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# **The Million-Dollar Marriage**

**EVA RUTLAND**

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### **Аннотация**

Whirlwind Weddings For richer, for poorer... Tony Costello adored Melody. He loved her warmth, her bubbly sense of humor.... There were a million reasons to marry her. Thirty million to be precise—in dollars! Except Tony hadn't known about his bride's fortune. And he couldn't forgive her for it—for being rich and for keeping it a secret. But Melody knew Tony was a proud man. How could she tell him that she had more money in the bank than he could earn in a lifetime? He was everything she'd ever wanted in a husband, and saving their marriage was all that mattered. Rich or poor, she loved Tony. She just had to prove it! Who says you can't hurry love?

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“I pronounce you man and wife.”

It was over. He kissed his bride, happier than he had ever been in his life. The family went wild, hugging and kissing each other, laughing as they emerged into the sunshine.

Something must have happened, he thought, as they started down the steps. Such a big crowd, television cameras and everything.

Before he had a chance to take it in, to wonder, he felt the flash of a photographer's bulb, and a microphone was thrust into his face.

“Mr. Costello, how does it feel to be married to an heiress?”

Eva Rutland began writing when her four children, now all successful professionals, were growing up. Eva lives in California with her husband, Bill, who actively supports and encourages her writing career.

Some people marry for true love, some for convenience...but what about marrying for money?

Eva Rutland continues her humorous look at reasons to say “I do!” in this delightful sequel to Marriage Bait and The Wedding

Trap.

# **The Million-Dollar Marriage**

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### **CHAPTER ONE**

FROM her bedroom window, Melody Sands looked down at the man working in the rose bed. He moved with a quick energy that intrigued her. Clipping, digging, planting and transplanting like mad. As if he actually enjoyed it. In this weather! It was early March, but the winter winds were still going strong.

At least he's busy, she thought with a twinge of envy. Not rambling around in a big house that nobody lives in but Mrs. Cook, who, with a little outside help, keeps it in apple-pie order for Dad and me. In case either of us drop in, she thought, chuckling. She was only here now because she was bored with Dad's business ventures in Japan, bored with Adrian's relentless

pursuit, and because there was no other place she particularly wanted to be. Nothing particular she wanted to do.

Oh, well...too rough for sailing, too windy for golf. Maybe something doing at the club.

She pulled on suede pants and a cashmere sweater, and went down to the kitchen.

“Hi, honey.” Mrs. Cook, the cherubic housekeeper, looked up from the oversize thermos into which she was pouring hot coffee. “Ready for your coffee?”

Mel smiled as she nodded toward the thermos. “Not that much.”

“Oh, I’m taking this to the man in the yard. I thought he could use a hot drink.”

“New gardener?”

“No. Someone Pete hired to do whatever you do to roses this time of year. Pete’s arthritis don’t take to this weather. You want the usual juice and toast? I’ll fix it as soon as I take this.”

“I’ll take it for you,” Mel said, reaching for the thermos. She wanted to see that man close-up. “And don’t bother about me. I’ll get whatever I want. Okay if I borrow your jacket.” Cook nodded, and she slipped on the well-worn oversize jacket, grabbed the thermos, and went out the back door.

He didn’t see her approaching. He rested on his heels, intent upon what he was doing. She watched as he placed a rosebush in the ground, and with his bare hands arranged the soil around it, gently, with a kind of loving care.

“Hello,” she said.

He looked up and she caught her breath. He was that handsome. Thick, unruly, very black hair, eyes almost as dark with thick, long lashes, features so perfect they might have been sculptured.

One quick graceful movement, and he was on his feet, dusting his hands on his jeans, laughing dark eyes looking down at her. “Hello. Something I can do for you?”

“No. Something for you,” she said, still looking at him, holding on to the thermos with one hand while the other slapped at the hair whipping across her face. “Cook thought you might like a hot drink. It’s so windy.”

“Don’t knock it. I like what it blew my way.”

“Could be an ill wind,” she quipped, trying to read the message in his eyes.

“Not when it blows in an angel,” he said, as he caught a few flying strands of red hair, and inspected it. “Is this for real?”

“Take three guesses.” She forced herself to break the spell and thrust the thermos at him. “Here,” she said as she turned away.

“Hey, wait!” he called, almost dropping the thermos. “Don’t blow away. Why don’t you join me? You can have the cup. I’ll drink out of the bottle.”

She didn’t want to leave. She turned back and accepted the hot drink he handed her. She sipped from the cup, feeling a little awkward.

He smiled at her. “I’m glad you stayed. Let’s get acquainted.

I'm Tony—”

“But I didn’t come out here to get acquainted. Cook just asked me to...” She stopped. Cook hadn’t asked her. She had volunteered. And now... The nerve of this guy!

“Tell Cook I’m mighty grateful, both for the coffee and the pretty angel who brought it.”

“You’re quite welcome, but I’m afraid you’ll find I’m no angel.”

His eyes brightened, his brows lifted. “You mean you’ve got a bit of devil in you? Interesting!”

This had gone far enough. She handed him the cup. “Thanks,” she said, and turned away.

“Wait. I just want to get to know you. Anything wrong with that?”

“Yes. Not a mutual desire, since I’ve no wish to get to—”

“How would you know, if you never give me a chance? I’m not a bad guy.”

“Look, I don’t have time to dawdle here with you.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hold you up. But, later... Couldn’t we go somewhere? What time do you get off?”

“Off?” She was puzzled by the question.

“From that fancy joint.” He gestured toward the house. “What time are you off work?”

Oh! He thinks I’m the maid. “I don’t...” Whatever she intended to say was checked by his grin. An open, wholesome, boyish grin that lit up his whole face, and touched something deep inside her.

Something that had lain dormant for a long time.

“I could pick you up. We could go for a burger or something, and...well, like I said, get acquainted. How about it?”

She said nothing. Just kept watching him. Feeling a funny coming-alive feeling.

“Look, I’m an all-right guy. Really. Give me a chance.”

That crazy lopsided grin. Full lips curving around white, even... No. One tooth was crooked, lapping over another...

“Well, say something! Wouldn’t you like to get to know me?”

“Not really.” she lied. She liked that crooked tooth. He wasn’t so darn perfect.

“Aw, come on. Why not?”

Why not? she echoed, wondering... Liking the laughter in his dark eyes.

“Look, it doesn’t have to be a burger. You like pizza? Or there’s this little Italian place down the valley. We could—”

“Six,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Six o’clock. I’ll be...ready then. Okay?”

“Okay!” Jubilant, but wary, as if he couldn’t believe his luck. “Shall I pick you up there?” He nodded toward the back door.

“Sure.” She turned to go. Couldn’t stand there looking at him all day, could she!

“Okay! See you,” he called after her. “Oh, and tell the cook thanks. I’ll bring the thermos back before I leave.”

She rushed in, not daring to look back. What the hell had come

over her? She didn't know this man from zilch. A gardener. Part-time gardener at that. Cheeky. And too good-looking. Probably had women falling all over him. For all she knew he could be some awful creep. He came on strong.

She laughed. Nothing creepy about that boyish grin, that open, honest... "Hey, give me a chance...I'm not a bad guy."

The crisp air must have whetted her appetite, for she shared an unusually hearty breakfast with Cook, absentmindedly responding to the housekeeper's cheerful chatter. Not once did she glance outside.

But his image stayed with her. The laughing, appraising dark eyes. That smile. The crooked tooth. His quick graceful movements.

When she was back in her room, she did look out. And was disappointed. He was gone.

Never mind. She would see him tonight, she thought, and was surprised by the jolt of anticipation.

Stupid. She didn't even know him. Had seen him for about...five minutes?

But the feeling of excited expectancy remained. She hadn't felt this way since... She swallowed, hating to admit it. Since Dirk...

She curled up on the window seat, and looked out into the yard again. It was raining now. A funny in-between-winter-and-spring rain. It had been winter when she met Dirk.

Dirk Johanson. Blond, blue-eyed Dirk Johanson, tall and... well, not movie-star handsome like... What was his name? Tom?

No. Tony. But Dirk was striking, tall and muscular, so blond. He looked like a Viking or a Greek god, invulnerable against the high snow-covered cliffs. All the girls at the ski resort were wild about him. Me, too. And he chose me.

My head spun like crazy. I was all his. I would have gone to the end of the world with him... without one damn penny! I knew I would be safe in the loving and protective arms of this strong man. Hadn't I skied with him over Nevada's highest and most treacherous mountain slopes? A man who could conquer such mountains could...turn into a sneaking, conniving, self-serving, scurrying weasel when faced with the real world!

She didn't believe it. Even after he had deserted like the swine he was, she had waited. She had sat in that crummy motel room for three days... waiting. And, when her father came for her, she had vented her rage against him, not Dirk. How could Dad, who had never denied her anything, send Dirk away, threatening disinheritance if they carried out their plans to marry?

"He dumped you for a measly fifty thousand dollars," her father said. "He didn't care about you. It was your money."

She didn't believe him. It hurt too much. Even now.

She pressed her face against the window, and looked out. The fresh green leaves of early spring trembled and danced under the battering of the late winter wind and rain, but clung tenaciously to the tree boughs.

As she had clung to her faith in Dirk. She had slipped from the motel and evaded her father's detectives for three whole months.

Even now she could smell the grease and cooking food in the Reno kitchens where she had washed dishes. Waitresses were too visible. She had called the Colorado ski resort and learned that Dirk had moved to a resort in Switzerland. Her letters to Switzerland were not answered, and she convinced herself that he never received them.

“Don’t keep on being a fool!” Jake, her cousin, never bothered to cushion his words. Knowing her habits better than her father’s detectives, he had traced her to that rooming house in Reno. “He got your letters, all right, just like he got that bundle from your dad! And he doesn’t want you tailing him? Why do you think he hotfooted it to Switzerland?”

She stared at him, her mind fumbling for an excuse.

Jake bent toward her. “And why do you think he took that little hatcheck gal with him?”

“He didn’t!”

“Oh, but he did.”

She didn’t want to believe that, either. But Jake had never lied to her. For that matter, neither had her father.

“Face it, Mel. Your dad did you a favor. You may as well swallow your stupid pride and come home.”

She had gone home. How could she hold on to something that wasn’t there!

“Forget him,” Jake had said. And she vowed that she would. But she had lost more than Dirk.

She had lost trust. The wonderful, exhilarating, fulfilling

love found on the snow-covered slopes was a lie. Sold for fifty thousand dollars. Buried forever in the drab kitchens and cheap motel rooms in Reno.

Tony Costello slammed the door of his battered pickup truck, and ran up the steps of the modest bungalow on Lotus Street. The door was opened by Jerry, his seven-year-old nephew.

“Tony!” The little boy looked up in gleeful anticipation. “You come to help me with that model?”

“Not tonight. Got a date,” Tony said, rumpling Jerry’s hair as he followed him into a steamy, noisy kitchen.

“Hi, Tony. You’re just in time. Sit over there by Patsy.” His sister-in-law pointed with the spoon she was using to ladle out heavy servings of savory spaghetti. She was pretty, but heavy in the last stages of pregnancy, and her face and hair were wet with perspiration.

Tony bent over her bulging belly to kiss her cheek. “Thanks, Rosalie, but not tonight. I have a date, and I want to—”

“No!” his brother bellowed, almost choking on a mouthful of food.

“Aw, come on, Pedro!”

“Is it Joan?” Rosalie, who had filled her own plate, took her place at the table and smiled at Tony. “I like her. She’s so—”

“Not Joan. Someone I just met. Well...” Almost met, he corrected to himself. He didn’t even know her name. “Can’t expect me to pick her up in my truck, can you?”

“Can if that’s all you’ve got,” Pedro said, moving just in time

to prevent the kid in the high chair from dumping his dinner. "Watch it, buddy! It goes in your mouth, like this!"

"Aw, come on, Pedro," Tony said again, glancing at his watch. Almost five. And he still had to shower and shave. "Tell you what. I'll come over and break up the ground when you're ready to put in your vegetables." Pedro hated gardening more than he loved his '67 Mustang. That should do it.

Pedro was not about to give in easily. "If you'd get yourself a decent job, instead of monkeying around with flowers, you could buy your own ride. What kind of a living do you expect to make out of posies, for Pete's sake!"

"At least it's my own business. Which, I again remind you, has great potential. I'll be sitting back giving orders and collecting dividends, and you'll still be holding on to a jackhammer for fifteen bucks an hour."

"Twenty bucks. Which is why I've got a house and two cars, while you—"

"Did you bring me a present, Tony?" Patsy interrupted. She had heard this argument many times before.

"As a matter of fact, I did, honey." Tony tossed a bag of chocolates on the table. "Be sure to share it with your brothers."

"Not till after dinner," Rosalie said, confiscating the candy. "Who is this girl, Tony? Where did you meet her?"

"Around," was Tony's vague answer. "Come on, Pedro. I don't have time to argue. Where are the keys?"

Mel searched through her closet, trying to find something to

wear. Armani suits and Calvin Klein dresses didn't exactly go with a burger stop or a pizza parlor. Maybe a simple wool dress. No. Pants, to climb into that beat-up truck he'd been driving. She pulled out a pair of brown wool pants and a matching sweater.

She had told Cook she did not want dinner, and had been glad to see her retire to her room before five. She wouldn't see her leave.

She was waiting in the kitchen when a vintage, shiny black Mustang motored down the drive. Not the truck she had expected.

It was him.

She slipped on her jacket and hurried out.

## CHAPTER TWO

HE LOOKS different, too, she thought, as he got out and came around to open the door for her. Rather debonair, and more like a movie star than ever in tan slacks and a cardigan sweater.

"Hello again," he said, his eyes lighting with appreciation.

"Hello," was all the usually talkative Melody could muster. Why, she wondered, did she feel so giddy and light-headed?

"I thought we'd go to Beno's," he said as he shifted gears and started down the driveway. "It's not too far. Do you like Italian food?"

"Yes."

"Good." He smiled at her before turning into the street. "Now that that's settled and we've howdied, how about introducing ourselves? I'm Tony Costello and you are...?"

“Melody Sands.” Darn! Now he would know who she was.

He didn’t seem to make the connection. “Melody. Like a beautiful tune, huh?”

“A dumb name.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Melody,” he mused. “I kinda like it.”

“I don’t. I prefer just plain Mel.”

“Okay. Mel. Have you always lived in Wilmington?”

“Mostly. At least, this is home.”

“And I’ve never seen you before.” He shook his head. “This must be my lucky day. How long have you been working for... Who lives there anyway?”

Was he putting her on? “Don’t you know? You were working there.”

“For Peter Dugan. He just asked me to do the rose beds at 18 Clayborn Drive.”

“Oh.” So he doesn’t know who I am, she thought, pleased. She was... well, unencumbered. An ordinary girl on an ordinary date with an ordinary guy.

“I ought to pay him,” he said.

“Who?”

“Pete.”

“Why?”

He had pulled to a stop at a light, and turned to her. “I met you, didn’t I?”

“Oh.” She was mesmerized by the look in his dark eyes. Not laughing, but serious. As if seeing her as someone special.

“Guess I owe the cook, too. Best coffee I’ve ever tasted.”

“Oh?”

“Maybe because you brought it. Do you know you have the brightest blue eyes and the most gorgeous mop of red hair I’ve ever seen? Tell me, is it for real?”

“You tell me,” she said, at last finding her voice. “Do you flirt so outrageously with all the women you meet?”

“Only the pretty ones.” There was that grin again.

“And then?”

“Then what?” he asked, as he merged onto the freeway.

“What do you do with the crowd? Do you select the most beautiful one or do you take turns?”

“Ah, come on. I was kidding. I’m not some fancy ladies’ man. Really.”

He looked so embarrassed she couldn’t help teasing him. “Then you’d better be careful, passing out all that baloney. We poor females are vulnerable creatures.”

“Bull. You’re about as vulnerable as a stone wall. And what I said wasn’t baloney. You know you’re a number ten.”

She gave him a smug smile. “So I’ve been told.”

“I bet. Anyway, it was more than that...being beautiful, I mean. You’re...different.” He gave her a puzzled glance. “I don’t understand it myself. I don’t usually go for this sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing?”

“This. A date. I don’t have time. But this morning, when I saw you standing there...” He hesitated. “Well, it was like I didn’t want

to let you get away. I wanted to know all about you. Who you are, what you do, what you like, what you don't like." Another quick glance. "So. What do you do all day up at that big house?"

"Oh, this and that," she said quickly, her throat suddenly dry. This was dangerous ground. "You promised I would get to know you. So tell me. What do you do besides fix rose beds for Pete?"

"Everything. Or maybe I should say anything...from weeding to landscaping."

"Oh?" She gave him a skeptical glance. Quite a gap between weeding and landscaping.

"Okay, here we are," he said, as he pulled into a crowded parking lot.

She looked at the unpretentious one-story building that didn't seem large enough to house all the occupants from the cars in the lot. It took him some time to find a parking slot. When at last he did, she reached for the door handle, but he was there before her.

"Hope we won't have to wait," he said as he opened the door and helped her out. Most polite man she had met in a long time. Even Adrian would have allowed her to hop out by herself. Maybe, she mused as he guided her toward the entrance, Adrian and his ilk were accustomed to a doorman helping her out when they drove up for valet parking.

Also, Adrian would have had a reservation, she thought when Tony apologized for the twenty-minute wait. "Hope you don't mind. I asked for a booth. So we can talk."

She didn't mind. In fact it was quite interesting, standing in the

crowded entryway—it could hardly be called a lobby—watching people come and go. Like the fat man whom she thought was alone with his three noisy children until the harassed woman joined him, waving a doggie bag and exclaiming that Jimmie hadn't touched a thing on his plate, and she sure wasn't going to leave all that food. There was the overpainted woman holding on to a boy with bulging muscles who looked young enough to be her son. Was he her son? Hardly, not the way she was cuddling up to him. And the teenage girl with the ponytail who—

“Costello!” the man at the cash register shouted.

“Okay!” Tony said, taking her arm. “Wasn't too long, was it?”

Not long enough, she thought. She hadn't yet discovered who the teenager was with. She hoped she was with her parents. But as she followed Tony through crowded tables to a booth, she decided she was more interested in finding out about him.

“Are you a landscape artist?” she asked after the waitress had taken their order.

“Not bloody likely.”

“But you said—”

“I lied.”

“Shame on you,” she said, laughing.

“To impress you.”

“You wanted to impress me?”

“Sure. Why do you think I borrowed the car?”

“The Mustang? It's not yours?”

“Nope. Belongs to Pedro, my brother.”

"Nice car. I enjoyed the ride. Thank him for me."

"Thank me. I'm doing the landscaping to pay for it."

"Oh. Then you really do landscaping?"

He grinned. "If turning up the soil for a vegetable garden qualifies."

"Oh, you!" The waitress brought their drinks, and Mel was silent for the moment, wondering why she wanted to know everything about this man. Obviously, he was a jack-of-all-trades, and she shouldn't embarrass him by pressing. She couldn't seem to help herself. "Will you stop trying to impress me and tell me what you really do?"

"Like I told you, everything. Okay, okay," he said, holding up a hand as if to ward off her scowl. "I'm in business for myself. And I only stretched the truth a bit. I've got two more years at the State in Landscape Architecture."

"Really? I am impressed."

"You needn't be. It's a long way off. Evening school only, because I have to keep working, and then I have to do an apprenticeship before I can get a license."

"But it sounds like a great career." She paused as the waitress set a plate piled with mounds of spaghetti before her. How was she to manage all that? she wondered, as she watched him expertly wind the spaghetti around his fork and begin to eat with relish. "I never can eat it like you're supposed to," she announced as she took her knife and cut small pieces, and sampled a forkful. "Delicious!"

“Yeah. Beno’s special,” he said.

“So, how did you happen to get into landscaping?” she asked.

“Grandma’s rock garden.”

“Come again?”

“Grandma wanted a rock garden and... Well, maybe it started before that. You see, I never wanted a nine-to-five job. At least not the kind my folks, Pop and both my brothers are into. Road construction. Guess I got a thing against concrete.”

“Oh? That’s a strange bias.”

“Guess so, but there it is,” he said. “Bugs me when good soil gets covered up. And we’re getting closed in. Frank’s got one of those new houses on Benton Circle. About an inch between him and his neighbors and not enough yard to spit in.”

“Who’s Frank?”

“That’s my oldest brother.”

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Just two.”

“And a grandmother,” she added to remind him. “Who wanted a rock garden.”

“Yeah. My grandparents have this farm, a hundred and fifty acres, in Virginia, about an hour from here. Grandpa’s not farming now. Bad case of arthritis. Anyway, there’s not much profit since the big combines have taken over. He was about to sell it for a pile, but the developer ran into zoning problems, and backed down.” Tony paused to take a swallow of beer. “That was my lucky day.”

“Why so?”

“I talked Gramps into leasing to me.”

“But you said there was no profit—”

“In vegetables. Flowers are different.”

She put her fork down and stared at him. “You’re opening a florist shop?”

“Nope. A wholesale nursery. You see, I spent a lot of time on my grandparents’ farm, and I just got into growing things. With all these acres of good rich soil—”

“Wait a minute. You said you’re studying to be a landscape artist.”

“That came later with Grandma’s rock garden.”

“I see. Meanwhile you’re running a wholesale nursery.”

“Not yet. There’s equipment to buy, greenhouses to build...things like that. Not to mention the plants themselves.”

“So you’re actually planning two careers.”

“Not really. Don’t you see how the two fit together?” He began to talk of his plans with a boyish enthusiasm that intrigued her. The clatter of silver and the murmurs of other diners faded as she sat in the little booth and listened. Through his eyes she began to see hundreds of florists and supermarkets filled with lovely luscious and unusual plants from his nursery, landscapes green with the trees and shrubs that would break up the concrete surrounding houses, condominiums, even commercial buildings and shopping centers.

Melody Sands, bored up to the ying-yang with all the

successful investments and mergers discussed by all the rich successful men she encountered, listened with deep interest and awe to the dreams of this young man who was starting on a shoestring. She liked being a Miss Nobody listening to an ordinary guy talk about... No. Nothing ordinary about this guy who was really a hunk, worked like a Trojan and dreamed big.

"I guess it will take some time," she said.

"And money," he said. "Why do you think I'm planting roses, cutting lawns, and having to borrow a car to impress the most fascinating woman I've ever met?"

"The most fascinating?" she teased.

"The most," he said with emphasis.

"Well, thanks for the flattery, but you didn't need a car to impress me. I could have ridden in the truck."

"You don't belong in a truck."

"How do you know where I belong?"

He didn't. And that's what bothered him. But he knew she didn't belong in a truck. From the moment he saw her, standing so erect, the wind whipping that mass of flaming red hair... He reached across the table to touch it. It felt like silk. "Is it for real?" he asked, just as he had the first time he saw it.

"Of course it's for real! Do you think I'd be fool enough to dye it this crazy color?"

"Not crazy. It's out of sight."

"Ha! If you knew how many times I've thought of dying it. A nice conservative brown or—"

“Don’t you dare!” She jumped and even he was surprised at his vehemence. Why did he feel such possessiveness toward this woman he hardly knew?

Damn it, he didn’t have time to possess any woman. Especially this one. Why did he sense she was out of his league? There was something about her. Something...well, classy. The way she carried herself with a certain confidence, maybe even arrogance. Even this morning, in that tattered jacket, her hair in disarray, she had looked...well, elegant. And so beautiful she took his breath away.

It’s not the way she looks. It’s the way she is. Warm, caring. Interested. He had sat all this evening spilling his guts. All his hopes and plans... things he had never even breathed to anyone else. And she had listened like they mattered to her.

This woman. This one woman. Why did he feel that he never wanted to lose her?

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like I might disappear or something?”

That was the way he was feeling. Scared. Like she might walk out of his life and he’d never see her again. This was crazy!

“Just thinking I’m pretty stupid,” he said. “I want to know all about you, and I’ve spent all this time on me. Things I already know. So, tell me. How many brothers and sisters do you have, and where do you live, and when can I see you again?”

“Wait, you go too fast,” she said, trying to get herself together.

She didn't want to lie to this man. But she didn't want him to know who she was. She liked listening to him, almost as if she was sharing his dreams...like they were on the same level. Would he feel free to share if he knew? "I...I'm an only child," she said.

"I see. That explains that look."

"What look?"

"That I - can - have - anything - I - want - I'm - a - spoiled - brat look."

"Now, don't you start!" she said, feeling angry because she had always been accused of just that. "I'm not spoiled and I don't always get what I want." She hadn't gotten Dirk, had she? And never mind that he hadn't wanted her, just her money. She sat up, staring at Tony. He didn't know about the money. He liked her.

He was laughing. "Okay, don't bite my head off. I see you've got the temper that goes with that hair. And I take it all back. You're not spoiled. You're working hard at...what do you do?"

"I... paperwork," she floundered. "For the man of the house." That was true. She often helped her father with his business.

"Oh, a secretary. I should have known." He reached for her hand with its perfectly polished nails. "Much too pretty and soft to do much scrubbing. And where do you live?"

"Where you saw me," she said, absorbed in the calloused thumb that was stroking the back of her hand, making her feel...like she hadn't felt for a long time.

"Oh, a live-in secretary?"

"Kinda."

“Don’t know if I like that. You’re much too pretty to be around some old fogy.”

“He’s away. Away most of the time. He travels a lot.”

“Good. And your parents. Do they still live in Wilmington?”

“My mother’s dead. And my father...well, we had a little disagreement.” They had had a disagreement, hadn’t they! “Anyway, he’s away, working out of town.”

. He could see that she was agitated by his probing, so he let up. There would be time. “Better take you home, much as I hate to,” he said. “I’ve got to start early in the morning.”

### CHAPTER THREE

SHE couldn’t sleep. She was too keyed up. Still glowing from the most exciting evening she had spent in years.

She laughed at herself. What, for Pete’s sake, was so exciting about sitting in a crowded little restaurant, struggling with a plateful of slippery spaghetti?

Just talking. They had talked all the way back to the house, where he got out of the car and stayed with her until she let herself in. Protective, courteous. Too courteous. He hadn’t kissed her.

Because of the outside lights? Because he didn’t want to?

She felt like she had been kissed. So alive, tingling as in after a night of passionate lovemaking.

Was it because he had asked when he could see her again? Hell, every man she ever dated asked that. Why was Tony Costello different? Why had she wanted to shout... “Tomorrow,

the next day, and the next. Anytime! Anywhere!” She wanted to pin down a time. She had told him not to call the house because she wasn’t sure what kind of signal Mrs. Cook would give off. She had thought of confiding in her. The housekeeper went a long way back and had always been warm and friendly toward her, but she was also loyal to Dad. During the Dirk episode, Mel had never known which side she was on. Best not to confide.

Confide? Good Lord, this wasn’t a conspiracy or anything like that! She was going to tell Tony all about herself, wasn’t she?

When?

Soon.

How soon?

When we get to know each other...well, better. When it won’t matter.

It matters now?

To me, it does. Because Tony likes me. Me. Not who I am. At least he doesn’t know who I am, and I think he likes me.

Anyway, I like him. So much that I can’t stand to see him leave without knowing when I’ll see him again.

So it was she who had said, “What are you doing tomorrow evening?” Then wanted to bite her tongue because he looked so surprised. She was surprised herself. Usually it was her escort, not she, who was eager.

“I have school,” he said. “I missed tonight. Can’t afford to miss too much. What about Sunday?”

“Good,” she said, disappointed. Four days away. “We can go

on a picnic. I'll fix us a lunch."

He looked embarrassed. "I meant Sunday night. You see, Sunday is my only day off and the only time I get to work at the farm."

"You weren't kidding, were you?"

"Huh?"

"You really don't have time to date."

"Not until you," he said with such emphasis that her breath caught. He did like her! "Sunday night? We could take in a movie or go dancing. Whatever you like."

"You said you work at the farm," she said, absorbed in his eyes. They seemed to promise...something. "Why...I mean, what do you do out there all day?"

"Lots of things. And...well, right now I've got a few lilies ready for the Easter market. Got to fix them for delivery on Monday."

"Need some help?"

"Now you're kidding."

"No, I'm not. I could help you plant or hand you things...whatever." Anything. Just so she could be with him. "Anyway, I want to see your grandma's rock garden."

He was silent for a moment and she couldn't tell what he was thinking. She breathed a sigh of relief when he finally said, "You don't know what you're in for. But...okay, it's a deal!"

And now she was so excited she couldn't sleep. She got out of bed, walked to the window and looked out at the night. How could she wait till Sunday?

And she'd have to confide in Cook. No way could she explain being picked up in a truck early Sunday morning.

"Damn it! You got the car, didn't you! You said you'd turn the soil and..."

Tony held the phone away from his ear, but Pedro's tirade came through loud and clear. "I didn't say this weekend."

"You said when I was ready. I'm ready."

"Ah, come on, Pedro. I got a date...sorta."

"What do you mean...sorta?"

"Another date, Tony?" Rosalie broke in.

"Oh, hi, Rosie. Didn't know you were on the line."

"Hi. Just picked up to call Mom and heard you and Pedro squabbling. Gee, Tony, you had a date the other night. Again today? That's good. You haven't had a date in months. Same girl or—"

"Will you get off the phone, Rosie! This jerk's trying to wiggle out. You heard him! He said—"

"Okay, okay! Tomorrow. Early." Tony slammed down the phone. Wouldn't take more than half an hour to do Pedro's little plot, but he was already going to lose three hours at the farm. Couldn't expect Mel to get up at the crack of dawn, could he? Mel...beside him all day. Hell and damnation, he'd lose more than three hours. He grimaced, but could not shake thrill of anticipation. Neither could he shake the feeling that she didn't belong in a truck.

She was dressed for it when he stopped for her the next

morning. Even if those jeans did look as if she had been poured into them. Her loafers were scuffed, the yellow pullover faded, and that gorgeous hair was tied back with a yellow scarf. Suddenly the sun was brighter, the air more refreshing, the day crisp and rich with promise.

He laughed as he lifted her into the truck. "You're worth three hours," he said. Just the sight of her was worth a whole darn day.

"What are you talking about? I'm ready, at eight, just like you said, aren't I?"

"Right. Don't mind me. I'm mad because Pedro's cutting into my prime time, and I'm taking it out on you."

"Pedro? The owner of the Mustang?"

"Who's demanding payment pronto!"

"Oh, yes. The...er...landscaping. I take it his yard is bigger than your other brother's. What's his name?"

"Frank. Yeah, Pedro bought one of those old houses in Richmond. East End."

An alarm bell sounded. Mel gasped. Wasn't that the section where Jake's wife's company was doing a lot of business? If she ran into Judy...

Oh, for goodness' sake, Judy might be a dedicated architect/contractor, but was surely at home now, very much occupied with their two-week-old son. Oh, hell, Judy wouldn't be hobnobbing with the residents, would she? Not even anywhere in the area on a Sunday, and...

And I'm getting paranoid. This is ridiculous. I should just tell

Tony who I am.

“Used to be a pretty bad section.” Tony, who seemed not to notice her reaction, was still talking. “They’re upgrading it now, and Pedro got a real bargain. Not bad. Big yard, trees.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah. More breathing space than the new ones like Frank’s.”

“Space enough for vegetable gardens than need tilling, huh?”

Why not tell him? What difference would it make?

“Right. But it won’t take long. And it’s on the way to the farm.”

“Does Pedro have children?” That’s when she’d tell him. On the drive to the farm. It would be awkward, but... Oh, well, just a misunderstanding. Not worth mentioning. Didn’t seem important, forgot.

“He has three, and one on the way. You’ll meet them.”

She did meet them. All at once. They converged upon the truck as soon as it rolled around the house into the backyard. A boy and girl who jumped from a tree and came running. A dark-haired pregnant woman with a toddler squirming in her arms.

Tony jumped down and took the boy from her. “You shouldn’t be lifting him, Rosie.”

“I didn’t want him to run under your truck. He heard you turn into the drive and was off!” The woman spoke to Tony, but her wide speculative eyes were on Mel.

Uncomfortable under the inspection, she smiled. “I’m Mel,” she said, glancing at Tony. He was involved with the children who were climbing all over him. “I hope you don’t mind my tagging

along.”

“I’m Rosalie, and I don’t mind at all. I’m delighted. You can keep me company while they work.”

The screen door slammed, and a man came out. Pedro, of course. A slightly heavier version of Tony, almost as good-looking. “Get off Tony,” he shouted. “He’s here to work, not to play with you.”

Tony, relieved of the children, made the introductions, including the kids. “Patsy, Jerry and Mike, better known as Buddy.”

As they were exchanging greetings, another man came across the lawn. A tall lean man.

“Charlie Hill, my neighbor,” Pedro said. “This is Melody Sands, Charlie, a friend of Tony’s.”

Mel’s heart jumped into her throat. She knew this man. She had met him at Jake’s just last week, when he and his wife came to bring a present for the new baby. Did he recognize her?

His look said he did. But evidently he had also caught the slight shake of her head, for he simply acknowledged the introduction as if he had never seen her before. She thanked him with her eyes, wanting to explain that it would be all right as soon as she told Tony who she was.

Tony was taking down a machine, and talking to Charlie about some plants he wanted. Mel, still a little shaken, found she was being addressed by the little girl.

“Tony’s got to work,” Patsy explained. “You want to play with

us?”

Mel looked down, delighted by the wide, friendly, one-tooth-missing smile. “What are you playing?”

“We’re pirates. That’s our ship.” The boy pointed to a wooden platform that had been constructed along two limbs of the wide-spreading cedar tree.

“Can you climb a tree?” Patsy asked.

“Sure,” Mel answered. She had ridden horses, sailed boats, skied steep mountain slopes. But...she had never climbed a tree in her life. It seemed a good idea. “I’d enjoy it,” she assured the apprehensive Rosalie.

“Well, only for a few minutes. Then it’s my turn. Women talk,” Rosalie added, and winked at Mel before going into the house.

Mel was glad she had opted for the tree. She wasn’t ready for Rosalie’s “women talk.” Not until the coming talk with Tony.

Following Jerry’s instructions, she mounted the two-stair step boards that had been driven into the trunk of the tree and swung easily onto the first big limb. The platform was sturdy with ample space for the three of them, and, with a bit of pretend, was a ship tossing upon an ocean far below.

“I’m the captain, and Patsy’s first mate,” Jerry announced. “You can be the second mate,” he generously conceded.

“Aye, aye, sir.” Mel saluted, and following orders, climbed to the “masthead” to sight vessels within capturing distance. The weather had turned warm, but there was a gentle breeze stirring. The top of the tree swayed in the breeze, and Mel held

on, viewing the vast ocean of fenceless backyards that stretched below her. There was Tony expertly handling the noisy rototiller that was uprooting the garden soil several yards from the house. There was Pedro directing Tony and making sure a scampering Buddy was kept safely away from the machine. There was a blue fenced-in unoccupied swimming pool in the yard next door. “Belongs to the Hills,” Jerry had said, “but we can swim in it anytime... that is, when Charlie’s there to watch us.”

Charlie, who knew who she was. For goodness’ sake, she was acting like being rich was a crime! And it wasn’t like she was trying to deceive Tony. She planned to tell him this afternoon, as soon as she got the chance!

She took a deep breath and continued to survey the neighborhood. Two houses away, three teenage boys tossed a basketball at a hoop mounted on the back of the garage. There was the sweet smell of cedar mingling with the fresh aroma of newly overturned earth.

There was a vague sad sense of something she had missed. A yard that blended into other people’s yards where other children played and shared swimming pools and basketball hoops. Hers had been a big yard that stretched for acres, and contained no child but herself. Plenty of trees, but not one to climb. Or was it she had not thought of climbing? Would it have been permitted? Visions of her childhood flashed before her. Coloring books, games, or puzzles with whichever nanny. Contact with other children was restricted to birthday parties or visits to the club

under the careful supervision of several nannies. Less supervision when she graduated to horses and boats, of course.

But she envied these children who, even in their early years, had the freedom to imagine and pursue their own games. She enjoyed every precious minute with them. She was sorry when Rosalie called that breakfast was almost ready. Jerry was to tell the men and Patsy should come to set the table.

“We’ll do this another time,” she told the children. She would take them sailing on a real boat...Jake’s. They would like that.

After the ritual of hand-washing, Mel followed Patsy into a big kitchen which smelled delicious. “Can I help?” she asked.

“No, indeed. Everything’s about ready,” Rosalie declared. “You just sit over here and talk to me while Patsy sets the table.”

When I was Patsy’s age, Mel thought, I wasn’t even allowed in the kitchen, where a Swedish cook, at one time a French chef, presided. She watched in amazement as the little girl set out the plates, silver, coffee mugs, glasses, and paper napkins as efficiently as her mother turned over the hash browns.

“Is Wilmington your home?” Rosalie asked as she added slices of red onions to the potatoes.

“Yes.”

“Lived here all your life?”

“Mostly.” She was right. Rosalie was curious.

“Me, too. Lacey Elementary and Milton High. Did you go to Milton?”

Mel shook her head, visions of her Swiss finishing school

dancing through it.

Rosalie laughed as she stirred the onion rings in with the potatoes. “Don’t know why I keep thinking I should have seen you somewhere. If you had gone to Milton, it would have been long after me. Good gracious, seems a hundred years since my high school days. Patsy, strap Buddy in his chair, and see if the men are getting washed up. Oh, here they are.”

Just in time, Mel thought, with a sigh of relief. She was glad Rosalie’s turn with her had been brief. Answering the inquisition would have been awkward. After she told Tony...

After a brief but solemn blessing by Pedro, the usual Sunday ritual began...a short Bible verse from each person at the table. Mel panicked. Her church excursions were skimpy. Her mind frantically searched. Please, she prayed as, beside her, Patsy’s child voice confidently crooned, “Honor thy father and thy mother...”

Her prayer was answered. Her mother’s funeral. She repeated the pastor’s words. “In my Father’s house are many mansions...” Thank you, she silently whispered to a God she hardly knew.

It was a good thing that everybody in this family was very active. Otherwise they would all be fat, Mel thought as the full platters were passed around. Potatoes browned to perfection and well seasoned by the crispy onions. Thick, juicy slices of ham. Hot biscuits with jam or honey, eggs to order, and strong, hot coffee. Rosalie was obviously in the last stages of pregnancy, but even she could not be called fat. Probably never would be,

Mel thought, the way she kept jumping up and down to serve everyone. Every now and then Patsy was called upon for hot biscuits or to get more butter. But no man, not even little Jerry, budged. Meals were definitely women's work.

It was a hilarious gathering, with everyone, even the children, talking at once. About everything, from the vegetables Pedro was going to plant to the "owie" on little Buddy's skinned knee. Mel said nothing, but felt warm and happy, a part of the camaraderie. Happy listening to down-to-earth talk that had nothing to do with stock options or how the market was going. Happy just looking at Tony.

He was beautiful. Now that was stupid. Calling a man beautiful, especially one as masculine as Tony. Tall, and yes, almost too slender, but with strong rippling muscles that made him seem as sturdy as a tree trunk. She loved the way he used those muscles with graceful dispatch. Planting roses, or lifting her into his truck as if she was as light as a feather. She loved the tender caring way he had taken Buddy from Rosalie, the easy strength with which he had held the rototiller steady. How he was laughing at something Pedro had said, and that crooked tooth was showing. She loved that crooked tooth, loved the way he ate. With his fork in his left hand! Why? He wasn't European. Funny, she had not noticed at the spaghetti house. Just that he had wound the spaghetti around his fork with the same ease and dispatch as he did everything else. She loved the way he moved.

She loved him.

This was ridiculous. She didn't really know him. Hadn't known he existed five days ago.

He had never even kissed her. None of those passionate, all-consuming, erotic sensations that had once rippled through her body on a Nevada mountaintop. A love she had lost and never hoped to find again.

This couldn't be it, could it? Couldn't love a man just because he held his fork in his left hand and handled a rototiller with ease, could she?

But there it was. A warm, sure knowing. A feeling that she had found someone wonderful, someone warm, caring and dependable. A feeling that she had come home to a man she would love forever.

Come home to...? Good heavens! What made her think he would have these same crazy mixed-up impossible sensations!

She tried to get back on track, and focused on the conversation at the table.

Pedro's deep laugh bellowed out. "Married into money, did he?"

"Guess so. More'n he'd ever had, anyway," Tony said. "She's got some kind of catering business that's beginning to pay off."

"So you lost the only employee in your little posy business."

Mel didn't like the way Pedro said that. Like he was putting Tony's business down.

Tony didn't seem to mind. He answered readily enough. "Wasn't much help anyway, the lazy slob."

“What’s his wife like, Tony?” Rosalie wanted to know.

“Busty blonde. Kinda good-looking, but a bit bossy for my taste. Joe’ll be dancing to her tune the rest of his life.”

“But he’s pretty well set, ain’t he?” Pedro’s laugh rang out again. “Maybe you should follow Joe’s example, Tony. If you’re gonna stick with posies, you could use some support.”

“No thank you. I prefer to dance to my own tune.”

“Atta boy!” Pedro slapped his brother on the back. “You might be a posy peddler, but you’re a Costello all the way, right?”

“Right,” Tony agreed.

“Yep, we Costello men support our women. They don’t support us.” Pedro now addressed his remarks to Mel. “My little Rosalie hasn’t worked a day since she married me.”

Mel smiled and nodded an approval which she didn’t exactly feel. It looked as if Rosalie was working her head off right now.

But she had just learned something important. About somebody named Joe, and about Costello men.

Maybe she shouldn’t tell Tony she was rich. Not yet.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“YOU love the farm, don’t you?” Mel asked as Tony merged the truck onto the freeway.

“Yeah. It’s...well, kinda home base for all I plan to do.” His face brightened as he began to talk of his plans, how he would divide each plot, where he would set out the trees, which would be reserved for the greenhouses. “All that rich soil. It’s a perfect place for a nursery, and I’m itchy to get started. But I have to go

slow. It'll take quite a bit of capital to set it up right."

"You could borrow." Every venture her father went into was on somebody else's money, not his.

"Can't borrow without security."

"The land..."

"Belongs to my grandparents, the only security they have. Grandpa was running into debts the last few years, but he never borrowed. I think they were sorry when the sale didn't go through, but with the present zoning laws, they wouldn't get enough to sustain them. They're leasing it to me for peanuts, but I plan to make it up to them when I get going." His voice rang with confidence and determination. She felt in her heart that it wouldn't be long before he "got going."

"Do you spend much time out there?" she asked.

"Not as much as I'd like to. Got a room in town near the school and more convenient for the jobs I pick up."

"But you'd rather be at the farm?"

"Oh, sure. And I stay there as much as I can. Still have my old room."

"Your old room? You spent a lot of time there as a kid?"

"Every summer."

"Your brothers, too?"

"Only me. Frank and Pedro were into baseball and wouldn't leave the city, and Marie was too little."

"Marie?" This was the first she had heard of a sister.

"Baby of the family, and the only girl. She's at City College

now. Really into drama, which bugs the hell out of Pop.”

“Why? If she enjoys it...”

“Wrong crowd for his little girl.” Tony grinned. “Guess Pop must have read one or two of those wild stories about actresses in People magazine.”

“Oh.” Mel wondered if Tony’s family really lived in the twentieth century. His grandparents must be out of this world. And she was about to meet them. No wonder she had the jitters.

But the jitters began to dissipate as they left the city noise and traffic for the comparatively uncrowded countryside. There was something magically calming about the quiet, the smell of country air, the sight of rolling green pastures and acres of freshly tilled earth.

“Here we are,” Tony said as he turned the truck into a tree-shaded lane. The lane led to a two-story clapboard house that seemed small under three towering oaks. There was a banistered porch that wrapped around the house. There was a frisky dog that ran across the lawn to meet them.

There was the feeling that she had come home to something warm, solid and enduring. Strange. She tried to understand it as she jumped down to pet the dog that greeted them with excited barks.

Suddenly the peace was broken by a woman’s voice, frantic, cutting through the yelps of the dog. “Tony! Thank God. Come quick!”

Tony sprinted into the house, Mel following, somewhat

impeded by the dog. By the time she entered the wide living room, Tony was kneeling beside a large man who was sprawled across the four steps of a landing which led to a steep stairway. A small woman also knelt beside him, and the dog was licking his face.

The man was cursing. “Damn it! I’m all right I tell you. Down, Cocoa down! Damn it, Tony, get this fool mongrel the hell off me!”

“Just keep still, Al. Is he hurt?” The woman anxiously questioned Tony who seemed to be checking for broken bones.

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