

MARY LYNN
BAXTER

AT THE
TEXAN'S
PLEASURE



Desire

Mary Lynn Baxter

At The Texan's Pleasure

Аннотация

It had been five years since Molly Stewart Bailey fled east Texas, secretly pregnant with Worth Cavanaugh's child. Now he was the state's most powerful man and her mother's boss. Molly would do anything to protect her son, but being in Worth's indomitable presence had her taking all sorts of risks. With his housekeeper's daughter back on his ranch, Worth felt nothing but raging desire. He was determined to relive the passion that had nearly destroyed them both—for just one more night. And then he would uncover the secret that Molly had vowed to guard with her life...

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Coming Next Month

One

What was she doing?

Molly Stewart Bailey couldn't ignore her queasy stomach a moment longer, so she pulled off the highway onto the side of the road. Quickly she turned to see if her unexpected action had awakened her son Trent who was sound asleep in his car seat, his head lobbed to one side. For a second Molly considered jumping out of the car and propping his head back upright.

She squelched that idea as traffic was swishing by her at a rapid rate and in her present state of despair, she was liable to get run over. Still, she paused and continued to look at her son, who favored her, with dark brown hair, smoky blue eyes and clearly defined features.

A friend once told Molly she had the most uncluttered face ever. When she recalled that, it made her smile.

Not today.

Her mind was in too much turmoil; maybe that was why she kept her eyes on her child.

The only feature he had of his father was...

Suddenly Molly slammed the door shut on that thought. Now was the worst possible time to travel down memory lane. As it was, it would take every ounce of fortitude and courage she could muster to do what she was about to do. But she had no choice, even though choices had consequences. In this case, the

consequences could change her life forever, and not for the better either.

That was why she had to guard her heart and its secret with every bit of fight she had in her.

Shaking her head to clear it, Molly pulled back onto the highway, soon to realize she was closer to the Cavanaugh Ranch than suspected. Once again she felt a wave of nausea wash through her. So much for her vow never to return to east Texas, much less to this precise location.

But then who could've known her mother would fall and injure her back to such an extent she was now bedridden? Molly stifled a sigh and tried to concentrate on something mundane like her surroundings, the tall oaks decorated in their fall colors of reds, browns and golds, the pines whose limbs seem to reach to the heavens—the ponds whose waters glistened like diamonds, and the meadowlands dotted with fenced-in cattle.

Only she found she couldn't fix her mind on anything other than gaining ground on her destination.

Nothing could usurp the fact that after almost five years she was about to see Worth Cavanaugh again. In the flesh. Cold chills darted through Molly, and she shivered. Stop it! she told herself. She had to get control of her splattered emotions and never let go of them. Otherwise, she was in for a world of hurt for the next couple of weeks, if not longer.

Gripping the steering wheel harder, Molly made the last turn before entering the long strip of graveled road which led to the

ranch house atop the hill. Once there, she stopped the car and took several deep breaths, which helped settle her nerves. She'd known this endeavor wouldn't be easy, but she hadn't envisioned it being this difficult. It seemed that every nerve in her body was riding on the surface of her skin.

Not a good thing, she told herself, and not at all like her. As a registered nurse, she prided herself on having nerves of steel. Her job actually demanded it. But the who she was about to encounter didn't have anything to do with her job. It was personal. She would soon come face-to-face with the one man she had hoped never to see again, the man who had not only broken her heart but had jerked it out and stomped on it.

"Don't, Molly!" she chastised herself out loud, then quickly glanced in the rearview mirror at Trent. Her self-imposed rebuke hadn't impacted him at all. He was still sleeping soundly. She frowned, realizing that in a few moments, she'd have to awaken him, which would not be to his liking, or hers. When he didn't get his full nap, he tended to be grumpy and oftentimes hard to manage.

Waking up in a ranch setting would most likely right his world quickly, as she'd been telling him about the horses and cattle he'd see every day. She had even bought him a new pair of cowboy boots and hat in honor of this visit to see his grandmother.

Trent had insisted on wearing his new attire today, which brought a smile to Molly's face, recalling how he'd paraded around the house, peering at himself in the mirror every chance

he got, a big grin on his face.

Another sigh filtered through her at the same time the smile disappeared. Worth's house stood in front of her, and for a second she was tempted to jerk the gearshift in Reverse and back down the drive. Out of sight; out of mind. That thought was only fleeting as the needy edge in her mother's voice rose up to haunt her, recalling this visit wasn't about her, Molly, but rather her mother.

As long as she kept that uppermost in her mind, she would do just fine. Molly owed Maxine Stewart more than she could ever hope to repay, and not because she was her mother, either. Maxine had stood by her, though she had been kept in the dark about much of what had gone on in her daughter's life these last few years. If for no other reason, Molly would always love her for that.

"Mommy."

Glad for the interruption, Molly flung her head around and smiled at her son who was now wide-eyed and kicking his booted feet. "Hey, it's about time you woke up."

"When can I see the horses and cows?" Trent asked right off the bat.

Molly grinned. "First things first, okay? We'll see Granna, then the animals."

"Granna'll take me."

Molly heard that comment just as she exited the Toyota Camry and came around to release Trent from his car seat. Then

helping him out, she said, “Remember Granna can’t do anything. She’s in bed with a hurt back.”

Trent frowned as he jumped to the ground, his eyes scanning the surroundings. Molly followed suit, taking in the lovely manicured lawn close to the modern ranch house. Then her gaze dipped beyond to the sloping grounds where animals grazed in the distance near a blue pond.

“Mommy, look, I see lots of cows.”

“Me, too,” Molly said absently, turning Trent by the shoulders and steering him in the direction of the side door to her mother’s small living quarters. Although Maxine’s bedroom and sitting room were part of the main house, Worth had been thoughtful enough to add a private entrance, for which Molly was especially grateful today.

As splintered as she was, she didn’t need to run into Worth, not until she’d at least seen her mother and found out for herself how seriously she was injured. Beyond that, Molly intended to take the moments as they came and deal with them no matter how painful or unsettling.

“Mom, we’re here,” Molly called out, knocking on the door, then opening it.

Maxine Stewart lay propped up on a pillow in her bed, a broad smile on her still-attractive face, her arms reaching out to Trent, who seemed hesitant to move.

“It’s okay, honey, go give Granna a hug.”

“I’m expecting a big hug, you cutie tootie. Granna’s been

waiting a long time for this day.”

Though Trent still appeared reluctant, he made his way toward his grandmother and let her put her arms around him, giving him a bear hug. Finally pushing Trent to arm’s length, Maxine’s eyes glistened with tears. “My, what a big boy you are.”

“I’ll be five my next birthday,” Trent said with pride.

Maxine winked at him. “Granna hasn’t forgotten. I already have your birthday present.”

“Wow!” Trent said with awe.

“Don’t get too excited,” Molly cautioned. “Next month you’ll only be four and a half, which means your birthday’s a while off yet.”

“Can I have it now?”

Molly grinned, tousling his hair. “Not a chance, boy.” Then it was her turn to hug her mother, though through it all, her heart took yet another beating, but for an entirely different reason.

Maxine’s once unlined face had wrinkles that were unavoidably noticeable and dark circles under her eyes where none used to be. Her mother appeared frail, so much frailer than she had ever been.

Though Maxine wasn’t a robust woman, she’d always been the picture of health and beauty. Friends and strangers who saw the two of them together knew they were mother and daughter because they favored each other so much. Some even told them they could pass for sisters.

Pain. That was the culprit that had so changed and aged her

mother. Peering at Maxine closely through trained eyes, Molly didn't see any signs of that pain turning Maxine loose any time soon, not if the X-rays her doctor had sent Molly to peruse were correct. At this point, Molly saw no reason to question the diagnosis.

"Mom, how are you really doing?" Molly asked into the short silence.

"Good."

Molly rolled her eyes. "Hey, remember who you're talking to."

Maxine made a face. "A nurse, I know."

"All the more reason you need to be honest and 'fess up."

"Okay, my back hurts like you-know-what," Maxine admitted down in the mouth, casting a glance at Trent who was busy wandering around the room, fingering this and that.

"That's why I'm here."

"Only not for long, surely." Maxine made a face. "You just can't leave your job. I'd feel even worse if you lost it because of me."

"Hey, calm down," Molly said, leaning down and kissing Maxine on the cheek. "I have a great doctor for a boss. Besides, I have sick days, as well as vacation days, I haven't used. Four weeks' worth, actually."

"Still..."

"It's all right, I promise. I'm not going to do anything that puts my career in jeopardy."

Maxine gave a visible sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear that."

She smiled. "It's so good to see you and Trent. You're a sight for my sore eyes." Maxine faced her grandson and her smile widened. "He's grown so much since I last saw him."

"He's growing much too fast," Molly said with a crack in her voice. "He's no longer my baby."

"That's not so." Maxine looked back at Molly. "He'll always be your baby just like you'll always be mine."

Tears welled up in Molly's eyes, but she blinked them away, hopefully before her mother could see them. "So tell me what's going on here."

"Are you referring to my job?"

Molly was taken aback. "No. I wouldn't think there's a problem with that."

"I hope you're right," Maxine said, her brows drawing together. "Worth let me hire a part-time helper several months ago, which is good. She's more or less running the house now, with me telling her what to do, of course."

"So is that working out?"

"Yes, but this home needs a full-time housekeeper, especially with Worth thinking about entering politics."

The last person Molly wanted to talk about was Worth. Actually, she'd rather not know anything about him period. Under the circumstances, she knew that wasn't possible.

"I just can't help but be a little fearful of eventually losing my job," Maxine said, "especially if I don't start improving."

"Oh, come on, Mom, Worth's not going to let you go. You

know better than that.”

“Maybe I do, but you know how your mind plays tricks on you and convinces you otherwise.” Maxine paused. “I guess what I’m saying is that my mind is my own worst enemy.”

“That comes from lying in bed with nothing to keep you occupied.” Molly smiled with a wink. “But now that Trent and I are here, that’s going to change.” Speaking of Trent made her turn to check on him, only to find he was no longer in the room.

“Did you see Trent leave?” Molly asked, trying to temper her building panic.

“No, but he can’t go far.”

That was when she noticed the door leading to the main house was open. “I’ll be right back,” Molly flung over her shoulder as she dashed out of the room, soon finding herself in the house’s main living area. “Trent Bailey, where are you?”

“Who is Trent?”

Molly stopped in her tracks, and stared into the face of Worth Cavanaugh. For what seemed the longest time, not only did her body shut down, but their eyes also met and locked, though neither said a word. But that didn’t matter. The tension was such that they might as well have been screaming at one another.

“Hello, Worth.” Somehow Molly managed to get those words through cotton-dry lips.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded in a curt tone, choosing to ignore her greeting.

“I would think that’s obvious.”

“Maxine failed to tell me you were coming.” Instead of curt, his tone was now in the freezer, showing no chance of thawing.

“That’s also obvious.”

Another silence.

“Again, who’s Trent?”

“My son.”

Worth’s black eyes flickered and his mouth stretched into a pencil-thin line. “Lucky you,” he finally said in a caustic tone, his eyes filled with scorn as they traveled up and down her body.

The word bastard was about to fly out of her mouth when Trent rounded the corner, racing to her side. “Mommy, I went to see the moo cows.”

Molly pulled him against her, clamping her hand on his shoulder. When he started to squirm, her hold tightened. As if sensing he was in trouble, Trent stopped wiggling and stared up at Worth with open curiosity.

“Trent,” Molly said in a tight voice, “this is Mr. Cavanaugh.”

Worth merely nodded at the boy, then looking up at Molly said, “I’d like to talk to you alone.”

Biting back another choice word, Molly peered down at Trent. “Go back to Granna’s room, honey. And don’t leave. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Okay,” Trent said, whirling and running back down the hall.

Don’t run, Molly wanted to shout, but she knew it wouldn’t do any good. Trent was already out of hearing range.

“So how old is he?”

Molly shook her head as though to clear it, Worth's question taking her by surprise. "Almost four," she said, lying with such ease that it shocked her.

"Good-looking kid."

"Thanks."

Instead of receding, the tension between them continued to rise until Molly felt either she or the room would explode. Or maybe both. She sensed Worth felt the same way, as his features seemed to darken by the second.

"How long are you planning to stay?" he asked, the muscle in one jaw moving up and down, something that always happened when he was angry or disturbed.

"I'm not sure." She paused. "Maybe a week. Maybe longer. I'm not sure. Do you have a problem with my being here?"

"Not in the least," he countered in a harsh tone.

"Is there an addendum to that?"

"Yeah," he said in a parting shot, "just stay out of my way."

Two

He'd been blindsided and he hated it.

This was his domain, dammit, and he had control over what went on here. Or at least he thought he did. Worth muttered a curse, rubbing the five o'clock shadow that covered a good portion of his face as he continued to stand on the porch outside his room. In the distance, he could see the last remnants of a sun fast sinking into oblivion.

Worth peered at his watch and noted that it was not quite five. He loved the fall of the year, especially October because the leaves changed colors. There was one exception, however. The time change. He didn't like anything about falling backward, robbing him of an hour of light at the end of day. As a hands-on rancher, light was a precious commodity.

At this particular moment, whether it was daylight or not wasn't what his frustration was all about. Time had nothing to do with the gnawing deep in his gut. But he sure as hell knew what did.

Molly.

Back in his life.

No way.

Not possible.

Not happening.

Only it had.

She was in his house.

And there wasn't one thing he could do about it short of pitching her and the kid out the door. He muttered another colorful expletive, but again that did nothing to untie the growing knot in his stomach.

Granted, he'd known he would eventually see her again. To think not would've been ludicrous and unrealistic. After all, her mother worked for him. But since he hadn't seen Molly in nearly five years, he'd begun to think that maybe fate was smiling on him.

Heretofore, during her vacation, Maxine had always gone to visit Molly. He'd assumed that would continue to be the case.

Of course, that was before Maxine had fallen and injured her back to the extent she'd been confined to bed. Molly returning to the ranch seemed to fit the logical order of events, which wouldn't have been as much of a problem, if only he'd known about it.

He didn't like surprises, especially not surprises of this nature. Almost walking head-on into her had definitely been a blow—a blow from which he hadn't yet recovered.

The kid hadn't helped, either.

Worth rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the hard coiled muscles under his fingers. Nothing short of asking them to leave would give him any relief. That wasn't about to happen, at least not for several days anyway.

Meanwhile, he'd just have to put up with the situation. If

Molly did like she was told and stayed out of his way, then he could manage. If not...Hell, he wasn't about to go down that treacherous road. It would only make him madder and more frustrated.

He just wished she still didn't look so damn good. Lovelier than even he remembered. And his memory was excellent. Never a day went by that some little something didn't remind him of her. While that never failed to shoot his blood pressure up, he'd learned to shove thoughts of her aside and move on.

Now though, that wasn't doable. He'd most likely see her every day whether he wanted to or not, regardless of what he'd told her. Having gotten over the initial shock somewhat and his head screwed back on straight had brought that reality home. As long as she was on his property, he couldn't avoid her altogether. He couldn't avoid the kid, either.

No doubt about it, she couldn't deny the kid. Looked just like her, which wasn't a bad thing. Molly's dark hair that reminded him of soot, was short and stylish, a perfect backdrop for those smoky colored eyes. And that sultry voice—God, it had always been a turn-on and still was.

Even though he knew she was twenty-seven, seven years younger than he, she didn't look it. With her unmarked skin that reminded him of porcelain at its finest, she could pass for less than twenty.

However, if one were to look closer, her figure bore testimony to her actual age. While remaining thin, with a to-die-for body,

he noticed that it was more rounded, even slightly voluptuous in certain places, particularly her breasts and stomach.

Having borne a child was responsible for those added factors. Instead of detracting from her beauty, they merely enhanced it, making her body sexier than ever. Though he was loathe to admit it, he'd have to be dead not to notice. He might be many things, but dead wasn't one of them.

There had been times, however, when he'd wished he were dead. All because of her.

After Molly had run off, leaving him high and dry, she'd killed something vital inside him, which had never been revived. Part of his heart and soul were dead and Molly was to blame.

He despised her for that.

At least that was what he'd always told himself. But seeing her for that few minutes had turned his perfect world upside down—socked him in the gut, actually. Only not for long, he vowed. Already he was remembering her for the liar she really was.

And with that recall, his confidence rebounded. Even though she was staying in a small suite not far from his didn't mean one damn thing, although at first he'd questioned his placement of her and Trent.

Then he'd told himself, what the hell. Where she stayed didn't mean a thing to him. Hence, he'd had Maxine's part-time helper, Kathy, show them to that particular suite, mainly because it was close to Molly's mother.

In addition, he'd reminded himself, she wouldn't be at the

ranch long enough to matter where she slept. He knew she was a nurse with some large doctors' group in Houston. Hell, he'd heard Maxine brag about that until she'd finally gotten the message that he wasn't interested in hearing about her daughter.

He often wondered what Molly had told her mother about their past relationship. He suspected it had been nowhere near the truth, which reinforced his anger. A good thing, he told himself. As long as he held onto that anger and hatred, he'd come out the winner.

And to hell with her.

Suddenly Worth heard a phone ring. It was only after the third ring he realized it was his cell. Without checking who was calling, he barked, "Cavanaugh."

"My, you sound like you're in a sour mood."

"Hello, Olivia."

He didn't miss the aggravated sigh that filtered through the line. "Is that all you have to say?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Hello, sweetheart, would do for starters."

He didn't answer. First, he'd never called her sweetheart and didn't intend to start now. Second, but most important, she'd hit the nail on the head. He was in a sour mood, but now was not the time to tell her why. He simply wasn't up to fighting the war that would occur if he told her Molly was back in town, staying at the ranch.

More to the point, it wasn't any of Olivia's business.

“Okay, you win,” Olivia replied in an offhanded manner. “I’ll let you pout, or whatever the hell you’re doing.”

“Did you want anything in particular?” Worth asked in a cold tone, knowing he was being a first-class jerk. Yet he felt no need to apologize.

“What time are you picking me up?”

Worth’s mind went blank. “Picking you up?”

“Yes,” she said, not bothering to hide her growing irritation. “Remember you promised to take me to dinner tonight.”

“Oh, right.”

“You’d forgotten all about that, hadn’t you?”

He had, but again he wasn’t going to admit it. “I’ll be there around sevenish.”

Another sigh. “You know, Worth, I think you take great pride in being an ass.”

Silence.

“And while we’re on the subject of dinner,” Olivia added, “don’t forget about the party at my house tomorrow night concerning your political future.”

“I haven’t, Olivia.” His tone was weary. “I know my parents are invited along with a possible potential backer.”

“At least you remembered something.”

With that, she hung up.

That was two women he’d ruffled today. He wondered if his mother was next in line. Probably so, he told himself. On a normal day, he and Eva Cavanaugh didn’t see eye-to-eye on much

of anything. If she'd stop trying to micromanage his life, that might change. His father, however, was a different matter. They got along fine, at least on the surface, though he felt he had never known what made Ted Cavanaugh tick.

In all fairness, his parents probably didn't know what made him tick, either. One thing he did know was they wanted him to marry Olivia Blackburn. No. They expected him to marry her, which was the same as waving a red flag in front of a bull. He didn't live by, or under, others' expectations. Besides, he didn't love Olivia. He'd made the mistake of falling in love once, and he'd never repeat it. Never.

Only problem was, he needed what Olivia could give him and that land she stood to inherit. His parents had deeded him the three hundred acres that adjoined their property, which he'd hoped would be enough to do most anything he chose in the way of ranching. But with his cattle business thriving, he needed more land.

That was where Olivia fit into his life so well. The acreage she'd inherit from her father would give him the room to expand his horse breeding business, a dream that hadn't yet come to fruition.

Ah, to hell with women and the garbage they dished out, his thoughts targeting Molly. What he needed was a drink, he told himself savagely. Something large and strong that would cut through the constriction in his throat that had a strangle-hold on him.

He was just about to accommodate himself when his phone rang again. This time he did look at caller ID and saw that it was his mother. He was tempted not to answer it, but he did. Maybe she was canceling the dinner. A smirk crossed his lips. Not a chance that would happen.

“Yo, Mother.”

“Is that any way for a politician to answer the phone?”

“I’m not a politician. Yet.” He was irritated and it showed.

“You will be,” she said in her lofty tone. “Just as soon as you throw your hat into the ring.”

“I haven’t decided to do that, either.”

“I don’t know why you take delight in being difficult.”

“Mother, if you’re going to get on your soapbox about politics, then this conversation is over.”

“Don’t you dare hang up on me.”

Not only could he hear the chagrin in his mother’s voice, but he could picture it in her face, as well. Although tall and rawboned like himself, she was nonetheless a very striking woman, with blond hair and black eyes, who commanded attention with her height and flare for fashion. But when she was out of sorts, which she was now, her usually pleasant features turned hard and unpleasant.

“I’ll see you and Dad tomorrow night at Liv’s around eight. We can talk about politics then, okay?”

“That’s not what I’m calling about.”

Something in her voice alerted him to be on guard, that the

rest of the conversation would not be to his liking. Her next words confirmed that.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” Worth’s tone was as innocent as hers was accusing.

“That Molly Bailey, or whatever her name is now, is at your ranch.”

God, it didn’t take long for news to travel, but then in a small town like Sky, Texas gossip was the most popular game in town.

“Because it’s no big deal.”

“No big deal.” Eva’s voice rose. “How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true. She came to see about her mother.”

“I understand that.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“The fact that she’s staying at your place is the problem.”

“Mother, I don’t want to discuss this.”

Eva went on as though he hadn’t said a word. “A motel would’ve been just fine for the likes of her.”

Although he had no intention of defending Molly—not for one second—his mother’s words set him off like a rocket. It was all he could do to keep his cool long enough to get off the phone before he said something he’d be sorry for.

“Goodbye, Mother. I’ll see you tomorrow tonight.”

“Worth Cavanaugh, you can’t hang—”

“Yes, I can. I’ve got to go now.” Without further ado, Worth punched the red button on the phone and Eva’s hostile voice was

no longer assaulting his ear.

Women!

He'd had enough of them for one day. That stiff drink was looking more enticing by the second. He was about to walk back inside when he saw her strolling across the lawn. Alone.

Worth stopped in his tracks and watched. Molly was still dressed in the same jeans she'd had on earlier, jeans that fit her rear to perfection. Right now, it was her backside that held him captive—the sway of those perfect hips. Then she turned slightly, giving him privy to the way her full breasts jutted against the soft forest-green sweater.

For what seemed an eternity, his eyes consumed her. Then muttering a harsh obscenity, he felt his manhood rise to the occasion. Even though he dragged his gaze away from the provocative thrust of those breasts and back to her face, that action did nothing to release the pressure behind his zipper.

She was such an awesome picture of beauty against the gold and orange leaves falling from the trees that his breath caught in his throat.

It was in that moment she looked up and saw him. For the second time in a day, their eyes met and held.

He stared at her, breathing hard. Then cursing again for the fool that he was, Worth pivoted on a booted heel and strode back inside, only to realize that he was shaking all over.

Three

Lucky for her it was Worth who looked away first. For some crazy reason, Molly couldn't seem to tear her eyes away from him, although he was several yards from her. Yet his tall figure appeared clear to her.

And threatening.

Even so, she had been held spellbound by his presence, though she knew that if she were close enough to read those black eyes, they would be filled with animosity.

Thank heaven the moment had passed and he was gone. However, she didn't move. Her body felt disassembled, perhaps like one of the many leaves that were falling from the trees, never to be attached again.

What an insane thought, Molly told herself brutally, storming back into her room. Besides, it was getting downright chilly despite the fact the sun was still hanging on. Once it disappeared, the temperature had a tendency to drop quickly.

By the time she closed the French doors, she was shivering all over. Not from the chill, she knew, but from her second encounter with Worth. She eased onto the chaise longue, the closest seat, and took several deep breaths to calm her racing heart, feeling lucky to be alone. Trent was with his grandmother who was happy as a lark reading to him. He had crawled into the bed with Maxine and was hanging onto every word she read out

of the book.

Before she had ventured outdoors, Molly had stood in her mother's door and watched them, feeling a peace descend over her. Coming here, despite the obstacles, had been the right thing to do. Not only did her ailing mother need her daughter, she needed to get to really know her grandson. To date, Trent and Maxine hadn't had the opportunity to bond, to develop a close relationship that was so unique to grandparents and grandchildren.

Now, however, the doubts were once again creeping back into her mind, following that long distance encounter with Worth. Molly bit down on her lower lip to stop it from trembling while her eyes perused the room where she tried hard to concentrate on the rustic good taste that surrounded her.

She forced herself to take in, and appreciate, the cobalt blue walls and the big four-poster bed that was angled in one corner. The one thing that held her attention was the handmade quilt that adorned the bed. The coverlet picked up the blue in the wall, as well as other vivid colors, resulting in a stunning piece of art.

An armoire occupied the other side of the bedroom. The sitting area where the chaise resided held a desk and chair. No doubt, it was a place where she could be comfortable for a long period of time. But even if her job allowed that luxury, it wouldn't work.

Because of Worth.

Suddenly Molly felt tears fill her eyes, and that made her mad.

Lunging off the chaise, she curled her fists into her palms and strengthened her resolve. She wouldn't let her emotions get the best of her again. She had indulged herself before she'd arrived, and that had to be her swan song. Otherwise, she wouldn't get through the quagmire that was already threatening to suck her under.

Yet seeing Worth again so soon after her arrival seemed to have imprinted him on her brain, and she couldn't let go of that image. What an image it was, too. She had never thought of him as handsome, only sexy.

Now he seemed both. He was tall and leathery thin, but not too thin, having toned his muscles to perfection riding horses and branding cattle—the two loves of his life. His short brown hair still had streaks of blond, but she could almost swear that some gray had been added to the mix. His face, with its chiseled features, was definitely more lined.

Neither change, however, was a detraction because of those incredible black eyes, surrounded by equally incredible thick lashes. They were by far the focal point of his face and his best asset.

And he knew how to use them. He had a way of looking at her like she was the only one in existence. And that was a real turn-on, or at least it always had been for her.

Until today.

When she had practically run into him upon her arrival, she'd seen none of that sexual charisma reflected in his eyes. Instead,

she'd seen pure hostility and anger that bordered on hatred. Another shiver darted through Molly, and she crossed her arms over her chest as if to protect herself.

From Worth?

Possibly, because he was someone she no longer knew. More noticeable than the physical changes in him, were the changes in attitude. From the first moment she'd met him that fateful summer, she remembered him as having been rather cocky and self-assured for someone who was just twenty-nine years old. But she'd taken no offense at that attitude; actually that was one of the reasons she'd been attracted to him.

While both cocky and self-assured still applied, other adjectives now fit his personality. He appeared bitter, cynical and completely unbending. Though she didn't know the reason for such a radical change, she didn't like it, especially since it was directed at her.

After all, he'd been the one who had betrayed her. If anyone had an ax to grind, it was she. Admittedly she did, but she wasn't about to show her bitterness to the entire world.

Maybe she was just the one who continually brought out the worst in him. Around others maybe he was a kinder and gentler soul. That thought almost brought a smile to Molly's face. Worth Cavanaugh was a man unto himself, having carved an empire for himself in his early thirties. Kinder and gentler didn't make that happen. Hard and tough-skinned did.

Suddenly a sliver of panic ran down Molly's spine. What was

she doing here? It wasn't going to work. She hadn't even been here one whole day, and thoughts of Worth had her by the jugular and wouldn't let go.

Molly swallowed convulsively as she eased back onto the chaise, vivid memories of the last time they were together rising to haunt her. If her recall served her correctly, she'd been in the barn that day, looking for Worth most likely.

The why actually hadn't been important. Once there, she'd climbed into the loft and plopped down in the middle of the hay. She remembered closing her eyes, taking a catnap during which she dreamed about Worth. When she finally opened her eyes, she was taken aback to find him leaning against a post, watching her with unsuppressed desire further darkening his eyes.

Since it had been summer and the temperature sizzling, she'd had on only the barest of clothing—a pair of blue jean shorts, a tank top without a bra and flip-flops. The way he'd stared at her, she might as well have been naked.

Heat pooled between her thighs as their eyes remained locked.

She saw him swallow with effort, causing his Adam's apple to bob up and down as he slowly, but surely pushed away from the post and made his way toward her, his fingers busily unzipping his jeans.

All of that seemed to take place in slow motion as she lay unmoving, her heart pumping so loudly she could hear it in her ears. By the time he reached her, Molly's eyes were no longer on his face but rather on the juncture at his thighs where his erection

was thick and hard.

She couldn't speak; her mouth was too dry. She could only watch him lift his arms and pull off his T-shirt, then toss it aside. A gasp slipped past her lips as her eyes covered every inch of his big, beautiful body, settling on his erection that seemed to be increasing by the moment.

Blood pounded from her heart into her head at such a rapid rate that it made her dizzy. Yet she couldn't have removed her eyes from him if someone had threatened her life with a gun. It wasn't as if that had been the first time she'd seen him in the buff, either.

It hadn't. Far from it, actually.

Since her arrival that summer at his ranch, she and Worth had become an instant item. It had been lust at first sight.

When that lust had turned to love, Molly couldn't say. Maybe it had been after he'd taken her that first time. From then on, he hadn't been able to keep his hands off her and vice versa. With summer coming to an end, nothing had changed. Every time Worth looked at her, or came near her, her bones melted.

That day was no exception.

"You're a beautiful man," she said in her sultry voice that now had a crack in it.

He merely grinned, then knelt beside her and promptly removed her clothing.

"Not nearly as beautiful as you," he rasped, his gaze now covering every inch of her flesh.

He bent over and latched onto an already burgeoning nipple and sucked it until she couldn't keep still. Finally releasing it, he moved to the other one and did likewise. Only after he left her breasts and began to lick his way down her stomach did she take action, latching onto his erection, rubbing her thumb in and around the opening.

Worth let out a loud groan as he nudged her legs apart and gently inserted two fingers inside her.

"Oh, yes," she whimpered, her hips going crazy.

"Baby, baby, you're so wet, so ready."

"Please, now. Don't make me wait."

Propping himself on his hands, Worth leaned further over her, then entered her with unerring accuracy. For a moment he didn't move, seemingly to enjoy the way she formed a tight sheath around him, his eyes burning deeply into hers.

Then he pumped up and down until the fiery explosion hit them at the same time. Moments later he lay limp on her with her arms clasped tightly around him.

"Am I too heavy?" he whispered at last, his breath caressing her ear.

"No."

"Oh, but I am." He chuckled, then rolled over so that she was now on top of him.

She leaned down, kissed him, and said in an awed voice, "I can't believe you're still inside me."

"Me, either, especially since all the lead's gone out of my

pencil.”

She giggled and kissed him again.

Suddenly his gaze darkened on her. “Know what?”

“I know lots of whats,” she said in a teasing voice. “One of them is that I love you.”

“I love you, too, so much that I got carried away and didn’t use a condom.”

For several seconds, silence fell between them.

“Are you mad at me?” he asked.

“No,” Molly responded, feeling her brows gather in a frown.

“It takes two to tango, as the saying goes.”

“Right, but I should’ve been more responsible.”

“Shh. It’s okay. It’s not the right time of the month for me.”

Molly paused. “At least I don’t think so.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you dare say that. I loved every minute of it. There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

It was the thought of those words that jerked Molly out of the past back into the present. Back to reality. To the pain and hurt that had resulted from that passionate afternoon of lovemaking.

Knowing her face was drenched with tears, Molly went into the bathroom and wet a washcloth with cold water. Though the cloth felt like ice against her skin, it did what she’d hoped it would and that was clear her fogged mind.

She couldn’t change what had happened between her and Worth. All she could do was change how she reacted to him now.

Though the aftermath of their affair had left deep and lasting scars, she wasn't sorry because out of it had come the blessing of her life—her son.

For that she would never be sorry.

It was then that Molly suddenly heard the sound of an engine. Hurrying to the French doors, she walked onto the porch where she saw Worth sitting in his truck. She was still standing in the cold when the taillights disappeared.

With her teeth chattering, she went back inside, not stopping until she was in her mother's room, facing her son's animated face.

“Mommy, Mommy, come see what Granna gave me.”

Squaring her shoulders, Molly shoved the past back under lock and key deep in her soul.

Four

“Oh, Doctor, thanks so much for returning my call.”

“Not a problem,” Dr. Roy Coleman responded. “I know you’re concerned about your mother and well you should be.”

Molly winced under the doctor’s direct words, but then she was a nurse, for God’s sake, so she shouldn’t be surprised. Most doctors nowadays didn’t tiptoe around the rose bush. They called the problem as they saw it and let the chips fall where they may. Her boss Sam Nutting was cut from that same bolt of cloth.

Somehow, though, she was reluctant to hear the truth because it was her mother, who had always been Molly’s lifeline and still was. Her dad had died from heart failure when she was young, leaving them without ample resources. Hence, Maxine had had to work her fingers to the bone for other people in order for them to survive. However, she never forsook her daughter; Maxine always found time to spend with Molly no matter how exhausted she was, or how much she had to do.

“Are you still there, Ms. Bailey?”

The doctor’s crisp voice brought Molly back to the moment at hand. “Sorry, I was woolgathering about Mother, actually. Now that I’ve seen her and the condition she’s in, I’m really concerned.”

“As I said earlier, you have good reason. She took a nasty fall, which did major damage to her back, as you already know, of

course. The main plus, however, is that she has no fractures.”

Even though Maxine had slipped in the hallway two weeks ago, it seemed much longer to Molly because she hadn’t been able to leave work and come immediately. Her mother had insisted that she not, making light of the accident.

Only after Dr. Coleman talked with her, then sent copies of the MRI did Molly know the extent of the damage to her mother’s back. Ergo, she lost no time in rushing to Maxine’s side.

“I appreciate you keeping me posted at every turn, Doctor.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way. As I told you, Maxine’s special, a rare breed. I know she’s in pain, yet she suffers in silence.”

“Only that’s not good.”

“You’re right. It’s not. I don’t want her in pain. But Maxine is one of—if not the most—hardheaded patients I have.”

“That’s why I’m here, Dr. Coleman, to see that she does like she’s told and behaves herself.”

He chuckled, and Molly liked that. Although she’d never met him, they’d had countless phone conversations. Each time she was more impressed with his sense of humor and his care of her mother.

“I’d like to get another MRI soon, so we can see if the severely strained muscles are beginning to heal on their own. Meanwhile, I’ve ordered a corset for her to wear. In fact, I don’t want her even sitting on the side of the bed without it, much less walking.”

Molly tried to remain upbeat, but under the circumstances that

was becoming more difficult by the second. "That sounds like she's going to be incapacitated for a good little while."

"Because of her osteoporosis, she will be."

Molly's heart sank. "So we're looking at long-term recovery instead of short-term." A flat statement of fact.

"Not necessarily. Maxine is so determined that she could rebound much quicker than most, I suspect." Dr. Coleman paused. "However, work of any kind is out for now."

"What about physical therapy?"

"That's coming, but it's too soon. The corset is enough for now."

Molly fought back the unknown fears that were festering inside her. For the moment, the picture was dismal. What if her mother never regained the full use of her body? Maxine had always worked, had always been full of energy. She didn't believe in resting on her laurels, she'd told that to Molly all her life. An honest day's work for an honest day's pay had been Maxine's philosophy.

"You're going to have to help me convince her that she can't work, Doctor. So far I don't think you've gotten that across to her. She thinks she'll be mopping floors next week."

"Someone will be mopping floors, but it won't be Maxine."

"Thank you for being brutally honest with me." Molly's sigh was shaky. "Now, I have to be brutally honest with her."

"If you want to wait, I'll drive out to the ranch. We'll gang up on her."

A doctor who made house calls? No way. Yet he had offered, though Molly wasn't about to take him up on that offer. She could handle Maxine, but it wouldn't be easy. No matter. Her mother had no choice but to comply.

"Thank you for your kindness, but let me have a go at it first. If she bucks me, you'll be the first to know."

"Call me any time."

When the conversation ended, Molly held the receiver for a few moments longer, then replaced it, feeling as though she was moving in a daze.

She had dreaded having this session with the doctor because she knew it wasn't going to be encouraging. Since her arrival yesterday, she had come to realize her mother was indeed in dire straits, with no easy fix.

Now this morning, she had the unpleasant task of breaking the bad news to her mother. Molly was just thankful Trent was with Maxine. Bless his sweet heart, he had rarely left Maxine's room since they had arrived, seeming to have forgotten the horses and cattle with which he'd been so fascinated. But then Maxine had played with him non-stop. Knowing Maxine was exhausted, Molly finally had to call a halt to their togetherness.

Putting off the inevitable wasn't going to make things any easier, Molly reminded herself. Squaring her shoulders with resolve, she left her room and headed toward Maxine's, though not without first taking a furtive look around. While she certainly didn't expect Worth to be lurking in the shadows waiting to

pounce on her, she still found herself somewhat rattled every time she left her room.

She had no idea what time Worth returned home last night, but she knew it was late, having heard him open the door to his room. It didn't matter where he went or what he did. Their relationship was past history and she had no right or reason to care about his whereabouts. Her aim was to avoid him at all costs.

Only problem with that, she was staying under his roof.

Pushing that unsettling thought aside, Molly knocked lightly on Maxine's door, then went in, only to pull up short. Her mother was asleep while Trent lay sprawled beside her, coloring in his coloring book.

"Hi, Mommy," he said in a soft voice. "Granna felled asleep."

"It's okay, honey." She reached for him and lifted him off the bed, then gathered the books and colors. "I want you to go to our room and color there for a few minutes, okay?"

Trent made a face. "I don't want to."

She smiled. "I know, but again, it'll only be for a few minutes, then I'll come and get you. I want to talk to Granna alone."

"Why can't I stay?" he whined.

Molly gave him a stern look. "Trent."

With his bottom lip poked out, he took the stuff, and without further ado, made his way to the door.

"Don't go anywhere else. Stay put in our room."

"Okay," he mumbled.

Molly stood watch until he was down the hall and the door

closed behind him. He was so precious. Rarely did she ever have to scold him, but she didn't want him to hear this conversation she was about to have with her mother. She feared Maxine's reaction would not be favorable.

"Mom," Molly said, gently touching Maxine on the shoulder.

Her mother's eyes popped open and for a moment, she seemed completely disoriented. Then when she apparently recognized Molly, she smiled in relief, only then to frown. "Where's Trent?"

"He's in our room. He'll be back shortly."

"What time is it?" Maxine asked, her frown deepening.

"Almost noon."

"Oh, dear. I can't believe I even went to sleep, much less for that long."

"It's okay, Mother. You need all the rest you can get."

"No, what I need is to spend time with my daughter and grandson before I go back to work."

Molly was quiet for a moment, her mind scrabbling for a way to tell her mother the truth without breaking her heart. "Mom—"

"You're going to tell me I can't go back to work any time soon, aren't you?" Maxine's eyes were keen on Molly.

"That's right," Molly declared with relief.

"No, that's wrong."

Molly's relief was short-lived. "I—"

"I'm going to be just fine. I know I pulled some muscles in my back—"

"That you did," Molly interrupted flatly. "And according to

the doctor, your recovery won't be quick or easy."

Maxine's chin began to wobble. "I refuse to believe that."

"It's the truth, Mother, and you have to face it. More than that, you have to accept it. Now if you didn't already have osteoporosis, then maybe things would be different."

"But what about my job?" Maxine wailed. "Worth has been so good to me, but he'll hire someone permanently to take my place. He'll have to, only I can't bear that thought."

"Mom, let's not beat that dead horse again. Worth is not going to replace you."

"Has he told you that?" Maxine's tone held a bit of belligerence.

Molly hesitated. "No, he hasn't."

"So you don't know what he has in mind." Maxine's voice broke.

"Oh, Mom, please, don't worry. It's going to be all right." Molly caressed one of Maxine's cheeks.

"He doesn't know—" Again Maxine broke off.

"The whole story about your back," Molly cut in. "Is that what you were about to say?"

Maxine merely nodded.

"Ah, so you told him what you wanted him to know, what you thought he wanted to hear."

Maxine reached for a tissue out of the nearby box. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Look, Mom, it's not as grim as you think."

“That’s because it’s not you.” Maxine paused, then added quickly, “For which I’m grateful. I couldn’t stand it if it were you in this shape.”

“Yes, you could. You’d just come and take care of me like I’m going to do for you.”

“You can’t,” Maxine wailed again. “You have a child and a job. And your life. You can’t—”

“Shh,” Molly said softly. “Enough. I’m not going to give up my life, for pity’s sake. Just rest easy, I have a plan.”

“What?” Maxine’s tone was suspicious.

“I’ll tell you later.” Molly leaned over and kissed her mother on the cheek. “Right now, I’m going to send Trent back in here unless you want to go back to sleep.”

“Not on your life. I want to spend every moment I can with my grandson.”

“By the way, I spoke to Dr. Coleman.”

Maxine’s chin wobbled again.

“Hey, stop it. I’ll tell you about that later also. Meanwhile, keep your chin up, you hear? Everything’s going to work out.”

Maxine did her best to smile. “Send my boy back to me. I have plans that don’t include you.”

Molly smiled big, then sobered. “Don’t let him wear you out. He can, you know.”

“You let me worry about that.”

When Molly reached her room, she realized tears were running down her face. Brushing them aside, she forced a smile

and opened the door. “Hey, kiddo, Granna’s waiting on you.”

Would there ever come a time when she wouldn’t react to him?

Yes, Molly told herself. As long as she didn’t see Worth, life would resume its normal course. Or would it? Almost five years had gone by and never a day passed she didn’t think of him. Residing in his house made a bad thing worse.

Right now she didn’t have a choice.

As if he realized he wasn’t alone, Worth swung around. When he saw who it was, his eyes widened, then a door seemed to slide over those eyes, blanking out his expression.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you it was rude to sneak up on a person?”

Go to hell.

She didn’t say that, but oh, how she wanted to. To speak her mind in that manner, however, would only incite a verbal riot, and she didn’t want that. Too much was at stake. She merely wanted to talk to him in a civil manner.

“Sorry,” Molly finally said in a moderate tone.

“No, you’re not.”

She hadn’t meant to sneak up on him without warning. She just happened to walk by the door leading onto the porch and saw him there, a booted foot propped on one of the iron chairs. He seemed to have been staring into the waning sun, far in the distance, as though deep in thought.

Molly guessed she should have coughed, or done something to

reveal her presence, only she hadn't thought about it. She had just walked onto the porch and waited, seeing this as an opportunity she couldn't pass up.

"Look, Worth, I don't want to fight with you," she said at last. She'd meant what she'd said, too, especially when she watched him set the empty beer bottle down on the table, making more noise than he should have, which spoke volumes about his mood.

She couldn't let Worth see the effect he had on her. Not now. Not ever. And entering into another verbal skirmish with him would put the power in his hands, power that could end up destroying her and what she held dear. At all costs, she had to maintain her cool.

"Is that what we're doing?"

"I don't want to play word games with you, either."

He jammed his hands into his pockets which pulled the fabric tighter across his privates. For a moment, her gaze lingered on the mound behind the zipper. Then realizing what she was doing, she jerked her head back up to his face, praying that he hadn't noticed anything amiss.

If he had, he didn't acknowledge it. Instead, he continued to stare at her through those blank eyes.

"What do you want, then?"

"To take my mother's place."

His head bolted back at the same time he went slack-jawed. "As my housekeeper?"

"Yes," Molly said with punch in her tone.

He pitched back his head and laughed. "Get real."

"I'm serious, Worth," she countered with an edge in her tone.

"So am I, and that's not going to happen."

"Why not?"

He smirked. "Come on, Molly, you know why not. You're a nurse, and that's what you need to be doing."

"I can do both. I can take care of the house and my mother."

"What about Trent?"

"I'll put him in day care, and he'll be just fine."

"No."

She ignored that terse rejection and went on, "My mother's mind is her own worst enemy right now. She thinks you're going to replace her."

"That's hogwash. She has a job here as long as she wants one. And I'll tell her that."

"I appreciate that, but I still want to take her place. I can take care of Mom, encourage her and she will see that my job as housekeeper is temporary. This way she won't worry about someone permanently replacing her. She'll know I'm only filling in. Not only that, but I'm good. I grew up helping her clean houses."

Worth looked astounded. "Are you nuts? Besides, you don't have to do that anymore."

"I know I don't have to. I want to."

"Dammit, woman, you haven't changed a bit."

Molly raised her eyebrows. "Oh?"

“Yeah, you’re still as stubborn as a mule.”

She wanted to smile but didn’t. Instead she held her ground.
“So are you.”

Worth cursed at the same time their eyes collided then held tighter than magnets.

Suddenly the oxygen in the air seemed to disappear, forcing Molly to struggle for her next breath. She could tell Worth was also affected as his face lost what little color it had left. And something else happened, too, though she couldn’t identify it.

What it hadn’t been was hostility. So had it been blatant desire? No. She’d been mistaken. He despised her and that wasn’t about to change. She didn’t want it to, either, she assured herself quickly, though the undertow of his sexy charisma was pulling on her.

Forcing her panic aside, Molly sucked in a deep breath and stared at him with an imploring expression.

“I’ll think about it,” Worth muttered on a sour note, cramming his hands further down in his pockets, which pulled his jeans even tighter across that area.

Molly averted her gaze and muttered, “Thank you.”

He laughed, but again without humor.

Feeling heat rush into her face, Molly knew she should leave before insult was added to injury. She was about to do just that when his next words froze her in her tracks.

“Why did you run out on me?”

Five

She whipped back around and stared at him, feeling as though she were strangling. “What did you say?” she finally managed to asked.

“Don’t play the deaf ear thing on me.” Worth’s tone was low and rough. “It won’t work. You heard every word I said.”

“I used to admire your badass attitude,” Molly responded with fire. “In fact, I thought you were the stud of all studs because of it.”

His eyebrows shot up as though that shocked him.

“But now I know better.”

His features darkened. “Oh?”

“That attitude sucks big time.”

The look that crossed Worth’s face was chilling, and he took a step toward her, only to stop suddenly as though he were a puppet on a string and someone had jerked that string. She knew better. Worth was no one’s puppet and never had been. Then she recanted that thought. His parents apparently knew how to pull his strings and get away with it.

“You know I really don’t give a tinker’s damn what you think about me or my attitude.” Worth’s voice had grown rougher.

“Then why ask me that question?”

“Curiosity is the only thing I can figure,” he said in an acid tone, fingering an unruly strand of light hair that grazed his

forehead.

Molly was suddenly tempted to reach out and push it back in place, something she had done on many occasions that long-ago summer. That sensual memory was so vivid she felt like a piece of broken glass was slicing through her heart.

“Your curiosity can go to hell. I’m not answering you.”

He smirked. “That’s because you don’t have a satisfactory explanation.”

“I have no intention of swimming through the muddy waters of the past. With your cynical judgment of me, I’d just be wasting my time anyway.”

No doubt she was on the defensive and probably sounded as cynical as he did, but she didn’t care. If she were going to survive and keep her secret from him and his parents, she had to best him at his own game, or at least match him.

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