



Silhouette®

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June

Oops...We're Married?

SUSAN LUTE

SILHOUETTE *Romance*



Susan Lute

Oops...We're Married?

Аннотация

Once she'd dreamed of those words, but Eleanor Silks Rose had grown up and kicked her crush on Dillon Stone like a bad habit. So why had she blushed as the widowed single dad touched his lips to hers during the mock ceremony? And when their charity dating-game wedding turned out to be real, why did she start dreaming she'd be Mrs.Dillon Stone forever?Dillon was on a quest for the perfect wife, yet he'd never expected to be wed to an irresistible Eleanor! But he didn't need passion; he needed a mother for his son. Could his accidental bride be the woman he'd been searching for to bring love and sizzle to his life?

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“Put me down.”

Eleanor’s voice sounded husky. Could she possibly be as affected as he was by their proximity?

Entering her bedroom, Dillon stopped beside the bed, releasing her legs so they dropped until just the tip of her toes were touching the rug. She was just the right height, he realized, oblivious to everything but the woman standing still in his arms.

“You can let me go now,” Eleanor said in a hoarse whisper.

“What if I don’t want to let you go just yet?” Heating up at the tremor in Eleanor’s voice, Dillon wondered exactly what he did want from her.

“You don’t really want to do this.”

“I don’t?” He gulped, her voice splashing like coldwater on his growing desire.

“Well, if we do...this, we can’t get an annulment.”

Dear Reader,

Oh, baby! This June, Silhouette Romance has the perfect poolside reads for you, from babies to royalty, from sexy millionaires to rugged cowboys!

In Carol Grace’s *Pregnant by the Boss!* (#1666), champagne and mistletoe lead to a night of passion between Claudia Madison and her handsome boss—but will it end in a lifetime of love? And don’t miss the final installment in Marie Ferrarella’s crossline miniseries, *THE MOM SQUAD*, with *Beauty and the Baby*

(#1668), about widowed mother-to-be Lori O'Neill and the forbidden feelings she can't deny for her late husband's caring brother!

In Raye Morgan's *Betrothed to the Prince* (#1667), the second in the exciting *CATCHING THE CROWN* miniseries, a princess goes undercover when an abandoned baby is left in the care of a playboy prince. And some things are truly meant to be, as Carla Cassidy shows us in her incredibly tender *SOULMATES* series title, *A Gift from the Past* (#1669), about a couple given a surprising second chance at forever.

What happens when a rugged cowboy wins fifty million dollars? According to Debrah Morris, in *Tutoring Tucker* (#1670), he hires a sexy oil heiress to refine his rough-and-tumble ways, and they both get a lesson in love. Then two charity dating-game contestants get the shock of their lives when they discover *Oops...We're Married?* (#1671), by brand-new Silhouette Romance author Susan Lute.

See you next month for more fun-in-the-sun romances!

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Mary-Theresa Hussey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, stylized 'M' and 'H'.

Mary-Theresa Hussey
Senior Editor

Oops...We're Married?

Susan Lute



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To my children,
Darren, Damon and Saritha,
you bring nothing but great joy to my life.
And...
to my husband, David,
I love you.

SUSAN LUTE

lives in the Pacific Northwest, in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. She married her high school sweetheart, has three children who are “the best thing she’s done with her life” and a dog named Wolfe.

Susan is fascinated by ancient history, loves reading, gardening, black-and-white photographs and traveling. She’s a veteran of the Portland to Coast Relay and plans one day to hike the Pacific Crest Trail.

By day she is a registered nurse. By night she loves to spin tales that resemble her own happy-ever-after, about that click of instant recognition that happens when a man and woman fall head over heels in love. When writing, her priorities include that first vanilla latté in the morning and a steady infusion of chocolate.

Dear Reader,

Used to moving from place to place with my family, I was thirteen the summer I discovered a lifelong friend in the guise of a book titled *Black Beauty*. Thus began my career as a reader, which ultimately led to aspirations of becoming a writer. For me, writing about that special, true love is like finally coming home.

I must confess to being an ardent student of human nature. Add a fascination for the ridiculous and the unusual, and you have the conception of Eleanor and Dillon’s story. I knew I wanted to explore the relationships between grandparent, parent and child.

Oops... We're Married? is about widower Dillon Stone and how he reacts when his father and son decide they heartily approve of Eleanor Silks, a corporate librarian so totally opposite from the wife and mother he's decided he has to find.

When I wondered what these two different people would do if they accidentally got married after being thrown together as contestants at a dating-game benefit dinner, their story ran away with me. There's nothing more devastating than love gone horribly wrong, and nothing more heavenly...and satisfying than love when it goes completely right. In the end, only Eleanor and Dillon could tell me how their love would triumph.

In heartfelt appreciation to Silhouette for this opportunity, I give you my first book....

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Susan Linte". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Susan" and last name "Linte" clearly legible.

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Prologue

Eleanor Silks Rose sat in the church pew wishing more than anything that it was she standing at the altar becoming Dillon Stone's new wife. It wasn't fair that Joan Butler, Centennial High's sweetheart, with her dark beauty and serene personality, had gotten the most perfect guy in the whole world to walk her down the aisle.

Squirming in pinching panty hose that she rarely put on for any reason, Eleanor watched the ceremony from a seat as far in the back of the small church as she could get and still see down the center aisle to where the couple stood taking their vows. She was oblivious to the soothing music, the serenity of lighted candles and the near tranquillity of the expectant hush as the priest said the words that would join Joan for life to the man Eleanor had secretly loved from the first moment she'd laid eyes on her foster brother Jake's newest friend.

She'd been fourteen then, and still she would give anything to be in Joan's white patent leather shoes, only Eleanor's choice of elegant footwear ran more to new Nikes than anything shiny or with a heel. To be fair, it wasn't the other woman's fault Dillon had never noticed her, a ragtag tomboy, who would much rather go hiking or follow the boys fishing than do girl things like primp in front of a mirror, clean house, or cook. She would rather eat dirt than do more than pop something frozen into the microwave.

Of course, Joan did all those housewifely things. Tugging on a piece of hair that insisted on curling around her neck, instead of staying in the French braid she'd tried for the first time, Eleanor dropped her gaze as the ceremony ended so she wouldn't see Dillon enthusiastically kissing his new bride.

At the start of the bold music that announced another couple had tied the knot, she looked up to see the happy couple start down the aisle toward her, sparkling in the congratulations of their wedding guests.

Her foster parents were always telling her she had her whole life ahead of her. But, to Eleanor, it sure didn't feel like it.

She refused to cry.

Her heart was not broken.

Another woman had gotten the only man in the world worth considering spending the rest of her life with. King Arthur of Camelot and the Man of Steel all rolled into one, Dillon would always be the only man for her.

Chapter One

“Jake Edward Solomon. You are not my father.”

“No, El, but a big brother is the next best thing. Now, are you going to do me this little favor or not?” Jake’s voice fairly crackled with humor.

Pushing the phone between her ear and hunched shoulder, Eleanor settled behind her desk and swiveled her chair to gaze unseeing out her office window at the intercity park below.

Jake knew he was going to get his way. Just once, Eleanor wished she could resist her foster brother and one of his crazy schemes. She hated being emotionally blackmailed, especially by the one and only person who came the closest to being any kind of family to her.

“I’m not saying I’ll do it, but tell me again what you want me to do?” Eleanor was resigned to helping him out, just like she always did. But, this time, she was determined he was going to have to work hard for his victory.

“The Marshals service is putting on this benefit dinner, and for the price of the ticket we’re going to do a dating-game theater show, with a mock marriage at the end—”

“You’ve got to be kidding, right?” Eleanor knew her voice was on the rise, but at the moment she didn’t care as she caught a glimpse of where her foster brother was heading.

“No, I’m not, El. We’ve got it all arranged for Saturday night,

and now one of the girls has backed out.”

Eleanor ignored the begging tone Jake tried to trap her with. She’d been exposed to it more times than she cared to remember. In fact, anytime Jake wanted his way.

“I hope you’re not suggesting that I should replace this... person in your charade. You know I don’t like to do dates...blind, for charity or otherwise,” Eleanor reminded Jake flatly, hoping to make him back off.

Wishful thinking.

“Come on, El. I told you I’m in a bind here. I need you. This is very important to a lot of people...and to me.”

Eleanor hated it when Jake used his soft, nobody-loves-you-more-than-I-do voice from their teenage years. Emotional blackmail. That’s what it was. And, even though it pushed her buttons, she still caved every time.

“Okay, Jake. I’ll do this for you. I don’t care about all those other people. They don’t mean a thing to me.”

“Of course they don’t. Thanks, El. You’re a champ and a—”

“Yeah, right,” Eleanor broke in, not quite ready to concede the brat his victory.

“Listen,” Jake said, “meet me at the Harbor Room tomorrow night and we can go over the details. I’m meeting a friend at five, but we should be done by six. Love you, baby sister.”

And then all that was left of Jake and his current mad scheme was the dial tone in Eleanor’s ear.

Dillon Stone studied his friend suspiciously in the dim lighting

of happy hour at the Harbor Room. Jake couldn't possibly know about his plans to find a wife.

It had been one month since his sister's wedding and his decision to go wife-hunting. And watching Ryan trying to settle into their new home near the university had only strengthened his determination.

Dillon remembered what it had been like after his own mother had died when he was a young teenager—how he'd felt so lost and alone. He'd missed her horribly. He didn't want Ryan to grow up feeling that same loss.

Tangled up in his memories, Dillon wiped away the moisture on the outside of his beer glass with his thumb. He wasn't looking for love for himself. He'd been lucky. He'd had love once. That wasn't something that happened twice in a man's lifetime. The best he could hope for was someone he could respect and live comfortably with. It was doable. Many married for far less.

Dillon thought about the two lists stashed away in his office at home. On one, he'd listed all of the qualities he required in a wife. On the other, all of the single women he thought would fill the bill. Not that the second one was long, but it was a start.

"...so, you can see, I'm kind of in a tight spot here."

"What tight spot?" Dillon lifted his beer to his lips, wincing at having to admit he'd just missed a good portion of his friend's conversation.

"I need a favor. I need a guy Saturday night," Jake spoke slowly as if talking to a slow-witted child, plunking his beer glass on the

table between them.

“Sorry, I have a lot on my mind. I’ve got this involved case I’m reviewing.” It wasn’t a total lie, Dillon reasoned.

“You don’t work in the courts anymore, you’re a law professor. What case?”

Dillon had no intention of sharing his latest project with Jake. When the man got ahold of an idea, he was like a dog with a bone. Remembering the number of failed blind dates his buddy had conned him into before he’d started going with Joan at the end of their senior year of high school, he shuddered to think what kind of woman his friend would try to scrounge up for him.

“How’s your sister?” Dillon asked, determined to distract Jake.

“El? She’s okay. Listen, you have to do this for me—”

For a split second Dillon’s stomach churned. Surely, Jake didn’t want him to go out with his sister. He remembered the shy tomboy who’d followed them everywhere. If his memory was correct, not long after his marriage to Joan, she’d gone back east to college.

“Do what for you?” he asked cautiously.

“The department is putting on a charity dinner for the East Side Women’s Shelter. We’ll have a silent auction and some dancing, but most of the program is a mock dating-game theater show, and the guy from the department who was going to be the contestant backed out at the last minute.”

Dillon took a long gulp of his beer, relief flowing down his

throat with the malt. His best friend was not setting him up to date his kid sister. The corporate workaholic Jake had said she'd become was not on his agenda. "What happened to the guy?"

"Got married and his new wife doesn't want him participating."

"What about one of the other guys?"

"All on assignment, and I'm going to be too busy being master of ceremonies to be a contestant, so don't ask."

As a U.S. Marshal, Jake took his assignments very seriously, including this one, apparently.

"When is this important 'event'?" Dillon asked, frowning at the delay to his own plans. He'd just have to work around it. He owed Jake too much. If it hadn't been for his tenacious friend, he didn't know how he would have survived Joan's death.

"This Saturday. I'm sorry this is so last minute, but I'm desperate. And maybe after the show is over, you and the lucky lady you choose can spend some time together." An incurable romantic, Jake had already informed Dillon, ad nauseam, that it was about time he rejoined the singles dating scene.

"Not likely, knowing the type of woman you usually rake up for your schemes." For a brief moment, Dillon wondered if he was out of his mind to get mixed up in anything his good buddy was involved in.

It's for charity, Stone.

"Okay. I can do it. I guess I'm not doing anything that night, anyway."

“Great.” Jake raised his beer in the air. “To success and to finding that perfect woman.”

Slowly, Dillon clinked his beer glass to Jake’s, suspicion dancing along his nerves. No, Jake couldn’t possibly know he was in the market for a new wife. This was just another one his friend’s wacky do-gooder schemes.

Finishing his beer, he idly glanced around the dimly lit room until his gaze settled on a woman just entering the lounge. For a breathless moment, with her face half hidden in shadow, she stood motionless, like a priceless porcelain sculpture.

Without his permission and faster than a heartbeat, all Dillon’s predatory male instincts came alive. Where in the world did she come from? Interest sneaking up his spine, he couldn’t resist feasting on the vision silently taking in the occupants of the room.

Blond hair fell straight past her shoulders like a shimmering pale waterfall, a faint layer of bangs blocked from falling into eyes framed by wire-rimmed glasses. Heart-shaped lips pressed tight in concentration as the woman thoroughly scanned each table, one by one.

Dillon’s first thought, She’s looking for someone, ambushed him into sudden attention as his gaze followed the lithe line of her body. His silent touch moved slowly down her long, slender neck, past proudly held shoulders, then memorized an unforgettable figure that assaulted him with its mounds and valleys—not the least bit hidden by the high-power business suit she wore.

Then the woman stepped farther into the low-lighted room.

Dillon's senses vibrated, like an overstrung guitar string, at the hint of long, lean legs enhanced to perfection by irreverent, practical shoes showcasing fantasy-producing legs and slender feet. Feeling like he'd been gut-kicked, he looked up from his frank appraisal to find the woman staring at him. For a heart-stopping moment, she stood still as if in stunned surprise, then just as quickly dismissed him and flicked her gaze to his friend.

Unaccustomed to being ignored like yesterday's day-old bread, and—God only knew why—not liking it, Dillon watched as the woman's gaze turned suspicious as she started toward their table with undeniable purpose.

His second thought, Uh-oh, here comes trouble, settled him back in his chair as he realized there was something familiar about the woman approaching them, anger barely suppressed and certainly not hidden in her smoldering expression.

Dillon's third thought concluded, This woman is not a Suzie Homemaker.

"Jake." Eleanor didn't quite succeed in hiding the blazing temper pulsing through her temples behind the cool, even tone of voice she directed at her foster brother. She'd known the brat was up to no good. Here was the proof.

She'd wondered how long it would take Jake to parade her in front of the man she once would have moved heaven and earth for. That childish crush had died a final death on the day he'd married Joan. Though nine years ago she hadn't thought it could be possible, she'd gone on and made something good of her life.

Now, in a nanosecond, she saw everything about Dillon Stone. The faded but well-fitting jeans. The casually worn brown tweed sport coat. Ruffled dark hair that annoyingly begged her fingers to run through it. The sharp, piercing gaze that she was afraid could see to her innermost secrets.

Eleanor ignored the faint tremble in her heart as she felt again his prowling interest when she'd first entered the lounge.

How often had she fought staring at the wedding picture Jake had given her? Each time, pushing down fierce longing for the look of love that radiated from a younger version of this man to another woman, his wife...a dainty, beautiful, dark-haired creature tucked protectively under his arm?

Even though she knew better, for a while she'd looked to find that same love for herself. Finally, convinced she wasn't going to be that lucky, she'd buried the picture and her dream of a true-and-lasting love for herself in the bottom of a box that contained the few mementos she'd somehow saved from her childhood and proceeded to make a successful, independent life for herself that had no room for that unpredictable emotion called love.

"Hey, El." Jake jumped up, his six-foot frame barely towering over her own height of five foot nine as he wrapped her in a strong hug.

Out of the corner of her eye, Eleanor saw Dillon stand, too. Taller than Jake by several inches, his eyes, the color of a deep forest, watched them warily. Then, as if she'd been mistaken, his strong features went carefully blank and the tension riding his

hard, lean body visibly disappeared.

Ignoring the sudden awakening of feelings she'd taken great pains to forget, Eleanor pushed at Jake's chest. "Let me go, Jake."

"Fine." Jake's eyes twinkled with mischief as he grabbed the chair next to him in a silent invitation for her to sit. "El, you remember Dillon."

Eleanor shot Jake her most potent I'm-going-to-kill-you-as-soon-as-I-get-you-alone look, then held out her hand to the one man she'd thought never to see again.

"Of course I do." She modulated her voice to cool detachment, strongly shaken by the touch of a handshake that threatened to melt her clear to the center of her soul.

Quickly, she snatched her hand away from his, careful to tuck it behind her back where the man couldn't touch it again.

Green eyes narrowed at her while the sound of Dillon's baritone voice bombarded her with unwanted awareness. "Hi, Eleanor. It's been a long time."

If the look on his face was anything to go by, she was pretty sure he wasn't pleased by this reintroduction. That was just fine with her, Eleanor decided, sinking into the chair Jake offered, her legs not as capable of holding her up as they had been when she'd first entered the lounge. She'd faced many a boardroom piranha and come out the winner since she'd last see this man. She could certainly face down Dillon Stone, who meant nothing to her now, without a single ripple appearing in the well-ordered life she'd intentionally built for herself.

“Jake, I’ve got to go. I have to get home to Ryan. Eleanor, it was nice to see you again.”

Startled, Eleanor watched Dillon’s back as he turned and walked away from her, then out the lounge door.

Disappointment pelted her like a cold rainstorm. Obviously, she was as unnoticeable today as she’d been all those years ago when she’d foolishly followed him around wearing her heart on her sleeve.

Slowly, Eleanor turned to Jake. “I think I really am going to kill you this time,” she stoically advised her foster brother, painfully aware that her hands had formed into white fists on the table.

Chapter Two

Dillon leaned closer to the mirror, trying to concentrate on the bow tie he was having trouble knotting. It just didn't make any sense. Ever since he'd walked...okay run, away from Eleanor Rose, he hadn't been able to concentrate on a damn thing. Not his preparations for classes. Not his lists. Not anything.

For at least the hundredth time he wondered about her. Her attempt to distance herself hadn't escaped him. He couldn't forget her studied indifference when she'd been forced to acknowledge him.

The woman he'd encountered at the Harbor Room only vaguely resembled the teenage girl Dillon remembered. She'd changed. A lot. The angry tomboy Jake had taken under his wing had morphed into a consummate businesswoman. Too aloof and independent for his tastes, she would never make the cut for his list of potential wife candidates. So, what was his problem?

An attraction for a dyed-in-the-wool corporate businesswoman was not in his plans despite the whiskey-colored eyes haunting him. Or the tall, lithe form and long legs, which he was sure could quite easily wrap themselves around his waist, tempting him. Or the fantasy of sun-struck blond hair cascading through his fingers, taunting him.

A shudder sneaked through Dillon as he savagely clamped down on the runaway images assaulting his good sense. What had

happened to the tomboy he used to know?

“Dad. I can’t tie this.”

Dillon glanced at the reflection of his six-year-old son in the mirrored closet door. Ryan reminded him so much of Joan, bringing back memories of his first wife that no longer hurt, but still left him feeling empty and alone. Though she’d been gone four years, he still missed her laughter and the comfort of coming home to the safety of her love each day.

Turning off the rush of memories he’d worked hard to come to terms with, Dillon squatted down in front of Ryan, quickly tying the boy’s bow tie. “You look sharp, champ.”

Standing, he turned them both to the mirror. The last of the Stone men, the son a shorter version of his dad, both dressed in black suits, relieved only by white shirts and matching green eyes. One young and too cautious, the other older and sadly wiser.

“Are we going to find a mom tonight?” His son’s small voice cut through Dillon’s unbidden fantasy of distant, whiskey... blond...

“No. Remember, I told you this is just make-believe. We’ll be helping to raise money for—”

“Charity. But I thought as long as you were going to pick a pretend—”

“Pretend,” Dillon agreed firmly, wondering if he’d made a mistake including his son in this event.

“I know,” Ryan said with a child’s aggrieved sigh, then perked up. “Maybe she’ll be my pretend mom, too.”

Dillon's heart fairly broke at the longing in his little boy's upturned face. He hated that Ryan couldn't remember his mother. In many ways the little guy was so much like her. He had her dark hair, her smile, her easy sense of humor. Even though Ryan had no memory of her, Dillon was aware his son wanted a living mom just like his friends had.

"It's going to be okay, champ. Hey, do you want to help me pick out this pretend wife?" Dillon didn't stop to think before he spoke, but he wouldn't have taken the question back for anything once he saw the excited look that lit up Ryan's face.

"Really?"

"Really." Dillon hoped Jake wouldn't mind a small change in the game plan.

"Do you think we'll find one who really likes us?"

At the wistfulness in his son's voice, Dillon turned them both to look in the mirror one last time.

"Of course she will like us. How could any lady resist two handsome James Bond types like us?" Dillon asked, grateful for the smile his answer put on the little guy's face.

"James Bond."

Dillon watched Ryan square his slight shoulders and once again tug on his tie, before adding in his best imitation James Bond voice, "I'm ready."

That's good, because I'm not sure I am, Dillon acknowledged as he led the way out to his pickup truck.

"This is a great idea, having father-and-son bachelors."

Dillon followed Jake, who led them to the mocked-up booths for the game show. “You’re not supposed to see the lady contestants, so sit here and we’ll get started as soon as everyone has been served.”

“It looks like you have a full house,” Dillon observed, glad that if he had to participate in one of Jake’s schemes, at least it was for something harmless, but important.

“Yeah, we’re packed. We’ll make a huge chunk of change for the shelter tonight. I’ve got to get the ladies settled in their booths. Ryan, sit here next to your dad. You can even ask a question if you want.”

“Wow.”

Dillon watched Ryan wriggle into the offered chair, relieved that Jake had no problem including his son.

“Wow yourself, little buddy.” Ruffling Ryan’s hair, Jake pinned on the boy’s microphone, then turned laughter-filled eyes toward Dillon. “Good luck. I’m betting you’re going to find the perfect woman tonight.”

His friend’s short laugh, before disappearing around the partition that blocked Dillon’s view of the other contestants, filled Dillon with foreboding. Partly because of Jake’s recent insistence that he and Ryan needed a change of location, he’d decided to leave Seattle for the smaller, more comfortable Oregon river city of Portland.

Now, he had a familiar feeling his friend was up to no good. He watched as elegantly dressed dinner guests were shown to

the tables within his field of vision. “No good” was his buddy’s speciality.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen. It’s time to begin,” Jake’s voice announced. “Let me start out by thanking each of you for coming tonight to help support this very worthy cause. Remember, at the back of the room is a silent auction. All proceeds made tonight will go directly to the East Side Women’s Shelter....”

Maybe his friend was right. There were three eligible women on the other side of the wall that separated him and Ryan from them. One of the ladies could be just what he was looking for... an addition to the list he’d left safely at home.

“For a surprise addition, we have not one bachelor, but two very eligible bachelors, father and son, who will pick a very lucky bachelorette....”

Eleanor stopped squirming in the hard chair Jake had shown her to, suspicion splashing her with a cold panic that was rapidly turning to anger.

He wouldn’t. The one person in the whole world she trusted, wouldn’t do this to her, would he? Yes...he would, a small voice offered its opinion in her mind. Eleanor spit silent curses at her brother. The three-sided cubicle where she sat, unable to lay her hands on him, revealed only an excited audience, beginning their dinner as they eagerly waited for the “dating game” to begin.

“Bachelor senior. Why don’t you start with your first question. We have three lovely ladies for you to choose from. Will it be Bachelorette number one? Bachelorette number two? Or

Bachelorette number three?”

“Bachelorette number three. What are your hobbies?”

Eleanor almost groaned aloud when she heard the unforgettable, familiar voice ask his first question amid cheers and catcalls from the audience. She wasn't prepared for the deep impact of his voice that ignited undisciplined awareness like Fourth of July fireworks.

“Bachelorette number three?” Dillon's dark, gravelly voice washed her in unexplained waves of startled sensation.

Clearing the lump suddenly lodged in her throat, Eleanor blurted without thinking, “I don't have any hobbies.”

“I see. How about Bachelorette number two?”

What did he see? Eleanor wondered angrily, feeling both foolish and irritated. Only what she wanted him to see. Which was nothing.

The honey tones used by the other two ladies to answer the law professor's question made Eleanor sick to her stomach. There was no way she was going to try to sell herself to this man by sugarcoating her responses just for his benefit.

“Bachelorette number three. What are your favorite foods?”

This time Eleanor was prepared. Carefully modulating her voice, she responded, “I'm a vegetarian.” Well, she was.

“And...?”

“And, I like vegetables.”

Dillon looked at Ryan, his eyebrows lifting in question. There was something familiar about that voice, even though it was

masked by the microphone and her abrupt responses.

Briefly, whiskey-colored eyes flashed bright in Dillon's mind and the last puzzle piece fell into place. So, that's what all Jake's meddling was about. He had three ladies to choose from. Of course, he wasn't going to pick Eleanor just because she was Jake's sister. The guy could be a loose cannon, but this little maneuver absolutely took the cake.

Eleanor stared out at the audience. The dinner was being catered by attendants dressed sharply in white shirts, black bow ties and black dress slacks. The tables were elegantly covered in gold tablecloths. And, without exception, every female eye in the place was focused on the left side of the stage, where she was sure Dillon sat with his little boy.

Heated with disgust, she unbuttoned the top button of the white blouse that seemed bent on choking her and renewed her earlier vow not to stoop to competing for the man's attention. Purposely, she answered each question Dillon asked her in the most bored, disinterested way she could, discouraging any idea the man might have of picking her, while the other ladies blatantly threw themselves at him. Their sugary, come-park-your-shoes-under-my-bed responses made her stomach queasy.

When Jake stepped into her line of vision, frowning at her, Eleanor felt a small pinpoint of malicious satisfaction. She arched her eyebrows at him, smiled sweetly and wished him at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. It warmed her sense of revenge when his frown deepened.

If she could just get to him, she would really hurt Jake, Eleanor promised, finding herself perched on the edge of her seat, leaning out of the small cubicle that marked her end of the stage.

Pushing her glasses farther up her nose, she briefly glanced toward the other end of the raised platform. Three additional cubicles, undoubtedly perfect matches to hers, stretched across the stage in a half moon, the two middle ones recessed slightly away from the audience. Suddenly, Eleanor found herself traitorously wondering what it would be like to be chosen by Dillon Stone. What would it be like to be the woman he would want to spend the rest of his life with?

Before she could break away from that heart-pounding thought, a solemn face peeked around the front of the bachelor cubicle. Serious eyes studied her without blinking. A sudden smile shattered the illusion of an adult packed secretly into the small boy's body.

Ryan.

The longing in his watchful eyes assailed Eleanor with an unfamiliar urge to take the small, serious child and fold him close in her arms. Tentatively, she smiled back.

"Bachelorette number three?" Dillon's annoyed voice broke the fragile connection she'd made with the child.

"I'm sorry. I didn't hear the question," she said as she removed her glasses and winked at Ryan, who was still watching her curiously.

“Where is your favorite place to vacation?” Dillon repeated, patience struggling with the irritation lacing his voice.

“I don’t go on vacation,” Eleanor answered truthfully, her mind still on a little boy’s heartbreaking smile as she scooted back into the uncomfortable chair.

“Okay...” The increasingly frustrated voice plowed through her thoughts. For the first time since she’d started this nightmare, Eleanor relaxed. For a second, she thought she could hear the man grinding his teeth. She smiled.

“Ryan. Come sit down,” Dillon whispered to his son, amazed at how hard it was to hide his frustration with Eleanor’s answers. He didn’t really care what they were, and he certainly wasn’t planning to choose her for his “pretend” wife, but the woman could at least make some attempt at being interested in the game; for the audience’s sake if nothing else.

Pushing away the image of whiskey-colored eyes and a body that promised to be a perfect match to his in the intricate dance of love, he helped Ryan climb back into his seat. He wasn’t interested in love, and it was with irritating effort that he finally wiped the seductive image from his mind.

“Okay. Bachelor junior. You get to ask the last question.” Jake’s booming voice broke into Dillon’s annoyance.

“James Bond,” Dillon reminded his son softly.

“Bachelor three. Do you like kids?” At the small quiver in Ryan’s voice, Dillon placed his arm around his son’s shoulders.

Eleanor heard the loneliness in the child’s voice and

understood it completely. She couldn't stop herself from remembering how his grown-up study had changed so quickly to a child's curiosity with one beautiful smile. Without further thought, she answered truthfully, from her heart, unable to cause more hurt to the little person who'd silently reached out to her.

"I think...kids are cool...especially little boys," she said hesitantly, but simply.

Surprised at the sudden warmth in Eleanor's voice, Dillon watched a smile spread over his son's face. He didn't really listen to the other two bachelorette's responses, although chatty number two had the three of them at Chuck E. Cheese's long before she was done.

How could the woman who'd answered so warmly to Ryan be the same woman who had been evasive, impersonal and dismissive with him all evening?

As a slow anger began to burn in his throat, Dillon flicked his finger at a piece of lint on his jacket sleeve. Even though he considered himself an average sort of guy, he wasn't used to being treated like a pariah by women. Dillon reluctantly admitted he didn't like it. It didn't matter that he wasn't planning on picking Eleanor. It was just that she could at least play nice.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen. It's time for our bachelors to choose their bachelorette." Jake's voice floated over the audio system, reminding Dillon that fortunately this whole nonsense would soon be over.

"Okay, Ryan. Which one do we want? Bachelorette number

one or number two?" Dillon whispered to his son as if asking the boy to help him pick between his two least favorite desserts.

"We want Bachelorette three." Ryan's excited answer caused blaring alarms to clang loudly in Dillon's head.

"No, Ryan. We need to pick either one or two." There was no way he was going to pick Eleanor Rose after her obvious lack of interest throughout the whole game. It was only a benefit dinner, for God's sake. The woman could have at least tried to pretend she wanted to participate.

"But I want Bachelorette three." Ryan's hands were balling into fists, his voice changing from a whisper to sharp demand.

"Ryan," Dillon insisted firmly, pulling the resisting boy against his chest.

"But I want her to be my new mom." The shake in Ryan's voice and the tears flooding his eyes was more than Dillon had the strength to fight, but he tried, anyway.

"This is just pretend, son. And only for tonight. Okay?"

"Okay. But, I still want Bachelorette three."

At that moment Jake rounded the corner into the cubicle and caught the tail end of their discussion. Dillon groaned inwardly at his buddy's apparent amusement at his predicament.

"It appears our bachelors are having a difference of opinion over which bachelorette they want," Jake said, playing to the expectant audience for all he was worth.

A burst of chatter erupted, forcing Dillon's hand. Resigned to his fate, he stood, taking Ryan up in his arms, anchoring his

son's light weight on his hip. As he faced the excited audience, a breathless hush replaced the noisy chatter.

"We'll take Bachelorette number...three," he said on a reluctant sigh.

Thank God it was just pretend and just for the night, he told himself. He was a big boy. He could put up with Eleanor Rose for one night. The smile that spread across his son's face and his little hands clapping gleefully amid thundering applause from the audience was all the confirmation he needed that he'd made the right choice...for his son.

Dillon thanked Bachelorettes number one and two, speculatively watching number two leave the stage. Her backward look was full of promise, if he'd only take her up on the offer. Mary Towers was her name. She was definitely the Suzie Homemaker type he was looking for and appeared to like kids just fine. Maybe he would add her to his list of possibilities.

She's just what I'm looking for. She'd make a great mother for Ryan, he was thinking when his gaze collided with angry, storm-filled, whiskey eyes that reminded him of...

Then it was just the four of them left on the stage. Ryan, his smile big, his eyes bright with excitement. Jake, grinning with smug satisfaction. Eleanor, her face white, her lips pressed into a thin, painful-looking line, her expressive eyes swimming with an emotion he couldn't put a name to. And himself.

Dillon didn't like the laughter that tinted Jake's voice when he turned to the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen. May I introduce

Portland's hottest new couple, Dillon Stone and Eleanor Rose.”

Flicking his gaze from his son's excited grin to Jake's triumphant laughter, then to Eleanor Rose's disbelieving stillness, Dillon couldn't shake the sinking feeling that instead of being almost over, this night's high jinks were only just beginning.

Chapter Three

“Ladies and gentlemen. We’re going to have a short intermission while we set up the wedding scene. Don’t forget to take a look at the silent auction at the back of the room.”

Eleanor wanted to scream at the top of her lungs at the turn Jake’s so-called “dating game” had taken. Hastily she tugged her foster brother away from Dillon’s frown and the excitement dancing in his little boy’s eyes.

“Jake. I am not going to marry that...man,” she whispered fiercely, turning her back on the tantalizing promise Dillon Stone represented.

“Of course you are. It’s perfectly safe, all make-believe. For charity, remember?”

Eleanor shook off Jake’s arm when he tried to wrap her in a smothering hug.

“He should have picked one of the others. Why didn’t he?” Eleanor didn’t like the feeling that she was losing it.

“Because you’re so sweet and wonderful? And, he couldn’t resist you?” Humor played across Jake’s face, only inching her irritation higher.

“You’re dead meat.”

“Thanks, El. I love you, too. Look out, here come the wedding props.”

Intent on getting as far away from Dillon Stone and his sweet

little boy as she possibly could, Eleanor scowled her worst at Jake before moving out of the way of the stage workers who were exchanging the cubicles for an elaborate garden wedding scene.

“This isn’t going to work, you know,” Dillon told his friend evenly, while Jake fixed the bridal boutonniere in his jacket lapel. Covertly, he watched Eleanor across the stage, fidgeting tensely while a woman, presumably one of Jake’s assistants, placed a long, trailing, lacy veil over her flowing blond hair.

God, she was beautiful. She certainly wasn’t a shy tomboy anymore. Gone was the young girl he remembered. In her place was a gorgeous woman, but one who still lacked all the female graces.

“Sure, it’s going to work. The crowd loves this stuff.” Jake indicated the wedding arch that was being placed center stage.

“No. I mean Eleanor and me.” Dillon didn’t believe the picture that was being created of Eleanor as the perfect bride. Unexpectedly, a painful knot formed in his stomach at the fleeting, wistful look she cast at him. A look that was concealed behind indifference before it was ever fully formed.

Damn. Why was he even thinking about this? He wanted more children. Maybe, lots of them. And in his experience, career women did not want children. At least not right away. Anyone could see that Eleanor Rose was a dedicated career woman.

Even now, she was dressed in a gray pin-striped skirt and jacket as if she couldn’t wait to get back to the office. Surprisingly, the top button of her blouse was open, exposing

a generous amount of her slender throat, slightly spoiling her perfect corporate image. But that didn't change the fact that he'd met her type before.

"What about you and Eleanor?" Jake's pseudo-innocent inquiry made the hairs stand at alert on the back of Dillon's neck.

"We have absolutely nothing in common. After tonight we'll probably never see each other again." The ping that poked his heart at the thought of never seeing Eleanor again didn't mean a thing. Suspiciously, Dillon watched his friend's unchanging expression. Mary Towers was the more obvious choice for his list of possible wife candidates.

"Hey. No problem. But it wouldn't hurt if you and El got together after this."

Get together? With Eleanor Rose? The poster lady of corporate womanhood? No way.

"It's not going to happen, Jake," Dillon firmly informed his friend.

"All I'm saying—"

"Dad, how come she's standing way over there?" Ryan pulled insistently on his hand, effectively derailing Dillon's conversation with Jake—a conversation that had been going nowhere, anyway.

"Because the bride and groom are not supposed to see each other before the wedding ceremony, pal." Jake answered for him, dropping on one knee to fix a matching boutonniere on Ryan's lapel. "Everything seems to be ready. Why don't we get your dad and El in place?"

Eleanor turned to face the man she'd worked so hard to keep out of her dreams. She couldn't go through with this. She wasn't going to pretend to marry the one man who had once had the power to rock her to her very soul.

"El, come stand over here."

Jake's instruction set her teeth on edge. Forcing stiff limbs to move, Eleanor slowly walked to the spot her foster brother indicated.

Why was she doing this? Because it was a fake ceremony... and for charity. Eleanor squared her shoulders. She had a fulfilling career and was just fine living on her own. She was not feeling sorry for herself or wishing for the impossible just because as a young woman she'd once wished she could be bound to this man for life.

A small hand nestled into hers. Unable to stop the feelings suddenly warming her, Eleanor looked down into shining green eyes and the biggest smile she'd ever seen on a child's face.

"You're going to be my new mom," Ryan said, eyes twinkling at her. Eleanor's heart sank. She didn't need any new cracks to form in her armor.

"Remember, son, this is just make-believe." Dillon's determined words sealed those cracks shut with a lonely clang.

"Where's the judge? Is there a judge in the house?" Jake demanded playfully of the audience.

In unison the audience began to loudly chant. "Judge... judge...judge..."

Keep your sense of humor. Don't break your heart over this, Eleanor admonished herself as a sprinkle of laughter drifted through the room. Nervously, she adjusted her glasses on her nose. This mockery of a marriage was for charity. It didn't mean anything more than that.

Taking a deep breath to settle the skittish alarm clanging in her stomach, Eleanor looked up as a new disturbance erupted at the door. Now what?

Causing the minor commotion was an elderly man in a western-style black frock and flat-brimmed black hat. Haphazardly, he was making his way toward the stage, patting his pockets as if he'd lost something. Finally, out of one deep side pocket, he pulled out wire-rimmed spectacles and pushed them onto his bulbous nose.

"So sorry I'm late," the old man wheezed, out of breath as he stopped opposite Dillon.

Eleanor couldn't believe her eyes. Jake couldn't have gotten a more disreputable-looking judge if he'd tried, which he probably had, she decided, disgusted. The man looked as if he'd been pulled right out of an old-time western.

"Are you two young folks ready? I'm Jed Banta. This is my third wedding for the day and I'd like to get started," the old man muttered as Jake attached a microphone to his once starched collar.

"Okay, young fella, what's your name?"

Dillon couldn't help smiling at the old man's appearance.

Where in the world had Jake found this decrepit old gent? He was perfect for the part of an old boomtown judge. Even down to the unkempt white hair poking out from beneath the wide brim of his felt hat and the thick white mustache that generously covered his lips.

“Uh...I’m Dillon Stone.” Dillon choked back a chuckle as the old man licked the end of a stubby pencil, then wrote his name on a slip of paper he’d pulled from the inside pocket of his coat.

The man’s act was perfect, Dillon realized, as the audience openly responded to his antics.

“Miss? What’s your name?”

For a moment Dillon thought Eleanor wouldn’t go along. Her face was as white as the paper the judge was poised over, and he was sure she was about to faint. What was she afraid of? Because from where he stood, Eleanor Rose was definitely afraid.

When he’d been a criminal lawyer, he’d seen the same look of sick fear on many a defendant’s face just before the verdict came down. Slowly, he laced his fingers with hers and was shocked by the bolt of electricity that raced from their touching hands clear down to curl his toes.

“Eleanor?” he prodded. Had she felt that electric zing, too?

Her pale face flushed with a pretty blush as she turned to look at him. The surprised look darkening her remarkable eyes heated the sizzle that was still blistering his fingertips.

“My name...” Finally she looked away, leaving Dillon with an uneasy feeling there was something important he was missing.

“Eleanor Rose Silks. My name is Eleanor Silks Rose.”

That brief moment of vulnerable emotion caused strange feelings of protectiveness to quicken Dillon’s heartbeat. The woman was so filled with contradictions. It didn’t make sense that he didn’t want to let her go when she pulled away from their connecting touch.

“Well, let’s get started,” the old man said. “We are gathered here...”

Eleanor was still trying to catch her breath from that moment when Dillon had held her hand. She’d been feeling so chilled, thinking about pretending to do something she would have given her right arm to do for real when she was nineteen.

But, of course, she didn’t want to marry Dillon Stone now. She’d made a perfect life for herself, resigned that her knight on a white charger had already been taken and his twin was not to be found anywhere. Then he’d intertwined his fingers with hers and consuming heat and hunger had licked at a loneliness she hadn’t known she’d lived with for too long.

Still reeling from the warm embers that scorched her, Eleanor looked up into her foster brother’s sympathetic smile. Before she could throw the tantrum she was thinking of and stick out her tongue at him, mischief-filled eyes dared her to go through with this farce of a pretend marriage.

Eleanor swallowed the fear crowding her throat. Her gaze moved from Jake’s satisfied expression to little Ryan’s equally excited face. Something long buried stirred near her bruised

heart. How could she protect herself when such a sweet little boy persisted in staring at her with stars in his eyes? Eyes that exactly matched the older, more experienced ones of his father.

“Do you, Dillon Stone, take Eleanor Rose to be your wife, to love and to cherish, as long as you both shall live?”

Dillon’s deep “I do” made a pair of excited shivers somersault up Eleanor’s spine as she locked gazes with the man standing so calmly at her side. What was he thinking? Frantically, she fought a bubble of hysteria.

“Do you, Eleanor Rose, take Dillon Stone to be your husband, to love and to cherish, as long as you both shall live?” Unbidden, a very secret part of her heart surprised her with the wish that she could love and cherish Dillon, and that he would love and cherish her, for longer than the rest of their lives.

“I...” Eleanor cleared her throat. This is for charity. She tried again. “I do,” she whispered.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. Young man, you may kiss your bride.” The judge’s pronouncement stretched Eleanor’s sense of the unreal.

“No,” she objected in a croaked whisper, earning a frown from Dillon that stopped her in her tracks. She didn’t like the sudden glint of determination that lit his searching green eyes.

Realizing his intent, Eleanor turned her head at the last minute so that his warm lips landed on the corner of hers. Instead of quickly kissing, then releasing her immediately, he tantalizingly stayed there a second too long...lingering...testing...nibbling...

seducing.

Stunned by the feeling of his lips exploring her sensitive skin, Eleanor forced herself to push against the hard landscape of his chest. Somehow, she had to resist the feelings tumbling through her stomach and the heat attempting to warm her skin. Closing her heart off to any more temptation, she stepped back from Dillon, only to find his hands firmly clamped at her waist, preventing her escape.

“Here. If you young people will sign this, we’ll be all done.” Amid cheers from the audience, Eleanor watched Dillon sign the phony license, then added her name below his bold scrawl.

“How about a big round of applause for our winners.” Jake was at the microphone again. “Let’s see if we can get our newest couple to lead us in a dance. Come on, everyone. Let’s give them some encouragement.”

Dillon glanced at Eleanor, surprised by the panicked look that spread over her classic features, as the swell of goodwill and rhythmic clapping grew around them. Still stunned by the raw feelings racing through him from the brief brush of his lips across hers and the firm feel of her waist between his hands, he wondered what was going on in the woman’s head.

He thought about the vulnerability that occasionally flickered across Eleanor’s lovely face, the loneliness she tried so hard to hide. The unmistakably sensual way she moved pulled at Dillon despite his best efforts to ignore the alarming fireworks that went off every time he got too close to the woman. The way he was

now.

As the demand of the dinner guests grew, he watched Eleanor struggle to recapture the cool reserve that pricked his normally nonexistent temper. What was wrong with her that she couldn't relax and just go with the flow for the evening?

Frowning, Dillon decided he was going to have a talk with his friend. Jake shouldn't have put his sister in such an uncomfortable position. He suspected his buddy had his own reasons for maneuvering them both into being here...together. But it wasn't right.

"Let's dance. It's the only way we'll get them to leave us alone." Expressive eyes darted to Dillon's, anger darkening them to a shuttered brown.

"Come on. I won't bite," he offered in reassurance, even as her tension sneaked into his body by way of the hand he'd never moved from the small of her straight back. Briefly, she leaned into his shoulder, causing annoying waves of hard-hitting awareness to leap through him. Then her back became rigid again, her delicate features wearing a careful, blank mask.

"Sure." Eleanor couldn't believe she'd almost melted into Dillon's arms when the expression on his handsome face changed to bewildering concern.

She lifted her chin and sealed her heart. How long could one measly slow dance last, anyway? As Dillon pulled her close, his touch ignited unwanted tremors of excitement that began in her belly and spiraled out of control to the rest of her suddenly alert

body. There was only one thing left to do. She had to take this bull by the horns and toss him out of her corral as soon as possible.

“So, what made you decide to pick me? Weren’t the other two ladies more to your liking?”

“They were. I didn’t pick you. Ryan did.” Dillon couldn’t bite his tongue quick enough to stop the rude words, peeved that the woman had maneuvered him into being so juvenile. When this dance was over he and Ryan were out of here as soon as he could make it happen.

“Do you always let your son pick your dates for you?”

Dillon didn’t miss the angry flush that spread over Eleanor’s porcelain skin or the way his body responded to the slender form he held close to him. If he wasn’t careful, the wasp would realize she ignited more than his temper.

“This isn’t really a date, so I figured this time it wouldn’t matter.” Whirling Eleanor to the tempo of the music, Dillon got tangled in the vanilla fragrance he’d noticed earlier when he’d kissed the stiff woman in his arms.

Telling himself he was not going to give in to the overwhelming desire to smell her long hair, Dillon stepped back slightly to escape the irresistible entrapment she seemed to weave around him.

Fortunately, Eleanor didn’t notice his withdrawal. She was too busy ignoring him...and watching Ryan, who was eating an ice-cream sundae with Jake and the fake judge. A rare expression softened her features. How could she be as prickly as a cactus

one minute and soft with unspoken longing the next?

Before Dillon could pursue that thought, Eleanor muttered, "Now, what's he up to?"

"Who?" But he already knew the answer as he saw one of Jake's fellow U.S. Marshals lean close to his friend's shoulder. Jake nodded briskly, changing instantly from the laughing mischief-maker he usually portrayed to the no-nonsense U.S. Deputy Marshal he really was.

"Looks like maybe we're done here," Dillon said cheerfully as he and Eleanor walked to the table where Jake was now standing.

"What's up?" Dillon pulled a chair out for Eleanor to sit next to Ryan.

"I just got the orders I've been waiting for on a case I was assigned last week. I have just enough time to pack a bag and turn my house keys over to a friend I'm subletting to."

"You're subletting your house? To whom?" Dillon watched Ryan climb down from his chair to stand close to Eleanor's shoulder as he seriously studied her. He was afraid to guess what was going through his son's agile mind.

"Remember my buddy who just got married? Well, the closing on their house got delayed and their lease ran out, so he and the new wife are going to stay at my place until the deal on their house closes."

Dillon knew better, but he asked, anyway. "Where are you going?"

Jake only shrugged his shoulders and smiled his most secret

grin, not about to give anything away.

“You’re my new mom, aren’t you?”

Dillon glanced quickly at his son and groaned. Once the little guy got something stuck in his mind, it was so hard to convince him otherwise.

“Son, remember this is only make-believe. Eleanor and I didn’t really get married tonight—”

Suddenly spitting into his napkin, the fake judge jumped up from his seat. “What do you mean you’re not married? Of course you’re married. I just married you in front of God and witnesses.”

Dillon laughed. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No.”

Stunned, Dillon looked from the old guy to his excited son, then noticed the horrified look on Eleanor’s frozen features.

“No. This can’t be real,” she whispered, one elegant hand going to the frantically beating pulse at her throat.

Unable to believe what he was hearing, Dillon looked at Jake, suspicion starting to crawl up his spine as a delighted smile spread across his friend’s face.

“Yes, ma’am. I married ya. As a duly appointed judge in the State of Oregon, I’ve been marrying folks for nigh on forty years. Can’t think why it wouldn’t be legal now. You young folks signed the license, all right. We had witnesses. And I signed, too. That’s how it’s done.” Pulling his spectacles from his nose, the old gent squinted while he gingerly wiped the glasses with a snowy-white hankie he pulled from his breast pocket.

Legally married to Eleanor Rose? But she's not even on my list.... She's not what I'm looking for, was all Dillon could think. Freezing mid-thought, he glared at his good buddy.

Barely suppressing a desire to punch him in the shoulder the way she did when they were kids and he'd gotten her into one more mess, Eleanor hissed at Jake. "You did this."

"No, I didn't. I swear it. I wish I had." Jake backed away, holding his hands up, palms toward her in surrender, his voice filled with as much surprise as she felt. "I admit, I did work to get you both here, but even I wouldn't have the guts to deliberately plan a secret marriage between the two of you."

"Then how did this happen?" Eleanor fired back at her foster brother, horrified to find tears gathering behind her eyes before the thought of murdering Jake rescued her.

"Maybe Cupid had something to do with it," Jake offered, his expression suddenly soft with caring, before changing to pleased approval as he continued his retreat, his hands still lifted in total surrender.

Cupid? Did the brat have any brain cells left at all?

"Jake Solomon, don't you dare leave now. You have to fix this. I can't be married to him." Eleanor watched her foster brother's expression change to naughty-boy mischief, and her heart sank.

"I can't stay, El. I've got an assignment. I have to leave. I'm sorry. I can't fix this for you. Dillon will have to take care of everything. But if you want to know my opinion, I think this is the best thing to ever happen. I only wish I could claim responsibility,

so I could take the credit and hold it over your heads for the rest of your lives.”

With a quick wave, a deep chuckle of delight and the parting words, “Dillon, take care of El for me, she’s very special,” Jake was gone, leaving Eleanor feeling very frustrated and suddenly more alone than ever.

Eleanor turned slowly, her mind working at top speed for a way out of the bizarre predicament Jake had left her in. Dillon and Ryan waited behind her; Dillon warily, Ryan not containing his wild excitement.

“Where’s that judge? We have to talk to him, get him to undo this, make us unmarried or something.” Eleanor couldn’t stop the panic that edged her babbling.

“He’s gone,” Dillon said. “Couldn’t stop him. Said he had another wedding to perform.” Still feeling as if his wits had been scrambled, he clutched their wedding license in one hand and Ryan’s hand in the other. “And, by the looks of this paper, unless I can find a loophole, I’d say we are legally married.”

Chapter Four

Dillon shifted uneasily at the smothering tension that surrounded them as he, Ryan and Eleanor climbed into his pickup. Once Ryan heard that his dad and Eleanor were really married, his son had latched on to Eleanor's hand as if he was never going to let the woman go.

Even now, Ryan was leaning forward from the back seat of the extended cab, his tiny hand resting possessively on Eleanor's shoulder. In a brief movement, she shifted, trapping his son's fingers between her shoulder and ear. Gently, she moved her head back and forth as if she was trying to smooth away some disappointment she knew was coming.

Sudden desire streaked through Dillon at the surprising gesture. Did Eleanor care for his son's tender feelings? She probably didn't have a clue how attractive that possibility made her.

"Ryan, sit back and put your seat belt on." Dillon turned the key to start the engine, still thinking about the seemingly distant woman beside him. Her classic features carefully blank, Eleanor turned away from him, looking into the still night outside her window.

"I can't believe Jake left me without a ride home," she mumbled unhappily.

"What do you want to do now?" he asked a little gruffly,

unreasonably wanting to shatter her isolation.

“I want to go home.”

“You’re going home with us. You’re my new mom.”

The enthusiasm in Ryan’s little voice sparkled brightly, filling Dillon with regret and anger. Ryan deserved to have a mom. A real mom, not this silent, remote, accidental “mom” who’d gently rubbed her cheek against his son’s small hand before the child reluctantly sat back and fastened his seat belt.

“Ryan, Miss Eleanor and I are not really married,” Dillon gently reminded his son as Eleanor’s stiff posture made him wonder angrily what was really going on behind the silent mask of her features. For a moment, while they’d danced, she’d taken her glasses off, but now they were firmly back in place, a shield she apparently hid behind. “There was a mistake. She doesn’t want to come home with us.”

When Eleanor swung around to glare at him, her silky blond hair swinging wildly around her shoulders, he realized he’d chosen the wrong words. And it made him even angrier. It wasn’t his fault she didn’t want to be married to him. He didn’t want to be married to her, either. And, just for that brief second, crawling out from under some hidden rock in his soul was a feeling of confusing disappointment.

“The man said he married you. That means she’s my mom.”

In a heartbeat, the wildfire in the deep whisky eyes hiding behind the windows of her glasses, changed to disbelieving panic, matching the feeling starting to fuel Dillon’s own emotions.

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