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The Millionaire and the Mum

PATRICIA KAY

Patricia Kay

The Millionaire and the Mum

«HarperCollins»

Kay P.

The Millionaire and the Mum / P. Kay — «HarperCollins»,

LOVE IS ABOUT SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST. SOME MEN FALL, BUT SURVIVORS LIKE ME DON'T.–Jack Stockwell's thoughts on loveMercenary Jack Stockwell's secret mission was twofold: 1) Find out if the Stockwells had swindled Beth Johnson's ancestors out of their fortune, and 2) Get out with his heart intact. The strong, earthy widow and her two children stirred the dark shadows of his soul–and left traces of hope. But Jack had to resist her sweet temptation–and shackle himself to caution. For Beth would soon discover that her lover was actually her worst enemy–a Stockwell. At the shock of this revelation, would she seek the ultimate revenge…or let love settle the score?

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If the walls of Stockwell Mansion could talk…

We'd say good riddance to that curmudgeon Caine Stockwell. He's thrown his last crystal vase against us, that's for sure! When Caine was alive he did nothing but make piles of money and mountains of mischief. And it's beginning to look like that money and that mischief are very close cousins…. The Stockwell siblings recently uncovered some damning papers…documents that seem to verify that a Stockwell ancestor bilked his neighbors, the Johnsons, of their valuable land—fine Texas property oozing with black gold! Well, thank goodness the mean gene didn't pass down to any of this generation of Stockwells. They're all anxious to discover the truth and set things straight.

And no better man for the job than mercenary Jack Stockwell. He banished himself from his notorious family years ago, but is back for a last call of duty. Under an assumed name, he's working on Beth Johnson's storm-ravaged rose farm in order to dig up the dirt on the dirt. Seems Jack can't quite keep his attention on the ground, however—his mind's swirling with tantalizing thoughts of Beth!

In the search for their long-lost mother, the Stockwell siblings find a sister, too! But she barely steps foot in Texas when she's kidnapped—and rescued by a Prince Charming rancher in The Cattleman and the Virgin Heiress, SE #1393, by Jackie Merritt, available May 2001, only from Silhouette Special Edition.

Dear Reader,

When Patricia Kay was a child, she could be found hiding somewhere…reading. "Ever since I was old enough to realize someone wrote books and they didn't just magically appear, I dreamed of writing," she says. And this month Special Edition is proud to publish Patricia's twenty-second novel, The Millionaire and the Mom, the next of the STOCKWELLS OF TEXAS series. She admits it isn't always easy keeping her ideas and her writing fresh. What helps, she says, is "nonwriting" activities, such as singing in her church choir, swimming, taking long walks, going to the movies and traveling. "Staying well-rounded keeps me excited about writing," she says.

We have plenty of other fresh stories to offer this month. After finding herself in the midst of an armed robbery with a gun to her back in Christie Ridgway's From This Day Forward, Annie Smith vows to chase her dreams…. In the next of A RANCHING FAMILY series by Victoria Pade, Kate McDermot returns from Vegas unexpectedly married and with a Cowboy's Baby in her belly! And Sally Tyler Hayes's Magic in a Jelly Jar is what young Luke Morgan hopes for by saving his teeth in a jelly jar…because he thinks that his dentist is the tooth fairy and can grant him one wish: a mother! Also, don't miss the surprising twists in Her Mysterious Houseguest by Jane Toombs, and an exciting forbidden love story with Barbara Benedict's Solution: Marriage.

At Special Edition, fresh, innovative books are our passion. We hope you enjoy them all.

Best,

Karen Taylor Richman

Senior Editor

The Millionaire and The Mom
Patricia Kay

www.millsandboon.co.uk

PATRICIA KAY

has had a lifelong love affair with books and has always wanted to be a writer. She also loves cats, movies, the ocean, music, Broadway shows, cooking, traveling, being with her family and friends, Cajun food, “Calvin and Hobbes” and getting mail. Patricia and her husband have three grown children, three adorable grandchildren and live in Houston, Texas. Patricia loves to hear from readers. You can write to her at P.O. Box 441603, Houston, TX 77244-1603.

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Chapter One

R ain and wind battered the casement windows of the first-floor library of the Stockwell mansion as thunder rumbled overhead. The storm had been moving toward the greater Dallas area for two days and had finally hit. But no one was complaining; the rain was a welcome change from the relentless heat and droughtlike conditions that had plagued this part of the state all summer long. Yet despite the noise of the storm, the four occupants of the room seemed oblivious to what was happening outdoors, so intent were they on their conversation.

"So we're agreed?" Jack Stockwell was saying. "I'll leave tomorrow for the Johnson farm."

Cord and Rafe, his twin brothers, both nodded. His sister, Kate, was slower to concur, but she finally nodded, too.

As always, when regarding his sister, the hard shell Jack kept around his heart softened. He hated that her joy over her recent engagement was marred by sadness. Learning a few months back that Caine Stockwell had been lying to them all these years had shaken Kate to the core, yet her love for their father hadn't wavered, and these past few days since his death had been very difficult for her.

As it had many times since their father had confessed his duplicity, anger flooded Jack. How could Caine have done this to his children? How could he have banished their mother from their lives when they were little more than babies and then told them she was dead? Depriving them of Madelyn's presence was a despicable thing to do, and Jack wasn't sure if he would ever forgive his father. He understood his father's motives, but no matter what Caine thought Madelyn had done, he'd had no right to cut her out of their lives.

Regardless of how many times Jack told himself it was wrong, he couldn't mourn his father. Caine Stockwell had been a real bastard. From earliest childhood, Jack had known his father hated him. His feelings were evident in every word, every slap, every brutal act directed Jack's way. Caine had not once had a loving or kind word for his oldest son. Indeed, he never missed a chance to belittle Jack.

As he had so many times before, Jack wondered what it was about him that had caused his father to hate him so much. Angry that this question continued to bother him when he should have come to terms with it long ago, he shoved it aside. What did it matter? Caine was gone. The wrongs he had perpetrated against Jack could never be changed.

"It's still hard for me to believe that Daddy didn't at least try to find out if Gabriel Johnson was telling the truth," Kate said, her dark blue eyes meeting Jack's. She was referring to the fact that she and her brothers had—in going through their father's papers—discovered a series of letters from Gabriel Johnson in which he accused their grandfather Stockwell of stealing Gabriel's father's fortune. He'd said he had proof and had demanded restitution. "After all," Kate continued, "the Johnsons are our mother's family!"

"Hell, Kate, why is it hard for you to believe? Look at what our father did to us!" Even though it would have given Kate some measure of comfort if they all pretended their father had been unaware of the possibility that a long-ago Stockwell really had cheated their mother's family out of its rightful inheritance, Jack refused to do it. First of all, he didn't believe it for an instant. Secondly, he wouldn't lie to Kate. Hell, his father didn't deserve any whitewashing of his actions. Caine Stockwell had been ruthless in his business dealings. He would not have wasted one moment of sympathy on the Johnson family, even if he thought Gabriel Johnson's claims were legitimate.

Caine's philosophy and that of his cronies echoed that of the jungle: survival of the fittest. If the Johnsons couldn't hold on to their fortune, that was their problem, not his.

And yet, even as Jack knew his father was entirely capable of turning a blind eye to any shady business deals that might have happened in 1900, as Gabriel Johnson claimed, Jack had some doubts about the authenticity of Gabriel Johnson's claims himself. If this Johnson man really had proof of

being cheated, wouldn't he have produced it? Wouldn't he have taken Caine to court to try to get back what was rightfully his? No, something was odd about this business, and even though Jack was prepared to believe the worst about his father, he was too familiar with the way people twisted the truth to suit their own purposes to believe Gabriel Johnson's claims simply because he'd made them.

Still, if there was any possibility their ancestors really had stolen his mother's ancestors' property, the only right thing to do was make restitution. They were all agreed on that point.

In investigating, Jack had discovered Gabriel Johnson was dead, and that he'd had only two direct descendants of that original Johnson, a boy and girl who lived with their mother on a rose farm in Rose Hill, Texas.

So tomorrow Jack would leave for Rose Hill.

"What're you going to tell this Beth Johnson when you see her, Jack?"

Jack shrugged. "I'm not sure. I'm just going to nose around, see what I can find out, then play it by ear."

Cord nudged Rafe with his elbow. "See? What'd I tell you? Jack flies by the seat of his pants."

"I've been thinking on my feet for a long time now," Jack answered mildly. He was referring to the fact that he'd been a mercenary specializing in hostage negotiation and rescue missions for the past fourteen years. The only way a mercenary stayed alive was by thinking fast.

"I know," Cord replied. "I was just kidding. Rafe and I trust you to make the right decision about the Johnsons, don't we, little brother?"

Rafe rolled his eyes. Cord never missed a chance to remind him that he was eight minutes older. "Yes."

"I trust your judgment, too," Kate was quick to add.

Jack smiled at her. "Thanks. When are you leaving for Massachusetts?"

Months ago, after finding out their mother might still be alive and that there was a possibility they had a sibling they'd never known about, Jack and his brothers and sister had started trying to find them. One lead led to another, and last month Jack had gone to France to follow up on the latest information. While there he'd found a painting of a woman and a young girl who strongly resembled Jack's sister, Kate. The painting led them to a woman named Madelyn LeClaire, who lived on Cape Cod. They were fairly certain this woman and their mother were the same person, and now that their father's funeral was over, Kate planned to go back to Massachusetts to try to arrange a meeting with Mrs. LeClaire.

"On Monday." For the first time since their meeting had begun, the sadness faded from Kate's eyes. "Brett has some things he has to take care of first." Brett Larson was Kate's fiancé.

"What about you? Got any idea where you'll be staying once you get to Rose Hill?" Rafe asked, directing his question to Jack.

"No, but I'll call you once I get settled."

That decided, the four of them turned their attention to their father's will. Cord had been named executor and would work along with the family lawyer to make sure all the specific bequests were taken care of.

"You don't mind, do you, Jack?" Cord asked.

Jack shook his head. "No." Even though, by rights, as the oldest he should have been named executor of the will, he had no interest in any aspect of his father's estate. He had turned his back on the Stockwell money long ago, preferring to make his own way in the world. Besides, for once, Caine had been right to pass over Jack. Cord had been working in the family business for years. He was the logical choice to oversee distributions under the terms of the will. Rafe, a Deputy U.S. Marshal, was like Jack and had no interest in the Stockwell businesses. Nor did Kate, who was an art therapist.

With no other business to discuss, the meeting broke up and the siblings prepared to go their own ways.

"Take care," Cord said, shaking Jack's hand.

"Remember what I said about the will," Jack reminded him.

"Jack, I am not going to—"

Cutting him off, Jack said, "I don't want any of the money."

"That's ridiculous, Jack," Kate said.

"It is ridiculous," Rafe agreed. "You're a part of this family, just like we are."

Not just like you are.

"Jack," Kate said softly, touching his shoulder. "We can't not give you the money. It wouldn't be right. You're our brother."

Jack's jaw tightened. "I don't want it. I'll just give it away."

"Fine," Cord said. "If you want to give away, that's your business. My business is to follow the terms of our father's will. And he gave you an equal share of his estate."

Jack would never understand why. Caine had loved his other children, that much had always been clear. He might have lied to them, and he might have been heavy-handed in his dealings with them, especially after they became adults, but he'd loved them. So it made sense he'd leave them equal shares in his estate. But he didn't love me. "I don't need the money," he insisted stubbornly. "I have plenty of my own."

"So now you'll have more," Cord said.

As a negotiator, Jack knew when it was time to back down. "Fine. We'll talk more when I get back."

Kate smiled at him. "Good luck. You'll keep us posted, won't you?"

"Of course. Good luck to you, too."

"Thanks. I'm looking forward to meeting her, but I'm scared, too."

Jack nodded in understanding. Of all of them, Kate had missed having a mother the most. "Don't worry," he said softly, giving her a shoulder hug. "It's going to be okay."

Kate nodded, but she didn't seem convinced. Jack wanted to offer her more assurance, but he held back. Hell, who knew? Maybe this Madelyn LeClaire wasn't their mother. They were pretty certain, but they could be wrong.

A few minutes later, as he climbed the stairs to the second floor of the mansion and headed for the wing where he had a suite of rooms, Jack was still thinking about Kate's mission. She would be very disappointed if this LeClaire woman turned out not to be their mother. Worse, if she was their mother but wasn't interested in having any kind of relationship with them. He and his brothers would survive the rejection—them because they were both newly married and Jack because he was used to being rejected.

The bitter thought was one he didn't often allow to surface. And yet it was always there, waiting to pounce on him anytime he allowed himself to be vulnerable. Which was why, except for his sister, he'd always avoided close relationships. It was also why he'd chosen the profession he'd chosen, where he didn't have to depend on anyone but himself. He would be relieved to get this mystery settled, once and for all, and then head back to his solitary, answer-to-no-one life.

And if, sometimes, he was lonely, so what? Better to be lonely than to be betrayed. Telling himself he had exactly the life he wanted, he firmly pushed all other thoughts from his mind.

The following morning Jack was packed and ready to hit the road by six. The horizon was streaked with pink and gold by the time he entered the on-ramp for Interstate 20. Because it was early, traffic was light. He would make good time. According to the map, Rose Hill was fifteen miles west of Tyler, and Tyler was only ninety miles from the Dallas suburb of Grandview where the Stockwell home was located, so even stopping for breakfast, as he planned to, it shouldn't take more than a couple of hours to get there.

He debated about what approach to take, whether to head directly for the Johnson farm once he reached the area or to first see what he could find out about Beth Johnson's situation. Rose Hill was a small town, so he figured he'd have no trouble finding the rose farm. He finally decided it would be

best to check in to a motel and do some investigating before going out to the Johnson place. He figured Beth Johnson must know the background of his ancestors and her husband's family. If she believed as Gabriel Johnson had believed, she probably hated all the Stockwells. Hell, if he just showed up there without warning she might shoot him on sight! Wouldn't that be ironic? he thought, chuckling aloud —to survive countless dangerous situations, to outwit passionate revolutionaries and the henchmen of despot rulers, and then to be felled by a lone woman defending her farm in Rose Hill, Texas.

When Jack reached the outskirts of Tyler, the sun was high and bright in the eastern sky and clearly illuminated how much harm yesterday's storm had caused. As he slowly drove through town, he noted the mangled trees, twisted and uprooted signs, broken windows and damaged roofs. In some places, debris blocked part of the roadway. Everywhere he looked he saw people cleaning up. It seemed the storm had been much more severe here than in Grandview. Had they had a tornado?

Less than a half hour later, a small green sign on his right proclaimed Rose Hill, Population 297. The speed limit dropped to thirty, and Jack slowed down. He figured he'd stop at the local gas station and ask for directions to the Johnson place. But just as he made the decision, a small motel appeared ahead. It looked clean, so he swung his Dodge pickup into the driveway and climbed out. Five minutes later he was registered, paying cash in advance for one night's stay.

The owner, a garrulous old man with a shiny bald head and friendly eyes behind trifocals, handed him a key. "That there's Unit Seven," he said in a country twang. "Jest pull your truck along back and you can't miss it."

"Thanks. Maybe you can help me. I'm interested in touring a rose farm. Does anyone around here give tours?"

The old man frowned. "Mebbe. But this ain't a good time for tours. That storm did a real job yesterday. Most of the farms had lots of damage."

"What about the Johnson farm? Somebody mentioned that they have a pretty nice place."

"Used to when it was Lillian Wilder's place. But they've been havin' a rough time lately, and they had turrible damage from the storm. Bud Thomason up at the Sack 'n Save told me the tornado hit one of their greenhouses—the one where they do their propagatin'—and I guess all but wiped out their waterin' system. Poor Bethie was in town earlier buyin' milk for the kids. On top of ever'thin' else, her electric has been out since yestiddy afternoon. I feel so sorry for that little gal. For the past couple years, it's just been one dang thing after another." He tsk-tsked and shook his head, his eyes filled with sympathy. "I don't know what she's gonna do now, what with all the cleanup and replacin' that waterin' system. See, her cousin, who was workin' for her, he left the beginnin' of the summer. Got him a much better job down in Houston, and I know she can't afford to hire anybody else."

As Jack headed toward Unit Seven, he thought about what the talkative old man had told him. He couldn't help but feel sorry for Beth Johnson, but at least now he knew how to approach her.

"Mama, can we go play?" they said in unison.

Beth wearily pushed her hair out of her eyes and straightened up, wincing at the pain that shot through her lower back. She had been working steadily since sunup, trying to salvage whatever she could from the damaged greenhouses. She'd only stopped to make a quick run into town to buy some milk for the kids' breakfast.

"Please, Mama?"

She considered her seven-year-old son and five-year-old daughter's request. They were bored. Because of the devastation the storm had caused, she hadn't wanted them out of her sight today. There were too many ways they could get hurt if they played outdoors unsupervised. Yet she felt sorry for them. After all, they were only kids.

"All right, Matthew," she finally said, "go on. But you've got to promise me you'll keep a close eye on Amy and that neither one of you will go anywhere near the sweet gum tree." When the tornado had struck yesterday, it had completely wiped out several trees at the back of the property, but it had only partially damaged the sweet gum, which sat on the side of the house. Now the sweet gum

was unstable, and Beth was afraid it could tear loose and fall over at any time. She would have to do something about the tree, and quickly. It was a danger to her and her children as well as to the house, which had miraculously escaped any serious damage from the storm.

"But, Mama," Amy said, "our tree house is there."

"Yes, I know, sugar, but I told you earlier, you can't go up into the tree house anymore. Not until I can get somebody out here to take it from the tree."

Amy's bottom lip quivered. "But my Pooh bear is in it."

Beth sighed. "I promise you, honey, I will find a way to get your Pooh bear out of there, just not today, okay? Can you be patient a little while longer?"

Amy toed the ground with her sneaker. "Okay," she finally said.

"I'll watch her, Mama," Matthew assured her.

"All right, but I mean it, now. You must stay completely away from that tree. Do you promise?"

After giving her their solemn promises, they ran off happily. Beth watched them for a moment, then turned back to her task. Oh, God, there was so much to be done! Suddenly she felt overwhelmed, and tears blurred her eyes. Why, on top of everything else, did this storm have to happen? Wasn't it enough that Eben had left them with nothing—no insurance and no savings—and that grasshoppers had all but wiped out their plants last year?

Now this.

Yesterday's storm had caused enormous damage to the farm. One of the trees hit by the tornado had fallen on the propagation house—the greenhouse where she nurtured the cuttings taken from leftover stock and grew into viable plants. The misting system had been destroyed, and one of the tanks used to catch rainwater had been torn from the ground and thrown a hundred feet. It had missed hitting anything when it landed, which was about the only good thing Beth could say.

The other six greenhouses, which held the more mature plants—the ones she sold—had all suffered damage. Because the greenhouses weren't covered until November, the plants were sitting under open roofs. At least half of them had been completely ruined by the wind and hail. The ones remaining looked half-drowned, but Beth was hopeful they'd perk up again. If they didn't, she wouldn't have any way to obtain new root stock, because she certainly couldn't afford to buy it.

Of course, how she would tend the baby plants, even if she was able to salvage enough of the mature plants to take cuttings, she had no idea. It would have been hard enough before this happened, seeing as how she had no money to hire help, but now! A misting system was absolutely necessary, because the baby plants needed water on a regular basis. Her misting system had been automatic, turning on every hour for a few minutes. And to make matters even worse, the water used by the misting system had come from her rainwater tanks, one of which was now gone.

It seemed ludicrous. Why was she trying so desperately to hang on to the farm? Yes, it had belonged to her dear grandmother, and yes, the farm and the old country roses her grandmother had introduced to the area nearly fifty years ago were Beth's heritage and she loved them, but were they really worth the price she'd had to pay to keep them?

She thought about how she hadn't had a day off since Eben died a year ago. How she'd had to say no to Matthew when he wanted to play soccer because she knew she wouldn't be able to get him to and from practices and games. How she hadn't bought herself a new outfit in three years. How most nights they ate spaghetti or soup or meat loaf—things that didn't cost a lot of money. How her truck was ten years old and had more than 150,000 miles on it and how she prayed every day that it would last another year.

When Caleb, her cousin who had worked for her since Eben's death, left at the beginning of the summer, he'd said, "Bethie, if I were you, I'd try to sell this place."

Beth knew it would be a lot easier for everyone if she sold the farm. With the proceeds, she could buy a small house in town, get a job in Tyler, live a normal life. Yet every time she thought about leaving the roses she loved—Madame Hardy and Bloomfield Courage and Madame Alfred

Carrière and Jacques Cartier and hundreds of others—she got such a desolate feeling in her stomach, she knew she would never willingly do it. Her grandmother had loved her roses passionately, and she had passed that passion on to Beth. She would never sell. Not unless she was forced to. Not unless there simply was no other way for her family to survive. And I'm not there yet. I may be close, but there's still Grandma's jewelry.

As she had many times since her drunken husband had run his truck into an oncoming eighteen-wheeler, she told herself it didn't matter that she was virtually penniless. That she had no idea how she would get another crop together for the spring selling period. That she had never before had to do everything herself. She was strong, and she wasn't afraid of hard work.

I have to keep this place going. This place isn't just my heritage. It's my children's heritage, too.

They were such good kids. They made up for all the bad stuff she'd had to endure during her marriage.

Beth's grandmother hadn't wanted Beth to marry Eben. "He's lazy," she'd warned. "Always wanting something for nothing." She hadn't added, like your good-for-nothing daddy, but Beth had known it was implied. "He'll give you nothing but grief," her grandmother had added sadly.

But Beth hadn't listened. She'd been twenty-two and a hopeless romantic. He'd been twenty-four—handsome and charming. It was a whirlwind courtship; they were married four weeks to the day after she met him at a country-western dance.

Marry in haste, repent at leisure.

Beth grimaced. Truer words were never spoken, cliché or not. Beth and Eben hadn't been married a month when he started coming home drunk. Later she found out he'd always had a problem with alcohol.

Oh, Granny, I should have listened to you. And yet, if she had, she wouldn't have Matthew and Amy today.

Beth became pregnant with Matthew almost immediately after marrying Eben. For a while after Eben found out about the coming baby, he'd tried to be a good husband, but the lure of booze was stronger than his good intentions, so when Matthew was a year old, Beth decided to leave Eben. But then her mother got sick. And her grandmother couldn't do everything—run the farm and take care of Beth's mother. So Beth abandoned her plan to leave Eben and talked him into moving out to the farm instead. She didn't have to do much in the way of persuading. Eben liked the idea of being a rose grower. Rose growers were respected and looked up to. That he knew nothing about growing roses didn't seem to daunt him, and to be fair, he had worked pretty hard that first year. Beth began to hope that he had changed.

Carrie Wilder lasted six months before succumbing to the cancer that plagued her body. A week after her funeral, Beth discovered she was pregnant again. Distraught over the loss of her mother, Beth resolved that unless things got worse, she would try to stick it out with Eben—at least until the kids were in school.

The following year, just fourteen months after her mother's death, Beth's grandmother suffered a massive heart attack and died. It was a shock to all who knew her. Lillian Wilder was only sixty-eight years old, and had always seemed indomitable.

Beth was devastated by the loss of the woman she had so admired, but there was no time to mourn. The farm was now hers. By the following week, she had taken over its management.

Eben couldn't handle it. Once again, he began to drink heavily. Beth knew his ego had suffered a fatal blow, yet how could she have done anything else? He didn't know enough about the business to run it without her supervision. So his drinking increased, and as he drank more, he worked less. Beth had to hire more help. Instead of one helper, she had to have two men, one to replace Eben, one to assist. She spent as much time as she could overseeing the work, but the children were young and needed her attention, too. She was busy day and night, too busy to worry about Eben's bruised ego.

Now he was gone and, except for the children, Beth was all alone. She wasn't beaten yet. And with that thought to sustain her, she turned back to the job at hand.

Chapter Two

J ack had no trouble finding the Johnson place. It was clearly marked with a neat white sign hanging from a rose-covered trellis.

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A long gravel driveway wound through a large field surrounded by trees, gradually ending in a parking area beyond which sat a two-story redbrick and white frame house with a wraparound porch. To the right of the driveway was a garden area that contained dozens of rosebushes, interspersed with other kinds of flowers, although not many were in bloom now. Dotted around the grassy area surrounding the house were tripods and birdhouses and small trellises that were used as support structures for what Jack guessed would be called climbing rosebushes. Some of them had lots of roses in bloom, others only a few. To his left he saw half-a-dozen greenhouses, and behind the house he could see part of a barn and another greenhouse. The man at the motel hadn't exaggerated. Everything in Jack's line of sight showed storm damage, although the house and the rose garden seemed to have escaped with the least damage.

To the left of the house was a sweet gum tree that looked unstable. Several branches had been severed or partially severed and the trunk itself looked as if it had been split. As Jack drove closer, he saw that there was some kind of tree house in the sweet gum.

Somewhere out of sight he could hear a child, and down by the greenhouses, he thought he saw someone working. Looked like a woman, too. Maybe it was Beth Johnson. Turning off the ignition, he decided he would head that way.

Beth shaded her eyes and watched the unfamiliar red truck enter her property and come slowly up the road leading to the house.

She frowned. She didn't recognize the truck, but maybe it was a customer. Pulling off her gloves, she walked toward the house.

Halfway there, she heard Matthew. His voice came from the back of the house. "Amy! Where are you?"

"I'm right here!" Amy answered.

Beth's heart knocked painfully against her rib cage as she spotted Amy, who was just emerging from the tree house, Pooh bear clutched in her arms.

"Oh, my God! Amy!" she shouted. She began to run.

Although Beth's entire concentration was focused on her daughter, who had begun to descend the tree house stairs, she was aware that a tall, dark-haired man had climbed out of the truck and, until she'd shouted, had been heading her way.

Suddenly there was a horrible cracking noise, and the sweet gum tilted to the left.

"Amy!" Beth screamed.

The stranger dashed toward Amy, reached up and snatched her off the ladder and, with Amy safely cradled in his arms, leaped out of the way just before the tree crashed to the ground. Once clear of the area, he gently set her on her feet.

"Mama!" Amy cried, racing toward Beth.

Beth nearly collapsed in relief. Tears ran down her face as she whisked her daughter—who also began to cry—up into her arms. "Oh, Amy," she said, kissing her again and again. "You scared me. Why did you go into the tree house after I told you not to! You could have been killed."

"I'm sorry, Mama. I just wanted my Pooh bear. He was scared up there by himself!"

Beth knew that to Amy, her Pooh bear was as real as her brother, and almost as important. “Hush, sugar. It’s okay. You’re okay. But don’t you ever, ever, disobey me again, do you hear? No matter what the reason is.”

“I won’t,” Amy said, her voice muffled as she buried her head against Beth’s neck.

By now a white-faced Matthew had joined them. “I had to go to the bathroom, Mama, but she promised me she wouldn’t move off the porch until I got back.”

Normally Beth might have scolded him, but just then, she didn’t have the heart to. She knew he’d been as frightened as she was. Taking a deep breath, she finally turned her attention to the heaven-sent stranger who had saved her daughter. Meeting his eyes over Amy’s head, she said in a voice that still trembled a bit, “How can I ever thank you?”

He shrugged. “No thanks necessary. I’m just glad I was here.” Then he put out his right hand. “Jack Stokes, ma’am.”

His handshake was firm and strong. “Beth Johnson.” Now that her heart was calmer, she began to assess the man who stood before her. He was very good-looking, in a rugged, Marlboro man sort of way, with a deep tan, dark thick hair cut short, and striking blue eyes. “And these are my children,” she added. “Matthew and Amy.”

Matthew said a polite hello.

Jack smiled down at him and offered his hand once more.

Matthew grinned and the two shook hands.

Beth couldn’t help smiling.

Amy finally raised her head. After hiccuping, she gave Jack a shy smile.

“Hello, little lady,” he said.

“Hi,” she said in a tiny voice.

“You probably think I’m a bad mother,” Beth said, “but I told them to stay away from the tree.”

He nodded.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” Matthew said. Once again, he looked as if he were going to cry.

Beth squeezed his shoulder. “It wasn’t your fault, honey.” It really wasn’t. It was Beth’s fault Amy had been in danger. No matter how much work Beth had to do, that was no excuse for not watching her children more closely. “But it sure is a lucky thing for us that Mr. Stokes happened along when he did,” Beth added, turning back toward him. Now that she in control of her emotions, and Amy was safe, she was once more curious about why the man was there.

“Well, ma’am, I didn’t just happen along. I heard from Mr. Temple down at the Temple Motel that you needed some help here, and I came out to ask you for a job.”

Beth blinked. A job? He needed a job? Her gaze swept over his well-kept red pickup truck, his nice-fitting jeans, the worn but obviously well-made boots he wore, his clean hands and good haircut. Not to mention his teeth which—even though he had yet to smile—were white and straight and quite clearly teeth that had been cared for.

He sure didn’t look like he needed a job. Yet he had saved Amy from possible serious injury, so for that reason alone he deserved to have his request taken at face value. “I’m sorry,” she said with genuine regret. “I can’t afford to hire anyone.”

“I’d work real cheap.”

Beth grimaced. “I have to be honest. The only way I could afford you is if you’d work for free.”

He thought for a minute. “Tell you what. If you’ll give me a job, I’d be willing to work for room and board.”

Room and board? Was he serious? Why would he be willing to work for room and board? Something didn’t add up.

“I’m real handy,” he persisted. “And I’m not afraid of hard work. I could help you get those buildings in order again.” He gestured toward the greenhouses, then turned to the sweet gum. “I could get that tree cleared out, too.”

It was only then Beth realized she was doubly lucky. Not only had he helped avert disaster by saving Amy, but the sweet gum had fallen away from the house.

"I'm afraid that tree house can't be salvaged, though," he said.

They both looked at the tree house, which had been demolished by the tree falling on top of it.

Amy's lower lip quivered, and Beth knew what she was thinking. Eben had built that tree house, one of the few things he'd ever made for the kids, and Amy, in particular, had loved it.

It hurt Beth to see her child suffering, but what could she say? She certainly couldn't afford to have someone build them another tree house.

Apparently taking her silence for resistance, Jack said, "I have references. I could get you some names of people you could call."

Studying him, she considered his offer. She was tempted to take him up on it, even though she was sure this man was hiding something. He had to be. No man who looked as well off as he did would need to work for room and board. "Look, I know I owe you for what you've done for me today, but you could probably go to any one of the rose farms and get work. Paid work."

"I tried the other places. They all want someone who knows something about roses." He smiled at Matthew again, and Matthew smiled back. "I don't know a thing about roses, but I wouldn't mind learning."

Oh, God, despite her doubts about him, she desperately wanted to take him up on his offer. She was exhausted, and she had so much work ahead of her if she hoped to get the farm back in working order. So what if he had something to hide? Didn't most people? And he had saved Amy from a terrible accident, hadn't he? Besides, he'd said he'd give her references.

"How about a trial period?" It was obvious from his tone he sensed she was weakening. "One week. If it doesn't work out, all you have to do is tell me, and I'll go."

Her eyes met his again. His blue gaze was steady and direct. Maybe she was crazy, but it also seemed honest to her. She sighed. "All right. One week."

Now he smiled. "You won't be sorry."

Maybe not, Beth thought. Then again, maybe she would. She sure didn't have a great track record when it came to judging men. Right now, though, she really didn't care. She needed help, and he was offering it. She would take her chances and hope for the best.

Jack could see Beth Johnson wasn't sure she'd done the right thing by hiring him. Hell, if he could persuade warring fanatics to release a dozen hostages, he could sure persuade one woman to let him work for her. "I could start right away." He gestured toward the tree. "If you've got a saw, I could get that tree cut up and piled over by the fence where it won't be a hazard."

She nodded slowly. "That would be great. While you're doing that, I'll make up a bed for you on the sleeping porch. That's the screened in part at the back of the house. I hope that will be satisfactory." This last was said primly, and she didn't meet his eyes.

It was clear she was wary about having him inside her house. He didn't blame her. He was a stranger. For all she knew, he could be a thief or worse—a murderer. He was glad to see she was sensible as well as pretty.

For pretty she was, even though she was dressed in beat-up boots, faded blue jeans and an obviously old yellow T-shirt with dirt everywhere—on her clothes, her face, her hands, her knees. Still, no amount of dirt could disguise the fact that her slender yet womanly figure curved in all the right places, or that her strawberry-blond hair was thick and curly and shining, or that there was an appealing sprinkle of freckles on her cheeks and nose, or that her eyes were steady and clear and the warmest golden brown he'd ever seen. Yes, she was an altogether very pretty woman.

The kids were cute, too. That boy of hers looked just like her. The little girl, though, must have taken after the father, because her hair was dark and her eyes were blue. Jack hadn't been around many children in his life, but he couldn't help liking the Johnson kids. Or their mother, who was still waiting for his answer.

"The sleeping porch will be fine," he said. "But you don't have to rush to get it ready. I've paid for a night at the Temple Motel, so I might as well stay there tonight."

"Are you sure?" When he nodded, she said, "All right. But if you're going to work here this afternoon, you'll stay and have supper with us. My electricity's back on, so I can cook again." She grimaced. "Although my phone is still not working."

"On my way in I saw some telephone linemen working."

"Did you? That's good. I hope they get our service back soon."

He nodded. "I appreciate the offer of supper, but it's not necessary to feed me."

"I insist. That was the deal," she said firmly.

He could see her pride wouldn't let her accept his help today unless she could pay him something, even if it was only a meal. "Okay. Supper sounds great. Now why don't you show me where you keep your tools? I don't guess you have a chain saw?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." Leading the way to the barn, she added, "Everything you'll need is in there. While you work on the tree, I'm going inside for a bit. Matthew, you and Amy come with me."

"Ah, Mama, can't I stay out here and watch Jack?"

"His name is Mr. Stokes. You know better than to call an adult by his first name. And, no, you may not stay out here and watch. He doesn't need you hanging around getting in the way."

"I'd rather he call me Jack. Mr. Stokes sounds like some old man," Jack said, giving Matthew a conspiratorial wink.

"Can I call you Jack, too?" piped up little Amy.

"Amy," Beth said admonishingly.

Jack looked at Beth. "Mrs. Johnson, I really don't mind—"

"Beth," she interrupted. "Please call me Beth. We don't stand on formalities here."

"Beth," he repeated, liking the way her name felt on his tongue. "What I was going to say is, if the kids want to watch, maybe they could sit in the bed of my truck. That way they could see, but they wouldn't be in any danger."

"Please, Mama, please?" Matthew begged.

"Please, Mama?" Amy echoed.

"Oh, I guess it's all right, as long as Mr. Stokes—"

"Jack."

She seemed taken aback by the interruption, but when she realized he'd done the same thing to her that she'd done to him, she grinned. "Jack."

He liked the way his name sounded on her lips, too. He also liked her smile. It was open and real, with no suggestion of anything other than genuine amusement.

"Okay, then," she said, "You two can watch, but if you get out of the truck, Jack will send you into the house, and that will be that. Understood?"

Both children nodded solemnly. "Yes, Mama."

After one more warning to be good, Beth left the three of them and headed for the house. Telling the children to wait, Jack went into the barn and found the chain saw. Then he and the children walked back to the truck. After getting them settled in the flatbed, Jack attacked the fallen tree.

He worked steadily for the next hour or so, and just as the kids began to get restless, Beth walked out onto the porch. Jack saw that she'd cleaned herself up and now wore fresh jeans and a light brown T-shirt.

"Time for lunch," she said. "I made hot dogs."

"Oh, boy," Matthew said. "Hot dogs are my favorite."

"They're my favorite, too." Amy said.

Jack smothered a smile. It was obvious Amy had a bad case of hero worship where her older brother was concerned. The way she acted reminded him of how Kate used to follow him around all the time when they were young. The twins had had each other, but Jack had always had Kate,

and no matter how much their father had tried to discourage her from tagging after Jack, she had paid no attention.

"I thought we'd eat on the side porch," Beth said as she helped the children out of the truck.

"Cool! A picnic!" Matthew raced around to the side porch, closely followed by Amy.

Beth shook her head. "Those two are a mess." But despite her words, it was clear she adored her children.

"They're nice kids."

"Thanks."

"Matthew's in school?"

"Yes. Second grade. And Amy's in kindergarten."

"So they didn't have school today?"

"No. It was canceled because of storm damage. I do hope they'll go back tomorrow, though. It's hard to get anything done when they're home." Her expression became rueful. "You see what very nearly happened today. What would have happened if you hadn't been here." Her eyes clouded.

Jack had an idiotic urge to put his arm around her and tell her to quit thinking about it, everything was okay now. The unexpected feeling shook him, because he wasn't normally given to emotional reactions to people. He couldn't afford them, not in his line of work.

Leaving him on the porch with the kids, she went inside. A few moments later, she returned with a laden tray containing plates and silverware, hot dogs in buns, jars of mustard and relish, a plastic squeeze bottle of ketchup, and a bowl of something that looked like macaroni salad. She set the tray down on a small metal table in the corner. The kids immediately began to help themselves.

"Wait, Amy," Beth said as Amy picked up the bottle of ketchup. "Let me help you."

"I can do it myself," Amy said. To prove her point, she turned the bottle upside down and proceeded to squirt ketchup on her hot dog. Although the amount of ketchup that ended up on the sandwich was probably twice what should have been there, Amy gave them a triumphant smile. "See?"

"You did a good job," Beth said. "Now try not to get any of that ketchup on you, okay?"

"Okay."

"Help yourself," Beth said, turning to Jack.

"I need to wash up first."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You can wash up in the barn. I don't know if you saw it or not, but in the far corner there's a little bathroom that the help—when we had help—used to use." For a moment, her voice held a trace of bitterness. Then she seemed to shake it away. "There's even a shower."

He found soap and an old but clean towel hanging from a hook next to the sink and cleaned himself up. There was a mirror over the sink, too, so he combed his hair. While standing there, he felt something against his legs and looked down. A large black cat was rubbing against his legs. "Hey, where'd you come from?"

The cat meowed, yellowish-green eyes glowing in the semidarkness of the building.

Jack leaned down and petted the cat, who arched her back and purred. He had never especially liked cats; his father had tended toward dogs—big dogs—but this cat seemed okay. Besides, it was obvious she'd taken a liking to him. It was hard to dislike an animal that liked you, he thought ruefully. She even followed him when he set off toward the house.

"I see you discovered Char," Beth said when he rejoined her and the children.

"Char?"

She grinned. "Short for Charcoal."

"She discovered me."

"Usually when strangers are here, she hides until they leave, plus she's been really spooked since the storm. She must like you."

Again he thought how much he liked Beth Johnson's smile. So far his impression of her and her children was favorable. Whether that would make a difference to his investigation, he didn't know,

but he thought it probably would, because he was a pretty damn good judge of people, and Beth struck him as completely honest.

Returning her smile, he filled his plate, accepted a glass of lemonade, then sat on the top porch step and began to eat.

Beth settled the kids on the old glider that was a holdover from her grandmother's days, then decided it would be friendlier to join Jack on the steps, even though there were a couple of wooden chairs on the porch that she'd intended for them to use.

"I've been looking at your roof," he said when she was seated. "Did you know you've lost some shingles?"

Beth shrugged. "No. There are so many more immediate serious things wrong around here that I hadn't looked at the roof yet."

He nodded. "I can probably replace those shingles for you, and maybe later you can show me what else needs doing."

"Why don't we wait until tomorrow? It's probably going to take you the rest of the afternoon to dispose of that tree, don't you think?"

"Probably."

"Okay, then. Tomorrow morning we'll look at everything else."

For a while, they ate in silence, but Beth was acutely aware of his presence beside her. She was very curious about him, yet strangely reluctant to ask questions lest he think her interest something more than normal curiosity.

When they had finished their meal, she got up and went into the kitchen where she fixed a plate of cookies from a batch she'd baked a couple of days before.

"They're peanut butter," she said apologetically when she offered the plate to Jack.

"Peanut butter cookies are my favorite."

"Really? Did your mother used to bake them when you were young?"

For just a moment, something resembling pain flashed in his eyes, but it was quickly masked. "My mother left home when I was six," he said offhandedly.

Beth wasn't fooled by his attempt to be casual. Tenderhearted, she was immediately sympathetic. How awful to lose your mother when you were little more than Amy's age! And he hadn't said she'd died, he'd said she'd left home. Had she willfully abandoned him? Is that what he was saying? She was tempted to put voice to her questions, but thought better of it. Jack Stokes didn't seem like the kind of man who would share confidences easily, and certainly not with someone he barely knew. Mind your own business, she told herself.

But she was still wondering about him later that afternoon as she prepared supper. He was back working at the sweet gum tree. She could hear the intermittent whine of the chain saw as he cut the trunk and branches into pieces small enough to easily move.

Walking to the sink, she peered out the window. He sure didn't look like a man down on his luck, she thought again, yet what other reason could he have for offering to work for room and board? It wasn't as if Beth had anything else he might want.

She took an onion out of the wire bin hanging over the sink and, laying it on her cutting board, peeled it, then cut it into hunks. Using the food chopper her best friend Dee Ann had given her, she minced the onion, then added it to the ground meat mixture she was preparing to turn into meat loaf.

Still thinking about Jack, she rooted around in her spice cupboard for the bottle of Worcestershire sauce she was sure she had. Finding it, she sprinkled some over the meat mixture.

Could he be running from the law? Somehow he just didn't seem like the type. Besides, if he was, Rose Hill wasn't the kind of place he'd go. People running from the law usually tried to lose themselves in big cities where you could be anonymous. In little towns like Rose Hill, everybody knew everybody else's business. Beth would be willing to bet just about every one of the nearly three hundred souls who called Rose Hill home knew that a man in a red pickup truck had been hired to

work out on the Johnson place. And in a day or two, they'd probably know the terms of his hiring, too. There were no secrets here.

Maybe she'd been crazy to hire him. And yet, there was something so solid and reassuring about him.

She added two eggs and bread crumbs to the meat, then washed her hands and dried them carefully. Once she was sure they were clean, she stuck them into the bowl and mixed everything by hand until all the ingredients were well blended. There was something very satisfying about mixing meat loaf by hand, she thought, remembering how her grandmother had done it the same way.

"Mama, I'm hungry."

Glancing around, Beth smiled at Amy, who had walked into the kitchen. "Supper won't be ready for a while, but you can have a banana or an apple if you want."

"Okay." Amy walked over to the table and reached into the bowl sitting in the center. Inside were two bananas and one apple. She took a banana out and began to peel it.

Beth shaped the meat mixture into a loaf. Once it was a neat oval, she placed it in the pan she'd prepared earlier. The oven was already preheated, so she stuck the meat loaf inside and turned her attention to the potatoes that needed to be peeled.

While the meat loaf baked and she prepared the mashed potatoes, green beans, and butterscotch pudding that would round out the meal, her thoughts returned to the man outside.

Maybe she was crazy for hiring him, but right now she really didn't care. It was comforting to have a strong, masculine body on the property, someone who could do the things she couldn't do herself, so no matter what he might be hiding, she wasn't going to look this gift horse in the mouth.

Chapter Three

“S upper’s ready!

Jack looked up and saw Beth standing on the porch. The late afternoon sun had turned her hair into a fiery crown of red and gold. “Be there in a minute.” He glanced down at his watch and saw it was almost six. He couldn’t believe how fast the afternoon had flown by. He still wasn’t finished hauling off the remains of the sweet gum tree, but he only had about an hour of work left. He should be able to finish after supper, though, if there was enough light. If not, he would come early in the morning and get it done.

Since he was finished cutting the wood, he picked up the chain saw and carried it over to the barn, replacing it where he’d found it. Then he washed up and headed for the house.

The kitchen was unlike any he’d seen before. Certainly it bore no resemblance to the massive kitchen in the Stockwell mansion, which contained the very latest stainless steel appliances and every modern kitchen contraption known to man.

This kitchen was big and square, with lots of light, but, with the exception of a fairly new looking stove, there was nothing modern about it. The top cupboards had glass-paned doors and the wood, chipped in places, was painted white. An ancient refrigerator—so old that it did not have a separate freezer compartment—stood in one corner. A quick glance revealed no dishwasher, and Jack would be willing to bet there was probably no disposal, either. The floor tile, worn and weary looking, had obviously seen better days. In the center of the room was an oval maple table surrounded by six chairs. It, too, looked ancient, its top scarred and deeply grooved from use.

Despite all this, the room was cheerful. Yellow-and-white-checked curtains on the windows, yellow paint on the walls, bright red cushions on the chairs and a red-and-yellow-flowered pillow on the maple rocking chair in the corner, along with several vases of roses and a couple of healthy-looking ferns in pots, combined to make the kitchen homey and welcoming.

The place smelled great, too, and made Jack’s mouth water.

“Have a seat,” Beth said with a friendly smile. Her face was flushed from cooking, which made her look even prettier than she had before. She placed a jug of iced tea on the table. The windows were open and, although there was a breeze, the room was warm. Jack wondered if the place was air-conditioned. He couldn’t imagine how Beth and her kids could survive the area’s sizzling hot summers if it wasn’t.

“I’m sorry it’s so warm in here,” she said, almost as if she’d read his mind. “I’m not running the air conditioner because the compressor is making a funny noise.” She made a face.

Damn, he thought. How many things could go wrong at once? “If you want me to, I can take a look at it after supper.”

Her eyes brightened. “Would you?”

“Sure.” Maybe the unit just needed cleaning.

Matthew and Amy were already seated on opposite sides of the table, an empty chair between them. Jack sat next to Matthew, who beamed. Beth took the chair between the two children.

“Amy, it’s your turn to say grace,” Beth said.

Startled, Jack bowed his head along with the other three.

“Thank you, Lord, for our food,” Amy said in her sweet, little-girl voice. “And for all the blessings you give us every day.”

“And thank you, Lord, for keeping Amy safe today,” Beth added. “And for sending us some much-needed help.”

“Amen,” said Amy.

“Amen,” said Beth and Matthew.

An unfamiliar emotion swept Jack. He couldn't have put a name to it. He only knew something in the simple words and their obvious sincerity had touched him deeply. He thought back, trying to remember if grace had ever been said in his home. He couldn't think of a single instance, not even on Thanksgiving. Of course, he hadn't had that many meals with his family, since his father had shipped him off to boarding school the year after his mother had supposedly drowned, and then to military school. Even during the summers, he was often away at camp or anywhere else Caine could think to send him. But even so, the times he had been home had been enough to show him his father cared nothing for religion, unless you counted the worship of money and power.

"Jack, do you want to start the meat loaf?"

Beth's question drew his attention back to the meal, and Jack shook off the remembrance of his lonely boyhood. He picked up the platter of meat loaf, helped himself, then passed it on.

As they ate, several things struck him. Although Jack hadn't been around many children and so didn't have much with which to compare them, he felt the Johnson kids were remarkably well behaved. They didn't argue and they didn't complain about the food. They ate enthusiastically, and when their mother spoke to them, they answered politely.

The other thing that amazed him was how comfortable he felt. These three were virtual strangers, and Jack wasn't exactly sociable, yet he felt at home. As he ate the plain but tasty food, he tried to figure out why he was at ease, finally deciding it was because Beth and her children were different from most of the people he knew. Despite their troubles, they counted their blessings, a concept unknown to most of the people Jack knew.

"Would you like more mashed potatoes?"

Jack accepted the bowl from Beth and helped himself to seconds. "The food's great."

She shrugged. "It's nothing much. Just simple country food." The pleased expression on her face belied her offhand comment.

"Well, I like it."

Now she smiled. "Good. Because it's what you're going to get from now on. Although I do promise not to serve you meat loaf more than once a week. That is," she added quickly, "if you stay."

Jack thought about their agreement of a week's trial. When he'd suggested it, he'd hoped to have his answer about the supposed swindle perpetrated by his great-grandfather before the week was up, after which he'd be on his way, but now he found himself saying, "I'll stay as long as you want me to."

After a moment, she nodded. Then, in an obvious attempt to change the subject, she turned to Matthew and said brightly, "Matthew, honey, did Mrs. Ford give you any homework?"

"Only spelling words."

"After supper we'll work on them, okay?"

"Okay."

"We didn't even think about homework last night, the storm was so bad," she explained to Jack.

"Where were you when the tornado hit? Here in the house?"

Beth grimaced. "Yes. There wasn't anywhere safer to go. We just huddled inside the hall closet and prayed."

"It was scary!" Amy said, eyes big as silver dollars.

"Yeah," said Matthew. "It made this big roaring sound, just like a train."

"I know. I saw a tornado once," Jack said. Then he immediately wished he hadn't, because where he'd seen it had been a small African country in the middle of a rebellion.

"You did?" Matthew asked.

"Yes, and you're right, Amy, they are scary."

"We were very lucky," Beth said, "even though, this morning, when I saw all the damage to the greenhouses and equipment, I wasn't thinking about being lucky. Now I'm ashamed of myself. Things can be replaced. People can't." Reaching out, she squeezed a hand of each of her children.

Although her eyes were downcast, Jack could swear he'd seen the glint of tears.

After a moment, she sighed deeply. “Well now, that’s enough emotion for one day. Who wants dessert?”

“Me!” shouted Matthew.

“Me!” squealed Amy.

“Me,” said Jack.

Beth grinned. “Butterscotch pudding coming right up.”

The kids downed their pudding faster than Jack would have believed possible, then they politely asked if they could be excused.

“Yes, you may, but don’t forget your spelling words, Matthew,” Beth said. “In fact, why don’t you go study them while I clean up the kitchen, then I’ll go over them with you?”

“Okay.”

The kids took off, and by the time Jack finished his pudding, Beth was already clearing the table. He began to help her.

“No, no,” she protested, “that’s not necessary. I’ll do it.”

“No big deal.” He was used to cleaning up after himself. The way he lived, he either cleaned up after himself or it didn’t get done. “If I help, the work will be finished twice as fast.”

Without further discussion, they finished clearing the table together.

Beth was all too aware of him as she washed the dishes and Jack dried them. Unlike most of the men she’d known throughout her life, Jack didn’t seem to feel awkward doing women’s work, as Eben had disdainfully called it.

She and Eben had never shared household chores. Eben considered cooking and cleaning and doing the dishes beneath him. Not manly. Yet Beth couldn’t imagine a man more masculine than Jack Stokes, and here he was, cheerfully helping her and not thinking a thing of it.

It was very pleasant working side by side. And just as Jack had promised, the work went a lot faster. Before she knew it, all the dishes had been dried and neatly stacked.

“Just show me where they go,” Jack said, “and I’ll put them away.”

“That’s okay. You’ve done enough.” Beth removed her apron and hung it on the hook at the side of the cupboard nearest the back door, where it joined several others.

“Well, I really do want to get back outside and finish up with the tree. Plus I’ll take a look at that compressor.”

“The compressor can wait until morning. It’s supposed to go down into the sixties tonight, so we’ll be comfortable. In fact, you can finish up with the tree tomorrow, too.”

“I only have about an hour’s worth of work left on that tree. I’d rather get it done tonight.”

“You know, as hard as you’re working, you’d think I was paying you top dollar.”

For a moment, his eyes met hers. Lordy, his eyes were sure blue. They reminded her of the color of the bluebonnets that covered the fields and roadsides in the spring.

“You are,” he answered quietly. “You’re giving me an opportunity to learn about growing roses.”

For the briefest moment, his statement caused a frisson of alarm to snake through her. Was that his angle? He wanted to learn about growing roses so he could go into competition with her? But as quickly as the thought had come, it disappeared. So what if he did have some idea like that? He’d soon find out how hard this life was. Lots of people like him, who knew nothing about roses, only saw the romance of the end product. But it didn’t take them long to get educated. Growing roses was just like growing corn or growing wheat or growing anything else. It was hard work. It was so hard, in fact, it would suck the life out of you if you weren’t careful. A person could work seven days a week, twelve and sixteen hours at a stretch, and there would still be mountains of work left to be done. Not to mention the fact that you were constantly battling something: too much rain, too little rain, grasshoppers, a downturn in the economy. “Well, if that’s what you want, that’s what you’ll get,” she said lightly. “‘Cause if I know anything, I know about growing roses.”

He nodded. “Guess I’ll get on out there, then.”

"All right."

"When I'm done, I'll head back to the motel, but I'll be here early in the morning."

"Okay. Plan to have breakfast with us."

"You don't—"

She cut him off. "I insist. We eat at seven, because Matthew's bus comes at seven forty-five."

He reached for the handle of the screen door. "Okay. Thanks again for supper."

"You're welcome."

Almost exactly an hour later, as she sat at the kitchen table going over Matthew's spelling words with him while Amy carefully colored a picture of kittens playing with a ball of yarn, Beth heard the sound of Jack's truck starting, followed by the crunch of gravel as he turned the vehicle around and drove away down the driveway.

"Jack's leaving," Matthew said.

"Yes."

"I like him."

"I like him, too," Amy said. "He's nice."

"I wish I didn't have to go to school tomorrow," Matthew added. "Then I could help him. Can I stay home, Mama?"

"No, Matthew. It's your job to go to school and learn a lot so when you grow up you'll be able to take care of yourself."

"But you said when I grow up I'm gonna grow roses. I can't learn about that in school." This last was said triumphantly.

"Yes, that's true, but in order to run a farm like this, you also have to know how to read and write. You have to know math and computers and all kinds of things."

"Are we gonna get a computer?" Matthew asked excitedly, zeroing in on the most important point just the way kids always seemed to.

"A 'puter!" Amy exclaimed. "Brittany has a 'puter, and they have the Rugrats game. When I go to her house, I gets to play it." Brittany was her best friend Dee Ann's daughter—three years older and Amy's idol.

Beth tried to make her voice upbeat, even though it broke her heart to constantly disappoint her children. "We can't get a computer right away, but I promise, we will get one." She'd been wanting a computer for the business, too, but it was way down on her list of priorities, because you had to have something to sell before you needed to keep records, and the way things had been going the past couple of years, all her financial resources were needed just to keep her head above water. Still… she could buy a secondhand computer for the kids. Oh, yeah, sure. If she could find a secondhand computer for sale for ten dollars, then maybe she could afford it. Fat chance.

"It's okay, Mama," Matthew said, reaching out to touch her hand. "I don't need a computer."

"Yeah," Amy said loyally. "We don't need one."

Beth swallowed against the lump in her throat. Getting up, she kissed them both in turn, saying softly, "What did I ever do to deserve two kids as wonderful as you?"

Jack got back to the motel after nine. As he drove past the office, he saw a woman inside. Mr. Temple was obviously gone for the day. Jack parked outside Unit Seven, noticing as he did that there were only two other cars in the parking lot. If that's all the business they did, he wondered how they stayed afloat. Of course, this was a weeknight. Maybe they did better on weekends, although it wasn't like this place was on a major highway. He couldn't imagine that anyone coming through Rose Hill would go anywhere else. Rose Hill would pretty much have to be your destination.

He locked his truck and walked over to his room. Just as he inserted his key into his door, a voice said, "You been gone a long time. You must have got to see some farms today."

Jack whirled around, automatically falling into a crouch and reaching for his gun. It took a moment before he realized where he was and that he had no gun. All his guns were safely locked up

back at the mansion. Alarmed by his lapse, he hoped the old man—whom he belatedly realized was sitting in the shadows outside Unit Five—hadn't noticed his odd reaction.

"I didn't see you sitting there," Jack said, walking over to where the motel owner sat.

"Not many people do. That's why I like settin' here. I can see ever'thing goin' on, but nobody can see me. It's in'erestin'."

From what Jack could tell, there wasn't anything going on. Unless you count the fact you tried to shoot Mr. Temple when he spoke to you.

"So did you get to see some farms?" the old man repeated curiously.

"Yes, I've been out at the Johnson place." And then, because he knew the motel owner would find out about him working for Beth, anyway, Jack decided he might as well tell him. "I'm going to be working there for a while."

"Is that a fact? I guess Bethie must have scrounged up some money from somewhere, then, 'cause she was sayin' just last week how she didn't know what she was gonna do this season. I told her she could try and get a loan from the First National, but she said her granny would roll over in her grave if she mortgaged the farm. Her granny didn't believe in bein' beholden to anyone. Course, most folks in these parts feel that way, leastwise the older folks, like me. We was growin' up durin' the Depression, and we remember how so many folks lost ever'thin' to those banks, many of our parents included."

He kept on in this vein for a good ten minutes. When he wound down, Jack used the opportunity to change the subject a bit, because something had him curious. "How long has Mrs. Johnson been on her own out there? You mentioned her cousin who quit, but what about her husband?"

"That good-for-nothin'! He's long gone, and good riddance, I say. Eben died a year ago June when he had a losin' argument with an eighteen-wheeler. Drunk as a skunk, he was. Course that wasn't nothin' new. Eben, he liked the bottle more 'n just about anything."

"That's too bad."

"Yeah, folks around here, we were sure sorry for Bethie. Her granny, one of the most sensible women you'd ever meet, tried to warn her about him, but you know how young folks are. They gotta learn ever'thin' the hard way."

Now Mr. Temple was off on another tangent, which kept him going five more minutes. Jack finally managed to find a way to say good-night without seeming impolite.

"Guess I'll turn in now, too," Mr. Temple said. "It's been kinda borin' out here tonight." He got up slowly and opened the door to Unit Five.

"You live here?" Jack said.

"Yep. Ever since my wife, God rest her soul, died, I been livin' right here on the property. When Alma, that's my sister, two years older 'n me and thinks she's my keeper, asked why was I sellin' the house, I told her 'cause I wanted to, that's why, and I didn't need no other reason. That shut her up. First time in memory!" He laughed, delighted with his own wit. Then, maybe feeling guilty about bad-mouthing his sister, he added, "Alma, she's okay. She's got a big mouth, but she's also got a big heart."

Later, as Jack lay in the unfamiliar, faintly uncomfortable bed and listened to the chorus of cicadas outside his window, he thought about Beth and her kids and wondered about what old man Temple had told him. Could he have exaggerated? Maybe Eben Johnson hadn't been as bad as Mr. Temple had painted him, because Beth sure didn't seem like the type of woman who would put up with that kind of behavior for very long. And she'd obviously been married to Eben awhile if Matthew was seven years old and Eben had only been dead a little over a year. Usually, if a woman stayed with a man like that, she did so because she was scared to be on her own. Weak, in other words.

Beth was not weak. Just the opposite, in fact. She was strong—a fighter, just like Jack. But fighter or not, right now she needed help. Suddenly he was very glad circumstances had sent him her way, because he was going to enjoy helping her.

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