "I know we're only pretending for Momma's sake."

"Apology accepted. After all, we have to make it look good." Darcy grinned. "Feel free to fight off any interlopers you feel like. It'll do my ego good."

"I don't know about your ego, Darcy. But it'll damn sure do mine just fine." Bill grinned. "I don't exactly have the reputation of a ladies' man around here."

Darcy arched an eyebrow. "You couldn't prove it by me. You sure did a good job of picking me up."

"Ha ha," Bill said dryly. "I might have come to your rescue, but it wasn't exactly on a white charger."

"No, just a dark green Jeep Cherokee. That was good enough for me." Funny, she hadn't noticed the color of the Jeep when he'd picked her up.

Now she noticed everything.

Like the way Bill's chest had expanded when he'd looked at her. And the way he cared for his mother, and his wide-open face, and his green eyes and the touch of his hand…No, she couldn't be thinking about that. It isn't real.

It isn't real, she reminded herself again.

She shook her thoughts away, and looked up at Bill, only to find herself drowning in his deep green eyes. She forced herself to look away before it was too late.

For what?

"What else do we have to do to get ready?" Darcy asked, though she knew they were as ready as they could be. She had to say something to change the subject. Anything. They were heading toward dangerous territory if they didn't switch to a different topic of conversation.

Bill shrugged and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Everything is pretty much under control for now. Lou and Earline are bringing the party. All we had to do was make sure everything was cleaned up and ready." He smiled crookedly. Odd that they were both acting like a couple of teenagers on a first date. But then, this was more like a first date than a birthday-slash-engagement announcement party.

At least on a first date, they would have been alone.

The crunch of tires on the gravel driveway saved him from any more deep thinking.

"Looks like the first wave is here. I reckon we better get to battle stations." He glanced out the window. "It's Earline and Edd and the kids." With Earline's kids around, at least, he wouldn't have time to think.

BILL WAS RIGHT when he'd told her they wouldn't have to make an announcement, Darcy thought as she assessed the crowd in the small living room. It seemed as if everyone who came in had already heard. It might have saved them from having to stand up in front of the group and tell a bald-faced lie, but it hadn't made it any easier.

Because everyone already knew, she found herself fielding questions that she and Bill had not prepared for.

Like, when was the wedding?

Since there wasn't really going to be a wedding, they hadn't thought that anyone would ask. Both of them had severely underestimated the curiosity of the residents of Mattison, Alabama.

"You really ought to set a date soon, girl," Ruby Scarborough, Bill's first-grade teacher, said as she cornered Darcy in the nook by the fireplace, far across the room from Bill.

Bill had told Darcy that Mrs. Scarborough considered herself a member of every family in the community since she'd educated all the kids and most of the parents as well. She attended every party, wedding shower and reception, whether she was invited or not.

"Gosh, Mrs. Scarborough, Bill and I hadn't even thought that far ahead," Darcy told her truthfully. "We've only just gotten engaged, and we want to enjoy that part of our relationship for now."

Mrs. Scarborough took her by the arm and pulled her farther to the side. "You know, Nettie doesn't have much more time," she said in hushed tones. "Perhaps, you should think of doing it sooner instead of later."

"Yes, ma'am. We know. But I've just gotten out of nursing school, and I want to work for a while first." Darcy knew her reply was lame, but what else could she say?

Bill came to her rescue. "You'll excuse me, Miz Scarborough, if I steal my fiancée away."

"You're excused for now. But I will not forgive you if you don't set a date, and soon. Your momma needs to see you married and settled."

"Yes, ma'am, I know. But, I'm going to be busy with several training schools for the next few months, so we won't be able to schedule anything until I'm done."

"Until you're finished with them," Mrs. Scarborough corrected. "You're only done if you've been baking at 350 degrees for about five hours like a turkey," she added.

"Yes, ma'am. When I'm finished." Bill steered Darcy across the room.

"I'm sorry," he whispered quietly into Darcy's ear. "I hadn't expected the news to spread like wildfire. I could throttle Earline."

Darcy turned and whispered back. "It's all right. We should have asked your mother to keep it quiet." Then she stopped. "But, that would have been unfair to her."

"Yeah," Bill said. "I should've straightened it all out last night." Then he looked across the room to where his mother was seated regally in a chair, her attendant guests surrounding her.

No, he was glad he'd given her these few moments of pleasure. He and Darcy could pretend to have a falling-out later. He did have that long string of specialty schools coming up. It would be a perfect reason for the engagement not to work out.

Then he looked at Darcy, smiling down at Chrissy, Earline's youngest. It might be a perfect excuse, but everybody'd think he was a damned fool to let a keeper like Darcy get away.

Too bad she wasn't really his to lose.

DARCY'S FACE hurt from smiling so much, and it was still early in the party as far as she could tell. There were mounds of food on the table, and the huge sheet cake that Lougenia had baked and decorated herself had yet to be cut. It was going to be a long evening.

Lougenia banged on an aluminum cook pot with a wooden spoon. "Come on, ever'body. Food's getting cold. Grab a plate and fill it, then find a spot to set."

Edd stepped up to the table and reached for a plate, but Lougenia smacked her brother-in-law's hand with her wooden spoon. "Hold on, bubba. Where are your manners? Let's let the birthday boy and the guest of honor go first."

Edd backed up, looking duly chastened, but his hangdog look soon turned to a grin. "Better get up there, boy. They's hungry people waiting."

Bill blushed, and Darcy couldn't help liking the man more. He took her by the hand and stepped forward, and as a shock of warmth ran up her arm, Darcy couldn't help thinking she liked that, too. It was a good thing that Bill was going back to his base soon. If she wasn't careful, she would be wanting to make this engagement real.

And the last thing she needed right now was another man in her life.

Bill handed Darcy a plate, a chipped piece of bone china in a beautiful old pattern that must have been in his family for years. "Better eat up," he said low, under his breath. "We don't skimp on food around here."

Darcy looked around the room at the well-fed group, and could see that that statement was true. Maybe too true. But that was a crusade she'd fight later. She hadn't done a cardiology rotation for nothing.

Lucy Carterette, the minister's wife, Darcy thought, stepped into line behind her as she debated the merits of deviled eggs versus carrot sticks. The eggs won. She could do an extra mile the next time she ran. She smiled at the woman and helped herself to an egg.

"It's so nice that Billy has found someone," Mrs. Carterette said as she, too, selected an egg. "How did you and Billy meet?"

"Darcy's car broke down, and I gave her a lift," Bill interjected. They'd decided to stick as close to the truth as possible without filling in too many details that could get them into trouble later.

"Isn't that sweet!" another woman, whose connection Darcy couldn't quite figure, cooed.

"Yes, ma'am. I was quite worried. I had just set out to walk when Bill drove up and rescued me." That much was true. She'd managed to keep her story straight, so far. Maybe, if people were busy eating, she wouldn't have to answer so many questions.

She filled her plate and followed Bill to a spot on the floor by the fireplace.

Bill held out his hand and took her plate while Darcy settled, cross-legged, next to him. They left the sofa and chairs for the older, less nimble people.

Chrissie squealed as Little Edd swiped a carrot stick from her. She shoved her plate at her mother and dashed across the floor and tackled the boy in a play that would have made any football coach proud.

Big Edd got up, crossed the room in two long strides, grabbed both kids by the shoulders and pulled them apart. “Go set with your momma,” he told Chrissie sternly. Then he looked at Little Edd. “What do you mean, picking on your sister like that? You know we didn’t bring you up to steal from girls.”

The boy, head hanging dejectedly, dragged back to his spot on the other side of his mother.

“And you watch about letting people tackle you like ‘at. It ain’t no way to get to the University of Alabama if you gonna let a girl get the better of you.”

Little Edd looked up quickly, then swallowed. “Yes, sir,” he said. “I know I shoulda been watching my flank.” He picked up his abandoned plate and sat down.

“Starting a little early, aren’t they?” Darcy murmured as she tried to hide a smile.

Bill looked at her. “Around here, one of the few ways a poor kid can get to college is to do good on the football field.”

“A football scholarship’s the only hope they have?” Darcy concluded.

“Got that in one,” Bill answered grimly, then dug into a mound of potato salad with black olives and pickles. “That and joining the service.”

Earline looked over the heads of her children, still giving each other dirty looks. “Momma said you just graduated from nursing school.”

Darcy nodded.

“I got my LPN at John Patterson Technical College. Where’d you go?”

“Duke.”

“Where’s that?” Earline asked, her mouth full.

“North Carolina.”

Earline swallowed. “If it’s in North Carolina, how’d you meet Billy when he’s in Florida?”

Now it was Darcy’s turn to swallow. She swallowed again, but before she could answer, Bill came to her rescue.

“I went to jump school, at Fort Bragg in North Carolina.”

“Oh. Lucky you.”

Darcy didn’t know whether Earline was referring to Bill or to her, but considering the good save, she answered, “Yes, it was lucky. If Bill hadn’t come along when he did, I don’t know what I would have done.”

“That’s enough poking your nose into Darcy’s business, Earline,” Bill said. “Let her eat.”

“Well, I was just interested,” Earline protested. “She is going to be a member of the family. I would like to know a little something about her.”

Bill shot his sister a look, and she drew in a deep, aggravated breath and turned her attention back to her plate.

“Thank you, Bill,” Darcy murmured under her breath. “It seems like you’re always saving me.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Bill said.

Darcy wondered what Bill meant by that, but she didn’t make an issue of it. It was good enough that the questions had stopped, for now, and she could eat in peace.

BILL WOULD HAVE LOVED to have everybody leave so he could take a long nap after all the food he’d eaten, but he figured there were a good couple of hours before people headed home. At least he and Darcy hadn’t been bothered too much since Earline’s earlier inquisition. People had gathered into quiet clumps and the kids were outside chasing fireflies.

He turned to Darcy. “How you holding up?”

She shrugged. “Okay, I guess. I like your family and friends, but I feel funny about lying to them.”

Bill let out a long breath. “I know that, but remember it’s for Momma. And so far, we haven’t really lied. We’ve just sort of left out a few details.”

“What’s the difference?” Darcy said, setting her empty plate on the floor beside her. “They all think we’re engaged,” she said in low tones.

“But we didn’t tell them that. That’s the difference.”

“And we didn’t correct them when they made the assumption,” Darcy persisted.

Bill set his plate on top of Darcy’s. “It’s too late to do anything about it now. We’re just going to have to stick with the plan.”

“Easy for you to say. You get to go back to Hurlburt and business as usual.” Darcy sighed.

“What you two lovebirds doing with your heads together like that? Making wedding plans?”

Bill and Darcy sprang apart, and Bill looked up to where Lougenia was standing at the plundered dining-room table, a cake knife in hand.

“It’s time to honor the birthday boy and to cut the cake.” Lougenia motioned toward Bill. “Come on up to the table, and bring the lovely Darcy up with you.”

“They just want me to blow out the candles,” Bill said, offering Darcy his hand. “And everybody wants to get a good look at you.”

Bill loved the way her small, warm hand seemed to fit in his. He helped her to her feet. “Here goes nothing,” he said as he led Darcy across the room.

Lougenia lit the candles and beckoned him forward. “All right, Billy. Stand here,” she directed.

Bill had barely settled into position when everyone broke out in a chorus of “Happy Birthday.” By the end of the song, even Darcy had joined in.

“Now, make a wish and blow out the candles.”

Playing along, Bill closed his eyes and pretended deep concentration while he thought about his wish. Then, drawing a deep breath, he reared back and blew all the candles out at once.

“Yesss! That means you get your wish,” Darcy said, falling into the spirit of the situation.

“What did you wish for?” Chrissie asked.

“It won’t come true if I tell, sugar pumpkin,” Bill said ruffling the girl’s hair.

“I bet I know what he wushed for,” Little Edd said, his voice dripping with disdain. “I bet he wushed we would all go home so he could make kissy face with Miss Darcy.”

Darcy blushed, and Bill didn’t know what to say.

“Well, brother dear, if that’s your wish, I hereby grant it,” Lougenia said. “Have at it.”

Bill looked at Darcy, who was exhibiting nothing short of sheer panic.

“Kiss her,” somebody said.

“Give her a good one,” someone else chimed in.

“Kiss. Kiss. Kiss.” Pretty soon the room echoed with the chant.

“Do you mind?” Bill said quietly, looking into Darcy’s brown eyes. “I think that’s the only way they’ll quit.”

Darcy drew in a short, quick breath and swallowed. “Okay,” she said reluctantly. “If that’ll be the end of it.”

“Go on, Billy. It ain’t no big deal.”

Bill looked around the room. The noisy chant dwindled as the party guests saw that he was accepting the challenge.

“I don’t usually do this in front of an audience,” he murmured, more for Darcy’s sake than for the people watching. In fact, it had been so long since he’d done it at all that kissing Darcy was a very big deal.

He swallowed and wiped his palms, suddenly sweaty, on his jeans. Then he drew Darcy into his arms, situated her in front of him, and lowered his mouth toward hers.

# Chapter Four

Darcy's breath caught in her throat. She hadn't bargained for this. This was only supposed to be a pretend engagement, but the handsome man leaning in to kiss her was all too real. Yet, curiosity and more than a little desire had her closing her eyes and moistening her lips as Bill's face drew closer to hers.

His lips touched her mouth, landing feather-soft at first, like a butterfly lighting on a flower.

She should have let him lift off and be done and that would have been that, but Darcy couldn't. She wanted to know what it would be like to kiss this man standing so close to her, so steady, so real. She kissed him back.

Bill uttered a soft moan that only she could hear, or had she only felt it? Then he pulled her closer to him, pressing her against his hard, strong chest. Darcy's eyes fluttered open for a moment, but only a moment, then drifted shut again as she sank into the delicious sensation of being thoroughly kissed by a real man.

Her lips parted, and Bill accepted the invitation, plunging deep within her recesses. As he probed and tasted her, Darcy felt almost as if she had been well and thoroughly loved.

How would it be if they weren't pretending?

But this kiss felt too good to be pretense. And Darcy longed to satisfy her body's desire for more. For him. All of him. She heard herself whimper with need.

If Dick had kissed her like this just once, maybe she wouldn't have left him in the chapel.

"Come on you two. Get a room," Edd said from somewhere out in the real world.

Edd's comment and that brief reminder of Dick was all it took to break the spell. And that's what Darcy had to convince herself it was, a spell. An enchantment. There was no way she could have responded to this man she hardly knew if she hadn't been bewitched in some way.

She jerked away, fighting the urge to touch her tingling and sensitive lips. She felt unwanted heat rising to her cheeks, then willed her face to cool.

"Now that's enough, Edd. Leave those kids be. They don't need you teasing and taunting them," Nettie Hays said to her son-in-law from her throne-like position across the room.

"Yes, ma'am," Edd said. "Let's leave them to make out without a audience."

"Just thought we could give you a few lessons," Bill fired back over his shoulder as he loosened his grip on Darcy's arms. He turned back to her. "Do you want me to send everyone home?" he asked in an undertone.

Darcy glanced behind Bill to where Nettie seemed to be enjoying her company. "No, not yet. Nettie's having a good time, but if she begins to look tired, we should tell them that the party's over."

"Thank you," Bill whispered. "I owe you." Then he turned and grinned at his mother.

No, thank you, Darcy couldn't help thinking. Bill had shown her more about love today than she had seen in her entire life. She drew in a deep breath, pasted on a smile, and prepared to face the guests and the rest of the party.

IN SPITE OF the crush of guests around him, the only thing Bill could think of was that kiss. That wonderful, breathtaking, unexpected kiss. Maybe he should have anticipated the possibility—hell, probability—of kissing Darcy, but he hadn't. And now that he had kissed Darcy, he wanted to keep on doing it. But he knew he couldn't.

It wouldn't be fair.

Not to him, not to Darcy, not even to his mother, for that matter.

He and Darcy had to figure out a way to make this engagement look good for now and then make it come to an end without hurting anybody. Talk about an impossible task!

He wasn't used to lying. Pretending to be engaged to Darcy was a lie, even if he wouldn't mind if it were true.

Bill looked across the room to where Momma seemed to be sinking lower into her chair. He saw that she was tired. Excitement had been replaced by dark smudges beneath her eyes. He wondered how to ask the guests to leave.

"Hey, little brother, I've got one sleepy little quarterback here," Earline said, drawing Bill out of his thoughts and saving him from having to come up with an excuse. She guided a drowsy Little Edd toward the door while Big Edd followed with Chrissie in his arms. Leah, their oldest, brought up the rear.

"Hey, Uncle Bill, I like Miss Darcy. You got a real keeper," Leah said. She turned toward Darcy. "Can I be in your wedding? I'm the only girl in my class who hasn't been a bridesmaid yet."

Darcy looked startled, but she recovered quickly enough. "We'll have to see, sweetie. We haven't started to make plans," she finally said.

It seemed to satisfy Leah, and she left happily enough. Too bad they wouldn't be able to follow through.

Lougenia, announcing that Momma was tired, followed Earline and her family out. Soon the rest of the guests took the hint, leaving Bill and Darcy alone with Momma.

"I'll just take my bedtime pills and then leave you two alone," Momma said. "I'd love to help you clean up, but I just don't seem to have the energy anymore," she said as she shuffled into the kitchen for a glass of water.

"That's all right, Nettie. We can handle it," Darcy called after her. "You go ahead and get your rest." She started clearing the dining-room table while they waited for Momma to finish in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry Leah put you on the spot like that," Bill said as he watched Darcy stacking plates from the ravaged dining-room table.

"Me, too. I hate to disappoint her," Darcy said, piling flatware on top of the plates. "She's a nice girl."

"No nicer than you," Bill told her.

After Momma went up to bed, he followed Darcy into the kitchen and watched as she deposited the plates on the sideboard and filled the sink with sudsy water. "I'll dry if you wash," he suggested, hoping for a way to be close to her without crowding. He knew that Darcy had been just as uneasy about the kiss they'd been forced into as he had, but they'd had to do something or they wouldn't have made their fake engagement look real.

Or ever heard the end of it.

"You're on. Though, I'd rather you'd wash and I dry," she said as she lowered the first glass into the water.

"I don't expect we ought to risk that slippery, wet china with these big mitts," he said, holding up his hands.

Darcy tossed a dish towel at Bill which he deftly caught. "Remind me to pick up some rubber gloves in town," Darcy said. "Or maybe a dishwasher," she mumbled just low enough that Bill had to strain to hear.

Bill chuckled. "We've tried for years to get Momma to let us give her one, but she wouldn't have a thing to do with it. Said she'd raised five kids without having one, so why'd she need one now?" He thought for a minute. "Now that it looks like there's gonna be a new Mrs. Hays, maybe we can swing one."

Darcy dipped a soapy glass under the running water. "No," she said, shaking her head. "I won't be here that long, and it's a big expense. I can make do. After all, you don't have twenty people over for dinner most of the time." Darcy looked up at him, her eyes wide. "This isn't a regular thing, is it?"

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