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*American* ROMANCE

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CHARLOTTE DOUGLAS

Spring in the Valley



# Charlotte Douglas

## Spring In The Valley

### **Аннотация**

North Versus South...Police officer Brynn Sawyer is all but married to Pleasant Valley, her picture-perfect Southern hometown. And even if she were in the mood for romance, smooth New York lawyer Rand Benedict is the opposite of everything Brynn wants in a man. So why can't she stop thinking about him and his little boy, Jared?Rand can't deny the electric chemistry that burns between him and the beautiful Brynn. But Rand's real motivation for his arrival in Pleasant Valley isn't pleasant at all,and the discovery of his secret just might tear apart a once-in-a-lifetime chance at love.

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All Brynn could think of was how much she was attracted to Rand, from his thick brown hair to the tips of his Gucci loafers  
And especially everything in between.

Rand gave her a look that made her suddenly hot. “It’s been such a great day that I don’t want it to end. Come to River Walk with us.”

No way, her mind was screaming, but her reply came from her heart. “I’d love to.”

His face lit up like Fourth of July fireworks, his delight so obvious Brynn had to look away. She restrained herself from beating her hand against the window in frustration. Why hadn’t she just said no?

Because Rand Benedict is a very special man, maybe the one you’ve been looking for all your life, a voice inside her head insisted.

But she hadn’t been looking for a man, not even a special one.  
Had she?

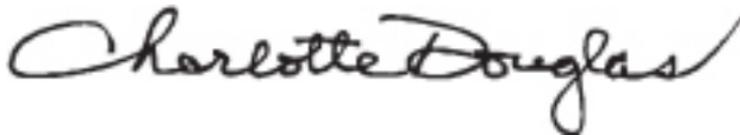
Dear Reader,

In the words of an ancient Chinese saying, we live in interesting times. Due to tumultuous world events, we appreciate more than ever security, solace, acceptance and love as bulwarks against the troubles of the day. In my series **A PLACE TO CALL HOME**, I’ve created a small town in upstate South Carolina, where love and acceptance, along with only occasional mayhem, abound. For the residents of Pleasant Valley, friends are family, and family is everything.

In *Spring in the Valley*, book three of the series, Officer Brynn Sawyer, one of Pleasant Valley's finest, finds her heart and values shaken by Yankee stranger Rand Benedict, a lawyer on a secret mission to the South. But Brynn has always given as good as she gets, and Rand soon discovers his life and expectations upended after being ticketed by the curvaceous cop.

I hope you'll enjoy the romantic skirmish between Brynn and Rand, aided by Rand's adorable nephew and ward, and as we say in the South, y'all come back and visit Pleasant Valley again early in 2006.

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Charlotte Douglas". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'C' and 'D'.

*Spring in the Valley*  
Charlotte Douglas



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The major passions of Charlotte Douglas's life are her husband—her high school sweetheart to whom she's been married for over three decades—and writing compelling stories. A national bestselling author, she enjoys filling her books with love of home and family, special places and happy endings. With their two cairn terriers, she and her husband live most of the year on Florida's central west coast, but spend the warmer months at their North Carolina mountaintop retreat.

No matter what time of year, readers can reach her at [charlottedouglas1@juno.com](mailto:charlottedouglas1@juno.com). She's always delighted to hear from them.

# Books by Charlotte Douglas

## HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE

591—IT'S ABOUT TIME

623—BRINGING UP BABY

868—MONTANA MAIL-ORDER WIFE\*

961—SURPRISE INHERITANCE

999—DR. WONDERFUL

1027—VERDICT: DADDY

1038—ALMOST HEAVEN†

1049—ONE GOOD MAN†

1061—SPRING IN THE VALLEY†

## HARLEQUIN INTRIGUE

380—DREAM MAKER

434—BEN'S WIFE

482—FIRST-CLASS FATHER

515—A WOMAN OF MYSTERY

536—UNDERCOVER DAD

611—STRANGER IN HIS ARMS\*

638—LICENSED TO MARRY

668—MONTANA SECRETS

691—THE BRIDE'S RESCUER

740—THE CHRISTMAS TARGET

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# Chapter One

Officer Brynn Sawyer was definitely out of uniform. At the rate her friends were getting married, she contemplated with a wry chuckle, a bridesmaid's dress was beginning to feel like her backup wardrobe.

Recalling Jodie Nathan and Jeff Davidson's wedding earlier that day, she couldn't help smiling as she drove her SUV down the dark, winding road toward the valley highway. Hours ago, she and a few hundred other guests had given the happy couple a great send-off for their Bermuda honeymoon.

After most of the others had departed the festivities at Archer Farm, Brynn had remained behind to help the staff and clients clean up at the juvenile rehabilitation center that the groom had founded. The teenage boys, most of whom she knew well, both through personal encounters and from memorizing their rap sheets, had had other ideas. Refusing her offers of assistance, they had settled her in a deep chair in front of the great room fireplace, slipped a hassock under her high-heel-clad feet and placed a mug of hot chocolate in her hands. Then, insisting they were used to grunt work, they'd ordered her not to muss her pretty dress. In less than a year, Jeff Davidson and his staff of former Marines had worked miracles with their sixteen at-risk boys.

Contemplating Jeff and Jodie's well-earned happiness, Brynn

drove slowly through the darkness. The only illumination on the narrow road was the high beams, and the only interior light came from the faint glow from the control panel. She briefly fingered a fold of her dress before taking hold of the wheel again. The full-length gown was pretty, as the teens had said, a delicate leaf-green silk, perfect for the first day of spring and new beginnings, and to complement the midnight-blue of her eyes.

“You’re next,” Jodie had declared after Brynn caught the bridal bouquet of apple blossoms, paper-whites and fragrant ivory roses. “Remember the rule of threes. It was Merrilee last year, now me. You’ll be married, too, before you know it.”

Brynn had shaken her head and laughed. At thirty, she had no special man in her life, and certainly not one likely to propose. Steady dating, much less marriage, was the furthest thing from her mind. Although she definitely enjoyed men’s company—most of her fellow officers were male—she didn’t need a man to make her feel complete. She loved her job as a Pleasant Valley police officer and aspired to fill her father’s shoes as chief of police someday when he retired. And the people of the valley were her extended family. What woman could want more?

A blast of frigid wind shook the vehicle. Switching on the windshield wipers, she peered through the first flurries of blowing snow, glad she’d donned her department-issue, down-filled parka over her lightweight dress and changed her high-heeled sandals for waterproof boots before she’d left Archer Farm. The early spring snowstorm had timed its arrival just

right—after Jodie’s wedding and reception had ended, thank goodness.

Reassured by the heavy-duty tires and four-wheel drive of her SUV, Brynn eased onto the highway that led through the valley, filled with small farms, to town. If she drove carefully, she’d have no trouble reaching home before heavy snow, which practically never fell in South Carolina, made the roads impassable.

To her right in the darkness, the Piedmont River, already swollen with melting winter snows from the surrounding mountains, paralleled the highway. Her car topped a ridge, and, on her left, lights flickered through the trees in front of Grant and Merrilee Nathan’s home.

Merrilee, along with Jodie’s fifteen-year-old daughter Brittany, had also been bridesmaids at this afternoon’s wedding, and Grant and Merrilee had headed home hours ago. Brittany had left soon after to stay with her grandparents for the honeymoon’s duration. Brynn had been the last guest to depart.

Valley Road was deserted, and she uttered a prayer of gratitude that the snow was falling so late. By morning, when the locals went about their business, the snowplows would have cleared the accumulated white stuff and made the roads safe and her job easier.

No sooner had those thoughts formed than the blinding glare of headlights filled her rearview mirror. A vehicle was approaching rapidly from behind. Definitely too fast for existing conditions. The speeding car bore down on her, swung into the

opposite lane and blasted past, leaving Brynn's SUV vibrating in its vortex.

"Idiot," she muttered under her breath. "He's going to kill himself and someone else if he doesn't slow down."

Keeping her eyes on the road, she reached to the floor of the passenger seat for her portable warning light, popped it onto the dash, and turned on it and her siren. Flooring the accelerator, she took off after the speeder. For now, the falling snow formed only slush on the asphalt, but with temperatures dropping like a rock in a pond, dangerous ice would soon coat the roads, a recipe for disaster.

Brynn grabbed her police radio from the seat beside her and keyed the mike. "This is Officer Sawyer. I'm on Valley Road in pursuit of a silver Jaguar, South Carolina plates." She rattled off the tag number.

"10-4," answered the steady voice of Todd Leland, the night dispatcher. "I'm running the plates now. Do you need backup?"

"10-4." Especially if Todd had a hit on those tags. "Sawyer out." Brynn dropped her radio and gripped the wheel. Ahead, heeding her signals, the Jaguar's driver slowed, pulled to the side of the road, and stopped.

Adrenaline pumping, Brynn parked behind him and switched off her siren. Traffic stops were generally routine, but one going bad was always a possibility. A fleeing felon with nothing to lose wouldn't hesitate to kill a cop to make his escape. She retrieved her off-duty gun from the glove compartment, shoved it into the

pocket of her parka and keyed the mike again.

“Anything on those plates yet?”

“It’s coming through now, registered to a Randall Benedict on Valley Road. No report of the vehicle being stolen. No outstanding warrants on Benedict. Your backup’s on the way.”

“10-4.” According to Todd’s report, the driver was merely stupid, not criminal, but from a cop’s point of view, she could never have too much backup. Especially on a deserted road so late at night.

Hiking her long silk skirt above her boots, Brynn slid from the car and used her Maglite to guide her steps to the idling Jaguar. At her approach, the driver’s window slid down with an electronic whir.

The driver started to speak. “I have a—”

“I’ll do the talking. This is a state highway, not a NASCAR track,” Brynn said in the authoritative manner she reserved for lawbreakers, especially those displaying such an obvious lack of common sense. “And the road’s icing up. You have a death wish?”

“No.” The driver seemed distracted, oblivious to the seriousness of his offense. “I need to—”

“Turn off your engine,” Brynn ordered, “and place your hands on the wheel where I can see them.”

She shined her flashlight in the driver’s face. The man in his midthirties squinted in the brightness, but not before the pupils of his eyes, the color of dark melting chocolate, contracted in the

light. She instantly noted the rugged angle of his unshaven jaw, the aristocratic nose, baby-fine brown hair tousled as if he'd just climbed out of bed...

And a wad of one hundred dollar bills thrust under her nose.

Anger burned through her, but she kept a lid on her temper.

"If that's a bribe, buster, you're in a heap of trouble."

"No bribe." His tone, although frantic, was rich and full.

"Payment for my fine. I can't stop—"

"You can't keep going at your previous speed, either," she said reasonably and struggled to control her fury at the man's arrogance. "You'll kill yourself and someone else—"

"It's Jared. I have to get him to the hospital."

Labored breathing sounded in the back seat. Brynn aimed her light at the source. In a child carrier, a towheaded toddler, damp hair matted to his head and plump cheeks flushed with fever, wheezed violently as his tiny chest struggled for air.

Brynn's anger vanished at the sight of the poor little guy, and her sympathy kicked in. Accustomed to emergencies, she sorted quickly through alternatives. Her four-wheel-drive SUV was safer under present conditions, but removing and reinstalling the child carrier would take time, precious time, judging from the boy's obvious respiratory distress. But the driver—the child's father?—was so rattled, he might wreck his car if left entirely on his own.

"Follow me," Brynn ordered. She'd push her speed, but only as fast as was safe. "I'll radio ahead for the E.R. to expect us.

What's Jared's problem?"

"He had a cold, but it's developed into something worse. He's having trouble breathing."

Brynn hurried to her vehicle, drove onto the highway and turned on her siren again. The Jaguar pulled in behind her. After radioing Todd to cancel her backup and alert the hospital, she concentrated on the road, vigilant for signs of ice as she sped through the night, emergency lights flashing.

Questions flitted through her mind. Who was Randall Benedict? She'd never seen the Jaguar's driver before, and she knew everyone who lived on Valley Road. And where was the boy's mother? Wouldn't a kid, especially one as sick as he was, want his mommy?

"Where's Mommy?" four-year-old Brynn asked.

Her mommy had been gone for a long time, and the house was filled with flowers, so many that the overpowering sweetness of their mixed fragrances made her tummy feel sick.

Her father lifted her in his arms. "Mommy's gone to Heaven."

"Wifout me?" Brynn didn't understand, didn't know where Heaven was or why so many people, friends and strangers alike, had gathered at their house, especially without her mother there to greet them. Or why her father's usual big grin had disappeared and he looked so sad.

"Tell her to come home." Frightened, Brynn started to cry. "Right now."

"She can't, pumpkin." Her father looked as if he wanted to

cry, too.

“But I want my mommy!” Her wails drew the attention of the people in the room. And then something happened that frightened her as much as her mother’s absence. Her big, strong father broke into sobs and clutched her against his broad chest so tight, it hurt.

Brynn pushed her memories aside to concentrate on the job at hand. She slowed only slightly as Valley Road became Piedmont Avenue, Pleasant Valley’s main drag. This late, no stores were open, and the weather was too raw for pedestrians. The Jaguar followed at a safe distance.

After rounding the curve at Jay-Jay’s Garage, she pulled into the emergency room entrance of the medical center and parked, grabbed her radio and hurried from the SUV. The Jaguar stopped behind her. Randall Benedict jumped from his car with his boy bundled in his arms and rushed past her.

Trained to form instant assessments, Brynn noted that the man was tall, well over six feet, but with an athletic build, apparent even under his expensive camel-colored cashmere overcoat. Beneath it, she caught a glimpse of designer sweatpants and an immaculate T-shirt. Judging from his Gucci loafers without socks, he’d dressed in a hurry. Even in his disheveled state, the man looked too handsome to be true. Had to be fantastically good-looking, Brynn admitted, for her to notice. Too bad he was married. And where was his wife, anyway? What woman in her right mind wouldn’t want to spend every minute with such a

gorgeous husband and adorable little boy? What mother wouldn't stay with her seriously ill child?

Possibilities flitted through Brynn's mind. Benedict could be divorced, but that seemed unlikely. Only under the most unusual circumstances did judges take a child as young as Jared from his mother. More feasible was the probability that Mrs. Benedict simply hadn't arrived in Pleasant Valley yet. The man was a newcomer. Perhaps his wife had remained at their former home to oversee its sale and the loading of moving vans. Or she could be on a business trip. Or taking care of a sick parent. Any number of reasons could explain her absence.

Brynn studied Randall Benedict closer. After her first glimpse of him, he appeared remarkably self-confident and self-possessed. He moved and spoke with the ease of a man who knew what he wanted and was accustomed to getting it. Further inspection revealed worried furrows in his high forehead, the edge of tension around his generous mouth and a slight tick below his right eye at his sculpted cheekbone. Although his entire body was rigid with anxiety, he cradled the toddler with remarkable tenderness.

"Hang on, tiger," he murmured in a reassuring tone. "The doctor's going to help you feel better."

"Wanna go home," the boy wheezed.

"We'll go home soon," Benedict promised with a gentleness at odds with his earlier response to Brynn. He paused as she caught up with them. "I can't thank you enough for your help," he said

to her.

“No problem. That’s my job. Let’s get your son inside.”

“He’s not—” Benedict began, but stopped, shook his head and hurried toward the entrance.

Not going to make it. She shoved the pessimistic thought aside. “Jared will be fine. Dr. Anderson’s a very competent physician.”

Brynn accompanied them through the automatic doors of the emergency room, where Dr. Scott Anderson, the young E.R. specialist who’d joined the hospital staff last year, was waiting for them in the foyer. The doctor motioned Benedict and Jared into a treatment room, followed with a nurse in tow and closed the door. Brynn took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She hadn’t realized how tense she’d been until relief washed over her that the little boy was now in the doctor’s capable hands.

While she waited for news of Jared’s condition, Brynn stopped at the desk to speak with Emily Carmichael, one of the night nurses. As Emily chattered away, Brynn couldn’t stop thinking about Randall Benedict, who stirred her interest. And so attractive he’d stirred her senses in a way no other man ever had. Just her luck to find the one man she might like to know better was almost certainly married and with a son. She considered family sacred, which made Benedict definitely off-limits and reinforced her conviction that she was meant for single life. Catching Jodie’s bouquet had been a fluke that had sent Brynn’s thoughts in directions they had no business taking. As far as

marriage was concerned, she was wedded to her job. Period. End of story.

“Looks like you just came from Jodie’s wedding.” Emily pointed to Brynn’s long skirt with a hint of wistfulness. “We were all invited, but some of us had to work. I drew the short straw.”

“Get used to it, Em,” Brynn said with a sympathetic smile. She’d had to pull a few strings and juggle duty rosters to attend her best friend’s nuptials. “Duty comes first in our lines of work.”

The young nurse, only months out of college, nodded. “Want some coffee?”

Brynn checked the clock on the wall behind the desk. She wouldn’t leave until she’d had a report on Jared and could be in for a long night. “Sure. High-octane with cream and sugar, please.”

Emily disappeared into the break room and returned moments later with two foam cups. She handed one to Brynn and nodded toward the treatment room. “Must be tough, having a sick kid.”

Brynn sipped her coffee and attempted to put a lid on her worry over the little boy. So small and vulnerable, he’d touched her heart and broken through the objectivity she worked so hard to maintain on the job. “Illness is a fact of life.”

Emily cocked her head and considered Brynn through narrowed eyes. “You’ve been a cop how long?”

“Eight years.”

“That explains it.”

“What?”

“Why you’re so cynical.”

“Sheesh, Em, don’t spare my feelings,” Brynn said with pretended hurt. “Just spit out what you really think.”

“We’ve spent a lot of time together since I started work here,” Emily began.

Brynn nodded. Too much time. She’d logged more hours in the E.R. than she cared to remember, interviewing victims of accidents, domestic abuse and the rare but disturbing casualties of assault and other crimes. “And your point is?”

Emily shrugged. “You act like none of this—” her gesture encompassed the E.R. “—touches you.”

Brynn blinked in surprise. Did she really come across so hard-boiled? “If you don’t maintain emotional distance, jobs like ours will burn you out fast.”

“That’s easier said than done,” Emily admitted with a sigh. “Especially when kids like that sweet little boy are concerned, bless his heart.”

Brynn had to agree. Worrying about Jared had shaken her more than she cared to admit. “A sense of humor helps.”

“Any new jokes?” Emily asked.

Brynn grinned, happy to change the subject. “How can you tell if it’s a skunk or a lawyer who’s been run over on the highway?”

“I give up.”

“There’re skid marks around the skunk.” Emily’s laugh encouraged Brynn to continue. “How many lawyers does it take to change a lightbulb?”

“How many?”

“How many can you afford?”

Emily chuckled again and shook her head. “You know more lawyer jokes than anyone I’ve ever met. Do you really dislike them so much?”

“Lawyers? I like ’em about as much as I like Yankees,” Brynn admitted.

“I always figured lawyers and the police are on the same side.”

Brynn snorted with disgust. “If I had ten bucks for every criminal who’s lawyered up and gotten off scot-free because some crooked attorney manipulated the system, I could buy a luxury condo at Myrtle Beach.”

Emily folded her arms on the admissions desk. “But not all lawyers are crooked.”

“No,” Brynn admitted with a straight face. “Some are dead.”

“You are so bad,” Emily laughed and shook her head.

Although Brynn had made her comments in jest, she recognized her prejudice. For the most part, she considered herself fair and open-minded, but attorneys and Northerners pushed her buttons. Where attorneys were concerned, she agreed with the principle that every person was entitled to the best defense possible, but the shady shenanigans of too many unprincipled lawyers had left a bad taste in her mouth for the profession as a whole.

And she hoped Emily wouldn’t get her started on Yankees. They flooded the town every summer, in their big RVs and

fancy cars, passing through on their way to summer homes in the nearby mountains. Not that she envied their wealth. They'd probably worked hard for it. What Brynn disliked was their condescension, treating the locals like dim-witted morons from The Beverly Hillbillies, laughing at Southern drawls and taking great pleasure in explaining how much better everything was done up North.

Two particular Yankees had caused plenty of trouble recently in Pleasant Valley. Ginger Parker, with the morals of an alley cat in heat, had almost ruined Jim and Cat Stratton's marriage. Ginger had been from New Jersey. And the antiques dealer who'd tried to rip off sweet old Mrs. Weatherstone had been based in Rhode Island.

Not that there weren't Southern snakes in abundance, but, at least in a five-county radius, Brynn knew who they were. Strangers, especially from the North, always put her on alert and on edge. If that attitude made her opinionated, it also made her cautious. And she couldn't be too cautious in her line of work.

"You don't fool me," Emily was saying. "I know you too well. For all your ranting about lawyers and Yankees, you'd be first on the scene if either needed help. And you'd provide it gladly."

"That's my job," Brynn countered.

Before she could say more, Dr. Anderson came out of the treatment room and approached the desk.

"How's the kid?" Brynn asked.

The young doctor pursed his lips, then sighed. "He's in severe

respiratory distress. I have him on oxygen and antibiotics. We'll have to wait and see how well he can fight this off."

Brynn's heart went out to the little boy, so ill without his mother. "How soon before he's out of the woods?"

"Depends on how strong he is. Could be a couple of hours. Could be a few days." The doctor's solemn expression indicated a third possibility. The boy might not recover at all.

Brynn felt a rush of sympathy, not only for Jared, but for his father. She couldn't imagine how Randall Benedict was feeling now, without anyone to stand watch with him over his sick child.

Her radio squawked and she keyed the mike. "Sawyer here."

"We have an accident with injuries west of Carsons Corner," the dispatcher announced. "I've dispatched Rhodes."

"Understood," Brynn replied. "I'm coming in."

The Pleasant Valley police department was small, usually manned at night by only the dispatcher and one patrol officer. In bad weather or other emergencies, additional help was needed, and Brynn often had to pull an extra shift. With the police station across the street from the medical center and a clean uniform in her locker, she could report for duty in mere minutes.

Brynn said goodbye to Dr. Anderson and Emily and headed for her car. But she couldn't get Randall Benedict and Jared, a worried parent alone in a strange town and his dangerously ill little boy, out of her mind. She turned before exiting the automatic doors.

"I'll drop by later to see how the kid's doing," she said before

plunging into the night and the blowing snow.

## Chapter Two

The light pressure of a hand on his shoulder jolted Rand out of a deep sleep. He came instantly awake and centered his attention immediately on Jared. The boy, dwarfed by the hospital bed, lay still.

Too still.

Terror squeezed Rand's lungs like a fist, and he couldn't move from the hard plastic chair where he'd slept. Couldn't breathe. "My God, he's not—"

"Jared's fine," a drawling feminine voice assured him. "The crisis has passed. His fever's broken, and he's breathing without difficulty now."

Relief cascaded through him, and, for the first time, Rand became aware of the woman whose hand still grasped his shoulder. "You're sure?"

"Dr. Anderson was just in, but he didn't wake you. You've had a long night."

Sunlight filtered through the curtains of the hospital window, and Rand checked his watch—8:00 a.m.

He stood, leaned over Jared, and placed his hand on the boy's forehead. The toddler's color was normal, his fever gone, his breathing easier. The oxygen mask had been removed. Weak with relief, Rand turned to the nurse—

And saw instead the police officer who'd escorted him into

town.

“You here to arrest me?” His mind, fuzzy from lack of sleep, struggled to make sense of the officer’s presence.

His question apparently took her by surprise. “Arrest you?”

“For speeding. I know I was driving like a bat out of hell last night, but—”

“I just stopped by to check on Jared.”

She smiled, and suddenly she was no longer an officer but the most beautiful woman Rand had ever seen. Midnight-blue eyes glowed with compassion, and her mouth turned up at the corners in an alluring smile. Even with her auburn hair tucked neatly into a French braid, it appeared thick and luxurious, the kind of hair he’d love to run his fingers through. And its color complemented perfectly the apricot flush of her cheeks and her flawless complexion. Tall—she had to be at least five foot eight—her body filled her navy blue uniform so sensually it should have been against the law. In contrast to the severe lines of her uniform, the faintest hint of her floral scent swirled through the room.

When he’d rushed Jared into the E.R. last night, Rand had been so frantic with worry that the police officer’s appearance had barely registered. Otherwise, he would have noted those spectacular eyes, like the blue velvet of a moonless summer sky. Even if he hadn’t been distracted, he couldn’t have seen how curvaceous she was. She’d been bundled up in her police parka and a long dress. Long dress? Had she really been wearing one

or had his worry-crazed mind played tricks on him?

“You okay?” she asked.

He flushed, embarrassed that he’d been staring. “What?”

“You’ve had a rough night. You should go home and get some sleep.” Her words, slow and sensual, made him think of the heady fragrance of magnolias and steamy Southern nights.

“I won’t leave Jared alone.” He checked once more to reassure himself that Jared was truly better.

“Anyone I can notify for you?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Thanks—” His gaze traveled to the name tag on the pocket above the enticing curve of her breast. “Officer Sawyer—”

“Call me Brynn.” She offered her hand.

He grasped it and noted instantly the contrast of cool, silky skin, long elegant fingers and a no-nonsense grip that he released with reluctance. “Thanks, Brynn, but I have my cell phone if I need it. And I’m Rand, by the way.”

“I can stay while you take a break. I don’t mind. He’s a sweet little kid.”

“You’re very kind, but, no. Jared’s had a tough time lately, and when he wakes up, he should see a familiar face.”

“At least let me bring you breakfast.”

He scrutinized her closely, assessing her motives. She wasn’t coming on to him. In spite of her obvious sexual attributes, she didn’t flaunt them. Her concern seemed genuine with no strings attached, probably an example of the legendary Southern

hospitality he'd heard so much about.

"Doesn't the hospital have a cafeteria?" he asked.

"You can eat here if you're a masochist," she replied with a friendly grin. "But Jodie's Café is just down the street. They have the best cranberry-pecan muffins in the Upstate."

"Upstate?"

"Northwest South Carolina."

"Sorry. I haven't learned the local lingo."

"You live on Valley Road, right?"

"Just moved in. I bought the place called River Walk."

Her magnificent eyes widened at his mention of the name. "Great location, right on the river. Good trout fishing."

"And lots of fresh air and sunshine. Just what the doctor ordered for Jared's health." He glanced at Jared, sleeping peacefully, and felt a stab of guilt. "Guess I didn't get him out of New York fast enough."

"You're from New York?" Brynn's question seemed strained.

"New York City. Jared and I moved to River Walk to escape the pollution. Jared, as you can tell, has weak lungs. I'm hoping the country air will improve his stamina."

Brynn flashed a brittle smile. "Will you be working in town?"

He shook his head. "I'm with a New York law firm."

A wary look flashed across her very pretty face. "You're a lawyer?"

Rand frowned. She'd uttered the word in a derogatory tone usually reserved for wife beaters, serial killers and child

pornographers. “A corporate attorney.”

She backed toward the door. “Not many corporations in Pleasant Valley.”

“I’m taking a sabbatical, time for us to settle into our new life.”

Brynn reached behind her and grabbed the door-knob. “Dr. Anderson says Jared should recover completely in a day or two. That new antibiotic did the trick.”

Rand didn’t want her to leave. Not until he’d learned a whole lot more about the delectable Officer Sawyer. “Come to dinner when Jared’s better. I’d like to show you our place.”

Now that was the understatement of the year.

“Maybe.” Brynn couldn’t have sounded more noncommittal. “I’ll have the café send that breakfast over.”

Before Rand could protest, she slipped out the door and closed it firmly behind her. Officer Sawyer hadn’t appeared the type who would spook easily. He sank back into the bedside chair, wondering what he’d said that had sent her running as if the devil were at her heels.

BRYNN STOMPED through the snow that covered the sidewalk, heedless of the creeping dampness at the cuffs of her uniform trousers, oblivious to the cold that nipped her cheeks. As steamed as she felt, she was amazed the snow didn’t melt in her path. How could she be so stupid, going all fluttery inside over a guy with three strikes against him?

Married, most likely. He hadn’t been wearing a wedding band, but that wasn’t concrete proof of anything.

Yankee, by his own admission.

And a lawyer.

But try as she might, she couldn't get Rand Benedict out of her mind, especially the way his deep brown eyes had widened first with surprise, then blatant approval when she'd seen him this morning. And that voice. No nasal Yankee twang. Just seductively rich, deep and smooth, like an anchorman's on the network news.

He had shed his cashmere overcoat, too, using it as a blanket over his knees, exposing broad shoulders, well-developed biceps and an enticing chest beneath his pristine white T-shirt. Sitting at a desk and hoisting law books didn't produce that kind of physical perfection. He probably worked out in an expensive Fifth Avenue health club. In New York City, for Pete's sake! She'd have more in common with the man if he came from Mars.

Then why couldn't she get him out of her head? He'd occupied her thoughts during the entire night shift, causing Todd Leland to eye her more than once with curiosity when he had to repeat a question. Fortunately, she hadn't been called out on the road. In her present state of out-of-her-mind, she'd have ended up with Jay-Jay pulling her patrol car from a snowbank with his tow truck.

Brynn had worried all night about little Jared, too. She could have simply called the hospital to check on him once her shift was over. But, no, she'd gone and stuck herself smack-dab in temptation's path by returning to the hospital where Rand

Benedict would be waiting.

Reaching the entrance to Jodie's Mountain Crafts and Café, Brynn stomped the snow off her boots and opened one of the double glass doors. A blast of warm air and a mélange of delicious aromas greeted her. In a couple months, the café would be crowded with tourists stopping for breakfast on their way to the North Carolina mountains, but in late March, the working locals had already eaten and left, and the dining area was practically empty.

“Morning, Officer Sawyer.”

Sixteen-year-old Daniel, a teen from Archer Farm whom Jodie had hired as a busboy, looked up from the table he was clearing. Of all Jeff's clients, Daniel had made the most progress in rehabilitating himself. Tall and lanky with carrot-colored hair and freckles, Daniel had gained poise and self-confidence over the past few months. And a reputation as a hard worker.

“Hey, Daniel,” Brynn greeted him. “Do you have time to make a delivery for me?”

His face lighted with its usual puppy-dog eagerness. “Yes, ma'am!”

“Take a large coffee, large o.j. and several kinds of muffins over to the hospital. To Mr. Rand Benedict. And put them on my tab.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Daniel tucked the tub of dirty dishes under his arm and hurried toward the kitchen.

Just because Rand was off-limits didn't mean he didn't

deserve a little pampering after the hard night he'd endured. She'd promised him breakfast, and with that obligation fulfilled, she'd forget him.

Brynn wandered through the gift area, a wide hall lined with shelves filled with handmade quilts, willow baskets and rustic birdhouses, many made by the boys at Archer Farm. The passage led to the dining room on the deck overlooking the river. The arching glass roof and walls kept out the snow and cold and provided a breathtaking view of the Piedmont River below and the mountains beyond.

"Hey, honeybun, come sit with us," a familiar voice called.

Brynn's aunt, Marion Sawyer, sat with Merrilee Nathan at the only occupied table on the deck. Glad for an excuse not to be alone with her troublesome thoughts, Brynn joined them.

"You two are up early," Brynn said.

"I'm filling in as hostess for the breakfast shift while Jodie's on her honeymoon," Merrilee explained. Her face flushed and her eyes glimmered at the mention of the honeymoon, and Brynn guessed Merrilee was recalling her own last summer with her veterinarian husband Grant, who was Jodie's brother.

"And I have a house to show at nine o'clock," Aunt Marion explained, "although the clients may cancel because of the weather."

Brynn shrugged off her parka and took a seat at the table. Merrilee retrieved a mug and silverware from a nearby serving station and poured Brynn's coffee.

“You didn’t sell River Walk, by any chance?” Brynn asked Marion. Along with her husband, Bud, Marion ran the local real estate office.

“Don’t I wish?” the older woman with huge bones, big hair, a strong jaw and a heart as large as the rest of her said. “That commission alone would have equaled my last year’s income.”

Brynn had never been inside the riverside “cabin,” a massive log home with expansive windows and multitiered decks, built before she was born, but she’d often checked out the exterior of the empty house while on patrol. “Isn’t it in pretty rough shape?”

“Needs some cosmetic repairs,” Marion agreed, “new appliances and upgrades in the bathrooms, but it’s still a valuable property with over five thousand square feet, a guest house and location, location, location.”

“How come you’re so interested in River Walk?” Merrilee leaned forward and eyed Brynn closely, like a bloodhound scenting a trail.

“Aren’t you?” Brynn sidestepped the question. “It’s practically across the highway from you and Grant.”

“And it’s sold?” Merrilee asked.

“Apparently.” Brynn filled them in on her encounter with Rand and Jared Benedict.

“Poor little kid,” Marion murmured. “Dr. Anderson’s sure he’s going to be all right?”

Brynn nodded, sipped her coffee and tried to ignore the laserlike glare of Merrilee’s sky-blue gaze.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Merrilee asked.

“About what?”

“About Rand Benedict.” Merrilee exchanged a long look with Marion.

“I’ve told you everything I know about the man,” Brynn insisted with a shrug, striving for nonchalance.

Merrilee narrowed her eyes. “You haven’t told us why you’re absolutely glowing when you talk about him.”

“I’m glowing because I just walked two blocks in the snow, not because he asked me to dinner.” Brynn started to push away from the table, but Marion grabbed her wrist.

“Whoa, not so fast,” her aunt said.

Cornered, Brynn sank into her chair. “What?”

“Tell us the rest,” Marion said.

“I told you—”

“—the bare bones,” Merrilee interrupted. “Now fill in the blanks.”

Irritated at their persistence, Brynn ran a finger under the suddenly too-tight collar of her uniform. “There are no blanks.”

Merrilee shook her head. “This is Merrilee June, your old buddy, you’re talking to, your friend who’s taken part in every bit of mischief you’ve ever committed. I know that look, Brynn.”

“The dead-tired-after-working-all-night-and-want-to-go-home-and-sleep look?” Brynn hedged.

“Un-uh.” Merrilee shook her head. “The I’m-hiding-something look.”

“What would I have to hide?” Brynn asked, feigning innocence.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Aunt Marion said. “What’s this Rand Benedict look like?”

Handsome as sin. Good enough to eat. Pulse-pounding perfect. “He’s nice looking.”

Merrilee rolled her eyes. “C’mon, Brynn. I can tell you’re interested in the guy. You get this soft, misty look when you talk about him.”

“I am not interested. And even if I were, he’s a married Yankee lawyer.” She didn’t know for certain he was married, but claiming the fact would help get her off the hook. She hoped.

“You sure he’s married?” Marion asked. Brynn’s aunt had been trying to find a husband for her only niece since Brynn had turned eighteen. Having gone through all the eligible bachelors in Pleasant Valley and the surrounding counties, Marion obviously viewed Rand Benedict as fresh meat.

“He has a son,” Brynn said, hoping to convince them that Benedict was unavailable. “He’s bought a house too huge for just the two of them. Maybe he’s waiting for his wife to join him.”

“Maybe he’s divorced,” Merrilee countered.

“Well, hot damn,” Brynn said with more sarcasm than she’d intended. “That would make him a real catch. A divorced Yankee lawyer.”

“Maybe the two of you could find something in common,” Aunt Marion, ever the optimist, suggested.

“Maybe the two of you should mind your own business,” Brynn said with a smile to soften her words. “I’m not in the market for a man.”

“Then there’s no reason why you shouldn’t accept his dinner offer,” Marion responded with maddening logic.

“And every reason why you should,” Merrilee added.

“Name one,” Brynn shot back, outflanked and outnumbered.

“He’s new in town.” Merrilee studied her perfect pink fingernails with exasperating calm. “You should make him feel welcome.”

Aunt Marion bent her head toward Brynn, her eyes flashing with curiosity. “And you’d have the perfect opportunity to learn more about him.”

“Why would I want to know?” Brynn refused to admit how much the prospect of discovering more about Rand appealed to her.

“Pffft,” Marion snorted. “This is Pleasant Valley, honeybun. Everyone wants to know everything about everyone else. And it’s particularly important for the police to have all the facts. Think how much trouble Jim and Cat Stratton might have avoided if you had dug up the goods on that Ginger Parker when she first came to town.”

“I’m a police officer,” Brynn said. “If you want someone to dig up dirt on Rand Benedict, hire a private eye.”

“We’re not suggesting the man has skeletons in his closet,” Merrilee said with a shake of her pretty blond curls. “If he

really is a single parent with a small son, he needs the help of a supportive community.”

“From what I saw,” Brynn said, “Rand Benedict can afford to pay for all the help he needs.”

“You can’t buy friends,” Merrilee observed quietly.

Brynn winced. Maybe police work had made her cynical, just as Emily had said. “You’re right,” she conceded with a sigh. “If the man asks me again, I’ll consider going to dinner.”

Hope flared in Marion’s eyes, and Brynn was quick to add, “But just because it’s the neighborly thing to do, and I only said I’d consider it. By the way, what did you think of Jodie and Jeff’s cutting their wedding cake with a Marine officer’s saber yesterday? That’s a first for Pleasant Valley.”

With the subject safely shifted, Brynn leaned back in her chair and enjoyed her coffee. Rand Benedict lived out of town and didn’t seem the type to mix with the locals. In a few days, Aunt Marion, Merrilee and Brynn herself, she hoped, would forget all about him. After all, the man had said he was on sabbatical, not a permanent resident. She’d probably never see him again.

Over a week later, Brynn surveyed the eager young faces of Mrs. Shepherd’s third-grade class with a sentimental sense of déjà vu. It didn’t seem that long ago that she and Jodie had sat next to each other in the rows beside the windows and Merrilee had been in the first grade classroom down the hall.

Outside the tall windows of the ancient brick building, a row of spectacular Bradford pear trees bloomed like stalks of white

cotton candy against the brilliant blue sky. Beneath them, beds of cheerful yellow daffodils, hearty survivors of the brief spring storm, nodded in the breeze. Last week's snow had melted almost immediately, replaced by warm balmy days that had induced an outbreak of spring fever in the school's population. Needing a diversion from routine, Mrs. Shepherd had asked Brynn to present her Officer Friendly program to the class.

Brynn had completed her standard talk on avoiding strangers and observing traffic and gun-safety rules and was handing out junior officer cards when she noted a newcomer who had just slipped in the rear door and joined the parent volunteers at the back of the class.

Rand Benedict.

What was he doing at the elementary school? Jared wasn't old enough to enroll. But Rand, dressed with great casual style in khaki chinos and a sage-green knit shirt that brought out the deep brown of his eyes, sat with one hip propped atop a low bookcase, perfectly at ease, as if he had every right to be there.

He'd phoned the station several times over the past week and left Brynn messages, asking her to return his calls, but she hadn't. In spite of her halfway promise to Merrilee and Marion, she didn't intend to accept his dinner invitation. Being alone with a man she found both entirely too appealing and at the same time completely wrong for her would be an exercise in frustration. By not responding to his calls, Brynn had hoped to make him realize she wasn't interested. And until this moment, she'd believed her

lack of response had worked.

“Now, class,” Mrs. Shepherd was saying, “before Officer Sawyer leaves, does anyone have questions?”

Brynn dragged her attention from Rand to the class. In the front row, Kenny Fulton, a skinny little hellion whose father owned the town’s only department store, waved his hand. “Have you ever shot anybody?”

Aware of Rand’s gaze, which was making her cheeks flush and her body temperature rise, Brynn answered, “No, Kenny, fortunately, I’ve never had to draw my gun in the line of duty.”

“How come?” the boy demanded.

“Because most people have enough respect for the law to do what an officer says without the need to display deadly force.”

Kenny screwed his face in disgust. “What’s the fun of having a gun if you can’t shoot it.”

The class laughed, and Brynn smiled. “Oh, I shoot it a lot. At target practice. Anyone who carries a gun must know how and when to use it.”

“Officer Sawyer is being modest,” Mrs. Shepherd interrupted. “She has a caseful of trophies that she’s won in shooting competitions all over the country.”

“Awesome,” Jennifer Clayton, a redhead in the middle of the room, who reminded Brynn of herself at that age, said. “Just like Annie Oakley. We learned about her this year.”

Sid Paulie, whose folks ran the drugstore, stuck his hand in the air as if grasping for a lifeline.

“Yes, Sid?” Mrs. Shepherd said.

The boy sat up straight, pleased to be recognized. “How much money do you make, Officer Sawyer?”

In the back of the room, Rand shifted his weight and crossed his arms over his broad chest. Interest sparked in his expression, and Brynn felt a smidgeon of irritation. The clothes he wore today probably cost more than her pay for the month, so why was he so captivated by her finances?

But her salary always came up in school sessions, so she had her stock answer ready, thank goodness, because Rand’s steady scrutiny was turning her brain to mush.

“Police officers make about the same as school-teachers,” Brynn explained to Sid. “It’s not a lot of money, but enough for a decent living. People who become police officers and teachers don’t choose those jobs for the money. They do them because they like to help people.”

Kenny raised his hand again. “How do the police help people? Don’t you just give them tickets or lock them in jail?”

Brynn opened her mouth to answer, but a voice at the back of the room beat her to a response.

“May I answer that, Mrs. Shepherd?”

Looking more flustered than Brynn had ever seen her, the veteran teacher peered at Rand, apparently noting his presence in the midst of the other adult volunteers for the first time. “And you are?”

“Rand Benedict.” He held up the laminated visitor card on

a lanyard around his neck to indicate he'd checked in with the office. "I recently moved to Pleasant Valley. Last week during the snowstorm, my boy Jared was dangerously ill and having trouble breathing. I was rushing him to the hospital when Officer Sawyer came along, radioed ahead to the emergency room and led the way to the hospital with lights flashing and sirens wailing. That's one example of how the police help people," he explained to the class.

"Is Jared okay?" Jennifer asked.

"He's fine now, thanks to Officer Sawyer and Dr. Anderson." Rand seemed as at ease among the children and parents as if he spoke to strangers every day. That confidence, Brynn thought, must give him a hell of a courtroom presence.

Jimmy Clayton, Jennifer's twin brother, spoke up. "There was an accident on the highway near our farm last year. Officer Sawyer gave the driver CPR until the ambulance got there. My dad said she probably saved the lady's life."

"So you see, Kenny," Mrs. Shepherd explained with a kindly smile, "police officers do much more than give tickets and lock people up."

"Thank you, class," Brynn said, anxious to make her escape. "You've been an excellent audience."

She turned to leave, but Rand spoke again from the back of the room. "Mrs. Shepherd, may I ask one more question?"

Irritated by his interruptions and struggling not to show her annoyance, Brynn turned back toward the class.

“Of course, Mr. Benedict,” Mrs. Shepherd answered with her characteristic courtesy.

Rand nodded and locked gazes with Brynn, who felt skewered like a butterfly on a pin with no hope of escape. She forced herself to relax. Just one more question and she was out of here. And away from the magnetic charm of Rand Benedict.

“Officer Sawyer.” Rand addressed her directly, and even from the back of the room, she could read the devil in his eyes. “May I speak with you outside?”

## Chapter Three

The children in the classroom turned and stared at Rand with open curiosity. Mrs. Shepherd smiled as if she'd just guessed an interesting secret. The adult volunteers on either side of him exchanged knowing looks. Only Brynn didn't react, but stood at the front of the room as if carved from stone, her posture rigid, her expression impassive. She didn't give him a clue to what she was thinking.

Suddenly his bright idea of confronting her publicly didn't seem so bright after all.

He moved quickly toward the rear door of the class, but Brynn became instantly animated and made a swift but dignified exit through the door at the front of the room. She had a lead on him as she hurried through the hall to the exit, so he ran to catch up with her.

This might be his only chance, and he didn't want to blow it. He'd been trying for a week to contact her, and pulling this stunt showed how desperate he'd become.

He couldn't help it. Ever since the night of Jared's illness, she'd haunted his thoughts. God knew what would have happened to him and Jared if she hadn't miraculously appeared. Rand knew nothing about children. He knew even less about sick children. When Jared's breathing difficulty had begun, Rand had panicked, shoved Jared into the car and taken off in the direction

of town in search of a hospital. When Brynn's siren sounded behind him, he'd been horrified to discover he was traveling ninety-five miles an hour on a dark, unfamiliar road. If she hadn't pulled him over, he might have killed himself and Jared. He'd been so rattled, he'd been barely coherent when she'd stood by his car window and read him the riot act. As soon as he'd gathered his wits enough to inform her of Jared's illness, she'd transformed into an angel in navy blue. As he'd watched over his sleeping child during the days and nights of Jared's recovery, Brynn had filled his thoughts.

And gratitude wasn't all he felt. In his corporate career, he'd met plenty of slick, sophisticated, smart women, elegantly attired, carefully coiffed, magnificently made-up. But he'd never encountered a woman with Brynn's genuinely natural beauty—and a warm heart to match. Fate had thrown so much sorrow his way recently, Rand considered meeting Brynn compensation for the sadness in his life, and he wasn't about to let her get away.

“Brynn, wait!”

She barreled through the double exit doors into the sunshine, then wheeled to face him, fists on her hips, her eyes blazing with annoyance. “You have some nerve!”

The deep blue hue of her eyes matched her uniform, and the sunlight sparked golden highlights in her auburn hair. Her full lips pursed in disapproval, her strong but lovely chin jutted at a defiant angle, and a delicate vein pulsed in the slender column of her throat.

“I was desperate,” he said.

“Desperate for what?” she demanded. “To embarrass the living daylights out of me? Everyone in town will hear about this and jump to all the wrong conclusions.”

I was desperate to convince myself you're as magnificent as I remembered, he thought. To persuade you to know me better.

“To get in touch with you.” He couldn't believe how calm he sounded when his heart was racing, not only from his sprint down the hall but from the sight of her in all her outraged glory. “You didn't return my calls.”

“I've been busy.” This time she avoided his gaze, and he knew she lied.

“You have to eat,” he said.

“What?”

“All I ask is that you have dinner with me, to let me thank you for your help the night of Jared's illness.”

“You've thanked me already. Dinner isn't necessary.” She pivoted on one foot and headed toward the parking lot.

He fell in step beside her. “Are you always this rude?”

She stopped again and turned on him. “Me? Rude? You're the one who interrupted Mrs. Shepherd's class.”

“I didn't interrupt. In fact, I contributed to the discussion.”

“With a request to speak privately with me?”

“How else was I supposed to get in touch with you, when you won't return my calls?”

“Did it ever occur to you I have good reason not to return your

calls?”

“Name one.”

“You’re married.”

“I’m not.”

She stopped suddenly. “Divorced, then.”

“Not guilty.”

Her features spasmed with regret. “You’re a widower?”

He shook his head.

Puzzlement replaced regret on her lovely face. “But you have a son.”

“Jared’s not my son.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Then why is he with you?”

“I promise you, I haven’t kidnapped him.”

He could almost see the wheels turning in her mind. He’d thrown her a puzzle, one her investigative curiosity couldn’t resist. He wasn’t at liberty to divulge everything and would have to be careful not to reveal his true motives for coming to Pleasant Valley. If they became known, they could spoil his chances for success.

“Come to my place for dinner tonight, and I’ll explain everything.” Well, almost everything. “Lillian, by the way, has finally arrived and is an excellent cook, so you’ll be well fed.”

“Who’s Lillian?”

“Eight o’clock?” he persisted.

She folded her arms across her chest, drawing his attention to the sweet curves that even the severe cut of her uniform couldn’t

hide, and leaned her head to one side, as if considering.

“If I accept your invitation, will you leave me alone?”

Her request shocked him. “I’m not a stalker.”

“Then how did you know where I was?”

He jerked his thumb behind him to the building across the street. “I stopped by the police station, hoping to run into you. The dispatcher told me I’d find you here.”

“If I have dinner with you, will you leave me alone?” she repeated.

“Brynn, I just want to show my thanks—”

She cocked one eyebrow in clear disbelief.

“Okay,” he admitted. As a police officer, she probably had a built-in B.S. detector, so he settled on honesty. “I’d also like to have you as a friend. I don’t know anyone in town, and since I’m going to be here awhile...”

Honesty apparently was the best policy. Her expression softened and the fire in her eyes cooled. “I suppose one dinner wouldn’t hurt.”

He relied on his courtroom face to keep his elation from showing. “Dress casually and warm. It’s cold on the river at night.”

“Eight o’clock tonight,” she said with a nod and walked away. And didn’t look back.

BRYNN PULLED a pair of wool slacks from her closet, held them against her in front of the mirror, then tossed them in exasperation on the growing pile on her bed. Casual dress, Rand

had said, but somehow her usual jeans and sweatshirt didn't seem appropriate for dinner at River Walk.

Why had she accepted his invitation in the first place, she wondered with self-disgust.

Curiosity, her image in the mirror answered. You're dying to know why your initial assumptions were off base. Rand Benedict is neither married nor divorced, and Jared isn't his son. You want to know the real scoop.

"Why should I care?" Brynn dragged a long denim skirt from the closet.

He's a mystery. And if there's one thing you can't resist, it's a mystery.

"Okay." She was talking to the mirror again, a sure sign she was losing her mind. "I can't stand a mystery, but I can definitely resist him. He's still a Yankee lawyer."

A delectably handsome Yankee lawyer with a smile that makes your knees wobble. And he's deliciously tall. You're five-eight and he towers over you—

"Oh, shut up," she snapped at her reflection.

She yanked a white turtleneck, an embroidered denim vest and black Italian boots from the closet, added them to the long denim skirt, and dressed hurriedly. Her selection would have to do. She was just going for dinner, for Pete's sake, not an audience with the queen.

Because her friends and family would pester her to death for details and jump to all the wrong conclusions, she hadn't told

anyone she'd accepted Rand's invitation. Except Todd Leland, the dispatcher. And she'd fibbed to him a little, saying she was just going out to River Walk to check on Jared. Between her off-duty gun and her skills at hand-to-hand fighting, she wasn't concerned about her safety, but having her whereabouts known was always a wise precaution, in case of emergencies.

Half an hour later, she turned her SUV off Valley Road onto the long drive that curved through banks of deep glossy green rhododendron. At the final bend of the road, River Walk shone through the darkness in all its glory. Built in the late sixties as a summer getaway for an Atlanta millionaire, the magnificent log mansion stood three stories high on a bluff above the river. Walls of glass extended to the peaks and gables of the undulating roofline, and welcoming light streamed through the panes onto the surrounding decks, a series of tiers that descended to the river, with the final level extending over the rushing waters below.

Vacant for decades, the expensive property had been an occasional seasonal rental until placed on the market last year. And Rand Benedict had been the lucky buyer. The man had to have more money than God to afford such a place, just one more area where she and the attorney had absolutely nothing in common.

Then why was she here, she asked herself for the one hundredth time.

Pure, unadulterated nosiness, the fatal kind that dooms

curious felines.

Parking on the wide flagstone landing beside the front steps, she hoped the answers she found tonight would quell her runaway curiosity. Just thinking about Rand stirred too many unfamiliar feelings she didn't want to deal with, emotions she'd previously been able to sublimate in the cool objectivity that her job required—

Until she'd met Rand Benedict, who'd rattled her calm detachment as no one else had done before. And she couldn't figure why. She was used to handsome men. She'd been surrounded her entire life by alpha males, police officers and farmers, big strapping men who lived with gusto and commanded respect, yet none had left her breathless, sped her pulse or quickened her interest as this Yankee stranger had.

Inhaling a deep breath of the chilly night air to steady herself, she gathered the Officer Friendly teddy bear, her purse and a heavy wool shawl from the passenger seat, stepped from the car and climbed the stairs toward the front entry.

The massive carved wooden door swung open before she reached it, and Rand stood in a pool of light with Jared in his arms. How did the man manage to look more attractive every time she saw him? Tonight he could have passed for a cover model for GQ in tight designer jeans, a bulky beige fisherman's sweater and tooled leather boots. And beneath that handsome facade, she suspected, were rock-hard strength and a brilliant mind.

Jared, arms tight around Rand's neck, hid his face against Rand's shoulder.

"Welcome to River Walk," Rand said.

Brynn stepped inside, and the magnificent architecture drew her attention from her host.

"Wow." Brynn winced inwardly at her automatic naive response to the house's interior. If Rand didn't already consider her a typical hayseed, she'd just given him cause.

The wide foyer with its soaring timber-framed ceiling was brightly lit by an immense chandelier of deer antlers. Brynn hadn't seen a rustic building so impressive since her dad had taken her to the Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone National Park when she was seven.

"You remember Jared," Rand said. "This is Brynn, tiger. She helped us when you were sick."

"Hey, Jared. I brought you a present." She held the teddy bear toward the boy.

One wide hazel eye filled with skepticism peeked out at her. She wiggled the toy to animate it and said in a high squeaky voice, "Hi, Jared. I'm Officer Friendly."

Jared raised his head and gazed at the bear. "Who?"

"I protect you from all the bad guys," Brynn explained in the same funny tone. "Will you play with me?"

"That voice alone must strike fear in the hearts of evildoers," Rand said with a bone-melting grin.

"Evildoers?" Brynn asked in her normal voice, no mean feat

considering the effect Rand's smile was having on her pulse rate.

"Legal term," Rand answered with a straight face. "We lawyers use it all the time."

Jared stretched out a hand, and Brynn gave him the bear. He clutched it fiercely against his chest and buried his face in the toy's plush fur.

"Hi, Ossifer Fwienly," he murmured, mutilating the name in typical toddlerese.

"What do you say to Brynn?" Rand prompted gently.

Jared shot her a quick glance before hiding his face in the toy again. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, sweetie." Brynn was happy he appeared much healthier than the last time she'd seen him. "You feeling okay now?"

Without looking at her, he nodded, his withdrawal almost painful to observe. Brynn had encountered shy children before, but Jared's quiet attitude went beyond simple timidity. She sensed an underlying sadness and wondered where the two-year-old's parents were.

Footsteps sounded from the rear of the hall, and a short, plump woman with gray hair in a pixie cut and rosy-pink cheeks hurried toward them, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Sorry, Rand," the woman said in a lilting voice with the faintest trace of Irish brogue. "I was headed for the door, but the oven timer went off, and I didn't want the salmon overcooked."

Rand smiled at the older woman with obvious affection. "No

problem. Lillian O'Mara, meet Brynn Sawyer.”

“Hi,” Brynn said. “Whatever you’re cooking smells good.”

“It’s nice to meet a friend of Rand’s,” Lillian said with a welcoming twinkle in her green eyes. “I’ve known him and Patrick since they were both no bigger than this little one.” Lillian held out her arms to Jared. “Come to Lillian, darlin’. It’s past your bedtime.”

Jared released his stranglehold on Rand and went willingly to Lillian, but hid his face again as soon as he’d transferred to her arms.

“I’ll tuck him in and sing him to sleep. By then, dinner will be ready.” Crooning softly to the child, Lillian climbed the spectacular log staircase and disappeared into the upper reaches of the huge house.

“How about a drink?” Rand gestured toward his right, motioning Brynn into a living room with the same soaring timber-framed ceiling as the foyer. Walls of glass revealed the abundance of exterior lighting that showcased the surrounding decks and landscape. A fireplace of mountain stone, large enough to roast an ox, blazed with a cheery fire.

“Nice place,” Brynn said, and struggled to suppress another cringe. So far she was two-for-two on the road to striking out in the game of scintillating conversation. “Plenty of room for the three of you.”

“Lillian lives in the guest house,” Rand explained. “About that drink?”

“Fine.”

He crossed the room and opened a set of doors built into the wall next to the fireplace to hide a fully stocked bar. “What would you like?”

Nothing to further addle her already befuddled senses. “Do you have a Diet Coke?”

“Sure.” He placed ice in a tumbler and poured her Diet Coke, then fixed himself a scotch on the rocks. When he handed her the glass, their fingers brushed briefly, sending a buzz of pleasant warmth up her arm. He lifted his drink. “To friendship.”

“To truth,” Brynn countered and took a sip.

He stared intently for an instant, as if trying to assess her thoughts, and gestured to a sectional sofa covered in butter-soft beige leather. Brynn took a seat.

Rand settled across from her in the sofa’s right angle. “You don’t trust me, do you?”

She shrugged. “Trust has to be earned. I don’t know you well enough to know if you deserve to be trusted.”

“Ouch. Are you always so blunt?” Although his words were accusing, he hadn’t lost his killer smile.

“Bluntness saves time.” She sipped her drink and glanced around the massive room. Marion had said the house needed work, but what Brynn had seen looked fine. Mostly lots of window glass, aged timbers and minimal furnishings. “I don’t like beating around the bush.”

“An admirable attitude for you, but not very productive for

a man who earns his living by running up billable hours.” Rand reclined with one arm extended on the back of the sofa and swirled the ice in his glass with his other hand.

“So why am I here?” Brynn had already established her penchant for bluntness. She might as well exploit it.

Rand’s smile faded, and his expression turned serious, drawing her attention to the accentuated planes of his high cheekbones. With the rugged attractiveness and deep tan of an athlete, he lacked the softness she expected from a man who spent his life in conference rooms and courthouses. Flames from the massive fireplace reflected in the deep brown of his eyes.

“As I explained before,” Rand said, “I wanted to thank you.” She shook her head. “You already have.”

He set his drink on a table behind the sofa and leaned toward her, his strong hands clasped between his knees. “Not enough. I could never thank you enough. I was out of my head with worry the night you pulled me over. If you hadn’t stopped me, I might have killed Jared, myself and God knows who else.”

The sincerity in his rich voice and the intensity of his gratitude threatened to crack the shell she’d thrown around her emotions. “Just doing my job. Protect and serve.”

His gaze turned curious. “Why did you choose police work?” “My dad’s a cop, so it runs in the family. And I like people.”

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