

DAWN TEMPLE

TO HAVE AND
TO HOLD



Cherish

Dawn Temple

To Have And To Hold

«HarperCollins»

Temple D.

To Have And To Hold / D. Temple — «HarperCollins»,

The way to a woman's heart...When Lindy Monroe separated from her workaholic husband, Travis, after a devastating miscarriage, she fled to her beloved grandfather's country farm. After he died, a brokenhearted Lindy was shocked to learn that he'd left his home to her on one impossible condition: She had to live there with her husband!City boy Travis was definitely out of his element in Land's Cross and with the beautiful woman he'd briefly called his wife. But country life agreed with Travis more than he'd ever expected, and also fanned the fires of a failed marriage that hadn't quite burned to ash. Would Travis be able to set the reluctant Lindy's heart ablaze again?

Содержание

Contents	6
Chapter One	7
Chapter Two	16
Chapter Three	23
Chapter Four	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	32

To Have and To Hold
Dawn Temple



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Infinite thanks and love to Sandra K. Moore,
Ann Peake and Sandy Thomas for teaching me
the true meaning of conflict.

To my guys, Doug, Jacob and Jeremy. Thanks for
the underwear dance. I am so proud of you.

Contents

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

Chapter One

A soft purple glow drew Lindy Lewis Monroe from the solitude of the barn's dark interior. She slipped outside the wide double doors and stopped suddenly, awestruck. Before her, dawn painted the East Tennessee sky with hope and renewal, a visible reminder that life goes on.

Beautiful day for a funeral, huh, Pops?

She had a ton of things to do before burying her grandfather this afternoon, yet she stood in the barnyard for several minutes, watching the sun break over the horizon, sharing a final sunrise with the one person who'd always been there for her.

"Goodbye, Pops. I love you." Her raspy voice gave testament to the buckets of tears she'd cried during the past few days.

A chilly spring breeze drifted across the barnyard. Goose bumps spread over Lindy's skin beneath her dew-dampened clothes. Her teeth chattered, disturbing the barnyard's unusual tomblike silence.

Quit standing around like a bump on a log, Lindy girl.

Pops's gentle reminder whispered through her brain, part memory, part wishful thinking.

Heeding her grandfather's advice, Lindy turned her back on the glorious sunrise and hotfooted it to the house. Thanks to mid-April's near-freezing overnight temperatures, her damp jeans grew colder and stiffer with every step.

The screen door squeaked as she entered the mudroom and toed off her boots, then quickly freed the button on her jeans, shimmying her lower half until the clingy, wet denim peeled from her hips.

The damp tails of her oversize shirt slapped against her bare thighs, causing more gooseflesh. She removed Pops's old red-and-black checkered work shirt and lifted it to her nose. His Old Spice scent still clung to the soft flannel. She hated the idea of laundering away that familiar smell.

Burying her face in the fabric, she wiped away a tear and let the shirt fall to the floor. Cold air enveloped her arms. She shuddered. Her T-shirt, which she'd pulled on without a bra, offered little coverage. Or warmth.

Leaving her wet clothes heaped on the floor, she stepped into the kitchen and paused for a heartbeat, letting the familiar warmth surround her, that blanket of welcome that engulfed her every time she stepped foot inside her childhood home. All her life, she'd dreamed of sharing that warmth with a family of her very own.

Not all dreams come true. She'd taken her shot at happily-ever-after and lost everything: her husband, her baby, her heart. Never again would she trust her dreams to someone else.

Don't rehash the past. Focus on today. She inhaled deeply, a cleansing breath to wash away her maudlin thoughts. The welcome aroma of her favorite Colombian brew filled her senses.

Should've known Alice would show up this morning.

Alice Robertson had been friend, neighbor and part-time housekeeper to the Lewis family for more years than anyone cared to remember. Having her here, today of all days, felt right, Lindy thought, heading for the coffeepot. A mug prefilled with half-and-half waited on the countertop.

Such a sweet woman. For the first time since leaving the hospital three nights ago, Lindy's lips curled into a halfhearted smile. Wondering why Alice hadn't stuck around for coffee, she turned away from the cabinet and came face-to-face with the past she'd just been trying to forget.

Travis Monroe.

Her breath backed up in her throat. She clamped her eyes shut, waited a long second, then slowly reopened them. He hadn't moved a muscle.

The man she hadn't seen in almost a year leaned against the doorjamb, steaming cup in hand. His thick black hair was ruffled, no doubt from his own agitated fingers. Dark stubble covered his angled jaw. His Brooks Brothers suit was wrinkled. He looked haggard. And fantastic.

His eyes, a sexy starburst of green and gold, were riveted to the thin cotton clinging to her breasts.

Oh, great. Travis shows up unexpectedly, and I'm parading around the kitchen in my undies.

Despite her near nakedness, Lindy refused to cross her arms in some virginal attempt to cover what he already had intimate knowledge of. "What are you doing here?"

Her abruptness seemed to snap him out of his stunned stupor. His eyes lifted to her face. The desire and anger she saw there made her take a step backward.

"What happened to your legendary Southern charm?"

Her chin tilted up a notch. "Manners are for friends and invited guests. You are neither."

"No, I'm just your husband." Travis pushed away from the doorway that separated the kitchen from the family room. His firm lips fell into a frown. She knew how warm and soft they'd feel pressed against her own.

Don't go there.

"How'd you get in here?" Surely Alice hadn't let Lindy's estranged husband in and then left without warning her.

"Your front door was unlocked."

Unlocked? She wrinkled her brow, momentarily puzzled until her brain connected all the dots. Pops had always taken care of locking up at night. Another sad twinge plucked her heart, but she determinedly tucked her grief deep inside. Later, when she was alone, she'd let it out and allow her tears to flow.

Right now, she propped her hands on her hips, pretending she wore her favorite denim overalls rather than see-through cotton. "For the most part, the only doors we lock in Land's Cross are on the henhouse. That's generally the place we have problems with unwanted varmints."

Travis's knuckles whitened against his coffee mug. "Sounds like a great slogan for the chamber of commerce."

A shameful heat warmed her cheeks. Why was it so easy to shuck her normal kindness and stoop to rudeness with Travis?

She knew the answer to that one. Because no one else had ever hurt her like he had.

"I'll be sure to pass your suggestion along. Coming from such a career-driven person, I'm sure the chamber will give it all the attention it deserves."

"I see your tongue's as razor sharp as ever." Still standing in the doorway, he lifted his coffee and took a slow sip. Over the mug, his eyes captivated hers. "Although, I remember times when your only response was a purr. Or a moan."

Heaven help her, she also remembered those times. Remembered them too well. Too often. But that was her own dark secret. Travis didn't need to know how often he played the starring role in her memories, both during daylight hours and dark.

"I hate to disappoint you, Travis, seeing as how you've come all this way to stroll down memory lane, but my schedule's pretty tight today. And we both know what a busy man you are. Why don't I give your secretary a call later? Perhaps Marge can squeeze me in between your more important commitments."

He stepped toward her, all desire gone from his eyes. "You think I want to be here?" The muscle in his clenched jaw jumped.

"Then why are you? I didn't ask you to come."

"No, you sure didn't," he said bitterly. "You've made it clear where your loyalties lie."

A rusty sound erupted from her throat. “My loyalties!” Her hands began to shake, making her wish for pockets to hide them in. Why hadn’t she waited to take off Pops’s huge shirt? She felt as vulnerable on the outside as she did on the inside.

“You’re one to talk about loyalties.” How many times had Travis rushed off to rescue his “real” family, often not bothering to tell her where he’d gone or when he’d return?

“You’re the one who ran off.” Travis’s voice was colder and tighter than the jeans she’d left crumpled on the mudroom floor. “Until I read that damned note you left, I never pegged you for a coward. You always bragged about being ‘strong Lewis stock.’”

Strong Lewis stock. That had been Pops’s motto, his answer to all life’s problems.

“How dare you throw my grandfather’s words in my face!” She kneaded her fist against the ache in the pit of her stomach. “You must be spending too much time with your brother. That’s the kind of cruel remark I’d expect from Grant.”

Hurt flickered across his features. Lindy hardened her heart. She wouldn’t let her softer emotions distract her. “You obviously came here to upset me. You’ve succeeded. Now you can leave.”

“Leave?” Travis spit the word out. “Is that your only answer? When things get sticky, pack up and crawl home.”

“What choice did I have? Did you ever give me a reason to stay?” Lindy’s voice rose, but she didn’t care. She couldn’t keep her feelings bottled up any longer. “You worked twenty hours a day, seven days a week. On the rare occasions you came home, it was just for a quick nap—in the guest room for God’s sake. Do you have any idea how demoralizing that was for me? Being tied to a man who’d rather fold himself onto a bed too short and too narrow to be the slightest bit comfortable than share a king-size bed with me?”

She paused, sucking air deep into her burning lungs. Even a year later, the idea of being no more than an obligation to Travis caused her heart to spasm.

He straightened from the door frame. “I never meant to hurt you. I didn’t know what you wanted. What you needed.”

“You could’ve asked.” She’d desperately needed words of comfort from him. All she’d gotten was his silence. His absence.

“I figured I had time. I wanted to wait until you’d fully recovered before—” His shoulder shrugged. “Before I broached such a sensitive subject. Our relationship was rocky enough.”

“What little relationship we had died that night.” Her voice hitched, as it always did when she remembered the car crash that had wrecked their lives. Her hands again covered her stomach. If their son hadn’t died, would their marriage have survived?

This time, Travis’s hurt was more than a flicker. It was a beacon. She’d never doubted the sincerity of Travis’s grief. Unfortunately it was their only common emotion.

“I’d give anything to change what happened,” Travis whispered, the warm timbre of his voice washing over her raw nerves, once more weakening her resolve.

In self-defense, she resorted to rudeness. “Well, not even you can fix the past. And I have a funeral to attend today.”

She turned to leave, desperate to escape before the tears burning her eyelids broke free.

Travis’s warm touch halted her getaway, his thumb gently stroking the tender flesh just south of her underarm. “I was sorry to hear about Lionel. I know how much he meant to you.”

She knew the tingles coursing through her were wrong. For goodness’ sake, in a few hours she would bury the only real family she’d ever had. So why did Travis’s touch feel so right?

She looked pointedly to where his tanned flesh intersected with her pale skin. Knowing he couldn’t miss the skip in her pulse, she played her reaction as anger, lifting her gaze to his and arching her brow.

The left side of his mouth twitched slightly. He wasn't fooled. Whatever problems she and Travis may have had, chemistry was never one of them. Every time they came within five feet of each other, they spontaneously combusted.

Lindy sighed sadly and tugged her arm free. More than anything, that explosive attraction explained how they had ended up in this mess.

"Do us both a favor, Travis. Go back to Atlanta where you belong."

Travis stood under the shade of the oak tree centered in the rural cemetery and studied Lindy from behind the protection of his sunglasses. She stood as rigid as a soldier, looking strong and composed. But her hands, wrapped in a death grip around a handkerchief, trembled.

If she doesn't bend soon, she's gonna break.

Even with an iron rod down her back and that damned chin of hers aimed to the heavens, she looked stunning. She'd tamed her blond curls into a sophisticated little knot resting on her nape. A classy black suit hugged her body, showcasing the fullness of her breasts, the curve of her hips.

She wore no sunglasses, facing the sun's glare and the crowd's speculation directly. Purple smudges tinted the skin under her blue eyes and lines formed around her tightly clenched lips. Even her nostrils flared at regulated intervals.

Against his chest, Travis's cell phone vibrated for the third time in half an hour. He slipped his hand into his suit jacket and turned it off. Monroe Enterprises, more specifically, his brother and father, would have to get along without him for a couple of days.

He wasn't going anywhere until he figured out what was going on here, why he'd been summoned to Lionel Lewis's funeral. Not that he wasn't sad to hear about Lionel's passing. They may not have seen eye to eye where Lindy was concerned, but Travis had respected the old man. In fact, he admired the way Pops had always put his family's happiness—Lindy's happiness—first.

"Let us not focus solely on our loss," the minister said. "Rather, let us remember the joy Lionel brought into our lives."

The words buzzed into Travis's consciousness, but his gaze remained focused across the crowd of mourners, where Lindy stood beside her grandfather's flower-draped casket.

His eyes flicked to the hulking Jethro reject hovering at her elbow. He recognized the bastard. He'd never forget the image of his wife's arms wrapped around this overgrown hick.

After reading Lindy's Dear John note last year, he'd raced to Tennessee to lay it all on the line, and what did he find? Lindy dancing the night away in the town square with some farm boy. Travis had stormed out of town without learning the man's name. Once back in Atlanta, he spent the evening spilling his guts to Jack Daniel's.

He knew the man's name now. The old lady who ran the boardinghouse that passed for a hotel in this one-horse town happily supplied the man's identity over lunch.

"Thank goodness for Danny Robertson," she'd cooed. "Lindy needs a strong man to lean on during these hard times. And Danny's such a great boy."

His hostess, diligently thorough in her gossip, spared no detail about Lindy's longtime "friendship" with the CEO of the local Feed and Seed.

How can these people stand to live in this fishbowl?

Around him, the funeral crowd began reciting a hushed version of the Lord's Prayer. "Lead us not into temptation—"

Temptation. Yeah, right.

Shifting under the heat of the sun—and his rising anger—Travis watched Lindy mutilate her handkerchief. Was it possible she didn't know her attorney had called him yesterday, giving him all the details of Lionel's funeral as well as the meeting scheduled for tomorrow afternoon?

She'd seemed genuinely surprised by his presence this morning. And not just because he'd caught her practically naked. Coming face-to-face with a barely dressed, smiling Lindy had thrown him for quite a loop. But even through his own surprise, he'd noted the shock on her face.

The seductive vision of his wife wearing nothing but two strips of white cotton filled his brain. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen so much of her creamy-white skin.

It had been even longer since he'd seen her smile.

His focus had been so riveted on Lindy, he didn't notice Robertson move closer to her side until the grizzly-size man lifted a paw and rested it on her shoulder.

Travis waited for Lindy's shoulder to shrug, knock the paw off, refuse the man's affection. Instead her hand lifted, touched the fingers resting on her shoulder. She craned her head, relaxed her lips, favoring him with a small smile.

The big man seemed to swell under Lindy's attention. Travis's stomach twisted, along with every other muscle in his body.

Fists clenched, he stepped forward.

Luckily common sense prevailed. He couldn't very well strike the man at Lionel's funeral. Forcing his muscles to relax, he fell back in line and tried to pay attention to the service.

Lindy smiled and greeted well-wishers until her cheeks ached. Unshed tears burned the backs of her eyes. Seemed like the entire population of Land's Cross had shown up to pay their respects.

Guilt washed over her. So many people, most she'd known her entire life. Yet all afternoon, one guest had monopolized her thoughts. Travis.

Why was he here? She'd give anything to find out he'd come to support her, to finally be there in her time of need. Her pride and her memory squashed that thought.

Would the frivolous hope lurking inside her ever accept the truth? During their brief marriage, Travis had shown over and over again that she was not his number one priority. Heck, as his wife and the future mother of his child, she hadn't even rated second best. She'd come a distant third. Far, far behind his family and his precious Monroe Enterprises.

Whatever his reasons for being here, they certainly had nothing to do with comforting her.

Since most of the mourners had already headed to the farm, she dropped her forced smile. Gritting her teeth, she watched Travis stride confidently across the grassy cemetery. He'd removed his sunglasses. His incredible eyes locked on to her, keeping her in his sights, never sparing a glance for the people or grave markers littering his path. He maneuvered through the obstacles without faltering, with the accuracy of a heat-seeking missile, she his target.

A shudder quaked through her, from the inside out.

Beside her, Danny touched her shoulder and bent close to her ear.

"You hanging in there?" he whispered.

They'd been friends since their diaper years, and she knew what he really meant. Let me know if you need to cry and I'll carry you out of here so quick no one will see a single tear. Danny had always been good as gold.

She managed a silent nod in answer to his question, but her gaze remained glued to Travis. He continued his approach, seemingly in slow motion. She pressed her right hand against her breastbone and forced a ragged breath into her lungs. A good twenty feet separated them. Still, Lindy felt blanketed by the pure physical force of his presence.

It was a new sensation. More than chemistry. Almost like—

Her thoughts broke when Travis cocked his head to the left, releasing her from his visual grip. Noticing movement in her periphery, her eyes rotated, blinked several times. She'd been so wrapped up in Travis, she'd forgotten where she was.

Her focus now shifted to the man who stood before her. Chester Warfield studied her, his pale blue eyes narrowed against the afternoon sun. Chester had been Pops's best friend for more than sixty years, his attorney for almost fifty. Tears filled her eyes and her tense lips quivered into a weak smile.

The stout man answered with a solemn nod and spread his arms wide. She didn't hesitate, just buried herself in his hug. His familiar scent of lemon drops and arthritis rub engulfed her. For a split second, Lindy allowed herself to pretend everything would be okay.

Then Travis cleared his throat.

Who was she kidding? Her life would never be okay again.

After a few more pats on her back, Chester released her and turned to face Travis, extending his right hand. "You must be Mr. Monroe. I'm Chester Warfield. We spoke yesterday?"

Travis dipped his head slightly in acknowledgment and accepted the older man's hand.

"Good to finally meet you in person, Mr. Monroe, even under such sad circumstances."

Lindy studied both men, Travis with his veiled expression, Chester with his odd smile. "You two know each other?"

"Not exactly." Chester's gaze settled somewhere near her earring. The tiny hairs on the back of Lindy's neck snapped to attention.

Chester cleared his throat before continuing. "As your attorney, it was my legal obligation to contact him."

Lindy shook her head, trying to make sense of Chester's words. Danny's body brushed against hers as his large hand cupped her elbow. She'd forgotten he was there.

"You ready to go?" he asked softly.

"No," she answered, stepping away from Danny's grasp. "Back up, Chester. What do you mean, 'legal obligation'?"

Lindy felt a moment's panic when Chester's face flushed and his finger dug into the neckband of his shirt. Pops's face had turned that same shade of purple moments before his heart attack.

But upon closer inspection, she realized Chester wasn't having a heart attack. Rather, he suffered from an acute case of "you're not going to like what I have to say."

Lindy's internal warning siren began to hum. Her gaze snapped back to Travis. His face gave no hint of his thoughts.

She returned her attention to her perspiring lawyer. Her finger poked the center of his chest hard enough to force him back a step. "Spill it."

Chester's eyes flicked to Danny. "This is a family matter."

What a crock.

Lindy recognized the old man's stall tactic. Still, even though Danny was practically family, a little privacy sounded like a very good idea. Fewer witnesses.

"Danny, would you mind excusing us?"

"Sure. I'll just wait by the truck and take you home when you're done."

"That won't be necessary." Travis spoke for the first time. "After the family details are dealt with, I'll see my wife home."

Family? Oh, great. Now he gets it.

Stunned, she twisted her head whiplash-fast, but the scathing comment she'd planned dissolved on the tip of her tongue. Travis and Danny stood there, less than two feet apart, shoulders thrown back, eyes squinted, sneering at each other.

Lindy stomped her foot on the ground, the way she would if her prized Holsteins Thelma and Louise were being bullheaded and needed a distraction. The heel of her black pump burrowed into the ground. Darn it.

"You two look like a couple of puffed-up peacocks. Cut it out!" She took a deep breath, counted to ten. Then twenty.

“Danny, I’ll call you tomorrow. Okay?” She lifted her cheek to accept his kiss. With a last glare at Travis, Danny turned and headed back to his truck.

Too tired for more stalling, she addressed her attorney. “I’m assuming whatever you don’t want to tell me has something to do with him.” She indicated Travis with a jerk of her thumb.

Chester nodded.

“Okay.” Another deep breath. “Let’s hear it.”

“Yesterday, I contacted Mr. Monroe in my capacity as executor of the Lewis estate,” Chester said, sounding very lawyerly. “I informed him of Mr. Lewis’s death and requested his presence at the reading of Lionel’s will.”

“Why?” Lindy’s voice echoed inside her head, as if it came from the end of a very long, very dark tunnel. Her internal warning siren no longer hummed. It clanged. At full volume.

“Your grandfather left his entire estate to Mr. and Mrs. Travis Monroe.”

The clanging in Lindy’s brain stopped, replaced by the rushing roar of shock. Her heart sank to her feet, taking her blood supply with it. Despite the afternoon sun’s warmth, a chill seeped into her bones. She wrapped her arms around her body and squeezed her eyes shut tight. Keeping her tears locked up felt like an impossible task.

Mr. and Mrs. Travis Monroe. The words danced a teasing jig around her brain. Suddenly the ground beneath her feet seemed to shift, throwing Lindy off balance. Travis’s strong grip on her shoulders steadied the ground, righted the world.

“No,” she whispered. Her eyes popped open. Travis’s face hovered a few inches from hers. “Don’t touch me.”

She jerked her shoulders free from his hold and moved away. He stepped closer, his startled eyes drilling into hers.

“At least now I know why you’re here.” She widened the gap between them. This time, he didn’t follow. “You came to Land’s Cross because of Pops’s will.”

A pink tinge crept up Travis’s neck, but he kept his eyes level with hers. “Fraid so.”

She’d known his reasons for being here had nothing to do with her, but hearing him admit the truth still stung. See, Pops, he doesn’t want me.

Apparently, though, he wanted her farm. Why else would he be interested in Pops’s will? Her dreams for the future were tied to that land. No way she’d let him get his hands on her dreams. Not again.

How do you know what he wants, Lindy girl? Did you ask? Did you ever tell him what you wanted? Pops’s words drifted into her memory. Her old-fashioned grandfather had spent the past year trying to convince Lindy to give her marriage a second chance.

“Now, Lindy, give the boy a break.” Chester’s voice shocked her. For the second time in under an hour, Travis had made her forget where she was. “He’s just doing what Lionel wanted.”

“What about what I want?” she demanded.

Travis stepped up again and opened his mouth. Before he could speak, she raised her hand between them. “Don’t bother asking, Travis. You can’t give me what I want.”

She wanted Pops to be alive.

She wanted to make her dream of opening Country Daze, a hands-on teaching farm for schoolchildren, a reality.

She wanted to be a wife and mother.

“I want to go home.”

Travis watched Lindy stalk away, disappearing behind the giant oak in the cemetery’s center. At least six feet wide, the tree hid her completely, offering the perfect place for a good cry. And if anyone deserved to shed a few tears, it was Lindy.

Knowing an audience would only embarrass her, Travis stayed put, letting her grieve in private.

You can't give me what I want.

Nothing new there. He'd failed his wife in every way possible.

Much sooner than he expected, Lindy stepped back around the tree. Her face showed no signs of a crying jag, just pure determination. Blond curls, freed from their knot, bounced on her shoulders. Bare legs protruded from the black skirt still partially bunched up around her hips. After three steps, the lightweight material resettled at her knees. Black pumps dangled from her right hand. Dark stockings hung from her left.

What the devil is she up to?

As she walked toward him, the breeze stirred. A strand of hair brushed her cheek, clung to the corner of her mouth. The black silk stockings she carried fanned out, wrapping around her derriere.

He swallowed. Hard. The lump in his throat slid into his gut. An acidic trail of need burned through him.

Beside him, Warfield expelled a forced cough.

Travis cleared his throat, dried his palms on his thighs before jutting a hand into her path.

"Lindy, what're you doing?"

Without breaking her stride, she walked around his arm. "I told you. I'm going home."

He spun, watching her hips twitch as she stalked toward the road. Those sexy stockings billowed behind her, taunting him.

Warfield clucked like a little old lady.

"What?" Travis snapped.

"Nothing." Chester shrugged, smiling. Travis hated that smile, like the old guy knew a secret. "Those Lewises are the most stubborn creatures God ever put on this Earth." With a final cluck, Warfield turned and headed in the opposite direction Lindy had taken.

"Damn, these people are all nuts." Shaking his head, Travis jogged after Lindy, catching up to her quickly. He grasped her arm just long enough to stop her momentum.

"Lindy, wait. My car's this way." Pointing in the direction Warfield had gone, he indicated his silver BMW. "Come on. I'll drive you home."

She ignored him and silently resumed her escape, stomping down the road that led to the main highway. Catching up to her again, he grabbed her arm, stopping her, but this time, he didn't drop his hold. "Damn it, Lindy. I'm the only one left to give you a ride home."

She stilled, her face angled over her shoulder, her blue eyes wide as saucers in her unexpectedly pale face. For a second, she looked more scared than angry. Then her eyes narrowed. "I have no intention of taking a ride from you." Her voice quivered as she yanked her arm out of his grasp.

"Then how do you plan on getting home?"

"Walk."

"You can't walk home from here."

"Sure I can. It's only two miles." Angry color refilled her cheeks as she once more turned her back on him.

He watched in amazement as she took off again, this time cutting across the grassy lawn. The rattle of a diesel engine sounded behind Travis. He stepped to the shoulder as Warfield's truck rolled to a stop next to him.

"Told you she was stubborn, boy. She decides she's gonna walk, you can bet your bottom dollar she'll walk all the way. Leastways, she's sure not gonna take a ride from the enemy."

"Enemy?"

"You and me, boy. I know how that girl's mind works. Right about now, she figures we're in cahoots, trying to take the farm from her. Till she figures out different, I'd steer clear if I were you. Besides, Lindy'll never get in that fancy car of yours."

Travis's brow inched up. "Why's that?"

“On account of her panic attacks, of course. She barely tolerates pickups. Gettin’ in a regular car’s totally out of the question.” Warfield lifted a cell phone and dialed, his lips turning up in a calculating smile. “I’ll call Danny Robertson. He drives a big Dodge four-by-four. He’ll take care of our Lindy. Don’t you worry.”

Panic attacks. The words echoed long after the older man drove off. Travis stood rooted to the road, watching Lindy cut through the cemetery, his eyes glued to the mass of bobbing blond curls. He didn’t blink until she disappeared over a hill.

Panic attacks. Guilt slammed him with a vicious force. No wonder she hated him. She’d lost so much because of him, but he never would’ve envisioned Lindy being afraid of cars.

Travis raked his fingers through his hair, still staring in the direction Lindy had disappeared. He could understand her fears. Hell, he’d battled his own nerves the first few times back behind the wheel. And, ironically, he hadn’t been injured during the accident. But Lindy had. For the second time in her life she’d survived a fatal car crash, while those she loved had not.

He’d never forget the anguish in her eyes, the pain in her voice, the night she told him about the sleeping trucker who’d crossed a highway center line and crushed her family’s station wagon. Lindy had been trapped in the car with her lifeless parents for four hours, waiting for help to arrive.

And then last year, on a rainy night, he and Lindy were arguing—again—as they drove home from a business party he’d dragged her to. A flash of red caught his attention. He swerved to miss the oncoming minivan. His Lexus spun out. The passenger side slammed into a light pole, breaking Lindy’s arm, killing their unborn son, destroying their marriage.

He rubbed the ache over his heart as he walked back to his car. Almost a year later, Travis could still see the heartbreak on Lindy’s face as she huddled in the front seat of his crumpled car, blood dripping from the gash on her forehead, her arm clamped across her abdomen, her thighs locked tightly together.

He’d failed her. No matter how badly he wanted it, he didn’t deserve Lindy’s forgiveness. And she didn’t deserve all the misery he’d caused in her life.

No matter what it took, he would find a way to make up for all that he’d taken from her. He owed her that much. And he always paid his debts.

Chapter Two

When Travis awoke the next day, bright sunshine filled his rented room. He wedged his head off the feather pillow and squinted at the clock: 12:37.

Crap, I'm running late.

After the funeral yesterday, he'd driven aimlessly for hours, making so many laps around Land's Cross he now knew every bump in every road. He'd finally quit trying to outrun his thoughts and returned to the boardinghouse, took a cold shower and flopped into bed. Then stared at the popcorn-textured ceiling until exhaustion dragged him under around dawn.

Forcing himself to sit, elbows propped on his naked thighs, he buried his aching head in his hands. The rural silence rang in his ears, competing with the throbbing beat of his pulse. Fingers pressed against his closed eyelids, he listened to the birds singing outside.

What the devil are they so happy about?

Oh, yeah. They didn't have to face a distrusting wife and a scheming attorney in an hour.

Groaning, he stood and headed for the shower, hoping the Sheltering Arms didn't skimp on the water pressure. Twisting from the waist, he tried to unkink the knots threaded into his spine. He thought longingly of his king-size mattress at home.

His feet stilled as Lindy's words filled his memory. Being tied to man who'd rather fold himself onto a bed too short and too narrow to be the slightest bit comfortable than share a king-size bed with me.

That lumpy old guest room bed was the last place on earth he'd wanted to be. He'd ached to lie beside his wife, to comfort her, love her. But he'd been afraid of her reaction, worried she wouldn't want to be anywhere near him. And after the way he'd failed her, he certainly wouldn't have blamed her.

Fighting off the memories, Travis showered and shaved. He had to admit, being named in Lionel Lewis's will had piqued his curiosity. What was the old man up to?

He'd find out soon enough. Gathering his keys and wallet, Travis picked up his cell phone. Amazingly he'd forgotten to turn it back on after the funeral. Probably the first time in years he'd been unreachable for more than an hour.

He switched the phone on. The voice mail icon flashed, indicating a full mailbox. Before he could retrieve his messages, the phone vibrated.

"Monroe."

"Travis, thank God."

Travis heard the anxiety in his brother's voice. He was in trouble. Again. "Who'd you screw with this time, Grant?"

"Whoa, man, don't take my head off. I was beginning to get worried. I must've called you at least a dozen times yesterday, but you never answered." He sounded concerned, but Travis knew better. The only person Grant ever worried about was Grant.

"I turned my phone off."

"Holy crap. She must be a knockout."

"What are you talking about?" Travis paced the small confines of his hotel room, wishing he'd waited another two minutes to turn his phone back on.

"Well, if your phone's off that must mean you've finally put an end to your monklike ways. So, who is she?"

Angry blue eyes flashed through Travis's memory. "God, Grant. Are you ever going to grow up?"

"God, Travis, are you ever going to lighten up?"

Travis wrenched loose the tie he'd just knotted and roughly freed his top button. Everything about his life was constricting these days. "I don't have time to play games. What kind of trouble are you in?"

"Not trouble, exactly."

"What then, exactly?"

"Dad fixed me up with the spinster daughter of some business associate. Promised her old man I'd take her to the Spring Fling at the Country Club tonight."

"Which business associate?"

"Burt Tanner."

The leather strap squeezing Travis's brain tightened. Had Winston Monroe lost his mind? A blind date between Grant and their banker's only daughter?

"Grant, what does your social life have to do with me?"

"I need you to take the wallflower. I've got a hot date with your old flame."

Grant hooking up with Julia Wellborne? Could plague and pestilence be far behind?

"Did you make this date before or after you found out about your date with Tanner's daughter?"

"What does that matter?"

"After. That figures, you selfish jerk."

Grant tried to interrupt, but Travis spoke over him.

"You don't have a choice, Grant. If you stand Susan Tanner up, her father's gonna be pissed. Monroe Enterprises needs his financial support to complete the Downtown Renovation Project."

"I don't need a lecture." Petulance filled Grant's voice, proving his words a lie. "I need you take the dog to the party."

"What you need is to learn that your actions have consequences. If you screw this up, you'll blow a ten-million-dollar deal. A loss like that'll devastate Monroe Enterprises, and if the company goes under, not only will you lose your free ride, but our employees will be out of work."

Travis pinched the bridge of his nose. Hundreds of people in danger of losing their livelihoods. He couldn't allow Grant's selfishness to destroy all those innocent lives.

"Spare me the St. Travis crap." Grant's words remained hostile, but the resignation in his tone assured Travis his brother wouldn't stand Susan up. But the poor girl was in for the worst date of her life. If he were in Atlanta, Travis knew he'd probably step in, just to save her the embarrassment.

"For once in your sorry life, just do the right thing." Travis severed the connection. Taking a deep breath, he tried to rein in his temper. He thought about the unsigned resignation letter in his desk. One of these days, he was going to sign the damn thing. Then Grant would have to learn to cover his own ass.

He scraped his free hand through his hair and sighed.

Watch over them, Travis. They're not strong like you.

Those had been his mother's final words, spoken as her hospital door closed softly behind Winston and Grant Monroe. His father and brother had been too cowardly to stay till the end.

Once he'd promised to take care of the weaker men, his mother's thin hand had squeezed his. Gratitude had filled her eyes. Then she was gone.

Losing his mother, the one person who'd honestly loved him, had left a hole in his heart. For years, he'd tried to fill the emptiness by building Monroe Enterprises into an international conglomerate. Work had occupied his time. But the vacancy in his heart had remained. Until—Lindy.

"Damn." Travis consulted the clock: 1:50. Stuffing his cell phone into his breast pocket, he grabbed his room key and rushed to his car, not bothering to turn off the lights before he left.

Grateful that Land's Cross was such a small place, Travis flew south down highway 411. Ten minutes was almost enough time for the trip out to Lindy's farm. In Atlanta, he couldn't escape the parking garage in under ten minutes.

He's late. Lindy seethed, pacing the front porch. Travis barged back into her life, made her wish for things she couldn't have, then didn't have the common courtesy to show up on time.

Angry footsteps carried her to the porch's far corner. Before her, twenty-four hundred acres of month-old corn-stalks had begun to poke their way out of the earth. Breathing deeply, she sighed and turned, walking calmly back around the porch that circled three-quarters of her home. She leaned her hip against the railing in the opposite corner and smiled.

Unlike the comfort offered by the cornfields, this view pumped her heart rate up a notch. She'd spent the past year transforming these forty acres, molding them to fit dreams she'd harbored since childhood.

The large two-story red barn stood just as it had since her grandfather built it half a century ago. But she'd built the lean-to on the north side herself. It was the heart of Country Daze Farm. Inside, she'd host dozens of schoolchildren daily, teaching them about the care and feeding of livestock. Her hands-on approach would allow kids to gather eggs, pick cotton from its boll, and for the brave-hearted, a chance to milk a real cow.

Beyond the barn, she'd penned off a petting area. She felt that familiar twinge of excitement as she imagined the schoolchildren lavishing attention on the gentler animals.

A flash of metal caught the corner of her eye. Lindy turned away from her dreams of the future and faced her uncertain present head on. An unfamiliar luxury car rolled down the long driveway. It had to be Travis. No one in Holcombe County would spend that much money on a vehicle unless it harvested crops.

Lindy's spine tensed. Watching the silver sedan park next to Pops's battered old truck, she felt her anger return. Travis's presence here threatened everything: her dreams, her home, her peace.

He stepped from the car and squinted in her direction, barely giving the farm around him a second glance. Guess he assessed the property's value during yesterday's visit.

Clutching her arms across her chest, tucking shaking hands into her folded elbows, she stomped back to the center of the porch, temper mounting with each step.

Arrogant fool. Did he think her grandfather had left him anything of value? He probably already had plans to mow down the crops and build a mall. As if she'd let him get his big-city developer hands on her land. No way. She'd rather sell the farm to one of those crazy emu ranchers.

Angry tears gathered behind her eyes. Blinking them back, she spun away from the well-dressed man climbing the front steps and scrambled for the front door.

But she didn't move fast enough. Somehow, Travis got there first, grabbing the knob with one hand and resting the other on her shoulder. He touched her nowhere else, but his warmth penetrated the skin on her back. She felt wrapped up in him.

The uniquely Travis scent of cedar and sea breeze filling her senses also stirred her memory, reminding her of the many times she'd sought comfort in his embrace.

She shrugged away from his touch, but he still held the door closed, imprisoning her within his personal space.

"Lindy, I'm not the enemy."

"You shouldn't be here."

"Well, I am."

"I don't want you to be."

Travis stood so close Lindy felt him flinch as her words hit their target. "Believe me, that's painfully obvious. But until we figure out what your grandfather has done, I'm not going anywhere. Don't make this any harder than it has to be by treating me like the bad guy."

The quiet calm of his voice was hard to resist. It would be so easy to lay her burdens at his feet and allow Travis, a professional problem solver, to make all the hard decisions, deal with the unpleasantness. But taking advantage of Travis's overdeveloped sense of duty would make her no better than his manipulating brother and father.

Nope. No matter what, she wouldn't sacrifice her pride by taking the coward's way out again.

Lifting her chin, she eyed him over her shoulder. "If you want to make this easier, go home. I'm sure you have pressing family business in Atlanta that needs your undivided attention."

Another bull's-eye. This man really brought out her inner bitch.

Lindy held her guilt in check as Travis closed his eyes for an extra long second, drawing air through his teeth. She'd seen him do that a hundred times and knew he fought his temper. When he opened his eyes, she saw he hadn't quite won the battle.

"Like it or not, right now I have pressing family business in Land's Cross that needs my undivided attention." His eyes locked on to hers. Lindy felt sucked into the emotional depths of the swirling green and gold whirlpools. She saw questions there, remembered the warmth she'd often seen reflected in his eyes. The passion. At one time she'd been foolish enough to imagine love shimmering in his eyes.

The echo of tires crunching down the driveway ended their visual standoff. Travis stepped back, leaving her feeling bereft.

Chester, briefcase in hand, climbed out of his truck and approached the porch. The older man wore his poker face. Lindy's already frazzled nerves unfurled further. Intuition assured this meeting wouldn't end well.

Before Chester could ease the tension with social niceties, Lindy pounced. "What's going on, Chester? What have y'all done?"

Chester blew out a frustrated breath and tightened the grip on his briefcase. "First things first. Let's go inside and have a seat. Before we can discuss the specifics, we need to have a formal reading of the will."

Travis finally opened the door and waved his palm, inviting her to precede him inside. Lindy crossed the threshold, feeling as though she'd stepped into a Monet painting. Everything remained recognizable, but nothing was clear.

Walking blindly past the family room, she headed down the hall and veered right, leading the way into Pops's study. Perched on the edge of the seat farthest from the door, she forced herself not to fidget. Once the will was read, she'd know what Pops had done; she'd know exactly what she was up against.

After Travis took his seat, Chester pulled a long manila folder from his briefcase and sat behind the wide oak desk. He slipped reading glasses on his nose, opened the folder and picked up the pages inside. He began to read without preamble.

"I, Lionel Charles Lewis, being of sound mind and body..."

Those words, more than any spoken thus far, brought the truth home to Lindy. Pops was gone. She was alone. Chester's voice droned in her ears, but like Reverend Hollister's eulogy yesterday, Lindy couldn't concentrate on the words.

Never-to-be-repeated scenes filled her memory. Pops tucking a frightened little girl into bed, reminding her that her parents would always be alive in her heart. Pops feeding her cheese grits and wiping away her tears as she struggled through the forgettable woes of puberty. Pops welcoming her home after she'd left Atlanta like a coward, slipping away without a word to her husband.

How would she survive without his strength? His love? Her knees knocked together and her teeth began to chatter.

I'm losing it.

No, she couldn't lose control. She locked her knees and clenched her jaw. Pops would not appreciate a weepy show of emotions. Respect for the man who'd raised her since she'd been orphaned at the age of eight demanded she pack away her tears.

Determinedly, she dragged her attention back to Chester, who was still reading her grandfather's words out loud.

“...a long and happy life. I’ve done a few things I’m not proud of, and I’ve thanked God every day of my life for the love of a good woman. Lindy girl, you’re a lot like your grandmother. You’ve got her good heart. I can only hope you turn out to be as understanding and forgiving as my Muriel.”

A postmortem apology? Lindy couldn’t contain the sob that hiccuped from between her lips.

Her skin tingled as Travis’s hand intertwined with hers. She tried to jerk away, but his fingers flexed, holding her hand in place. The strength of his grip offered much-needed reassurance. Her fingers relaxed beneath his. Lindy knew his support was temporary. But for a moment, she didn’t feel so alone.

“Lindy girl,” Chester’s voice continued, but the words were pure Pops, “I’ve loved you since the night you drew your first breath. All I’ve ever wanted is your happiness. In the months to come, I hope you can remember that.

“So, to the business at hand. I, Lionel Charles Lewis, leave my entire estate to my granddaughter, Lindy Lewis Monroe, and her husband, Travis Monroe. I make but one stipulation. For a period of no less than one hundred and fifty-four days, they must both reside at the Lewis Family Farm as husband and wife. Should either party refuse, my entire estate shall become a refuge for New Zealand swamp frogs. Neither party shall benefit in any way from this transaction.”

No, Pops. That’s over. He never wanted me.

Travis’s grip became painful, but Lindy welcomed the discomfort, sure that without it, she’d have slid to the floor.

Turning her head to study Travis, she found him staring holes into Chester. She noted the muscle jumping again at his jawline. Angry waves rolled off him.

His anger didn’t have anything on hers. For him, this was just a bump in the road. She could lose everything.

“How dare he!” Lindy pulled her hand free from Travis’s iron grip and jumped to her feet. “How dare you write that fool thing up, Chester. You can’t really expect us to honor such drivel.”

“Trust me, girl, I did everything I could to talk him out of it, but you know how stubborn he was. I knew if I didn’t draft the papers, he’d find someone else who would. Someone less discreet.” Chester’s mouth folded into a grim frown.

Lindy stalked around the guest chairs, into the open space in the middle of the room. She needed to move before she exploded. One hundred and fifty-four days. She’d lose her mind, cooped up with Travis for that long.

And what the hell were New Zealand swamp frogs?

Lindy paced to the door and back, rubbing her fingertips against her throbbing temples. Her heart pounded against her chest hard enough to bruise the skin.

Travis remained frozen in his chair, narrowed eyes riveted to Chester.

“Why, Chester?” she asked. “Why did he do this? And such an odd time period? What’s the significance of one hundred fifty-four days?”

“Lionel felt the two of you gave up too soon. A marriage takes time and work, especially when you hit a rough patch.” The old man leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers over his rounded belly. “One hundred and fifty-four days is how long the two of you lived together as man and wife.”

Stunned, Lindy stopped pacing. The muscles in her legs went limp. She slithered into her vacant chair.

She’d been certain one hundred and fifty-four days was forever. But as a measuring stick for her marriage, it sounded pathetically short.

The desk chair squeaked as Chester sat forward. “Lionel figured if he forced you two together, you’d find a way to work things out. He didn’t want pride or fear to cause you to wait until it was too late.” His voice gentled. “He knew tying up the farm was the only way to get you to make a move, Lindy.”

Her grandfather's best friend swiveled his chair, meeting Travis's stare. After silently studying the younger man for several long seconds, Chester spoke, his gentle tone forgotten.

"Lionel spoke highly of you, young man. Felt certain you'd be there for Lindy if her dreams were threatened. I'd say the fact you haven't already stormed out of here proves the old goat got a few things right, even if his method was a little off."

"A little off!" Lindy leaped back to her feet. "He's trying to control our lives. Did he really think we'd just roll over and say, 'Oh, what the heck? The old man's probably got a point. Why don't we just ignore what we want and give this a shot?'"

Travis's hand rested on her shoulder. She hadn't even heard him stand. She didn't shrug off the contact, but she did resist the urge to lean backward. It would be so easy to lose herself in the temporary security of his arms.

"Lindy, calm down." He tenderly squeezed her shoulder. "Your grandfather must've known he wasn't well. What he's done is meddlesome. And insulting. But I think it was his way of looking out for you."

"Why can't anyone see I can take care of myself!" Hands fisted, she itched to pace, but there was nowhere left to go. Dominating men surrounded her.

Travis's other hand grabbed her shoulder, spinning her so quickly she nearly lost her balance. She raised her face to his, shocked to see anger boiling in his eyes.

"That's always been your biggest problem." Travis's voice was low, despite the way his chest heaved. His hands fell from her shoulders and he took a step backward, as if he didn't trust himself not to take a swing at her. She'd never seen this side of Travis.

"Just because you're capable of taking care of everything yourself doesn't mean you've failed if you let someone else handle things sometimes. Or, God forbid, share the burden. You think your fears make you weak." He pivoted with military precision, turning his back on her, stalking to the window.

"Being strong doesn't mean doing it all by yourself," he told her over his shoulder. "Sometimes, it takes more strength to trust someone than it does to go it alone."

Tears burned Lindy's eyes. "When you trust someone and they let you down, it hurts worse than going it alone!"

"Yeah, I know." Travis turned and found her eyes. "You taught me that lesson."

Travis stared out the study window, searching the clouds for answers, ignoring Chester Warfield's perusal. An awkward, suffocating silence engulfed the room.

What the hell was he supposed to do now? He couldn't let Lindy lose her home, her dreams. On the other hand, he didn't think he could endure one hundred and fifty-four days of living with a woman who so obviously despised him.

Surely he could find a way to fix this. He needed a plan. First step, get his attorney involved. If anyone could find a loophole in the will, it was Brad Middleton. They needed a valid reason to contest the insane terms of the will.

Whoa. Maybe that was it. The terms were unquestionably insane. If they could claim—

"You're thinking too hard, boy," Warfield declared, breaking into Travis's thoughts. "Say what's on your mind."

He turned and faced his wife. "How about having Lionel declared incompetent and ruling the changes invalid?"

"What!" Lindy's cheeks bloomed with angry color.

Warfield ignored her outburst. "If you could convince a judge Lionel wasn't in his right mind, you could probably get the will overturned. Only problem is, there isn't a person in this county, hell, the whole state, that would say Lionel Lewis was anything other than ornery and stubborn. And those aren't grounds for incompetency."

"I can't believe you'd even suggest such a thing!" Lindy's fists balled at her sides. "There's no way I'd do or say anything to ruin my grandfather's good name."

Trying to ignore his wife, Travis turned his concentration to the attorney. He needed all the facts before he took action.

"So, as things stand, in order for Lindy to inherit the farm, I've got to move in with her for a period of one hundred and fifty-four days?"

Warfield nodded. "Correct."

Roughly five months. Long enough to earn her forgiveness? Maybe. Maybe not.

"Do we have to sleep together every night?" he asked.

"Ex-cuse me?"

Neither man acknowledged Lindy's outburst, but Travis rephrased his question. "Do we both have to be in residence on the farm every night during that time period? I have a business to run. What if I need to travel?"

Warfield rubbed his chin as though contemplating the question, but Travis noticed the smile he fought to hide. Apparently the old man was beginning to enjoy Travis's dilemma.

"While short business trips are a common component of married life these days, the intention is for the two of you to spend time together. Therefore, you must limit yourself to no more than three nights away per month."

"Darned fool," Lindy grumbled from across the room. Travis wasn't sure exactly which one of them she referred to.

"Does 'husband and wife' imply anything other than living under the same roof? Presenting ourselves as a couple in the community?" Travis wouldn't put anything past Lindy's grandfather at this point. Not even manipulating their sex life.

"No. The wording was chosen to ensure you both reside at the farmhouse without any other live-in guests." The attorney leaned forward in his chair, stacking his forearms on the desk. "I know this is hard for the two of you to believe, but Lionel thought he'd be doing you a favor by arranging this."

"Bull—" Lindy reentered the conversation with a very unladylike comment. "If Pops thought I'd be grateful for this little scheme, he wouldn't have kept it secret. He knew I'd be pissed. He also knew I'd consider it if it was my only way to keep the farm."

"It's not the only way, Lindy," Travis said, but he knew it was. She'd never endorse petitioning for Lionel's incompetency.

"Yes, it is. I won't ruin his reputation. Not for anything in this world. And that includes the farm."

"Final question." Travis readdressed the attorney. "What happens after we serve the hundred fifty-four days?"

Warfield no longer bothered to hide his smile. The old man was definitely getting a kick out of this.

"That's between you and your wife, Mr. Monroe."

Chapter Three

The next morning, Lindy stood before her closet, surveying her wardrobe. Did she really own two dozen pairs of jeans? Yep. And five sets of overalls? Yep, again.

Where were her girl clothes?

Bypassing her extensive denim collection, she dug far in the back of her closet and unearthed the most feminine thing she owned, a periwinkle-blue dress with a full skirt and three-quarter-length sleeves. Ah, yes. This should do just fine.

Not bothering with the back zipper, she tugged the dress over her head and smoothed the fabric over her hips until the hem fell to her midcalves. The lightweight jersey knit clung to her curves. And the color certainly set off her eyes.

She fluffed her curls, dabbed on her favorite floral perfume, and pulled out her only tube of lipstick. Pursing her colored lips, she twisted in front of the mirror, surveying herself from every direction. Despite the dark circles under her eyes, she looked ready to handle today's mission.

She'd tossed and turned all night, struggling to find a way out of this mess. Around one in the morning, a crazy idea had popped into her head. By the time she got out of bed this morning at five-thirty, the idea had grown into a full-fledged plan. Now, she just had to find the courage to see it through.

Once she refused to honor the will, she'd be on her own. If she wanted to make a success of Country Daze without involving Travis in her grandfather's crazy scheme, she needed cash.

This morning's trip to the bank was the first step. She refused to let her dreams slip through her fingers again. Making Country Daze a reality had saved her sanity over the past year. She'd lost Travis, their child and now Pops. Her dream was all she had left.

Down on her knees, she rummaged through the boots and dirty sneakers on her closet floor, digging up a comfy pair of sandals. Before she lost her nerve, she slipped them on and dashed downstairs, ducking into the kitchen to grab her keys just as Alice Robertson let herself in the back door.

Her neighbor let out a wolf whistle that would've made any construction worker proud. "Lord Almighty. You look like a girl."

"I sure hope so." Despite the heaviness in her heart, Lindy put her hands on her hips and struck a runway pose. "Girls are the best bait for a manhunt."

Alice raised one red brow. "Gracious, child, no need to set out the bait. You could have any man in Holcombe County with just the wiggle of one finger."

Yeah, right.

"I think I'll stick to my plan." She bussed her lips across Alice's cheek. "Wish me luck."

"Whatever you're up to, that dress oughta be all the luck you need."

Lindy grabbed a sweater off the hall rack and raced outside to Pops's old truck, anxious to get this charade behind her. Her stomach felt like one huge ball of nerves. At three o'clock this morning, she'd been sure her idea was foolproof. Under the bright lights of morning, though, doubts crept in. Pressing her foot against the accelerator, Lindy increased her white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel and did her best to block out her second thoughts.

At precisely nine o'clock, she parked her old truck in the front row of the People's Bank Building. More than ready to escape the close confines of the cab, she snatched her purse off the bench seat and quickly hopped down.

Pretending to rummage through her purse, she stood at the curb for a minute, gulping in fresh air and willing her heart rate to settle. She hated this whole weak-kneed, churning-stomach feeling she got every time she forced herself to drive.

With a final loud exhale, she walked through the double glass doors and entered the bank's lobby. Pinning a confident smile in place, she approached the woman who'd been the bank's receptionist for over twenty years.

"Good morning, Mrs. Carstairs."

"Good morning, Lindy dear. I sure was sorry to hear about Lionel."

Lindy's face curved into the same grateful expression she used every time she heard that sentiment. Pops had been such a popular man, she knew she'd still be accepting condolences a year from now.

"Thank you. How's Lucy doing?"

"She's carrying low. Sure sign the baby's a boy."

Lindy felt a twinge of envy, but pushed it aside. "That's fantastic." She rested one hand on the faux-marble reception desk and flattened the other over her twittering stomach. This was it. No more stalling. Time to do what had to be done.

"Is Mr. Harper in this morning?" No turning back now.

The receptionist's penciled-on eyebrows rose. "Why certainly, dear. Have a seat and I'll let him know you're here."

Resisting the urge to make a break for it and forget the whole thing, she settled into an overstuffed chair. In less than two minutes, Mark Harper appeared from behind a wall of smoky glass. His ever-present pocket protector overflowed with pens and his thick glasses hung precariously on the tip of his nose. He was still too thin for his height and he needed a haircut. And he represented her only chance at escaping this predicament.

Hating herself for what she was about to do, Lindy imposed a fake wobble in her voice and extended her hand to one of the nicest guys she'd ever known. "Mark, thanks for seeing me."

"N-no problem, Lindy. Come on in." He placed his hand on her back and ushered her into his office. His perspiration dampened the material at her waist.

Yep. She was about to do a really despicable thing. But Pops had her cornered.

Fifteen minutes later, Lindy stormed out of the bank building, so angry she didn't know whether to spit or cry. Unfortunately she could do neither in the middle of the town square.

Focused solely on getting the hell out of Dodge before she lost control of her temper and no longer cared about making a public spectacle of herself, Lindy blindly marched to her truck.

A creative string of curses dripped off her tongue as she dug into her purse for her keys. A familiar whiff of cedar drifting on a sea breeze distracted her. She raised her head, pointed her nose into the wind, and walked straight into the source of the smell.

Travis's hands gripped her elbows to steady her. "Whoa. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right. Why do people keep asking me that?" Lindy threw back her head and tried to look him in the eye. The sun haloed his head, blocking his face. "Are you following me?"

He laughed, a dry, humorless sound. "No, Lindy. I'm not following you. I just finished breakfast at Daisy's Diner. But I was on my way to see you. I checked out of the Sheltering Arms this morning. If we're going to honor the will, we need to make some plans."

Well, she'd already made her plans, and they'd blown up in her face. Dolled up like some backwoods femme fatale, she'd embarrassed both herself and softhearted Mark Harper.

She'd been so sure she could bamboozle him into loaning her enough money to buy the old Roosevelt farm. At just under four hundred acres, it offered less property than her family's farm, but was more than enough land for Country Daze.

But thanks to Pops's wild stipulations, she wouldn't have any collateral until she fulfilled the terms of the will and inherited her own farm free and clear.

She harrumphed at the fabulous-smelling man in front of her. "I'm sick to death of plans. Plans never work out." She tried to sidestep him, but he refused to release his hold on her elbows. "Let go of me, Travis. I have to get out of here. Right now."

She glared at him through eyes she knew were wet with unshed tears, uncertain how much longer her control would hold.

He leaned forward, bringing his mouthwatering scent with him. Without the sun directly behind his head, his expression became clear. The understanding in his green-gold eyes further threatened her self-control.

"Then let's get out of here." Stepping back, he waved his arm toward her old truck. "Lead the way. I'll follow you."

Tears and emotions back under control, Lindy drove under the Lewis Family Farm archway, one eye glued to the BMW tailing her. Now what?

Her brilliant plan to outsmart Pops had failed. That left her with only two options. Walk away from her home and her dreams or bury her pride and ask for Travis's help.

"Talk about your rock and a hard place." She turned off her old truck and sat for a moment, fiddling with the keys, delaying the inevitable. For the first time in over a year, she didn't feel the overwhelming urge to escape the vehicle.

Stunned to realize worrying about Travis had blocked out her normal nervousness during the entire drive home, she climbed slowly from the cab. As her feet hit solid ground, a breeze caught her hem, whipping the dress around her knees.

Travis rolled to a stop. Pretending to ignore him while she smoothed her skirt back into place, she watched from under her lashes as he stepped from the car, first one expensive Italian leather shoe, then the next. Straightening, he shut the door and engaged his car alarm.

A sardonic grin twisted her lips. Was he afraid the chickens might try to make off with his fancy car?

He's so out of place here. The hard truth sobered her, flattening her grin into a frown.

All those months she'd spent dreaming of Travis coming for her, putting their marriage before his family's selfish demands, she'd never once considered what would happen after his arrival. Seeing him here, standing in the barnyard wearing a coat and tie, she realized this man would never fit into her life.

Raising her head, she caught him openly studying her. His eyebrows rose, waiting for her to make the next move. She strode onto the porch. His footsteps followed. She opened the front door, but paused on the threshold, once again meeting his gaze over her shoulder.

"You don't fit in here." A simple statement of fact, but saying it aloud brought an unexpected lump to her throat.

"I'm willing to try," Travis said, following her inside.

"I'm not sure I am." She slammed the heavy front door, automatically toeing out of her shoes, even though the sandals she'd worn to town were free from barnyard yuck.

Travis gripped her arm, spun her around. Even in the unlit entryway, she could see the angry pulse jumping at his temple. His eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth.

What he would've said, she'd never know.

"Lindy!" Shayna Miller, her assistant, neighbor and childhood friend, called out from the kitchen. "I thought you'd never get home!"

Fast footfalls echoed down the hallway. Travis growled low in his throat and dropped her arm, but didn't move. Lindy did, stepping outside his aura of controlled energy, reestablishing her personal space.

“They’re here!” The petite brunette rounded the corner at full speed and skidded to a stop, barely missing a direct collision with Travis. “Wow, he is gorgeous.” Her soft brown eyes rolled in embarrassment. “Oh, gosh. I’m sorry.”

Lindy snuck a peek at her handsome husband. “Yeah, me, too.”

Travis extended his hand, gracefully ignoring Shayna’s faux pas. “Good morning. I’m Travis.”

Poor Shayna. At twenty-four, only two years younger than Lindy, she was totally unprepared for Travis’s well-honed charm. Or his sexy smile.

“Shayna Miller,” she gushed. Her blush deepened as she tentatively grasped his large hand.

“Nice to meet you, Shayna. Sounds like you’ve got big news.”

Amazing. She’d forgotten how easily he could avert social disaster with a smile and a handshake. She’d seen him do it hundreds of times on the cocktail-party circuit.

“Oh, yeah.” Embarrassment forgotten, Shayna turned to Lindy. “They finally came. The delivery van brought ’em this morning. Rufus barked like crazy.”

“Shayna?” Lindy asked when her friend paused for a breath.

“Yes?”

“What came?”

Shayna giggled. “Sorry. I’m just so exci—”

“Shayna!”

“The picnic tables and benches. Ooh, they’re so tiny and cute. It all looks pretty ratty now, but once we repaint them they’ll be so precious.”

Lindy plopped into one of the wing chairs just inside the family room. The picnic tables. Ten of them. And twenty benches. The prepaid, nonrefundable picnic tables and benches she’d bought at an online auction.

Ten picnic tables weren’t enough to accommodate her long-range plans for Country Daze, but her budget insisted she make do her first couple of years. This purchase had stretched her already burdened credit card to its limit.

Her mind spun with details. After so many years of hoping and planning, her dream was within her grasp. If she lost the farm, she’d lose everything.

“Lindy, what’s wrong?” Shayna stooped in front of her, worry lines etched between her eyes. “You’ve lost all your color. Are you sick?”

“No, I’m not sick. I’m stuck.” She rubbed her palm over her forehead, scraping her hair back. Tilting her head, resting her chin in her palm, she stared at Travis. He stood there, staring back, looking strong and reliable. But could she trust him?

I don’t have a choice.

“Shayna, why don’t you go on home for today? Travis and I have some things to settle.” She gave her friend a weak smile.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m sure.” The conviction in her voice pleased Lindy. At least she sounded like a woman in control.

Travis still leaned against the door frame. Lindy felt the pressure of his eyes, like a finger lifting her chin, demanding her full attention.

She met his gaze, calling on every ounce of her Lewis pride to hold his stare. Emerald and gold swirled together, offering understanding, threatening to break the seal on emotions she’d packed away months ago.

How would she get through this without sacrificing her pride? Or her heart?

Their gazes remained locked, their lips still, as Shayna gathered her things and let herself out. Neither moved until the back door snicked closed. Finally Travis straightened from his doorway slouch. “Should I sit?”

She noted the lack of humor in his voice, relieved to know he took this situation as seriously as she did.

Lindy lurched to her feet, bumping the upholstered chair against the wall. She was about to admit defeat, accept the terms of the will, invite Travis into her home.

She needed a moment alone before she surrendered.

“Make a pot of coffee first,” she ordered. “I’ll be right back.”

Travis stared out the window over the kitchen sink, studying the tiny green sprigs dotting the fields of dark soil. What did she grow here? Did she make a profit? Was she happy? There was so much he didn’t know about farm life. So much he didn’t know about his wife.

Behind him, the coffeepot chimed. Grateful for the activity, he pulled down two mugs and turned to the fridge for Lindy’s cream. Two cow-shaped magnets secured an August calendar page to the freezer door. An orange smiley face marked the second Monday with the words Opening Day written underneath. Each weekday block for the rest of the month contained the name of a least one school followed by the number of children in their group.

Intrigued, he lifted a bottom corner and found the page for September. Almost every school day was already booked.

A soft shuffling noise alerted him to her presence. “Looks like you’re going to be very busy this fall,” he commented without turning around.

“You should see the spring schedule.” She sounded tired, sad.

He doctored both their coffees before turning to face her. She looked tired. Sad. Travis wanted to hold her. Instead he carried the two mugs to the table, set them on opposite ends and took his seat.

Lindy laid the yellow legal pad and pen she carried next to her cup. Pulling out the chair, she folded her right leg into the seat and sat.

He could see the decision in her eyes. She was going to accept the terms of the will, but she wouldn’t meekly lie down and let life steamroll her. He’d bet his last nickel she still had a lot of fight left in her.

“Before we go any further,” she said, “I want to know why you’re willing to do this.”

Dangerous question.

He took a sip of his sugared coffee, and for half a second considered telling her the whole truth. How would she react if she knew about the many nights he woke, covered in sweat, haunted by the look of devastation on her face the night their son died? What if he told her part of him died that night, too, that he’d do anything to make up for the pain and loss he’d caused her? What if, God forbid, he admitted what a wasteland his life had become since the day she left?

She’d spit in his face, that’s what. Lindy obviously didn’t want him in her life. No sense putting himself out there just so she could trample him again on her way out the door.

Best stick with a partial truth. “Because, after everything that’s happened, I don’t want to see you suffer anymore.”

Her eyes narrowed, as if she waited for the other shoe to drop, certain it couldn’t be as simple as that.

“I also have a selfish reason.” Oh, he loved the way she raised that chin, telling him loud and clear she thought he was full of bull.

“I’ve been trying to distance myself from Monroe Enterprises. A couple months of AWOL should do the trick.”

Lindy’s brows knotted. Travis could almost see the questions forming in her head.

“You expect me to believe you plan to go five months without working?”

“I don’t intend to stop working.” He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. This was the first time he’d discussed his plans with anyone other than his attorney and best friend, Brad Middleton.

“There’s a huge potential in renovating old buildings and turning them into condos. The revitalization of metropolitan downtown districts is becoming big business. The board of directors doesn’t agree, so I’ve decided to branch off and start my own company.” He shrugged. The skeptical look on Lindy’s face made him glad he’d opted against explaining his more personal motives.

“Get real, Travis. No one knows better than I do how much the family business controls you. You’d never just walk away.”

“My goals are different these days.” During their marriage, he’d worked extra hard, putting in long hours, building a legacy to leave his child. Now that he didn’t have a son, he no longer needed a legacy. “I’m not quitting Monroe Enterprises altogether. Not yet, at least. With my laptop, Internet access and a fax machine, I can keep an eye on things from here.”

He paused, taking another sip of coffee. “Besides, I owe your grandfather one.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I promised him I’d take care of you and our baby. I failed.”

“Losing the baby wasn’t your fault.” Her voice hitched, but she kept her chin level with his.

“If I’d been paying attention to the road, that van never would’ve hit us.”

Lindy’s blue eyes suddenly sparkled with tears. She sniffed into her coffee cup, obviously fighting for control. Travis’s gut tightened. He’d give anything to go back in time, to avoid that drunk driver, to be able to keep Lindy and their son safe.

He watched as Lindy studied the elaborate doodle she created on the legal pad. She sat without talking so long, Travis wondered if the conversation was over.

Then she flipped the doodle page over and looked up, a very determined gleam in her eyes. “If we’re going to do this, I have some ground rules.” She wrote Ground Rules across the top of the page and underlined it three times.

Uh-oh. That didn’t sound good. Did she plan on making him sleep in the barn? One look at her stubborn Lewis chin convinced Travis such ideas were not improbable.

“Number one.” She wrote the number, then dotted the pad firmly. “This is a working farm. We keep farmer’s hours, so no loud noises after nine o’clock. Lights out at ten.”

Travis nodded, though he sensed her “ground rules” weren’t up for debate.

“Number two. The upstairs bedrooms share a common bathroom, so keep it neat. And don’t forget to use the lock. Alice Robertson comes in two mornings a week and helps with the housework, but you and I will have to trade off kitchen duty.”

“Robertson?” Please God, let her be Farmboy’s wife.

“Danny’s mother.”

Damn!

“Three,” Lindy continued. “Without Pops, I’m shorthanded. I expect you to help out around here. Danny is familiar with farm work, but he has his own responsibilities and can’t be here full-time, so we’ll figure out what chores you can handle. The work’s hard and dirty, but you’re strong enough.”

The words sounded complimentary, but he knew better.

“Number four. I will not take any money from you. Don’t insult me by trying to cover my expenses behind my back. Things are tight around here. That’s how I want it to stay.”

Lindy’s chin lifted; glittery defiance shot from her eyes.

“Five. No physical contact. This setup is for appearances’ sake only.” She put the pen on top of the tablet and crossed her arms on the table. He noted the slight tremor in her fingers before she clenched them into fists.

“Do we have a deal?” she asked.

Travis saw through her bravado. He wanted to round the table and sweep her into his arms, hold her until she melted against him, asked for his help, accepted his support. But this was Lindy. Things were never simple with Lindy.

He picked up her discarded pen and turned the tablet around. “I have a couple of conditions of my own.” He wrote a bold number six on the first empty line.

Her eyebrow cocked. “Such as?”

“No extramarital dating.”

Her forehead crinkled, but she shrugged and nodded. “Okay.”

She jumped on that faster than Travis expected. Did she have Farmboy wrapped that tightly around her little finger?

“You’re sure Robertson won’t object?”

“Why would he? Danny knows how important getting this place up and running is to me. He’s willing to help any way he can.”

Travis bit back a snort. If Lindy believed her own explanation, she was delusional. And Robertson was a bigger fool than Travis had originally thought.

Putting Robertson aside, Travis added number seven to the list. He cleared his mind, focused on his objective. Lindy had to agree with his final condition. She’d already paid too great a price for his mistakes.

Nothing would ever make things right between them, but her panic attacks were his fault. He had to find a way to alleviate her anxiety.

“Number seven, you let me help you face your fear of cars.”

Her face paled. “What? Why?”

“I had my own problems getting back behind the wheel. I understand some of what scares you.”

“I don’t know....”

“I wasn’t afraid to accept any of your conditions.”

Lindy’s chin popped up. He knew that would get to her.

“All I have to do is try?”

“Just try.” Travis fought to hide his growing smile. Pride had always been her Achilles’ heel.

“O-okay. I promise to try.”

“Then I guess we have a deal.” Travis held his hand out.

Lindy stood and clasped it. Her grip was steady, but her palm was moist. “Yes, God help me, we have a deal.”

Chapter Four

Travis slowly approached his father's house, dread filling him at the thought of the conversation awaiting him. Reaching the end of the road, he killed the ignition and stared at the house. Throw in a couple of ramparts topped with family-crested flags and the place would look like a bona fide castle.

His father had purchased this monstrosity the year after Carrie Monroe's death, and to Travis, it represented the antithesis of the warm home his mother had created. Despite marrying into one of the richest families in Georgia, she never forgot her roots.

His mother had grown up watching her parents work long hours turning an old family recipe into a profitable chain of restaurants. She'd tried her best to instill those values into her children. She'd succeeded with Travis, but Grant was too much their father's son to understand the appeal of earning your blessings. Like Winston, Grant considered changing the blade in his razor too tactile a chore for a Monroe.

After his mother's death, living in his father's new house had made Travis feel like a teenage hypocrite. He hated the way Winston immersed himself back into the world of Atlanta's spoiled rich, abandoning his late wife's ideals.

At eighteen, Travis escaped to college, moving to Boston to study mechanical engineering at MIT. After one semester, he returned to this mausoleum and found his father in a near-constant drunken stupor and his fifteen-year-old brother in juvenile lockup. Travis was forced to abandon MIT and transfer to Georgia Tech. He bailed out his brother and dried out his father. Ten years later, very little had changed.

He rolled his shoulders, trying to relieve his building tension. Telling his father about his extended stay in Tennessee promised to be a long conversation. And he still had the six-hour drive back to Land's Cross.

She'll have my butt if I miss curfew on my first night.

He slowly climbed from the car and approached his father's home. The well-worn work boots he'd pulled on this morning echoed like thunder as he crossed the bridge spanning a long, narrow koi pond—Lord Winston's version of a moat.

A corner of his mouth curved upward at his private joke as he rang the bell and waited. Brighton, his father's butler, opened the ten-foot-tall front door. The old man's stoic expression didn't falter as he eyed Travis across the threshold.

"Afternoon, Brighton. Is my father home?"

The butler nodded wordlessly and stepped back, allowing Travis to enter. His bony fingers pushed the massive door closed, blocking out the only natural light in the darkened foyer. "Wait here," the brusque voice ordered. "I'll see if he is available."

Travis watched the man's thin back disappear down the darkened hallway. All the curtains were drawn against the bright afternoon sun. The low-wattage bulbs his father favored didn't stand a chance against the dreary darkness. Directional lighting highlighted several expensive pieces of art throughout the marbled foyer. Despite the rich paintings, the room lacked life.

Unlike Lindy's home, where bright sunlight flooded the entry hall. The windows across the front of the farmhouse were all curtainless. The outside scenery provided more beauty and decoration than a hundred priceless masterpieces.

Travis traced the outline of a painted magnolia bloom with his fingertip. Where this place smelled of musty age and old money, the natural fragrance of flowers and sunshine filled every corner of Lindy's home. And Lindy's kitchen always smelled like cinnamon.

Brighton returned to the foyer, announcing his presence with a chastising clearing of his throat. The man had the eerie ability to show up suddenly in a room; no noise ever preceded him. "Your father will see you now."

As expected, Brighton led Travis into the study, a room that summed up Winston Monroe perfectly. Stuffy, old-fashioned and ostentatious.

“Dad.” Travis nodded at the man seated behind the wide mahogany desk and crossed the paneled room, heading directly for the leather-wrapped bar in the far corner.

With his dark hair and green eyes, Travis was the only member of the Monroe clan who carried the family’s black Irish coloring into this generation. He bore no resemblance to his father. Their physical differences were almost as startling as their polar opposite lifestyles.

His father had passed a near carbon copy of his genes to Grant—lithe build, light brown hair, hazel eyes, aquiline nose. Country-club handsome, Lindy called them.

“Glad to see you found your way back to town,” Winston snapped. “Unlike you to disappear without a word to anybody.”

“Marge knew where I was.”

Winston snorted. “That damn secretary of yours locks up tighter than Fort Knox.”

The image of Winston trying to wheedle information out of Marge brought a small smile to his lips. “I asked her not to reveal my whereabouts unless there was an emergency.”

His father’s only answer was a “Humph!” Winston Monroe believed everyone had their price. And if his father were this bent out of shape over three days’ absence...

Travis considered tipping the bottle over the glass again, knowing this was going to be a two-finger conversation. But he had a long drive ahead of him, so he recapped the decanter and pushed it aside.

He swallowed a sip of the amber liquid, enjoying the sting as Kentucky’s finest warmed his throat. “I came by to bring you up to speed on some changes I’ve put in place at the company.”

His father’s brows merged into a bushy line of apprehension. “What kind of changes?”

“I’ve promoted George Collins to second vice president and transferred most of my daily responsibilities to him, everything but the final details on the Downtown Renovation Project. Marge will be working with him, so the transition should be smooth.”

“Transition? What in blue blazes are you talking about?”

“I’m taking a leave of absence for the summer.”

“You can’t do that!” Noxious smoke curled from the cigar stub clinging to his father’s lower lip.

“It’s already done.”

Winston squinted. “What are your plans?”

“I’ll be working in Tennessee, helping Lindy get a new project off the ground.”

His father’s fingers shook as he plucked the cigar from his mouth and smashed the butt into an ashtray. “Damn it, boy!” Winston rose from his large, thronelike chair and prowled toward the bar. “Can’t you see that girl’s using you? First she forces you to marry her—”

“Choose your words carefully, Dad.” Travis clenched his fists around his glass, silently reminding himself his mother had once loved this son of a bitch.

His father shot a look across the room, focusing on a painting of Carrie Monroe hanging above the fireplace. He closed his eyes for a long moment, drew in a deep breath. When his lids lifted again, Travis saw icy control in his father’s eyes.

“All I’m saying is think about what you’re doing. If your wife were really interested in you, she’d have stood by you instead of taking off for almost a year. You and I both know what she’s after.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.