

MILLS & BOON



Vintage *Cherish*

Her Surprise Family

PATRICIA THAYER

Patricia Thayer

Her Surprise Family

«HarperCollins»

Thayer P.

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With these RingsHIS SURPRISE... WIFE?Rafe Covelli saw marriage as The Great Surrender. But new-gal-in-town Shelby Harris had this die-hard bachelor's mind swimming with thoughts of home-cooked meals, passionate bedtime kisses and baby cuddles. These were not the dreams of a self-respecting single male!But hard as he tried, when Rafe took sweet Shelby into his arms he couldn't let go. All his survival instincts went on red alert. She so clearly longed for a family...a husband...him. So why didn't he retreat? Could it be this solitary man was about to surrender...to a lifetime of love?...who will wed?

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“Looks like we’re in for a wicked night.”

Startled, Shelby spun around to see Rafe standing in her doorway.

Lightning flashed. Without warning, Rafe lifted her into his arms.

“Put me down!”

“Hush, green eyes,” he murmured. “I’m taking you to safety.”

Shelby was pulled against his solid chest, her hands gripping his muscular arms. His strength and the sound of his voice soothed her.

But she knew she couldn’t continue leaning on him. She wanted a home, a husband, children...but experience had taught her that the only person she could depend on was herself. She pushed against his massive chest, trying to break his hold, but his grip tightened.

She melted against him. Maybe she could linger in Rafe’s arms, for just a little longer....

WITH THESE RINGS

The Secret Millionaire (SE #1252)

Her Surprise Family (SR #1394)

The Man, The Ring, the Wedding (SR #1412)

Dear Reader,

September’s stellar selections beautifully exemplify Silhouette Romance’s commitment to publish strong, emotional love stories that touch every woman’s heart. In *The Baby Bond*, Lilian Darcy pens the poignant tale of a surrogate mom who discovers the father knew nothing of his impending daddyhood! His demand: a marriage of convenience to protect their BUNDLES OF JOY.... Carol Grace pairs a sheik with his plain-Jane secretary in a marriage meant to satisfy family requirements. But the oil tycoon’s shocked to learn that being Married to the Sheik is his VIRGIN BRIDE’s secret desire.... FOR THE CHILDREN, Diana Whitney’s miniseries that launched in Special Edition in August 1999—and returns to that series in October 1999—crosses into Silhouette Romance with *A Dad of His Own*, the touching story of a man, mistaken for a boy’s father, who ultimately realizes that mother and child are exactly what he needs.

Laura Anthony explores the lighter side of love in *The Twenty-Four-Hour Groom*, in which a pretend marriage between a lawman and his neighbor kindles some very real feelings. WITH THESE RINGS, Patricia Thayer’s Special Edition/Romance cross-line miniseries, moves into Romance with *Her Surprise Family*, with a woman who longs for a husband and home and unexpectedly finds both. And in *A Man Worth Marrying*, beloved author Phyllis Halldorson shows the touching Romance between a virginal schoolteacher and a much older single dad.

Treasure this month’s offerings—and keep coming back to Romance for more compelling love stories!

Enjoy,



Mary-Theresa Hussey

Senior Editor

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Her Surprise Family

Patricia Thayer



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To the special guys in my life, Jeff, Brett and Tom.
You all have turned into wonderful young men, definitely
hero material.

And to my rescuer, Steve, who set the example
for our boys.

I love you.

PATRICIA THAYER

has been writing for fourteen years and has published ten books with Silhouette. Her books have been nominated for the National Readers' Choice Award, Virginia Romance Writers of America's Holt Medallion and a prestigious RITA Award. In 1997, *Nothing Short of a Miracle* won the Romantic Times Magazine Reviewers' Choice Award for Best Special Edition.

Thanks to the understanding men in her life—her husband of twenty-eight years, Steve, and her three sons—Pat has been able to fulfill her dream of writing romance. Another dream is to own a cabin in Colorado, where she can spend her days writing and her evenings with her favorite hero, Steve. She loves to hear from readers. You can write her at P.O. Box 6251, Anaheim, CA 92816-0251.



Prologue

"Rafaele Mario Covelli, you come out of the water adesso, now," Vittoria called to her ten-year-old grandson from the back porch.

"You just ate your lunch."

The thin, lanky boy climbed out of the large swimming pool his father had assembled in the backyard for the long, hot summer months.

"But I feel fine, Nonna. I want to swim with my friends."

"You can swim a little later. You must let your food digest first."

"But I'm bored," he protested as he slumped down on the step.

"Then play with your baby sister." Nonna looked over at the precious black-haired three-year-old digging happily in her sandbox.

"No way," Rafe said. "I'm not playing with any girl."

Vittoria folded her arms and looked sternly at the boy. She knew for a fact that both Rafe and his younger brother, Rick, loved their baby sister and played with her often. “Then come here and I’ll tell you a story.”

Rafe’s dark eyes lit up as he sat cross-legged on his towel. “About Nonno Enrico and how he was a hero?”

Nodding, Vittoria spread out a blanket and sat on it. Little Angelina toddled over to see what was going on. She climbed on to her grandmother’s lap. “You want to hear the story, too, bambina?”

Angelina pushed her sunbonnet back from her eyes and nodded eagerly. “Please,” she said.

Before Vittoria knew it, her other grandson, Rick, and two of his school friends were seated on the blanket, too.

“Many years ago in Italy, my famiglia, the Perrones, lived in a small village. When I was a young girl, it was a bad time. War ravaged the countryside, but my village in Tuscany fortunately seemed to be safe. Until an airplane crashed not far from our home.”

“It was Grandpa’s plane. A B-24,” Rafe announced. “He was a nose gunner.”

Vittoria nodded. “Yes. It was an American plane. It had been hit and the pilot was trying to make it back to his base over the border, but was forced to crash-land in a field not far from our farmhouse. The next day, I found Army Sergeant Enrico Covelli hiding in our barn. He was wounded in the leg and had lost a lot of blood.”

Vittoria remembered it as if it were yesterday. His face was bruised from the rough landing and he was grimacing from the pain of his wounds. He’d still been the handsomest man she’d ever seen. He was also the enemy. But she was afraid he might die, and she couldn’t let that happen in her barn—or a prison camp.

“And you saved him.”

Immersed in the memory now, Vittoria hardly heard her grandson’s voice urge her on. “I knew I should turn him in, but I ended up caring for his wounds and sneaking out to stay with him while he fought his fever. Then after a few days, he began to get his strength back. He was American, but he spoke to me in Italiano. I was shocked when he told me his name was Enrico Covelli. His parents had come from Rome. I could not turn him over to the soldiers.”

“No, Nonna,” Rafe said, shaking his head, “you had to hide him.”

Vittoria looked around at the other three boys as they nodded in agreement.

“But I was afraid he’d be discovered.” And Vittoria had known that she was also falling in love with the American. Then came the night Enrico confessed his love for her. He didn’t want to leave her, but he had to find his way back to the Allied lines. They’d both be in danger if he was caught.

She continued the story. “I’d heard about the underground—a group who helped get people to safety. The next night, before Nonno Enrico left, he promised that he would return after the war. He said he wanted to marry me and take me to America. I told him I loved him, too. Then he kissed me goodbye and disappeared into the night.”

Rafe stood and leaned toward his grandmother. “Can I show them the box?” he whispered.

Vittoria nodded and Rafe hurried into the house. Within minutes he returned with a beautiful hand-carved jewelry box. He handed it to his grandmother and she opened the ornate brass clasp. She reached inside and took out the medal.

Rafe held it up. “My grandpa got a Purple Heart for being shot.” There were oohs and ahhs from the boys as the medal was passed around.

“For months I never knew if Enrico ever made it to safety. Another year passed, and then the war ended.” Tears filled her eyes at the memory. “I thought he must have died, because he’d promised never to forget about me.

“But he didn’t die,” Rafe said encouragingly.

Vittoria took her grandson’s hand. “No, but I had no word from him. I still waited. By then my padre had arranged for me to marry Giovanni Valente.”

Rafe's eyes narrowed. "But you didn't want to marry him."

"No, Rafe, I didn't love Giovanni as I loved Enrico. But my famiglia urged me to marry him because of his wealth. Even during the war, the Valentes managed to hold on to their vineyards. We had nothing left of value except the set of ruby rings that was to go to the firstborn daughter when she married. That was me. And my padre already had given the rings to Giovanni."

It still saddened her to remember it all. She had used the yards of white silk from Enrico's discarded parachute for her wedding gown. At least she'd have something of her true love with her.

"But Grandpa came back to rescue you."

Vittoria smiled. So many times she had told this story to her children and now her grandchildren. "Si, he returned the week of my wedding."

She recalled the day clearly. She had nearly fainted when Enrico came for her. He took her into his arms and kissed her until she realized she wasn't dreaming. He'd come back, just as he'd promised.

"Your nonno asked to marry me, but my padre insisted that I was already promised to another. That didn't stop Enrico. Together we went to the Valente famiglia to explain. Giovanni was furious that I wouldn't marry him, but finally agreed to release me from the promise. However, he swore he'd never love another and refused to return one of the rings. That he slipped on his little finger as a symbol of his stolen bride. Then Madre Valente placed a curse on both rings, stating that until the two were joined again, love would not be an easy road for the Covellis or their children."

For all these years, Vittoria's heart had ached deeply. She opened the box again and took out the remaining ring. Although her Enrico had never believed in the power of the curse, Vittoria knew that something had shadowed their love over the years. She had trouble conceiving a child, but was finally blessed with two sons. And her son Rafaele almost did not make it to the altar with his bride, Maria. Could the curse be the cause of these things?

Rafe got up on his knees. "Can I see it?"

Vittoria opened the case to display the large bloodred ruby with a circle of diamonds embedded in the ornate gold band. When the two rings had been side by side, they were a perfect pair. The last time had been more than fifty years ago.

"Wow! I bet it's worth a million dollars."

"Oh, Rafaele. This ring is a symbol of love, and it's priceless. And true love is the only thing that will break the curse and bring the two rings together again."

Chapter One

More than one hundred years old, and Stewart Manor was still a sight to behold.

Rafe Covelli drove his truck through the wrought-iron gates and gazed at the three-story structure. Years ago this place had been one of Haven Springs's most regal homes. Even the missing shingles and peeling trim paint couldn't take away from the grandeur of the architecture.

Ever since he'd been a kid, it had fascinated him. He'd ridden by on his bike and stared at the big, haunted-looking house, wondering what it would be like to live in such a place. His imagination had dreamed up all sorts of secret passages, hidden rooms and a few ghosts.

None of it was true, of course. The grand house had been built for wealthy businessman William Stewart, who had been mayor of Haven Springs at the turn of the century. His son, William, Jr., and his wife had lived here along with their only child, a daughter named Hannah. As a boy, Rafe remembered nice Miss Hannah, who'd never married and lived in the house until her death three years ago.

A distant cousin inherited the estate, but not wanting the big house, he put Stewart Manor up for auction. The town's landmark sold for a fraction of its worth. This was the first time someone other than a Stewart was going to live there.

Rafe stopped his truck in front of the house and noticed the woman standing on the porch. It looked like he was about to meet Haven Springs's newest resident, Ms. Shelby Harris.

Grabbing his clipboard, he climbed out of the cab. He made his way up the walkway, flanked by overgrown weeds, to the porch steps.

“Ms. Harris?” He tipped his baseball cap with the Covelli and Sons logo. “I’m Rafe Covelli.”

The woman appeared to be in her late twenties. She nodded. “Thank you for coming by, Mr. Covelli.”

“No problem. I’ve been working in the area. We’re doing the facade restoration on the houses up the street.”

When Rafe climbed the steps, he was surprised to find that the woman was nearly eye to eye with him. He was over six feet, so Shelby Harris had to be at least five-ten. A quick glance told him her height was all in a pair of long, slender legs, encased right now in a pair of nicely fitted jeans. His gaze moved to her narrow waist, then to the cotton T-shirt that did little to hide full breasts. His pulse began to race in appreciation. It had been a while since a stranger this appealing had come to town. The last had been Jill Morgan, who recently married his younger brother, Rick. Rafe’s gaze moved to her oval face, framed by short brown curls, and his heart did a somersault as he met the most incredible green eyes he’d ever seen.

His scrutiny seemed to make her nervous and she glanced away. “As I told you on the phone, I plan to turn Stewart Manor into a bed-and-breakfast inn.”

Rafe let out a low whistle. “And I explained that was going to take some work. And money.”

“I’m not afraid of work, Mr. Covelli,” she said. “But if you can’t handle the job...”

The woman was prickly as a cactus. “I didn’t say I couldn’t handle the job.” He stepped off the porch and squinted into the bright August sun, looking up at the massive structure, then began to calculate the things that needed immediate attention. The gables along the top story were badly in need of repair—the wood was weathered and rotted in some places. That was Rick’s specialty; maybe he could drag his brother out here to do the job. The roof was in bad shape and needed to be replaced. That meant the inside had to have rain damage.

He glanced back at her. “How much time and money do you have, Ms. Harris?”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

The look on her face told him he was in trouble. Damn. He’d seen that same expression on his sister’s face too many times. This was serious. Something was up and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know what. “Okay, talk.”

Her back straightened stubbornly. “Most of my ready cash went into buying this house. It will be a month or so before I have more available. Right now I need to be a little frugal. I thought maybe we could work out some sort of...deal.”

Rafe knew he should turn around, climb back into his truck and drive off. He had enough of his own problems without giving away his time. But something kept him rooted to the spot. Maybe he was curious about why a single woman wanted to buy this old house and turn it into a bed-and-breakfast. And the longing in her sparkling eyes made him ask, “What do you have in mind?”

Shelby stepped into the sun, which brought out the coppery highlights in her dark hair. “Because of the historical status of this house, all the facade repair is covered under the federal grant money.”

Rafe nodded. “We’re already handling that.”

“Yes, I’ve seen your work around town. You’re very good. But I need more done. I would like you to check the roof and have a look at the front rooms inside. Tell me how much it would cost to fix it up—” she hesitated and took a deep breath “—a little at a time. The bare necessities. Enough so I can open for business.”

Rafe held back his smile. “Haven Springs isn’t exactly overflowing with tourists.”

“But with the summer there’s the lake traffic, and then in the fall people come to see the foliage. I plan to advertise—there are people who like to stay in historical homes. After a few months I’ll be able to afford to continue the work on restoring Stewart Manor.”

There was that stubborn attitude again. Her full mouth drew into a pouty bow and something stirred in his gut. Damn.

“Let’s have a look, then.” He returned to the porch and walked to the heavy oak door with its oval cut-glass center. He opened it and stepped over the threshold into a huge entryway. A dim coolness greeted him as he stood on the bare hardwood floors. A magnificent chandelier hung from the high ceiling, edged with oak crown molding. The staircase across the hall made its way to the second story. Several spindles were missing in the banister, and a few of the steps were also missing.

“You’d better stay off the stairs until I’ve checked them out,” he said as he turned to his left and entered the front room, what used to be called the parlor.

Shelby stood back and watched the cocky Mr. Covelli move around her house. So he thought she was helpless. That she had to be warned about obvious dangers. Well, she had news for him. She’d spent her entire life taking care of herself and could do it just fine.

She’d asked around and knew he was her best chance for a fair deal. Worse, he knew it, too.

She went after him only to find him standing at the three double-hung windows and eying the frames. Then he glanced down at the ornate woodwork along the baseboards. He squatted for a closer look. She couldn’t help but notice the nice curve of his rear end, the way his muscular thighs strained against the fabric of his worn jeans. Her gaze moved to his chambray shirt as the muscles of his broad shoulders and back flexed. A shiver of awareness raced through her. She quickly raised her eyes to his face and found him in deep concentration. His bronze skin bespoke his Italian ancestry and the fact that he worked in the sun.

His eyes were chocolate brown and mesmerizing. His coal-black hair was cropped short around the ears. He pulled off his cap and his thick mane still appeared neatly combed. She somehow knew that was the way Rafe Covelli’s life was. All in neat, organized order. Everything cut and dried. Black or white.

The complete opposite of hers.

She doubted he would go along with her idea. It was beginning to seem crazy even to her.

“Well, Ms. Harris,” he said as he stood and faced her, “there’s bad news. You’ve had a water leak around these two west windows.” He pointed out the spots.

Shelby’s gaze was glued to his large hand with the long, tapered fingers. Strong, capable hands that carved wood. She couldn’t help but wonder how the roughened palms would feel on her skin.... She blinked away the thought and turned her attention back to what he was saying.

“First, I’ll have to go up to the attic and find the leaks, then I’ll have to replace these frames and tear out the plaster.” He went down on one knee. “See the moisture here? It’s worked down into the baseboards. This section of wood is warped and will have to be replaced, too.” He stood and walked into the hall again. She hurried to keep up. “The stairway needs to have those steps and spindles replaced. All in top-grade oak.” He kept walking until he finally reached the living room.

This was the room where Shelby had taken up residence. She’d cleaned and hung curtains, then arranged her furniture which consisted of a sofa, a chair, a portable television and a bookcase. A desk and computer were against the far wall. The only other rooms she’d used since moving in three days ago, had been the small servants’ quarters off the kitchen, which consisted of a bedroom and bath.

Rafe approached the huge stone fireplace and began to check out the carved-oak mantel. She held her breath when he stopped and eyed the framed photographs lined up on the top.

He looked at her. “Family?” he asked.

Shelby hesitated, then answered, “Yes.”

He smiled. “I didn’t think anyone had more family than I do.”

He studied the assortment of pictures, and a wave of envy washed over her. Like most people, Rafe Covelli seemed to take his relatives for granted. But there are those of us who don’t have a real family to claim.

She shook away the rush of loneliness. “You have a big family, Mr. Covelli?”

He nodded. “A grandmother, a mother, a brother and sister, but also a large assortment of aunts and uncles and cousins. Family reunions are a madhouse.” He smiled as his gaze met hers. Like a magnet, his dark eyes held her captive, and for a moment she couldn’t breathe. Finally he turned away and moved on to finish his appraisal.

He leaned down and examined the floor. Then wrote more notes on his clipboard. “Do any of your family live around here?”

“Uh, no,” she said. “They’re farther south.”

He glanced over his shoulder. “Why didn’t you buy a house there? Then maybe your family would be able to help you out.”

“I’d rather do this on my own. Besides, I could afford this place.”

“How’d you find out about Stewart Manor?”

She hadn’t had to answer this many questions to take out a mortgage. “It was on the Internet. You can find anything and everything if you know where to search.”

Rafe stood and walked over to the corner window. “As far as I’m concerned, you can put all the computers in a pile and blow them to kingdom come.”

Shelby bit back a smile as she watched the big man move around the room. So Mr. Macho was a cyberphobe. “Sounds like you’ve had some problems with your computer.”

“None whatsoever,” he assured her. “I don’t touch the thing. I leave all the computer business to my sister. Angelina minored in computer science in college. Got one in the office and I stay clear of it.”

“Well, if you ever decide you want to learn, just call me. I’m on the computer every day. I do graphics work and design web pages for a living.”

He cocked an eyebrow as if to say, I’ll want to learn when hell freezes over. “Thanks for the offer, but I doubt I’ll ever require your services. How many rooms upstairs?”

“Five bedrooms and two baths. One of the baths is connected to the master suite. The third floor is the attic.”

“How many rooms do you want me to look at?”

She shrugged. “I’d like you to tell me if any of them need major work. There are some water rings on the ceilings in two of the bedrooms, and in one of them some of the plaster has already fallen. I want to start painting and wallpapering as soon as possible.”

“I think you better hold off on any decorating until we assess the damage. Tearing out old plaster causes quite a mess.” His dark eyes lifted to meet hers, and instantly she felt a jolt of awareness course through her body. Why did this man make her so nervous?

She managed a nod.

“I’ll go have a look.” He started out of the room and again she followed him. When they reached the staircase, he stopped. She didn’t and ran into him. He reached out and grabbed her by the arms before she lost her balance. “You better stay down here. These stairs aren’t safe. And until the repairs are done, I don’t want you using them.”

Shelby felt the sudden heat from his gentle touch and lost any desire to argue. Then he turned and continued up the stairs. She watched as he moved with easy athletic grace over the broken steps. Finally he disappeared from view, and she returned to the living room.

Shelby crossed to the mantel and studied the row of pictures. Her family. Uncle Ray and Aunt Celia, along with an assortment of cousins. They were spread all across the country, of course. That way people didn’t ask why they never came to visit. All she had to do was make up stories about them. And she was really good at make-believe—she made a living at it. Shelby drew a long breath and released it. She glanced around the room, feeling a flood of contentment.

She finally had her home. And soon it would be filled with people, and she wouldn’t be all alone anymore.

After checking the attic and the other bedrooms, Rafe wandered into the huge master suite. A mahogany four-poster bed sat against the wall. Heavy brocade draperies hung at the large windows, but were so filthy you couldn't tell what color they'd once been. The floral wallpaper was faded and had water rings. There was also evidence of some vandalism, broken windows and beer bottles and some writing on the wallpaper. The floors were caked with years of dust.

He peeked into the bathroom and saw the oversize claw-foot tub. Upon close examination, he realized it was still in good condition, along with the pedestal sink. The marine-blue marble tile could use a good cleaning and some grouting, but all were easy to repair.

Rafe's thoughts turned to the woman he'd left downstairs. He normally didn't stop homeowners from following him around on the job site, but he needed time away from Ms. Harris. Her wide-eyed gaze seemed to watch his every move. He couldn't decide if it was mistrust or just plain curiosity. But it had bothered him. Damn. He hadn't felt that awkward around a woman since he'd taken Lisa South-erland to the junior prom. And that was because he had gotten brave enough to try to cop a feel. At seventeen, getting his hands on a girl's breasts was a major accomplishment.

Once again he recalled Shelby Harris in her T-shirt. She had an unbelievable body. Full breasts, long, shapely legs... Rafe groaned. What was the matter with him? He was acting as if he'd never been around a woman before. But it had been a while since there'd been anyone in his life. Still, he knew better than to think about getting involved with a potential client.

After giving himself a good talking-to, he returned to the bedroom. He stopped short when he found Shelby Harris in front of the bay windows. The afternoon sunlight formed a halo around her, softening her pretty face.

A quiet intimacy surrounded them as they stood in silence, neither, it seemed, wanting to break the spell with words. Rafe's gaze shifted slightly toward the large bed, and an erotic picture of this long-legged brunette lying naked on ivory satin sheets flashed in his head.

His body tightened as his gaze darted back to her. Damnation. "Thought I told you to wait downstairs."

She didn't seem intimidated by his anger. "I've been up here before. I know which steps to avoid."

"You still could have fallen. This house is old and has been vacant for a long time. If I'm going to work here, then you're going to have to listen to my warnings."

Her eyes flashed defiantly, as if she was about to argue, but then she averted her gaze. "I guess I was anxious to see how much damage you found and what your bid was going to be."

Rafe looked at his clipboard. He knew that the house needed a lot of time-consuming work. "On the whole, the house is solidly built. I think you already knew that."

She nodded.

"But the roof had been leaking for quite a few years. I was going to suggest that you replace it, but there are several bundles of shingles in the attic, so we might be able to do a fairly good patch job—for now. Once we stop the leaks, I'll tear out the ceiling up here in the front bedroom. Then put up new drywall."

"What about the other three bedrooms and this room?"

"The damage isn't extensive. This room seems to be in the best shape, and the bathroom is fine, too."

"So between the parlor downstairs, the stairway and the bedroom room, what do you think it'll cost me?"

He didn't know why, but he'd worked to cut his quote to the bare bones. He showed her the bid and watched her eyes widen.

"This is so expensive. You can't possibly need that much material."

"It's not the materials. It's the labor. I have to pay a guy to come in and tear away and dispose of the rotted wood and plaster."

“No, you don’t.”

“Well, someone has to do it. And I don’t have the time. My brother and I have several other jobs—”

“I know,” she interrupted. “I know you’re busy. That’s the reason I’m suggesting that, instead of hiring someone to do the tearing out, let me do it. I can work along with you.”

Rafe knew it. The minute he’d pulled into the driveway, he’d had a feeling she wanted more than an estimate.

Well, he had to set her straight. “Look, you have no idea what is involved with this. It’s hard, backbreaking work.” He eyed her slender body. “I have trouble finding high-school boys willing to do this kind of labor.”

“But this is my home,” she said. “I have a lot invested in it already. And right now I don’t have enough funds left to get this place ready to open for business.”

“Could your family help you?”

She glanced away. “I’m too old to go running to family for money.”

He looked around. “This is a big project, Ms. Harris. Maybe your parents would like to invest in making this place at least livable for their daughter.”

Her hands curled into fists. “My parents aren’t able to help out, Mr. Covelli. And for your information, this house was inspected before the auction. The gas company deemed the stove in the kitchen safe to use. The plumbing was checked out and fixed before I bought the house. So you see, this place is very livable. But if you won’t help me, then I’ll find another contractor who will.”

She pulled a business card out of her pocket. “There’s...the Norton Construction Company in Bedford,” she read. “So, thank you for your time.” She turned and headed out to the hall.

“Norton Construction? They have a reputation for doing things cheap, but you won’t get the quality this house deserves.” He went after her as she approached the stairs.

“It’s what I can afford, Mr. Covelli.”

He reached her side. “Will you please stop calling me that? You make me feel ancient. My name is Rafe.”

She stopped and swung around. “What I call you isn’t going to change the fact that I can’t afford you.”

Rafe could see the sheen of tears in her eyes, then she turned away and put her tennis-shoe-clad foot on the next step. One of the weakened steps. A scream erupted from her lips as she lost her balance and began to fall.

Rafe caught her and managed to halt her progress. He yanked her against him, and they both went down hard on one of the steps. Shelby ended up lying on top of him, his arms wrapped around her tightly. She felt incredible. Her softness against his hardness. He inhaled her fresh flowery scent. Suddenly his body caught fire and he knew he had to let her go.

But he couldn’t move.

Shelby finally pushed herself up and looked at him with those remarkable green eyes. He stifled a groan as his gaze moved to her mouth; he was unable to ignore how badly he wanted a taste.

He blinked away his wayward thoughts. “Are you all right?”

Blushing, she nodded and got off him. “I guess I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“It happens. But you can see why you need to get these stairs fixed before someone really gets hurt.”

“Yes, I do.” She sat down on the step. “And I will. Thank you for coming by with your bid.”

He got up. He started down the stairs, but knew he couldn’t leave her to Gus Norton. “Look, I can give you the names of other reliable companies, but the cost won’t be any less than my bid.” He wrote down two names on a piece of paper and handed it to her.

She took it. “I appreciate it. Thank you.”

He stood there for a few seconds. Even though this woman was tall, she had a delicate build and would have a hard time moving heavy materials, but from what he saw in the thirty minutes of knowing her, Shelby Harris was stubborn enough to try.

“I’ll have a crew here on Wednesday to start the work outside,” he said.

She nodded, but didn’t smile. And for some reason he was disappointed. After all, he was doing her a favor.

“Look, if I get a bit of time, maybe I could help you tear out—”

“I don’t need your charity, Mr. Covelli,” she said stubbornly. “I’ll get it done.”

“I don’t doubt that, Ms. Harris, but I wasn’t offering charity. Here in Haven Springs we call it being neighborly.”

Chapter Two

Shelby stood on the front porch watching Rafe’s Chevy truck pull out of the drive onto the quiet, tree-lined street.

“Arrogant man,” she mumbled as she sat down on one of the steps. What right did he have to boss her around? No man was going to tell her what to do. She wasn’t her mother, weak and submissive, allowing men to control her life, then walk out on her. As a child, she remembered the men who’d come and gone from Nola Harris’s life, including Shelby’s father. Years ago she had vowed she’d never let a man get close enough to hurt her.

Well, she had managed most of her life just fine by herself, and Rafe Covelli wasn’t going to change that.

Shelby glanced behind her at the house, and suddenly she was overwhelmed. How was she going to get all of it done? She sighed tiredly, remembering how hard she’d worked and saved for this place. Now this was her home. Excitement raced through her. Stewart Manor was hers.

She turned and surveyed the vast lawn. It wasn’t so much grass as two acres of knee-high weeds. The dozen or so maple trees could stand to be trimmed. So could the hedge that lined the wrought-iron fence bordering the property.

She stood and went down the steps, refusing to let herself get depressed. All her life she’d managed to handle anything that had been tossed at her, and she’d survived. With this place there was a lot to do, but she could handle it.

Making her way to the rear of the house, she realized that this area wasn’t in any better shape than the front. Weeds were everywhere. The large rose garden had been neglected, but there were some bushes that had survived the neglect.

Shelby continued her inspection of the property and followed the old brick walkway past a row of trees. She froze at the sight of a little cottage, its paint peeling and most of its windows broken. Taking a deep breath to calm her racing heart, she kept moving through the high grass toward the building.

A rusty glider swing sat on the small porch, which made memories flood her head. A hot Indiana summer, and she and her mom sitting on that very swing, waiting for rain to cool things off. Shelby had only been six years old, but that period in her life had been tucked neatly into her heart as the happiest time she’d ever spent with her mother. The last summer they were together—before Nola went away.

She felt a chill course through her, and her emotions threatened to surface. She was unable to stop the recollection of the nice woman who used to come and visit them at the cottage. A woman who lived in Stewart Manor and her name was Miss Hannah. She was pretty and always smiling. When she visited in the evenings, she’d bring cookies or ice cream. One time she brought a doll.

Then one night when Miss Hannah came by, Nola sent her daughter to bed.

But that didn’t stop Shelby from hearing their argument. The next day, Nola packed up their shabby suitcases and they left Stewart Manor. A bus took them away, and her mother never explained why.

Not long after that, Nola hooked up with another man, Orin Harris. Nola said he was going to be her daddy. Shelby didn't want a daddy, especially someone who was mean to her mother. Besides, Orin and Nola were always drunk and at night they'd fight. One day her mother had gotten sick, and with no other relatives to take Shelby, she had been put in foster care. She never saw or heard from her mother again. Later she was told she had died.

Shelby was almost overcome with sadness. But she drew a shaky breath and fought it, as she had so many times. Denial was her protection against getting hurt.

"Hello, is anyone there?"

With a startled gasp, Shelby jerked around to find an old man standing in the rose arbor. He was short, and as he walked toward her, she noticed he had a slight limp. He had snowy white hair and a ruddy complexion, and his smile let her know he wasn't a threat.

"May I help you?" Shelby asked.

"I'm Ely Cullen, ma'am." He held out his hand.

She shook it and felt his work-hardened hand. "Hello, Ely. I'm Shelby Harris."

"I know. The town's been buzzing about the new owner of Stewart Manor. I was down at the hardware store earlier when I thought I should come by to welcome you to town." He glanced around and sighed. "It sure was a fine place in its day." His hazel eyes returned to her. "Could be again."

"It's going to take a long time and a lot of money," Shelby said. "But I plan to turn the manor into a bed-and-breakfast."

Ely nodded. "Could you use some help getting the grounds in shape?"

Shelby's spirits soared. "I'd love it. But right now all I can afford are these two hands." She held them up.

"What if you didn't have to pay?"

Shelby paused and eyed the old man closely. She didn't like to take handouts. And he couldn't possibly handle the hot, humid summer weather. "That's awfully nice of you, Mr. Cullen, but this is a big job."

"I know. I did it for over thirty years."

She stared at the man. "You were the gardener for Stewart Manor?"

He nodded happily. "I used to prune Miss Hannah's prize-winning roses. Mowed the lawns and trimmed all the hedges. Now I know I'm older and slower these days, but it's been hard for me to stand by and watch the place go downhill since Miss Hannah's passing." His eyes raised to Shelby's. "I can still be useful."

"You sure? I could really use the help, Ely, but I don't want you to be overworked."

"I won't, 'cause I'm going to bring my grandson with me to do the heavy stuff."

"Then I have to insist on paying him."

He smiled. "We'll work something out. Right now let's just spruce up the place a little."

"I want that as badly as you do," Shelby said, finally feeling as if things were going in her favor.

Later that afternoon Rafe walked into Maria's Ristorante and sat down at the end of the bar in the section reserved for Maria's family.

He was a little early for dinner, but he wanted to talk to his brother, Rick, and this was the best place to find him. Rick's wife, Jill, had agreed to work the afternoon shift until she began her teaching job in the fall. The two had only been married a month and they were inseparable.

Rafe envied his brother. Rick had found love, and more importantly, he hadn't been afraid to go after what he wanted. That had been Jill. Rafe hadn't had time to find and court a wife. Not that he'd wanted one.

If the Covelli curse wasn't enough to deter Rafe from finding love, he'd had plenty to handle since his father's accident and death two years ago. Being the eldest son, Rafe had been responsible for Nonna Vittoria, his mother, Maria, and sister, Angelina. And he couldn't forget the family construction business, Covelli and Sons. Things had gone sour when his father's accident had been

blamed on substandard materials, and Rafaele Covelli, Sr., had been the contractor for the building. It had taken a few months, but with the help of Rick and their cousin Tony, Rafe had gotten the business back on track. They were still searching for the creeps responsible for the accident, and Rafe vowed he wasn't going to stop until he'd cleared his father's name.

Recently the family had branched out into different business ventures and were doing well. They even had enough work to employ a bigger crew. But Covelli and Sons had never been about quantity. It was quality that counted, and Rafe had always been the best custom carpenter he could be. His dad taught him that.

That was why he'd laid down the law to Shelby Harris. He remembered the way he'd left her on the porch of Stewart Manor. Her long, jean-clad legs, her emerald-green eyes... Why did he feel as if he'd deserted her?

Because he knew Gus Norton did shoddy work. That man was quick to cut corners. Rafe hated the thought of Gus laying his grimy hand on any of the beautiful woodwork in that house.

"Hey, bro."

Rafe turned to see Rick coming toward him carrying Jill's son, Lucas. The eighteen-month-old boy grinned and reached out for his newly acquired uncle.

Rafe took the boy and sat him on the bar. "Hello, Lucas."

"Hi," Lucas said, acting shy.

Rafe looked at his brother. "I take it you're both visiting a certain pretty blond waitress."

"Yeah," Rick said as his gaze wandered over to where Jill waited on a table. "It's tough having her at work all day."

"Poor thing." He tickled his nephew's chin. "Most people have to work for a living."

"Hey, I work," Rick said. "I've been replacing the hardwood flooring in the living room at the house." He was talking about the Victorian home on Ash Street that he and Jill had bought a few months back. After moving in a month ago, they'd decided to take their time and redo each room. So far they'd finished the kitchen, master bedroom and Lucas's room.

"I ran into another fixer upper today. Shelby Harris."

"She's the one who bought the big old Stewart place?"

"Yeah. She plans on opening a bed-and-breakfast. It's a mess right now. You could spend months working on that place. But the craftsmanship is incredible. Dad would have loved it."

"Didn't he do some work there when we were kids?"

Rafe nodded. "He designed kitchen cabinets for Mrs. Stewart about twenty years ago. I didn't go in the kitchen today."

"So what are you doing for this Ms. Harris?"

"Nothing."

Rick frowned. "She didn't like your ugly mug?"

"I was too expensive for her. I think she overextended herself buying the place. Not enough money left over to do any restoring. I don't think she had any idea what it would cost in time and materials." He shook his head. "That's one stubborn woman."

"Ohh, so you've noticed she's a woman. That's good. Is she young? Old? Pretty?"

Rafe shrugged. "She's about our age, and I didn't pay any attention to what she looked like," he lied.

"Oh, no. You are in trouble, bro, if you can't remember whether or not she's pretty. You've been too long without female companionship."

Rafe gave him a pointed look. "When have I had time? I've been trying to keep the business together."

"And doing a wonderful job, I might add." Rick opened a package of bread sticks and gave one to Lucas. "I hope you know how much I appreciated your keeping things going while I was away all those years."

Rafe knew the guilt his younger brother felt for joining the marines, then going to Texas to find his fortune in oil, rather than staying home to work in the family business.

"I wanted the business to keep going—for dad. We don't have to worry about our independent mom, because she has the restaurant. But Covelli and Sons is our legacy." It was more than that to Rafe. He remembered his father teaching him about woodworking when he was a child and talking about his sons someday joining the business. Rafe had wanted nothing more than to become an expert carpenter like his father, the man he was named after.

Rick broke into his thoughts. "Well, now it looks like you have more than enough to keep busy," Rick said. "Charlie told me you're about ready to rent out the storefront offices."

Rafe nodded. "I'm putting the ad in next week for that space and also the three low-income apartments upstairs. If you hadn't been off fixing up your own house, you could keep up with these things." He turned to his little nephew. "Right, kid?"

Lucas nodded. "Right."

Rick smiled. "Things have sure turned around these past few months. From the verge of bankruptcy to showing a profit in seven months. Good old cousin Tony was unbelievable coming up with the idea of purchasing the storefronts downtown and restoring them." He gave his brother a sideways glance. "Too bad we couldn't get Stewart Manor. Restoring a place like that would be wonderful advertising for the business."

Rafe shook his head. "What did you want me to do? Give away our services? I doubt she can even afford materials."

"Maybe something could be worked out. Sounds like this Ms. Harris needs to fix the place up so she can open for business."

"Maybe she should have taken out a larger loan."

Rick remained silent.

"So I'm the bad guy here," Rafe said.

"Bad boy," Lucas chimed in.

Rick laughed at his son's antics. Lucas joined in and clapped his hands. Hearing the commotion, Jill Covelli wandered over to the bar. She smiled and her blue eyes shone as she looked up at her new husband. She and Rick exchanged a look that made Rafe almost believe in love.

"What's so funny?" she asked, and took the time to kiss her husband and son.

"My older brother's got woman trouble."

Jill smiled. "Who is she?"

"The new owner of Stewart Manor," Rick said.

"Oh, you mean Shelby Harris. I saw her at the bank the other day. Mrs. Kerrigan pointed her out to me. A pretty brunette, tall and slender."

"With the most incredible green eyes," Rafe said before he could stop himself.

"Looks like another one is about to bite the dust," Rick said, grinning.

Rafe shook his head. "Oh, no. I'm not as brave as you, bro. I'm not about to mess around with the Covelli curse."

Around six o'clock Wednesday morning Shelby awoke to the sound of men's voices outside. She rolled over and realized she'd fallen asleep on the sofa while going over some work. She got up and went to the window. Pulling back the curtain, she looked out to find Rafe Covelli standing on her lawn along with two men. One was an older man of maybe forty-five, the other about the same size and age as Rafe.

It took a minute before Shelby remembered that Rafe Covelli was starting work on the front this morning. Her attention was drawn to how good Rafe looked in his navy T-shirt with his broad shoulders and muscular chest. Her gaze lowered to his faded jeans. His legs and rear end weren't bad either.

Suddenly Rafe turned and saw her at the window. Their eyes connected and held for what seemed like a long time. Finally Shelby realized she was in her pajamas. She dropped the curtain and hurried to get dressed. After pulling on a pair of jeans, she grabbed a white T-shirt from her dresser and slipped her feet into a pair of beat-up tennis shoes. She finger-combed her short hair and went outside.

The sun made her squint, and she shielded her eyes from the sun as she approached Rafe.

"Morning," he said sternly. "Sorry to wake you, but we need to get started before it gets too hot."

"I understand. I'm usually up, but I was working late on the computer." Shelby looked at the man standing next to Rafe.

"Hi, I'm Rick Covelli. The rude guy's my brother. Sorry we didn't warn you we were coming so early."

"No problem. Like I said, I just overslept this morning."

"Well, we'll be as quiet as possible. I just need to check out the gables." Rick glanced up at the huge brick structure. "I have to admit that I'm anxious to get my hands on this place. Mind if I go upstairs to have a look?"

"Sure. Go right ahead."

Rick tipped his baseball cap. "Nice meeting you, Shelby. And welcome to Haven Springs. I hope you're going to like it here."

"I'm sure I will."

"Our mother asked us to extend you an invitation to stop by the restaurant—Maria's Ristorante. She and my nonna would like to meet you. My wife, Jill, also works there."

Shelby's head was spinning. She couldn't believe these two men were brothers. One was open and friendly, the other brooding. She glanced at Rafe, who was busy writing something on his clipboard. "That would be nice, Rick. I've been pretty busy with moving in and trying to catch up on my work. I run a computer-graphics business from the house."

Rick smiled again. "Interesting work. Just don't let Rafe anywhere close to your machine. He and computers don't get along."

Rafe glared at his brother. "Don't you think it's about time you started working, bro?"

"All right," Rick said cheerfully, heading for the house. "I'll be on the third floor if you need anything."

Rafe introduced the older man as Charlie. Then another truck pulled into the driveway. It bore the logo of Norton Construction.

Shelby ignored Rafe's look as she walked toward the man getting out of the truck. "Hello, I'm Shelby Harris," she said, and shook his hand. "You must be Gus." The man appeared to be in his late thirties. He was heavysset and evidently hadn't taken the time to shave. And although it was early morning, his clothes were already dirty.

"Howdy, ma'am," Gus Norton said. He looked around. "I see Covelli is doing your exterior." He shook his head. "I don't blame you for not accepting his inflated prices. Old Gus here, I can do it for you at a lower cost I'll fix up the old Stewart place for ya."

Shelby knew she was making a mistake. "Like I said on the phone, Mr. Norton, I can't afford to do much right now."

He nodded and gave her a wicked grin. "That's right, sweetheart. You said you wanted to work something out."

Shelby cringed. Asking for a bid from this man had been a mistake.

"Well, hey there, Rafe," Gus said. "I hear you're doing these facade renovations. It's a shame you had to get out of new construction because of what happened to your daddy."

"I'm doing exactly what I want to be doing, Norton," Rafe said coldly.

Shelby could only stand back and watch the sparks fly between the two men. Then Charlie leaped into the fray. "Since when did they allow you inside the city limits, Norton?"

Gus just grinned. “Hey, Charlie. You ever want to work in real construction again, give me a call.”

Charlie started to say something, but he glanced at Shelby and seemed to think better of it. He walked away.

Shelby quickly ushered Gus into the house and sent him off to his task. In the kitchen she made a pot of coffee. She needed the caffeine to get her going this morning.

She’d spent most of the previous evening at the computer, trying to hammer out the ideas that were due tomorrow. She’d been behind with her work since she’d come to Haven Springs.

With her business doing so well, it had been a bad time to do the move from Louisville, but she couldn’t wait to get into her new home. Now she was paying for it. If she didn’t finish the story she’d been working on in time, she wouldn’t get paid—and she desperately needed the money for the restoration of her new home.

Home. The word seemed strange to her. In her almost twenty-nine years she’d never been able to call anyplace home.

“I can’t believe you actually went ahead and called that guy for a bid.”

Shelby turned around to find Rafe Covelli standing in the doorway.

“I told you, Mr. Covelli, that I needed to get some things done on this house. The rains don’t stop just because I can’t afford to fix the roof.”

“I’ll fix the roof. You already have enough materials in the attic for a decent patch job. I could have it done in a few days. Then you can take your time on some of the other repairs. Just don’t hire that jerk upstairs. Believe me, he doesn’t know a router from a chisel.”

Shelby was tempted to smile but didn’t. She was curious to know why Rafe Covelli was coming to her rescue. Or maybe she shouldn’t ask why and just accept it. “I won’t take charity. I’m going to pay you.”

“You can pay me by getting that jerk who calls himself a contractor out of this house. Stewart Manor deserves the best. That’s me.” Rafe entered the kitchen and stopped, eyeing the oak cabinets.

Shelby smiled. “They’re beautiful, aren’t they? But I don’t think they’re part of the original house.”

Rafe ran his hand over the fine wood grain. “No, they weren’t. They were put in about twenty years ago.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because my dad did the work.” He said this with such pride that she envied him his childhood and the obvious love and respect he had for his father.

“The cabinets are my favorite thing in this kitchen,” she said.

He turned to her. “And if you love this house as much as I think you do, get rid of Norton.”

“Stop giving me orders, Mr. Covelli.”

“It’s Rafe.”

Shelby swallowed as she looked into his intense dark eyes.

“What do you say, Shelby? Do we have a deal? I’ll do the repairs on the roof if you tell Gus to get lost.”

“I told you I won’t take your charity. Maybe we can trade something.”

A twinkle appeared in his eyes and she rushed on to suggest, “How about I teach you about computers?”

He blinked. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Take it or leave it,” Shelby said.

Rafe couldn’t believe this was happening. He was bargaining to get the privilege to repair her roof. When had he lost the upper hand here? But it was worth it when Shelby went upstairs to find Gus Norton and told him the bad news.

Just as she returned to the kitchen, a teenage boy came rushing to the back door. “Miss Harris. Miss Harris.”

Shelby dashed outside, Rafe following. “What is it, Josh?”

“It’s my grandfather. I think he fell.” The boy pointed to the yard.

Shelby hurried across the lawn. Rafe was right behind her. When they reached the rose garden, they found Ely Cullen lying on the ground.

“Don’t move him,” Rafe said. He knelt down beside the man. “Ely, can you hear me?”

“Of course I can hear you.” The old man tried to get up. “I just lost my balance. Bum knee gave out.” He sat up with help from Rafe.

“Wait. Let me check to see if anything is broken.”

“Ain’t nothin’ broken—just my pride.”

“Maybe I should take you to the doctor just in case,” Rafe suggested as he pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at the scratch on Ely’s head. “Does anything hurt?”

“Son, at my age something always hurts.”

“Grandpa, maybe you should go. You have scratches on your face and arm.” The blond teenager looked concerned.

“Josh, I fell on the grass. I’m fine. Like I said, my knee gave out. Just need a little help getting up.”

Rafe eased the man to his feet. The old man did seem steady enough. “Ely, what are you doing out here at seven in the morning?”

“I’m working for Miss Shelby. We’re going to get the lawn and garden in shape by the end of the summer.”

Rafe had had just about enough. Shelby Harris had hired the area’s worst contractor, and then a seventy-seven-year-old man to help with the yard work. He assisted Ely into a lawn chair.

“I’ll get you a glass of water,” Shelby said.

Rafe stopped her. “I think, to be on the safe side, we should run Ely to the clinic.”

“I don’t need to go,” Ely argued.

Rafe exchanged a worried glance with Shelby. She swallowed hard and he could see her fear. “Please, Ely. I’d feel better if you were checked out. I am responsible for your safety, after all.”

The older man smiled. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Shelby wanted to kiss the old man. “I know it wasn’t. It wasn’t anyone’s. But an accident happened.” Oh, Lord, she thought, what if he really was hurt?

“Okay, I’ll go to the doctor as long as this doesn’t mean I can’t work in the garden.”

“If the doctor says it’s okay, you can work here all you want.”

“I’ll get the truck,” Rafe said, and rushed off.

Shelby watched him go, knowing that Rafe Covelli was going to give her a lecture over this one. But right now all she cared about was getting Ely taken care of.

Chapter Three

Shelby sat in the Mayfair Clinic waiting room with Josh. As she anxiously waited for news, she played a few games of hearts and thumbed through every old magazine on the table.

“I promised my dad I’d watch Grandpa. I’m sorry, Miss Harris.”

“Call me, Shelby, Josh. And I’m not blaming you for anything. It was an accident. We just have to watch your grandfather more closely.”

“He isn’t going to lose his job, is he? Ever since he came home two days ago telling us about the new owner of Stewart Manor, all he’s talked about is working in Miss Hannah’s garden again. I haven’t seen him so happy in a long time. If I promise to stay with him, can he still work?”

“Of course. I’d love to have Ely working at the house. His gardening experience is a valuable asset.”

Just then Rafe and Ely came down the hall. Ely had a bandage on his forehead. She and Josh both went to them. “Are you okay, Grandpa?”

Shelby looked at Rafe for verification. “Ely is fine. The doctor said he’s got a few bruises and scratches. He just put a little too much strain on his bad knee.”

“It’s the pits being old,” Ely said. “You feel so dang useless.”

“You aren’t useless, Ely. Your skills are priceless. Just don’t overdo.” She surprised herself and grasped both his hands. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

The older man nodded. “I’ll have Josh do the hard physical work.”

“You just go slower,” Shelby suggested. “And concentrate on the rose garden. I think I can scrape together enough to have some men come in and do the mowing and trimming.”

Ely grinned. “I know a few men who could use a little money, and if I supervise, it’ll get done right.”

Shelby turned to Rafe and found a pleased look on his face. “How about we go to lunch and discuss it?” he asked. “My treat.”

When they all started out the door, Shelby hung back to talk with Rafe. “You don’t need to take us to lunch. I can handle that. I’m paying.”

“Fine. You try and convince my mother to take your money.”

“I will,” she said, determinedly. “And I’m responsible for Ely’s doctor bill, too. How much was it?”

Rafe kept walking. “I’ll just add it to whatever else you owe me.”

“I owe you nothing,” she insisted in a hushed tone.

“The patch job on the roof,” he reminded her.

“I thought we were doing a trade. I was going to teach you how to use a computer.”

Rafe frowned. “Get real, Ms. Harris. I have no desire to learn about computers.”

“You get real, Mr. Covelli. This is the computer age. It’s time you caught up with the times. Don’t you know we’re about to enter the twenty-first century?”

Rafe wanted to give Shelby Harris a piece of his mind, but not right now. He needed to get something into his empty stomach. He’d missed breakfast that morning, and it was nearly one o’clock.

He opened the door to Maria’s and the cool air hit him. After his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he ushered everyone to the table in the corner. He waved to Jill, their waitress.

At first his sister-in-law looked surprised, then a bright smile appeared. She called out to him that she would be right over, then disappeared into the kitchen. He wasn’t surprised when she returned with his mother and his grandmother. All three Covelli women made their way to the table.

His mother was tiny and still beautiful with her sparkling brown eyes and short gray hair. Nonna Vittoria was also small in build, but not quite so lively. Her shoulders were slumped, as if she carried the weight of the world on them. But her seventy-plus years hadn’t put an end to the quickness of her mind.

“Ely, it’s so good to see you,” Maria said cheerfully.

“Hello, Ms. Maria, Ms. Vittoria. Nice to see you again.”

His mother turned to the teenager. “And this must be your grandson, Josh. My, you have grown into a fine-looking young man.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ll be a senior this year.”

Finally Maria turned to her son and placed a kiss on his cheek. “You didn’t stop by for breakfast this morning.”

“Sorry, Mom,” he said. “I was running late.”

“You’re forgiven. Just introduce me to your friend.”

“Mom, Nonna, Jill, this is Shelby Harris. She bought the Stewart place, where we’re doing the facade restoration. Ely and Josh are helping her with some landscape work. We decided to come in for lunch and introduce Shelby around.”

Vittoria stepped forward and touched Shelby's cheek. "So pretty. Are you from around here?" Shelby shook her head. "No, Louisville."

"Ah, no family from here. But you look familiar. Your green eyes, so bonita." Nonna turned to her grandson and smiled. "Isn't she, Rafaele?"

Rafe bit back a groan. "Yes, Nonna. Now, we'd better eat so I can get back to work."

"Fine, I'll bring the lunch special," Maria said. She and Vittoria bustled back to the kitchen.

"Your family is very nice," Shelby said.

"You sound surprised. What did you expect?"

Shelby took a bread stick from the glass container on the table. "I just meant that you're very lucky."

Shelby didn't think she would ever be able to eat again.

The ravioli had been wonderful, plus, Mrs. Covelli had insisted she take some home, along with her homemade bread.

Back at the house, she put the food in the refrigerator and decided to try to get some work done. But she couldn't concentrate on anything.

Thunder sounded in the distance, and she glanced out the window to see that the wind had picked up and the sky had darkened. It was going to storm. Feeling the sudden drop in temperature, she rubbed her bare arms. She'd sent Ely and Josh home. And the crew from Covelli's had also gone. For some reason, she was restless. More thunder rumbled, alerting her that the front was moving through. She went from room to room, checking to see that the windows were shut. She climbed to the second floor and, after cleaning off the window seat in the master suite, sat and watched as the rain poured down and the lightning zigzagged across the gray sky.

Even as a kid, Shelby had liked thunderstorms. Now she only wished her roof was repaired so she could enjoy them without worrying about the ceiling falling in on her!

She got up and walked down the hall to the attic entrance. Maybe she could find the leaks and put a couple of buckets out to catch the water and stop further damage. Besides, she'd never been in the attic and was curious. Opening the raised wood door to the third floor, she flipped on the switch. A single bulb brightened the dusty narrow staircase. A little apprehensive, Shelby avoided the railing and started the climb. Smelling the musty dampness as she made her way up, she arrived into a large open room. She glanced up at the cobwebs laced in the open rafters.

Oh my, this is... spooky, she thought. She jumped at a sharp crack of thunder and saw lightning flash across the small attic window. Undaunted, she walked to the stack of furniture in the middle of the room—the realtor had told her that there were some things left behind. Shelby pulled back one of the blankets and was surprised to find an oak table and chairs, an iron bed frame and several other treasures she could use to decorate the house.

Then she spied a door in the far wall. She walked over and tried to open it, but it was locked. The key must be downstairs with the other house keys. Hearing the rain pounding on the roof, she decided to wait until another day to investigate.

Shelby continued her search for the source of the main leak. Finally she located a puddle. The rain wasn't coming from overhead but from the window. The runoff from the roof was coming in around the frame and running down the wall to the floor. A bucket wouldn't do any good. Maybe some towels stuffed around the window frame would soak up the moisture. Or she could use the blankets.

She pulled one off a table and carried it to the window. Realizing she wasn't quite tall enough, she dragged over a chair and climbed onto it. When she stood on tiptoe to reach the top of the frame, lightning flashed again. This time the lights flickered and went out.

Shelby screamed as she lost her balance and fell off the chair onto the floor. When her weight came down on her ankle, she felt it twist at an odd angle. The pain hit her and she cried out again.

In the dark Shelby tried not to panic, but she was all alone. Then she heard the noise downstairs. Oh, God. Someone was in the house. She cringed when the sound of footsteps came closer. Her heart pounded, until she heard her name called out.

“Shelby? You up there?” It was Rafe Covelli. She sighed in relief.

“Rafe. I’m here.”

A beam from a flashlight illuminated the steps, and then he came into view. “Where are you?”

She could hear the concern in his voice. “Over here.”

He hurried across the room and knelt beside her. He looked relieved to see her, then he grinned. “Well, Ms. Harris, seems you need my help once again. What are you going to use to barter yourself out of this one?”

Shelby wanted to punch him in his smug nose, but thought better of it.

“I don’t need your help,” she insisted as she braced her hand on the chair and tried to stand. She got to her knees then she felt the pain in her ankle and groaned. Automatically Rafe reached out to help, but she shoved his hand away. “I can manage. Just hold the light.”

“Sure, you can,” he said. “But I’ll stand by just in case.”

She finally made it to her feet, or at least to one foot. She didn’t dare put any weight on her tender ankle. “See, I’m fine,” she said through clenched teeth.

“Okay,” he said. “Then we should get downstairs. It isn’t safe up here since the storm took out the power.”

He stepped back, allowing Shelby to go first. But when she let go of the chair and tried to walk, the pain in her sprained ankle made her cry out.

Rafe dropped the flashlight on the floor and caught her to him. “I’ve got you,” he said hoarsely.

Shelby was pulled against his solid chest, her hands gripping his muscular arms. The comfort of his strength and the soothing sound of his voice was almost intoxicating. He smelled like rain.

But she knew she couldn’t continue leaning on him. Experience had taught her that the only person she could depend on was herself. She pushed back, trying to break his hold.

Rafe resisted. “Hey, you can’t go it alone, no matter how stubborn you are,” he said. He grabbed the flashlight off the floor and handed it to her. Then to her shock, he scooped her up in his arms.

“Put me down,” she said, but his grip tightened and her struggles were useless.

“Hush, green eyes,” he murmured. “I only want to take you downstairs and check your injury.” His dark eyes brimmed with tenderness and compassion.

She felt herself relax, and she nodded. The lightning flashed again. “But...but I’m too heavy.”

“You feel fine to me.” He smiled. “Now train the flashlight on the stairs, so I can see where I’m going.”

Shelby did as he asked and he managed to get her down the narrow steps without further problem. He took her into the master suite and deposited her on the window seat, where light from outside, such as it was, came in. The afternoon sky was still dark gray and the storm showed no sign of letting up.

“Looks like we’re in for a wicked night.” He knelt down in front of her and started to untie her tennis shoe. “Let’s have a look at that ankle.”

“I can do it.”

He raised his gaze to hers. “Is it me, or do you have trouble letting anyone help you?”

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