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The Bride's Choice

Sara Orwig



Vintage 90s

Sara Orwig

The Bride's Choice

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MARRY A STRANGER? Juliana Aldrich wouldn't think of it! But that's exactly what her benefactor's will was asking her to do. Worse, her would-be groom, Caleb Duncan, actually wanted to go through with it! Think of the money, he insisted. All Juliana could think about was sharing the marriage bed with this dangerously sexy man! Caleb couldn't have made a better proposal himself. Marry for one year, and he'd walk away with his bachelorhood intact. But he soon realized his pretty bride was sure to foul up his plans, because Juliana had him wishing that her hotheaded refusals would turn to passion on the wedding night... .

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“I’m Talking About A Marriage In Name Only,”

Caleb said quietly. “There wouldn’t be anything physical—” he paused, his dark eyes boring into her “—unless you want a physical relationship.”

Juliana’s mouth dropped open as she stared at him, and Cal had to bite back a laugh.

“In name only?” she repeated.

He was in deep now and he clung to the remembrance of the amount of money each would inherit. “As beautiful as your body is, I know we’re strangers. I’m suggesting in name only. I like my solitary life and peace and quiet, and I am not a marrying man.”

He knew when to rest his case. He gazed at her and wondered idly how she would look with her hair falling free. He resisted the impulse to reach out and tug loose her golden locks. Her skin was as smooth as silk and her lips full, looking tantalizingly soft.

What would it be like to kiss her?

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Silhouette Desire, where you can discover the answers to *all* your romantic questions. Such as...

Q. *What would you think if you discovered the man you love has a secret identity—as a movie star?*

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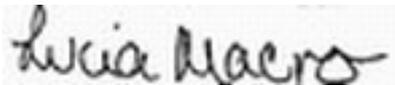
Q. *Would you ever marry a stranger?*

A. You might, if he was the hero of Sara Orwig’s *The Bride’s Choice*.

Q. *What does it take to lasso a sexy cowboy?*

A. Find out in Shawna Delacorte’s *Cowboy Dreaming*.

Silhouette Desire...where all your questions are answered and your romantic dreams can come true. Until next month, happy reading!



Senior Editor

Please address questions and book requests to:

Silhouette Reader Service

U.S.: 3010 Walden Ave., P.O. Box 1325, Buffalo, NY 14269

Canadian: P.O. Box 609, Fort Erie, Ont. L2A 5X3

The Bride's Choice

Sara Orwig



www.millsandboon.co.uk

SARA ORWIG

lives with her husband and children in Oklahoma. She has a patient husband who will take her on research trips anywhere from big cities to old forts. She is an avid collector of Western history books. With a master's degree in English, Sara writes historical romance, mainstream fiction and contemporary romance. Books are beloved treasures that take Sara to magical worlds, and she loves both reading and writing them.

To all my editors at Silhouette:
Lucia Macro, Cristine Niessner,
Angela Catalano and Lynda Curnyn.

One

“This is Elnora Roseanne Tangney Siever’s last will and testament.”

Caleb Duncan listened as Willard Mason read in an impassive voice, and again felt shock that Elnora had written a new will with a new attorney. Cal had been the Siever attorney since he had opened his practice. The Sievers were old family friends of his grandparents’ and Lawrence Siever had referred clients to Cal until Siever’s death. Cal had been Elnora’s lawyer. Why, only last month, he had taken her to lunch. He’d had no idea she’d hired another lawyer.

Cal glanced at the three people seated to his right: gray-haired Stoddard Tamblin, Elnora Siever’s elderly butler and chauffeur; Gladys Wicklund, the woman’s faithful servant; and Juliana Aldrich, former companion and friend to Elnora.

Cal’s gaze raked over the blonde, slowing momentarily over her long, silken legs. Juliana Aldrich was a good-looking woman. Tall and willowy, she had golden hair the rich color of ripe wheat. It was pinned behind her head in a chignon. Distaste curled in Cal’s mouth. The beautiful little gold digger should not be sitting there. During college, she had worked as a companion for Elnora, probably playing on Elnora’s sympathy and winning her everlasting friendship.

Cal recalled several times Elnora had suggested changing her will to include Juliana, and each time Cal had talked her out of the notion. Or he *thought* he had. Cal’s instincts told him why Elnora had hired Mason and written another will. Memories of what Elnora had suggested made his anger boil. Surely not even Elnora could have been so flighty and whimsical as to have actually written the will she’d proposed to him? And surely Willard Mason would have talked her out of it, too.

As Cal looked at Juliana Aldrich, cool blue eyes met his gaze. He stared back, fury and wariness churning in him while he listened to Willard Mason’s deep voice.

“I, Elnora Siever of Colby County, state of Texas, being now in good health and strength of body and mind, desiring to make disposition of my property and affairs, do hereby declare this to be my last will and testament.”

Provisions were made for bills to be paid, the standard legal jargon was read, and as she listened, Juliana was still surprised to be one of the heirs. She hadn’t given a thought to inheriting from Elnora. Various token amounts ran through her mind, but she felt certain she would be bequeathed some sentimental remembrance, Elnora’s music box that played “Lara’s Theme,” or some of Elnora’s books.

Yet, perhaps it was something more substantial; whatever it was, Caleb Duncan must not approve. He’d been curt with her, and every glance he gave her looked angry while he was warm and courteous to Gladys and Stoddard. Yet perhaps his anger was caused by Elnora herself. As Juliana recalled, Caleb Duncan had been Elnora’s attorney. What had caused Elnora to get Willard Mason to write her will? she wondered. Had Cal Duncan displeased the elderly woman?

As if he realized she was thinking about him, Cal suddenly turned and his dark gaze settled on her. Dressed in a navy pin-striped suit, with a snow-white shirt and maroon tie, he looked the calm, composed picture of the successful businessman. But when she looked closer, she noticed his snapping dark eyes, the firm jaw that was tightly set, the rugged angles and planes of his face; all his features held arrogance and a hint of danger. And another quality. As she stared into thickly lashed eyes, she felt a twist of curiosity about him as a man, a reaction that was purely feminine and physical. And as unwanted as cold germs.

To avoid his probing gaze, she shifted her attention to the leather briefcase beside his chair and the oak-paneled wall behind him, while Mason continued reading the will.

“To my employee, Stoddard Tamblin, he is to continue to draw the same salary as long as he shall live. In addition, he is to be given my Cadillac because he has maintained the car through the years. Also, he is to be given a sum of twenty-five thousand dollars for his years of faithful service. And he may continue to live in his house at Green Oaks.”

“Good heavens!” Stoddard gasped, fanning himself with his battered cotton cap and running thick fingers through his straight gray hair. “Bless Miss Siever’s heart.”

“My word,” Gladys muttered, pushing her bifocals higher on her round nose and staring at Stoddard.

Caleb Duncan glanced at Juliana, and she gazed into eyes that stabbed like twin stilettos. This time, there was no mistaking his anger. He wasn’t happy with Elnora Siever’s will. Juliana lifted her chin. Whatever Elnora had left to her, it was what the woman wanted to do and Mr. Caleb Duncan would have to accept it, whether he liked it or not. Suddenly, she realized she was caught in a staring contest as they continued to look at each other steadily. But she had no intention of being the first to look away. Caleb Duncan arched his eyebrows slightly then narrowed his eyes. Refusing to be intimidated by him, she stared back.

He raised his hand midway, and she glanced down at his fingers.

He dropped his hand, and too late, she realized she had been the first to look away. She wondered if he had moved his hand deliberately to distract her. He arched an eyebrow, and she clamped her lips closed, turning toward Stoddard who was smiling broadly.

“To Gladys Marie Thomas Wicklund...” Mason continued reading, announcing the same bequest for Gladys that had been bestowed on Stoddard, with the exception of the Cadillac. Suddenly, Gladys broke into a huge grin. “My word!” she exclaimed again, patting her hair and smiling.

Juliana wasn’t unduly surprised. Elnora was a loving, generous woman and both servants had worked long and faithfully for her, and Juliana was certain Elnora could afford the legacy. Happy for both of them, Juliana smiled at Gladys, who was still smiling and shaking her head as if in disbelief.

Feeling watched, Juliana glanced around and immediately wished she hadn’t. Caleb Duncan’s obvious disapproval sent an uncomfortable prickle along the nape of her neck. He stared at her solemnly while she returned her attention to Willard Mason.

“It is my wish that Juliana Aldrich take care of my precious cat, Snookums,” Mason read. “I know Juliana loves Snookums, and Snookums loves Juliana.”

Remembering the big fluffy white cat, Juliana knew her three rambunctious nephews would love him just as much as she did.

Again she received another look filled with smoldering anger. Why would Caleb Duncan disapprove of her inheriting Snookums? Curious, Juliana raised her head, then returned her attention to Willard Mason.

“To Juliana Lou Aldrich,” the lawyer said, pausing to look intently at her. Juliana locked her fingers together in her lap, wondering what Elnora had done; Willard Mason looked somber, gazing at her and then shifting his attention to the will.

“To Juliana Lou Aldrich,” he repeated, reading slowly and clearly, “who has been like a daughter to me, I wish to make a bequest. Also, I want to make one to Caleb John Duncan, the man who has been like a son to my dear departed husband, Lawrence, and to me. If these two people who are so dear to my heart, two people who are relatively alone in this world...”

Juliana felt as if she had not heard correctly. She was anything but alone, with her three orphaned nephews to raise. She pulled her attention back to Willard Mason.

“If these two people find it in their hearts to marry, it is my wish to leave them the bulk of my estate, my home and contents, Green Oaks...”

Marry!...bulk of estate... Stunned, Juliana’s heart pounded, and Mason’s voice receded as a roaring filled her ears.

“Damnation!” burst from the man beside her. She glanced at Caleb Duncan, and his dark eyes shot knives into her. Juliana’s head swam, the room spun and lights flashed before her eyes. For the first time in her life, she fainted.

“She’s coming around,” announced a man’s voice.

“Poor little thing had a shock.” Gladys wiped Juliana’s forehead with a cold cloth. They had moved her to the sofa.

“She ain’t poor now, Gladys,” Stoddard remarked. “Mercy, mercy. Miz Siever’s taken care of all of us good.”

“Only if they marry. Do you two know each other?” Gladys asked, her voice sounding dim and filled with curiosity.

“Just barely,” came a curt reply.

“My heavens! Miss Siever was a dreamer.”

The voices and words swirled around Juliana as she looked at Gladys, who was leaning over her. Beyond her, standing at the foot of the sofa, was Caleb Duncan with his fists on his hips, his coat pushed open as he stared down at her. His dark eyes gleamed with rage and she remembered the will. Marriage. It was absurd and impossible and ridiculous. And for one fleeting moment, she thought about all Elnora’s money—what only a tiny bit of it would do for the boys!

Juliana gave a shake of her head. “I hope Elnora made some provision for her estate in the event that we don’t marry, because there is no way—”

“She did,” Willard Mason said, moving away. “If you feel like continuing, we’ll go ahead.”

With a parting dark look, Caleb Duncan returned to his seat. He crossed the room with the easy stride of a person in peak physical condition. His thick black hair waved slightly from his forehead, and Juliana had to concede he was appealing. Her thoughts shifted to her departed friend Elnora, the hopeless romantic.

Juliana sat up and then finally stood. “I’m all right now,” she announced, hoping her voice sounded cool and in control. “Elnora’s bequest was a shock.” As she returned to her chair, she tried to ignore Caleb Duncan’s steady gaze.

Gladys and Stoddard were giving them curious glances as if Juliana and Caleb were strange specimens that had just crawled out of a test tube.

“I’m sorry. I’ve never done that before.” She settled on the forest-green wing chair and crossed her legs, catching Caleb looking at them.

Cal studied her, remembering the picture he’d seen of her in the paper only two months ago, after she had fended off a bank robber at the point of a pistol. She had been shot in the shoulder, but had retained her money. And even though the would-be robber had escaped, he had not gotten any money from anyone, thanks to Juliana Aldrich. She had to love money more than life.

Mason glanced at each of them, pausing when he looked into Juliana’s eyes. “Ready?” he asked. When she nodded, he returned to the will.

“If Caleb and Juliana marry, it is my hope they will live at Green Oaks in order that Snookums may continue to dwell in the only home he knows,” Mason read in an impassive voice. “This marriage must take place within the next six months from the day of the reading of the will. The marriage of Caleb and Juliana must last one year or everything bequeathed to them reverts to my estate. After one year the estate is theirs to do with as they see fit, whether they remain married or they divorce. During the one-year period, Caleb John Duncan will be the trustee in charge of dispensing the money.”

Juliana’s mind stopped following Willard Mason as he continued reading about a trust fund, the stocks, the bonds, the real-estate holdings, the certificates of deposit. She listened, but she was stunned, in shock over Elnora’s stipulation that they marry. Of all the ridiculous, unreasonable assumptions, yet Juliana knew all too well how whimsical and romantic Elnora had been. Elnora would have thought such a thing possible and a delightful arrangement for two people she loved. Even if the two people were all but total strangers. And from the looks Caleb Duncan had been giving her, it was clear that he despised her on sight. His anger had to be caused by the will. She raised her chin. She had no desire to marry him, either, not for any amount of money.

Once again came the tiny nagging thought of how she had to scrimp and save for the boys and what she could do for them if she had more money, but she pushed the thought out of mind and tried to pay attention to Mason.

The lawyer was still listing Elnora's assets and Juliana drew a deep breath, trying not to give one second's thought to what might have been. But her thoughts quickly drifted again to the marriage provision and for a moment Willard's voice faded away. The sound of the lawyer's clearing his throat brought her back to the present.

He smoothed the will and continued, "In the event my beloved friends decide against marriage—after giving this due thought—six months from the reading of this will, Green Oaks and its contents are to become a home for cats. Snookums will abide at Green Oaks and a board of three veterinarians are to oversee the running of the house. It is my wish that Ridley Westview actually oversee the running of Green Oaks as a haven for homeless kitties."

Cal listened in angry silence. A real cat house. All of Elnora's money was going to go to that dim-witted ball of fluff, Snookums, and a bunch of stray cats. There was enough money in the Siever estate to build homes for all the cats in Texas. Cal's stomach knotted as he thought about his need for money and what he could do with a sum like that. Instead it was going to cats. No wonder Elnora had sought out another lawyer!

Willard Mason finally finished reading the will and looked up. "I've scheduled our appointment with Judge Dooley in two days at ten o'clock in the morning. If all of you will meet here at my office, we'll go down to the courthouse together. Any questions?"

He answered Gladys's and Stoddard's questions, made arrangements for Gladys to continue caring for Snookums temporarily and gave each person a copy of Elnora's will. Caleb Duncan placed his in his briefcase, snapping the case shut as Willard said, "Also, Elnora asked me to give this envelope to you, Cal. As you can see by the instructions on the front, it is her wish that you do not open the envelope until a year from today."

Cal accepted the envelope, opened his briefcase once more while Willard Mason told the two servants goodbye. At the door, he turned to shake hands with Caleb, glancing from him to Juliana. "You two will have some decisions to make, but you have several months in which to decide what you want to do."

Cal looked at him, his expression tight. "I think we know—"

"Wait," Mason cautioned, interrupting him. "You're to give this thought. Elnora made me promise that I would not take an answer from either of you right away. She wanted both of you to give her bequest thought. This is a sizable estate, and she felt you could both do a great deal of good with the money."

Juliana saw Caleb Duncan's eyebrows arch and a glacial look come to his eyes. When his gaze shifted to her, she felt physically buffeted by his silent smoldering anger.

"Give it thought," Mason repeated. "I'll see you here Wednesday morning."

He held open his office door and Juliana went ahead. They crossed the anteroom, passing the receptionist's desk, and then stepped into a hallway.

Caleb closed the door behind them and faced her. She stared back at him, feeling as if she were going into battle. She could feel tension spark the air between them. "You tried to talk Elnora out of this, didn't you?"

"Of course I did," he admitted tersely. "We never got down to exact details—like leaving all of it to cats."

"At least you're honest. But I don't know why you're so angry with me. I knew nothing about her intentions."

His eyes narrowed only the slightest fraction and a muscle worked in his jaw, otherwise she wouldn't have known he had any reaction to her question.

“I think Elnora used poor judgment,” he snapped, pushing open his coat and resting his hands on his hips.

The air seemed to crackle around them, and his dark eyes tugged at Juliana’s senses. She wanted to shake him, and realized no man had ever stirred that kind of reaction in her before. “What you think isn’t what’s important,” she re- minded him.

“No, unfortunately.”

“I’m a total stranger to you, so don’t take your anger out on me.”

“First of all, I think she should have left that money to medical research, to children who need help, to the chil- dren’s hospital, to all sorts of worthy causes,” he answered in a clipped tone as if he was fighting to control himself. “There’s enough money in her estate to establish houses for stray animals all over the Southwest. To pour all of that into one home here in Colby for stray cats is absurd.”

Juliana was inclined to agree with him, but she wasn’t about to tell him.

“That doesn’t have anything to do with why your fury is directed at me,” she said scathingly. There had to be more, she thought. There had to be something more personal that made him look as if he would like to send her into perma- nent orbit in outer space.

His dark eyes bored into hers as he spoke. “I wonder when you worked for her if you didn’t play on her vulner- ability just so she would do something like this. She’s been trying to get me to ask you out since—”

“What!” Juliana interrupted. She took a step closer to him. “Listen, you, I didn’t work on Elnora to try to in- herit. Besides, I’d always assumed she and Lawrence had had their wills drawn up years earlier. I’ve just seen her on brief visits the last few years.”

“Oh, come on. Any woman who would fight a bank robber at gunpoint for a few dollars at the risk of her life, wants money damned badly,” he remarked tersely. Juliana suspected he was getting down to his real reasons for dislik- ing her.

“Listen, you legal harpy, I worked hard for the money that jerk wanted to take from me, and he hadn’t done any- thing but point a gun at people and take what he wanted.”

Caleb Duncan’s lips suddenly pursed and his eyes nar- rowed, but his reaction only dimly registered with her as she shook with fury. She moved a step closer to him. “I earned every dime in the bag I was holding. I wasn’t about to turn it over to that creep and I didn’t stop to think about it. You, sir, may have been raised in affluence and don’t understand having to work hard for a living. You’re a lawyer, so obvi- ously you make more money than I do. If I’d had an easier time of it all my life, perhaps I could have tossed away the money without a care.”

She was breathing hard, wanting to punch his arrogant jaw.

He moved a step closer and placed his finger beneath her chin, tilting up her face. “Legal harpy?” he asked in a voice laced with curiosity. He studied her. “Maybe I’ve jumped to conclusions here.”

Her heart missed some beats, and she tried to ignore it as well as the awareness of his finger beneath her jaw, his brown eyes watching her so intently and the change in his attitude. She yanked her chin away from his finger. “The bequest is absurd. We’ll see each other Wednesday and that should be the last time. Goodbye, Mr. Duncan.” She turned to walk away, feeling her back prickle, wondering if he was watching her.

The next time—and she figured the last time—she had to deal with him was Wednesday in court. As they finished and said goodbye to Willard Mason, Gladys and Stoddard, Ju- liana nodded curtly to Caleb Duncan. She hurried down the courthouse steps and along the sunny walk toward her car.

“Miss Aldrich,” Cal said in a deep, quiet voice that car- ried an iron command. She paused and turned around as he closed the distance between them. Wind tumbled locks of his dark hair across his forehead.

“*Is please* in your vocabulary?” she asked as coldly as possible, wishing she didn’t feel so breathless. His whole attitude was infuriating and her disquieting reaction to him fueled her rage.

“Not this morning,” Cal replied. She annoyed the hell out of him. At the same time, he was beginning to wonder about her. “Juliana—”

“Miss Aldrich,” she stated frostily.

“Juliana,” he drawled with emphasis. Her name rolled off his tongue, said in his bass voice, sending a tingle through her. Why did it sound far more personal when he said it?

“Do you have any idea how much is in Elnora’s estate?”

“Not exactly,” Juliana admitted, watching as he set down his briefcase and reached beneath his jacket to withdraw a small leather date book. “I know she was well-fixed. It’s all in the will, but since it’s a moot point, I didn’t study it. I won’t inherit it.”

While Juliana watched, he flipped open the date book and handed it to her. His fingers were long, well shaped and blunt. With curiosity she accepted the date book, and looked at neat printing that read, *Siever Assets*. Below the words was a list of assets and figures. Shock at the size of the estate made her weak in the knees. “Elnora was worth this much?”

“You’re on the first page,” he answered dryly. “Keep reading.”

Stunned, Juliana turned the page and gazed at figures that leaped at her. There must be a million dollars in assets, she thought. If she were to marry Caleb Duncan—she looked up to find him steadily watching her and thoughts of marriage made her heart thud. Feeling her cheeks heat, she looked down again at the figures. Marriage to a stranger would be absurd. To a hostile stranger, it would be disaster.

Numbers danced in her mind, along with knowledge of her small bank balance, and how she scrimped to make ends meet and keep her preschool running and take care of the boys. She ran her hand across her forehead. This fortune would go for one home for the stray cats of Colby.

Cal watched her, seeing her face pale when she first glanced down the page. A slight frown creased her wide forehead. His gaze raked over her. She was a good-looking woman. There must not be any man in her life or Elnora wouldn’t have been so persistent in wanting him to take Juliana Aldrich out. And Willard Mason was a thorough enough lawyer that he would have checked out Juliana’s eligibility before he let Elnora draw up a will with a clause about marriage.

Cal rubbed his jaw, his thoughts swirling and visions of bank accounts and money dancing in his mind. He had had forty-eight hours to think about Elnora’s will.

Idly, he wondered how Juliana Aldrich would look if her hair weren’t pinned up behind her head. There was a smattering of freckles across the tip of her straight nose that made her seem less the cool, unruffled blonde. With the patience of a lawyer, he waited in silence until she finished reading. She lowered the date book and stared at him.

“Elnora was worth all this?” Juliana repeated softly, her gaze going beyond him as if she was lost in thought.

“Willard Mason went over her assets, that day in his office, so you heard the figures.”

“I was in shock.”

“I think we should give some serious discussion to Elnora’s will,” Cal said quietly. “How about dinner tomorrow night?”

Juliana brought her gaze back to him. Shock took her breath at his suggestion. Caleb Duncan wanted to discuss Elnora’s will. That had to mean he wanted to discuss *marriage*. She stared at him in disbelief. The bequest had nagged at her constantly since Willard Mason had read the will two days ago, but never, not for one tiny second, had she given any thought to the possibility of inheriting. And never, not once, had she thought Caleb Duncan would give a second’s consideration to Elnora’s stipulation.

Cal watched her, seeing her surprise, feeling mildly amazed by her reaction. He had expected her to contact him, yet surprisingly, she was staring at him as if he had just sprouted fangs. Finally,

she nodded, and he felt a mixture of relief and apprehension. How easy it would have been if she had just refused on the spot.

“Good,” he said. “About seven. We should make some decisions about this will. I know you have to think about your nephews.”

“Elnora told you about the boys?”

“No, she didn’t. I ran some checks on you.”

“And how did I check out, Mr. Duncan?” she snapped.

He bit back a smile. As angry as he was with her and with Elnora, he had to admit that Juliana Aldrich had spunk. He was beginning to feel he had misjudged Juliana. “You passed. No criminal record. No bad debts. You took your sister’s boys when she died, which is very commendable.”

“So I can’t be all bad,” she retorted dryly.

“Look, since we have to give this bequest some thought, we better declare a truce.”

“I’m not the one with the problem.”

He shrugged. “I suppose you’re not. I don’t like Elnora’s will, but it was her money to do with as she saw fit. When you attacked the bank robber, did you give any thought to leaving three little boys without anyone to take care of them?”

“They would have my grandmother,” Juliana replied, feeling a flush creep up her face, because he had struck a nerve. She hadn’t stopped to think about anything except protecting her money.

She closed the date book and handed it back to him. His fingers brushed hers and small shocks ran through her system from the slight touch. Why was everything so volatile between them?

“With three boys to raise, you need to give some consideration to Elnora’s will.”

“I have my own business and my own savings. But I suppose you know all that already, down to the penny.” As if slightly embarrassed, he lowered his gaze, and she realized he did. “I don’t know how Elnora could have set this up,” Juliana declared. “She knew us both well, she knew we wouldn’t want this. Why did she go on with it?”

He raised his head, his dark eyes intent, and Juliana drew a deep breath. When he looked at her that way, her heart-beat became a drumroll drowning out other noises. And she didn’t want to have an intense physical reaction to Caleb Duncan. She didn’t understand how she could react that way to a man she actively disliked.

“Do you faint often?”

The question added more kindling to her fiery anger. “Maybe you should run a check on that, too. It wasn’t a performance for your benefit, I can promise you that. I don’t care what you think!”

“You better start caring,” he remarked quietly, “because there’s a fortune at stake.”

“Elnora’s will is absurd!”

“Calm down.” Caleb touched her collar and shifted one inch closer. She felt as if the sun had dropped closer to earth, her temperature rising. It was hot, difficult to breathe, damnable to gaze into dark brown eyes with black pupils that seemed to pull on her senses. “How come there’s no boyfriend in the picture?”

His fingers touched her collarbone and he stood far too close and he asked personal questions. She felt her pulse race. She wasn’t accustomed to this kind of reaction around men. But then, she wasn’t accustomed to men like Caleb Duncan.

“There isn’t anyone because I have three boys, and that scares men away. And I lead a busy life. I own Child’s World Preschool. I work with little children all day and the only men I see are mostly married fathers. The ones who aren’t married don’t want to go out with a woman who already has three boys that aren’t her own. They get a funny look when I tell them.” Why was she rattling on and on as if he had dropped a nickel in a slot in her brain?

“That wouldn’t scare me away.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t. I can’t imagine anything that would scare you, Mr. Duncan. Will you step back!”

He arched his eyebrows and looked amused. “I’m disturbing you? Here I was all set to dislike you, Juliana Al-drigh,” he remarked, rolling her name across his tongue, again sending little warm currents dancing through her, “and now I’m curious. We’re going to get to know each other well.”

“But not that well,” she stated, taking his hand and removing it from her collar, feeling another mild jolt the moment she made contact with him. His skin was warm, his hand large in hers, and tingles continued in an alarming manner. “I’ll see you tomorrow night.” She turned and walked away from him, rushing to climb into her battered ten-year-old van.

It felt three hundred degrees inside the vehicle, but part of it was her temper. If Caleb Duncan was considering marriage, he wanted money desperately. She knew he was already well-fixed. He had accused her of thinking only of money, yet he had to be incredibly greedy to give Elnora’s bequest a second’s thought.

Caleb Duncan was no harpy. He couldn’t be—he was the wrong gender. A sexy hunk with no heart was more accurate. Hard-hearted bastard would fit better. And she had a dinner date with him tomorrow night. He couldn’t seriously be thinking about marriage. But why else would he want to discuss Elnora’s will?

Two

On Thursday evening at one minute before seven, Cal parked in front of the Aldrich home. He knew Juliana rented the small, three-bedroom frame house in a modest area of town and lived there with her grandmother and nephews. What a change to go from this to Green Oaks. He glanced over the neat flower beds that held no weeds. Seven boys played ball in the front yard, while another little boy stood and watched.

Cal climbed the front steps and punched the doorbell, feeling nervous. When the door swung open, Juliana appeared and he caught his breath.

She was wearing a short, simple black dress that revealed what the suit had hidden, full breasts and a tiny waist. The dark material clung to her figure and was striking with her golden hair. Looking at her, Cal felt better about the evening, and the tension that gripped him eased slightly.

“Want to come in?”

“Sure,” he answered casually. She stepped back as he entered, and the faint scent of roses made him more aware of her. He followed her from the tiny entryway into a small living area and took his gaze from her hips a moment before she turned around to catch him studying her.

His feelings seesawed as he surveyed the living room’s clutter and disarray, with books and baseball mitts and model airplanes on the tables. Nondescript chairs and tables lined the walls and filled the corners. His tension level rose again at the disorder, yet at the same time the clutter reassured him that this was not the room of a woman who put money above all else. The ancient shag carpet was threadbare. The stuffed chairs had worn spots on the arms and there was a crack in the glass-topped coffee table. A petite woman with white hair smiled at him from a rocker.

“Grandmother, this is Elnora’s attorney, Caleb Duncan. Mr. Duncan, this is my grandmother, Mimi Gibson.”

“Evening, Mrs. Gibson.”

“Juliana told me about Miz Siever’s will,” Mrs. Gibson said slyly, smiling at him with a gleam that made him feel like a chocolate morsel about to be consumed.

“It’s unusual,” he said uneasily.

“We won’t be late, Grandmother,” Juliana said.

“Do you like crossword puzzles?” the old woman asked, pushing her glasses higher on her nose and shifting the paper spread on her lap.

“Yes, I like to figure things out,” he replied, looking into Juliana’s cool blue eyes.

“Maybe you can tell me,” Mrs. Gibson said, poising her pencil over the puzzle, “airplane-wing parts that have eight letters.”

“Could be ailerons or spoilers,” he answered, mentally counting the letters.

“The aileron word fits perfectly.” She smiled at him again. “I told Juliana that Miz Siever would never pick a bum to inherit her money.”

“Thanks,” he answered, rubbing the back of his neck and feeling uncomfortable. It was obvious that Juliana Aldrich’s grandmother felt just the same as Elnora about Juliana’s future.

“Mimi, we better be going. The boys are still outside playing ball,” Juliana said, conscious of Cal Duncan’s scrutiny and Mimi’s blatant approval.

“Have a nice evening,” Mimi said, smiling at Cal.

“It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Gibson.”

“Oh, please, call me Mimi, like the rest of the family does.”

“Sure, Mimi,” Cal complied, feeling as if a noose were closing around his neck—*the rest of the family*... The woman already had them married.

As they stepped outside, one of the kids yelled. The baseball flew toward Juliana. Stretching out a long arm, Cal caught it and tossed it back to the boys.

“Way to go!” the tall boy yelled, throwing it to a friend.

“I’m terribly impressed,” she said, too aware of Caleb Duncan’s fitness, of his dark, handsome looks. The charcoal suit and white shirt gave him the same successful, appealing appearance that he’d had in the lawyer’s office three days ago. And a close look still made her feel as if she was gazing at someone who was strong, determined and accustomed to getting his way. “Very good catch.”

“I’ve played ball, and those boys aren’t college-age or pros. That was easy enough.”

“I’ll have to admit, I don’t catch very well,” she said. “They’d just as soon I didn’t try. The tallest boy is my nephew Chris. I can call them over to introduce you.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to call Chris over. Here he comes,” Cal said.

The gangly boy loped toward them, blond curls a tangle over his forehead. “Hi,” he said, studying Cal with open curiosity. “You must be Mr. Duncan.”

“That’s right,” Cal said, offering his hand. “And you’re Chris.”

“Glad to meet you. Did you used to play ball?”

Cal nodded. “In college. Never pro. I had a baseball scholarship to Texas University.”

“Awesome!” Chris’s blue eyes sparkled and he rubbed a dusty finger along his jaw.

“It was a long time ago.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. Gol, you’re still good for an old guy—”

“Chris!”

Cal laughed. “Thanks, Chris.”

“I gotta run—” Then the boy was gone, racing away to join the others, while Juliana looked up at Cal and shrugged.

“Sorry. He thinks anyone over eighteen is decrepit.”

“I’m sure.”

“They’re a handful. Sometimes I feel inadequate,” she said, staring across the yard. He followed her gaze and noticed a small boy curled in the fork of the tree.

“Which one is that?”

“Quin. And I *am* inadequate for him. I just can’t get through to him.”

“You must love all three to give your life over to them. That’ll get through to him sometime.”

Juliana heard a strange note in Cal’s voice and wondered about his childhood, but she walked beside him without asking questions.

When they reached the car, Cal held the door. Looking at the flash of her long, shapely legs, he felt his smoldering anger at Elnora dissipate, yet he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was about to give himself a prison sentence.

As if trying to postpone an ordeal, Cal drove far more slowly than usual, his thoughts still churning. He turned on Main to take the highway to the outskirts of Garland on the east side of Dallas. He intended to get away from people they knew in Colby, to avoid constant interruptions through dinner. Details of the will would be in the public domain all too soon and they would have to live with everyone’s gossip about Elnora’s stipulations.

A short while later, he parked in a graveled lot filled with cars, and in minutes, they were seated in the secluded corner of a rustic room. After ordering glasses of wine, Cal leaned back in his chair to study her. “Tell me about your nephews.”

“Chris is eleven, Quin is eight and Josh is five.”

“I understand you took them in two years ago when your sister died after a long illness and their father was killed in a plane crash. Tough luck.”

“I have a feeling you know everything about us,” Juliana said, wondering exactly how much he did know. “It was tough for the boys. Quin goes for counseling. Chris and Josh seem to have adjusted to the changes in their lives.”

“It was good of you to take them. I would have thought your mother would raise them.”

Juliana shook her head, thinking of her tall, thin mother. “Mom’s frail, and the boys make her nervous. It never would have worked. My dad would have been good with them, but he died years ago, when I was seventeen. Now Mom’s remarried and living in California, busy with her husband, Jerry, and her own life. I know Trish, my sister, would want them with me.”

“That’s generous.” Cal paused as the waitress returned for their order. After ordering two steaks, they were alone again. Juliana watched him sip dark red wine. His lashes were lowered as he looked down and she realized his thick, black lashes added to his sexy appeal. He glanced at her and she looked away quickly, embarrassed to be caught studying him.

“The conditions of Elnora’s will are going to come out in the Colby paper sometime soon,” he began. “In a town as small as Colby, there will be no secrets about Elnora’s will— or the marriage provision.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she said with a slight frown. “I suppose you’re right. Will the public know about the size of the estate?”

“I’m sure they will. It has to be filed at the courthouse and reporters will print it. Do you know Wynn Barkley?”

“Only by name,” she answered. “I know he’s a *Colby Sun* reporter.” She had also heard Barkley loved gossip as much as he liked ferreting out stories. “I suppose I should tell the boys about the marriage stipulation.”

“You’ll have to answer their questions.”

“They may have a difficult time understanding,” she said, more to herself than to him, momentarily forgetting his presence as she worried about the boys’ reaction to learning that she could have inherited a fortune. A shared fortune. Would they understand why she couldn’t possibly marry a stranger?

She looked at him. “I can tell them you didn’t want to marry me,” she said lightly.

“They might try to talk me into it.”

She smiled, and Cal felt his pulse jump. It was a faint smile, friendly and warm, destroying the cool, aloof aura that seemed to surround her most of the time.

“I suppose it’s a good thing we got together tonight,” she remarked, “before the will is public knowledge. If we’re together afterward, rumors will fly. Do you date someone?” Instantly, she shook her head. “Sorry, that’s none of my business—”

“I think it is your business. I date occasionally, but there’s no one special in my life. And there’s no one in yours.” He arched an eyebrow. “Why did you and Barry Fowler break up?”

Juliana felt a prickle of annoyance that Cal Duncan had checked so thoroughly into her life. She was tempted to tell him it was none of his business why she’d stopped dating Barry, but she realized it was reasonable for him to ask.

“We were about to be engaged. The trouble started when it looked like I would take my sister’s boys. Barry didn’t like that, and it became an obstacle between us. Barry got a promotion and a transfer to Cleveland. He wanted me to leave the boys with my mother or grandmother and go with him. And then I found out he was dating someone else and hadn’t told me. If you have a serious relationship with someone, you should be open and honest with the person and be able to trust him.”

“I’d say that was incredibly poor judgment on his part.”

Surprised, she stared at him. “Look, Mr. Duncan, why did you want to talk to me about Elnora’s will?”

Cal felt his palms grow damp. “You’re forthright,” he remarked, still mulling over her statement about honesty and trust and feeling twinges of guilt. He had no intention of telling her why he needed the money and killing all his chances of getting it. But his conscience nagged him for another reason. He had silently accused Juliana of being a gold digger, yet *he* was the mercenary one after money and she had three boys to support.

“I’m also curious,” she replied.

He sipped his wine and wished he had ordered a stronger drink. The idea of tying his life to three children made him break out in a sweat. He thought of his orderly life, his hours of riding and fishing and reading law books at night in his quiet house. His blessed solitude. And he thought of all the money involved. Elnora's will had stipulated the marriage had to last a year and after that the money was theirs. One year was not forever. How disturbing could three boys be? He studied Juliana Aldrich. No difficulty there- she was good-looking, intelligent, and evidently he had misjudged her. Yet, she had fought off that bank robber, so money was important to some extent. But who was he to judge? He wouldn't be considering Elnora's will except for his own desperate need for the money.

He felt as if he were standing on the edge of a yawning abyss. "Juliana, the Siever estate is an enormous fortune that you and I could both use. You have three boys to raise. I need money for my practice," he stated, his conscience screaming at him for lying to her, when she'd said trust was important. "I think we should marry."

Stunned, Juliana involuntarily jerked as she was lifting the glass of water to her mouth. It sloshed out and ice water spilled across the front of her dress. "Ahh!" She dabbed at her dress, her heart thudding. Even though she had anticipated this proposal ever since he'd asked her to dinner to discuss the will, she was still shocked to hear the words. Even after thinking all night about what a marriage to Caleb Duncan would mean, she still wasn't sure of her answer.

"Your suggestion startled me. I don't know that marriage would be feasible for us. We're total strangers," she said, her words tumbling together. He pushed aside his silverware and carefully moved the glass of wine. Then he leaned forward, his dark eyes leveling on hers. As she looked into their black depths, she shivered and knew he meant every word he'd said.

"You need money for the boys, don't you?"

"Not that badly," she answered, barely able to get out her reply. She felt imprisoned by his gaze, held by the invisible bonds of his will. Thoughts tumbled wildly in her head. He must be as greedy as sin.

"Elnora's will specifies that the marriage has to last one year," Cal said in a quiet voice that held a note of steel. "That's only twelve months. I've known men to take a prison sentence for a longer time to get the kind of money we're considering."

"Marriage is just too impossible to contemplate," she said, barely able to breathe, still unable to look away from him. Her heart drummed wildly.

"No, it's not impossible," he said in the same firm tone that brooked no argument. "There's no man in your life."

"I don't need you to fill the void!" Something flickered in the depths of his eyes; if the moment had not been so tense, she would have suspected she saw amusement there. "You don't lose cases, do you?"

"Not often," he replied.

She shook her head, and with an effort of will, closed her eyes. *There*, she had broken free of his damnable, compelling gaze. *Marriage*. All that money for the boys. She gave a little shake and opened her eyes, carefully avoiding looking at him.

"It would be a marriage of convenience," he stated quietly, as if he were reading the terms of a contract, and she realized that was probably how he thought about this.

"I can't believe I'm hearing you correctly. I don't even know you. How old are you?"

Again, she thought she saw a flash of amusement, but it was gone as swiftly as it had come. "Thirty-four. I went to Texas University on a baseball scholarship. I went on to law school. My parents live in Dallas and I'll take you to meet them. I have a brother who is a car salesman and lives in Fort Worth, and we seldom see him. I've never been married."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "I was engaged once, but we broke it off. It didn't work out. I lead an ordinary life. I'm not abusive. I don't smoke, drink excessively or chew tobacco." He leaned forward again,

the earnest look returning to his face. “We marry for one year and you can take care of your boys for the rest of their lives.”

The waitress appeared, and Cal leaned back against his chair. He became quiet while their steaks were served with fluffy baked potatoes and crisp strips of broccoli and carrots.

Juliana’s stomach churned as she cut into the juicy steak. Images of Elnora’s list of assets danced in front of her eyes. The total amount of the Siever estate ran through her mind like an endless echo. Savoring the bite of steak, she carefully avoided looking at Caleb Duncan. *Marriage*. Caleb Duncan actually wanted to marry her. A marriage of convenience. Convenient for whom? He might not have bad habits, but he had to want money desperately.

Silence stretched between them, and as she ate, she continued to avoid looking at him.

“We would live in Green Oaks,” he continued quietly. “The mansion is big enough that we wouldn’t get in each other’s way. There are seven bedrooms, five bathrooms.”

She looked up and realized he had already made a decision about what he wanted to do. Butterflies danced crazily in her middle. “No mansion is big enough to keep three boys out of your way.”

His lips tightened. He must not like children, in spite of his easygoing manner with Chris earlier, she decided.

“Elnora was a hopeless matchmaker,” Juliana said, trying to push her concern aside. “Although she did introduce two couples who later married. The Kiplings, and Dale and Eva Jones.”

“Elnora believed that some people need a nudge, someone to step into their lives and meddle a little because they’re too busy or too set in their ways to change,” he said.

“So, which are you—too busy or too set in your ways?”

Amusement was plain this time as a sparkle came to his eyes. “I’m thirty-four and single, so I guess I’m too set in my ways.”

“Give you a point for honesty.”

“And have I earned any other points?” he asked in a teasing voice. “Or all minuses?”

“No, you have points—you were very nice to Mimi, and you impressed Chris terribly.”

“I have the feeling the minuses still outweigh the pluses.”

She tilted her head in speculation, looking into his dark eyes. “No, there are some other pluses, although during the first hours in Mr. Mason’s office, the minuses were dominant. A mutual feeling, I’m sure.”

“Now, why do you say that?”

“You didn’t hide your animosity.”

“Elnora’s meddling in our lives got to me in a way things usually don’t. That’s a lot of money.”

“I remember when I worked for Elnora and occasionally would see you.” When he looked surprised, Juliana smiled. “And you paid no attention to me.”

“I should have had my eyes checked,” he replied lightly, giving her a direct, sexy look that sent those butterflies dancing in her middle again. Dangerous. The word flitted into her mind. Caleb Duncan was dangerous, she realized, because he was so appealing. One year in a sham marriage—and she might lose her heart for life. As for Caleb, he would go merrily on his way with his half of the fortune, plus her heart.

He looked entirely capable of doing both. She returned her attention to her dinner.

They were silent while they ate, and she guessed he was going over his proposal as much as she was—as much as she had been all night. Occasionally, she shut her thoughts and enjoyed the thick, tender steak, the first she’d had in too long a time to remember. Once, she even closed her eyes to chew, relishing the taste. She opened her eyes to find him watching her.

“This is a delicious dinner,” she said, embarrassed to be caught enjoying the steak so much. “Steak isn’t something the kids and I can afford. The boys could eat yours and mine and everyone else’s in this end of the restaurant and still want more, so I don’t buy steaks.”

“You have a chance now to eat all the steaks you want.”

She lost the last of what little appetite remained as her stomach began fluttering once more. “You’re single and accustomed to doing things exactly as you please. How do I know you wouldn’t try to take over our lives?”

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. His gold cuff link caught the light. “We could draw up a contract, but I can tell you, I have no intention of interfering in your life and I don’t want you interfering in mine.”

She bristled, suspecting he wouldn’t call *his* actions interference.

“You’re not eating,” he said.

“It’s wonderful, but your suggestion has my stomach churning.”

She received a crooked smile. “It’s a good thing my ego isn’t fragile. Let’s get out of here and go where we can discuss this in private.”

He paid for their dinners and in minutes they were in the car. “We’ll go to my place,” he said, his tone of voice brooking no opposition.

She sat in silence, casting surreptitious glances at him, noting the firm jaw—no doubt an indication of stubbornness—the wide forehead—probably a sign of intelligence—the masculine, well-defined mouth—tempting evidence of a sexy kisser. She slammed the brakes on that train of thought, staring into the dark night while visions of money danced in her mind: money to pay for braces for the boys’ teeth, money for band instruments and sports equipment for the boys, money for Quin’s counseling.

Caleb drove through Colby to the outskirts, turning down a dirt road and passing over a cattle guard, stopping beside a sprawling house with a fenced area in back. Parked near the garage was a black pickup. A golden retriever bounded forward to greet them when they stepped inside the gate.

“That’s Red.” He waved the dog away and opened a door, entering the house and switching on lights. “I’ll get us something to drink.”

Juliana looked at the spotless, rustic kitchen with its beamed ceiling, oak cabinets and terrazzo floor. It was a large, inviting room, filled with the latest equipment. This man shouldn’t need Elnora’s money at all. Clearly, he was already comfortably fixed. He had to have the most colossal greed to want Elnora’s bequest. Juliana stared at him as he shed his coat and tie, his simple moves holding a masculine appeal that heightened her wariness.

With his hand on the door of the fridge, he turned toward her. “You’re looking at me again like I’m holding a gun aimed at you.”

She waved her hand, indicating their surroundings. “You have so much. You’re not so desperate for Elnora’s inheritance to go into a loveless marriage.”

To her surprise, he flushed and turned away. “I can use the money. Would you like wine, soda, or beer?” he asked.

“A glass of water, please,” she answered, watching him move around the kitchen to get her water and open a bottle of beer for himself. He handed her the water, his fingers brushing hers. A tingle ran up her spine at the contact.

“We’ll go sit out on the deck. It’s a nice night.”

She felt even more curious about Caleb as she followed him into an attractive living area with a polished oak floor, a forest-green sofa, one chair and little else. At one end of the room in front of sliding glass doors was a mahogany dining table and eight chairs.

They walked through the sliding doors to a wide deck. Light spilled through the glass as Cal motioned her toward a padded chair. He sat nearby, turning his chair to face her.

“You have a nice home.”

“Thank you. I enjoy it.” Cal felt his stomach knot. Think of the money, he reminded himself. Think about the mountain of debts and what the money would do to relieve them. He took a long drink of the beer, wishing now he had poured himself a straight bourbon. He looked at Juliana.

“I still don’t understand why you need the money. You have a good practice and a beautiful home. You’re single, so you don’t have any other person to support or worry about.” She shrugged. “I can’t imagine going into a love- less marriage, even for that much money.”

“For the sake of the boys, you should think about it,” he replied, turning the tables once again. “You’re giving up a lot of things that they may need as they grow up. They may need braces—”

“They already do. Chris is wearing braces now. But I can manage,” she said with more conviction than she really felt.

Cal felt amused at himself. In all his qualms and doubts and indignant speculation, he had never considered that she would give him such an emphatic no. He had expected her to accept the moment he got the proposal spoken. “It’s only one year,” he remarked.

“I don’t care if it’s one week,” Juliana said, her heart racing as she stared at him. Damn him, anyway, for his proposal. And for having bedroom eyes that made her feel weak in the knees whenever he gave her one of his brood- ing looks.

She stood. “No matter how sexy and appealing you are, Mr. Duncan, or how intelligent or charming, I do not care to sell myself to you for half of Elnora Siever’s estate! I have to go home now.”

Three

As Juliana walked away, Cal was at her side instantly, moving into the dining room with her. “Wait a minute,” he said, his hand touching her arm lightly. “Just listen. Sit down.”

It was worse in the light where she could see him in total clarity and his brown eyes compelled her to do what he wanted. Amounts of money danced in her head. The man proposing marriage wasn't a three-headed, drooling monster and his proposal was tempting.

“Think of your boys and sit down,” he said more forcefully, giving her the full impact of his dark gaze and pulling out a chair from the dining table. As she sat down, he moved another chair close to sit and face her.

“How could Elnora have done this?” Juliana said, running icy fingers across her forehead. She shivered in spite of the warmth of the room.

“I agree entirely and would never have drawn up that will. Which is why she went to Willard Mason.”

Juliana looked at Caleb, feeling the tension spark between them and the clash of wills. “You still haven't answered me. You have a nice home. You have a good business, I imagine. Why do you have to be so greedy?”

He gave her an impassive stare as he reached out to tuck a stray tendril of hair behind her ear. She felt the warm brush of his fingers and a tingle radiated from the contact of his hand with her skin.

“Mr. Duncan—”

“I'm talking about a marriage in name only,” he interrupted quietly. “There wouldn't be anything physical—” He paused, his dark eyes boring into her. “Unless you want a physical relationship,” he amended matter-of-factly.

Juliana's mouth dropped open as she stared at him, and Cal had to bite back a laugh.

“In name only?” she repeated.

He was in deep now and he clung to the remembrance of the amount of money each one of them would inherit. “As beautiful as your body is, I know we're strangers. I'm suggesting in name only. I like my solitary life and peace and quiet and I am not a marrying man.”

“It doesn't sound that way,” she said dubiously.

“In name only for one year. You have three boys to raise and send to college. I don't know how well-fixed your grandmother or your mother is, but I imagine you may have to help them, too. And you have to take care of yourself. That's a lot of people to be obligated to, and even if your mother and grandmother are self-sufficient, you have the responsibility for the boys. Think what you could do with half of Elnora's estate.”

He knew when to rest his case. He became silent, waiting, his gaze on her, while she seemed to stare through him into some distant place. Idly, he wondered again how she would look with her hair falling free. He resisted the impulse to reach out and tug loose the golden locks. Her skin was as smooth as silk and her lips full, looking tantalizingly soft. What would it be like to kiss her?

He shoved the question from his mind instantly. *Keep relations distant and professional.* Yet, when he gazed into her blue eyes, his good intentions evaporated and a little warning of danger popped into his mind. The last thing he wanted was to be drawn into a relationship with her. Three boys, a mother and a grandmother—Juliana Aldrich came with large responsibilities. Now she was staring outside, her wide forehead slightly furrowed. He wondered what she was thinking.

Thoughts tumbled in Juliana's mind, and like an annoying insect buzzing around her head, his words seemed to jam her rational processes. *As beautiful as your body is...* How many men had ever told her she was beautiful? Barry hadn't even told her that. Did Caleb Duncan really find her beautiful? More than likely, he was trying to spin a web of charm to get his greedy hands on Elnora's estate. Yet, when Juliana weighed the possibilities of inheriting enough money to take care of the

boys, she almost wanted to weep with relief. All her scrimping and saving was never enough. Her preschool business might have to close in the next few months because they were barely making enough to cover costs. And every month now, she was sliding a little more deeply into debt with all the expense of raising the boys.

“In name only,” she repeated softly and looked at him. “You’ve thought this over.”

He nodded solemnly. “We would get Green Oaks and could move there.”

“And in a year, we divorce and split the money?”

“Yes, if it’s necessary to divorce. Perhaps we can have the marriage dissolved because it was never consummated.”

She studied him, wondering what such an arrangement would be like. His whole aim in life must be to acquire money. He was accustomed to living alone and doing as he pleased, to working for himself. He seemed strong-willed, stubborn, determined. Would he make a shambles of their lives if she agreed to his proposal? “I still don’t think—”

“Don’t reject the idea too swiftly. Think what that money can do for your boys,” he repeated.

She did, swiftly and with a sinking feeling, because Cal Duncan was right. She would have her preschool funded; she could write the books she’d been planning about her methods for teaching small children to read; she could help Mimi and her mother, both of whom needed help. And the boys—the possibilities for them were endless. Clothes, camp... She was still struggling to make the payments for Chris’s braces. Quin’s counseling was incredibly expensive, too. And, best of all, the boys would have a father.

Juliana looked up at him with wide eyes, and Cal felt his stomach clench. “What?” he asked.

“You’d be like a father to them,” she answered with a note of amazement.

He shook his head. “Now, I don’t know anything about being a father—”

“You did fine with Chris earlier this evening. You’d be a role model for them.” She stopped and bit her lip. “You know me—and now I know why you’ve checked into my life so thoroughly—but I don’t know you. Do you have a terrible temper?”

“Terrible is relative,” he answered cautiously.

“That sounds like your legal mind trying to hedge. Would I have to fear your hitting the boys or striking me?”

Amusement flared in his eyes, and he shook his head. “No, I wouldn’t ever strike you.” He wondered if he should amend that with the truth that there might come a time when she would receive a playful swat on her cute butt, but he decided now was not the time to mention the possibility. That wasn’t what she was asking about anyway. “As for your boys, no, I wouldn’t hit them, either. I’m even-tempered enough that we can all get along.” His dark eyes narrowed. “But I do like my peace and quiet.”

“Well, then, Counselor, you better settle for the life you have and forget marriage. There is no way you can have three boys under the same roof and have peace and quiet.”

Cal clamped his lips closed, knowing she was telling him what he already knew and didn’t care to think about. “It’s only one year.”

“It’s ridiculous,” she said suddenly, knowing the plan would never work. “We would be in your way and you’d boss us around.” She stood. “I should go home.”

“Sit back down,” he said. His voice was quiet, yet she did as he wanted, perching on the edge of the chair.

“See what I mean about bossing us around,” she stated darkly, wondering how he could be so quietly compelling.

“It’s for your own good,” he rejoined in an offhand manner.

She stared into dark brown eyes that seemed to envelop her and stop her thought processes, mesmerizing her. “What about your lady friend?”

“Leah?” he asked and Juliana was startled, the spell broken.

“Who’s Leah?”

“You just asked me about her.”

“I just guessed there might be someone even though you said earlier that there wasn’t.”

“There’s no one I’m serious about. Leah Caldwell and I date occasionally, but there are no ties. I’d give up other women while we’re married.”

Juliana tilted her head and studied him. “Why do I find that difficult to believe?”

“I will not cause embarrassment to you or your neph-ews. I can keep my word about other women.”

“Your body might not agree.”

“I’ll worry about my body,” he drawled quietly, the words playing over her and making her skin tingle as much as if his fingers had trailed over her. Suddenly, she was once again too conscious of him, undercurrents of awareness tugging at her senses.

They stared at each other while she mulled over what he suggested. He was a forceful, crusty, determined man. And sexy. If she accepted his proposal, would she be getting into something that she would regret? Yet, only one year in a marriage in name only—how difficult could that be? Dark brown eyes stared back at her, and she felt out of her depth.

“I don’t really know much about men.”

“You don’t need to know much about them to agree to this. You know how large Green Oaks is—we would hardly see each other.”

“With my nephews around, I can promise you we’ll see each other.” She chewed her lip. He might be a good influ-ence for the boys. Lord knows, the man could be com-manding.

Cal waited quietly, again studying the tiny freckles on the tip of her nose. Her gaze swung around to meet his and the worried look vanished from her features. She smoothed her skirt and stood. “I’ll give your proposal thought. We have six months—”

“No, we don’t,” he said, coming to his feet, his casual movement placing him too close to her. She had to tilt her head to look up into his eyes and she was five feet eight inches tall. He had to be over six feet tall. She started to take a step back and then felt annoyed with herself. Let him be the one to back off.

“I remember the will saying we were to marry within—”

“Juliana,” he said in that voice that stopped her words instantly. “I need the money right away.”

Cal’s gaze shifted to a point beyond her. Guilt plagued him, but there was no way he was going to tell her the truth. He had learned long ago the terrible consequences of re-vealing everything about himself. “I’ve been considering expanding my law firm. I want to make commitments right away. I can’t wait six months.” He looked down into her wide blue eyes and saw the rising anger.

“How soon do you have to know?”

“I don’t see any reason to wait. If you give this some thought tonight, I think you can reach the same decision I have.”

“Mr. Duncan—”

“Call me Cal,” he ordered, his voice compelling and husky.

“Cal,” she said, meaning to snap it out because she was angry, yet a prickle ran across her nape and she had a sense of becoming more intimately involved with him just from that simple form of addressing him. And nothing in her tone sounded angry or forceful. He waited, his gaze intent on her. “I have to give this some thought because so many people are involved.”

“That’s exactly why it shouldn’t take you any time to consider my proposal. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose. What could you possibly lose?”

The words hung in the air between them, invisible, yet so tangible to her as she looked into his eyes. She wanted to say she was too aware of him as an appealing male, too vulner-able because she had been deceived by Barry. She would have her heart at risk. How easily she could imagine falling

in love with Caleb Duncan. There was only one certainty in this—she did not think he ran any chance of falling in love or losing his heart. His love was money.

“You make it sound so simple,” she said with reluctance because just being in the same room with him made her tingly. He was watching her, and she gazed back at him and was locked again in one of their staring contests, only this was no contest. She felt caught and held by invisible bonds, while awareness of him magnified and her pulse jumped. He was only inches away, leaning forward. Her skin vibrated and she could all but feel sparks jumping between them. Speculation and curiosity were obvious in his gaze.

“I seem to remember you said something about no matter how sexy and appealing I am—that was an interesting remark,” he said in a low voice.

“Don’t get carried away,” she replied, wishing she didn’t sound breathless.

Cal gazed into her large blue eyes and wanted to put his hand behind her head and pull her the last few inches. He wanted to taste her full lips, to feel their softness, to invade her mouth, yet the logical side to him warned against getting involved. Keep the whole arrangement impersonal. It could get incredibly sticky if he didn’t. And he could end up permanently committed, a married man with a wife and three boys, when he had no such intention. Or he could end up as he had with Andrea—getting his heart torn apart.

While part of his mind argued, the other part had one desire. He gazed again into fathomless blue eyes, full, rosy lips that were slightly parted, and knew that under any other circumstances he would lean the last few inches and taste her tempting mouth. *Caution*, common sense screamed.

“I have to give this thought.” But in her heart, Juliana knew she’d been thinking about marrying Caleb ever since he’d asked her to dinner. How could she *not* think about it, considering all the good it would mean to the boys? Juliana moved impatiently to the sliding glass door, once again seeking the softer lights on the deck. She brushed past him, bumping against him. As he steadied her, an enticing scent coaxed him to forget what was sensible.

“Sorry,” she said, her cheeks turning a delightful pink. He moved away as swiftly as if he had grasped a burning skillet.

“Just think about the money, Juliana,” he said, following her out to the deck.

Annoyed, she glanced at him. “I’m thinking about my nephews. At least you should make a good father figure for them. Would you give them some of your time?”

He was silent for a while, as if he was weighing her question. Faint light shone on the angles and rugged planes of his face. “Yes, I’d do that,” he answered finally, and she felt he meant what he said.

Silence descended once again, the darkness enveloping them, moonlight splashing across the yard while shadows danced in the faint breeze. Crickets were chirping their night song, but Juliana barely heard them. “If you give me your word, I expect you to keep it. Trust is important to me.”

“I’ll remember that,” he answered quietly, and she stared at him, unable to see the expression in his eyes in the darkness. He hadn’t answered that he would keep his word or that she could trust him—merely that he would remember that’s what she expected. His answer disturbed her, and then she brushed it aside as she went back to considering his proposal. What did she have to lose? Surely she could resist falling in love with him. All that money—the boys would be completely cared for. She could afford to send them to college. All she had to do was live one year under the same roof with Caleb Duncan.

Marriage to Caleb Duncan. Her stomach fluttered, her pulse raced and she felt dazed at the prospect. She sat down at the patio table, determined to try to look at everything objectively.

Cal sat across from her, waiting.

“Cal,” Juliana said finally, aware that calling him by his given name sounded intensely personal, even though he probably had not given it a thought. “There’s something that’s worrying me. You said that if we marry, that after a year we can dissolve this whole thing. But suppose by that time, the boys think of you as a father?” she asked.

Cal felt torn between relief and anxiety because it sounded as if she was sincerely considering accepting his proposal. For the first time, he thought about her nephews actually getting attached to him—something that hadn't occurred to him.

“Quin is in counseling now because of losing his par- ents,” she continued when Cal didn't answer her. “I don't want him to lose someone he loves again.”

Cal rubbed his jaw while he tried to come up with an an- swer. “It's difficult to imagine that they would really think of me as a father. I don't see myself that way.”

“It could happen.”

“All I can do is promise to do my best to avoid hurting them.”

Juliana felt torn between wanting to accept and wanting to say no, unable to say the words because they would be ir- revocable.

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