MAUREEN
CHILD

THE SURPRISE CHRISTMAS BRIDE

Desire

Maureen Child
The Surprise Christmas Bride

Аннотация

On the first day of Christmas…Finding herself in bed with her childhood love after being jilted at the altar by another man wasn't exactly Casey Oakes's idea of a merry Christmas. But she knew she wouldn't have wanted to spend her "wedding" night alone–even if Jake didn't love her.He got a wife… After he and Casey were caught in compromising positions, Jake had proposed. But love had made a fool out of him once, so he told himself that it was only lust his new bride inspired… And a surprise! Until the stick turned pink and Casey was congratulating him on his impending fatherhood!

Содержание

“White, no. Pink, yes,” Casey announced. 5
The Surprise Christmas Bride 6
MAUREEN CHILD 7
Contents 8
One 9
Two 22
Three 38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 49

“White, no. Pink, yes,” Casey announced.

“What did you say?” Jake asked.

“White, no. Pink, yes.”

Casey’s eyes were fixed on the plastic stick in front of her as if it meant life or death. Irritation simmered inside him. He glanced around the room, looking for clues. Suddenly his gaze landed on an unfolded set of instructions lying half in the sink. Frowning, he reached for them at the same moment she spoke again.

“Since it’s pink, do you suppose that means it’s a girl? No,” she continued, “pink just means pregnant. It could be a boy.”

Girl? Boy? Jake’s mouth went dry and his brain blanked out. Was she saying what he thought she was saying? No. Of course not.

But when she lifted her head and met his gaze through wide teary eyes, he knew it was true.

“Congratulations, Jake. We’re pregnant….”

The Surprise Christmas Bride
Maureen Child

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MAUREEN CHILD

Maureen Child is a California native who loves to travel. Every chance they get, she and her husband are taking off on another research trip. The author of more than sixty books, Maureen loves a happy ending and still swears that she has the best job in the world. She lives in Southern California with her husband, two children and a golden retriever with delusions of grandeur.

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To the gang at Sunshine Books: Nita, Betty and Ron.

You guys are the best.

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Epilogue

One

"Maybe I should put the top up before I drown."

Casey Oakes pushed wet hair out of her eyes and squinted into the freezing rain. A deep hard shiver rippled through her. "Too late now to bother," she grumbled, and told herself that maybe it would be a blessing if she did drown. At least then she would have done something no other Oakes had ever managed. Drowning in a convertible while cruising the back roads outside Simpson, California, wasn't, as her mother would say, "what society expects of an Oakes."

Accomplishing that feat in a wedding gown would only add to the myth, she told herself. A few years from now, her little ride would probably become the stuff of local folklore. People would tell the story of Cassandra Oakes in hushed tones around campfires. Parents would discipline misbehaving children with the threat of a nighttime visit from the Drowned Bride.

Still smiling to herself, Casey flinched when her soggy veil flew in front of her face and blocked her view of the road. She slammed on the brakes, heard something under her car snap, then came to a shuddering halt.

She cut the engine, and when that powerful noise disappeared, all that was left was the sound of the heavy rain pelting on and all around her. The windshield wipers continued to slap rhythmically as they futilely tried to do battle with the downpour.

Nearly an inch of water covered the floorboards, no doubt ruining the plush scarlet carpet. Casey winced as she realized that the leather seats probably weren't faring any better.

"Well, hell," she muttered to no one, "who expected rain?" But then, with the way the rest of her day had gone, why not rain? Heck, why not a blizzard?

Reaching up, she pushed her veil to the back of her head and looked around at the drenched countryside. The road wasn't much more than a narrow dirt track, covered yearly by a thin layer of gravel. Now the ground-up rock was practically floating atop a sea of churning mud. On either side of the road wooden fence posts, strung with barbed wire, stood at attention for miles. Behind those fences lay open ground. Meadow grasses, waving and dipping with the wind and rain, a few gnarled leafless trees that looked as though they'd been there for centuries, a veritable forest of giant pines, their needles dipping with the weight of the rain—and that was it.

No houses.

No lights.

No people.

To top it all off, it had been so long since she'd been back in Simpson she didn't know if she was close to the Parrish ranch or not.

Casey inhaled sharply and felt the familiar sting of tears filling her eyes. Roughly she brushed them away with the backs of her hands.

She already had all the water she could handle.

Then she heard it.

The call came softly at first, then built into a low throbbing moan.

Frowning, Casey stepped out of the car and grimaced as the cold mud oozed over the tops of her white satin pumps. When her right foot slid out from under her in the muck, she forgot all about her ruined shoes. She grabbed at the car door for balance and managed somehow to keep from landing facedown in the thick brown river at her feet.

"Yuck." A sucking noise accompanied the movement as she lifted one shoeless foot from the icy mud. She heard the moaning sound again and turned her head to find the source.

Her eyes widened and a rush of sympathy for something besides herself washed over her.

"Oh, you poor little thing," she crooned, and started slogging through the mud.

"No, I don't want to tell you what it is." Jake Parrish laughed, shook his head and reached for his coffee cup. His sister, Annie, hadn't changed a bit over the years. Grown-up or not, she still couldn't stand suspense.

"C'mon Jake," she pleaded over the phone. "One little hint. Just one."

"Nope," he told her, and took a sip of coffee. "You'll just have to get out here first thing in the morning if you want your curiosity satisfied."

"You really are an evil man, big brother."

"Yeah, I know." He grinned, then added, "Oh, and would you mind bringing Dad, Uncle Harry and Aunt Emma, too?"

Annie sucked in a gulp of air and Jake could almost see his younger sister's black eyebrows shooting into her hairline. Lord, how she hated not knowing everything.

"This must be big," she finally said.

"Big enough," Jake assured her.

"Dammit, Jake!" Annie's voice dropped into the stern no-nonsense tone she used on her three-year-old, Lisa. "You know I hate surprises. If you don't give me something to go on, I won't get a wink of sleep all night."

She wouldn't, either. Memories rushed through him. The night before her birthday, Annie would lie awake all night, wondering what she might receive. And Christmas Eve was even worse. Then she was so bad not only did she stay awake, she kept Jake up, too.

"All right," he said with a smile. "One little hint."

"Yesss!"

Jake frowned thoughtfully as he tried to figure out a way to phrase the hint without giving away too much of his surprise. He leaned back against the kitchen wall, crossed his feet at the ankles and stared up at the overhead light fixture. Shaped like a wagon wheel, the chandelier held six globe-covered lightbulbs, which shone brightly against the late-afternoon gloom.

He shifted his gaze to the storm raging outside the window.

Thanks to the deal he'd just managed to pull off, he told himself, not even the torrential rain or predicted snow could ruin his good mood.

"Jake…"

"Oh! Sorry, Annie. Just thinkin'."

"Don't strain yourself."

"Very funny. Maybe I won't give you that hint, after all."

"Jake Parrish, if you don't…"

He laughed and pushed away from the wall. "OK, you win. Here's your hint. It's something I've wanted for a long time."

A lengthy silent pause. Then, "that's it?" Outrage colored her voice.

"That's it. Until tomorrow."

"I said it before and I'll say it again. You're an evil man, Jake. And you're going to hell."

"Probably. But that's all right. At least all of my friends will be there with me."

"Count on it."

In answer he gave her a deep-throated malevolent chuckle. He wasn't surprised to hear her hang up in disgust.

Oh, he knew his little sister would find a way to make him pay for dragging this out. But dammit, it would be worth it. He'd waited a long time for this. And he wanted to enjoy every minute of it.

He hung up the phone, walked across the room to the gray granite countertop and set his coffee cup down. Then he leaned

forward to peer through the rain-spattered glass at the growing darkness. This was just the beginning, he told himself.

With the conclusion of this deal, his long-held plans for the Parrish ranch were complete at last. Now he could focus on the horse-breeding program he'd been thinking about for months.

Anything was possible.

A slow grin tipped up one corner of his mouth as he took a quick look around the kitchen. Modern appliances, a gleaming Spanish-tile floor and a kiva-shaped fireplace in the corner made the kitchen something of a showplace. Not that he could do anything more complicated than a pot of coffee, grilled cheese sandwiches and an assortment of microwavable delights.

That didn't matter, though. For Jake had made good on his promises. He had turned the ranch into a business prosperous enough to pay off all the cosmetic changes to the house that his ex-wife had insisted on. And despite Linda's efforts, she hadn't managed to empty his pockets.

Jake frowned slightly at the memory of the woman he had allowed to make a fool of him, but then he dismissed all thoughts of her. Instead, he concentrated on the ranch. His accomplishment. His triumph. The place was now a far cry from how it had looked while he and Annie had been growing up.

In his mind's eye he could still see the antique stove his mother had somehow coaxed into working long beyond the time it should have. If he tried hard enough, he could make out the shadow of the battered pine table where he and then Annie had done

their school-work. The same table where the family had gathered at suppertime for loud long discussions on everything from the Chicago Cubs to Darwin.

Jake blinked, and in place of that old familiar table was the heavy Santa Fe style polished-oak dining set Linda had purchased three years before. He frowned thoughtfully. True, the ranch hadn't had much in the way of comforts when he was a kid. But there was always enough love.

The one thing his new and improved ranch house lacked.

Jake shook his head and reached for his coffee cup. He took one last drink of the still-hot brew, then slammed the cup back down onto the counter. Keep your mind on business, he told himself. Thoughts of love and what-might-have-beens wouldn't get his work done.

And thoughts of Linda would only give him an ulcer.

"Besides," he said aloud into the empty room, "you've got to check the fencing before nightfall." With the rain and the howling wind, he couldn't risk wires coming down and his stock wandering out onto the roads.

Besides, if the weatherman was right for a change and the first snow of the season was really headed in that night, then he'd best keep ahead of the chores.

He snatched his rain slicker and hat from the pegs near the back door and pulled them on, purposely keeping his back to the shiny sterile room. The sooner he was started, the sooner he'd be back. With a microwaved pizza, a beer and a front-row seat for

the football game on TV.

If he kept the volume loud enough, he just might be able to convince himself that he wasn't really lonely.

"I know just how you feel," Casey told the little animal, and reached down to grab another handful of wet white lace. Draping the fabric across the calf's shivering body, she hovered over him, blocking most of the rain with her back. She stroked his neck and looked into his sad brown eyes. "It's no fun being cold and wet and alone, is it, pal?"

The calf snorted.

"Gesundheit," Casey said automatically, then blew fruitlessly at a sopping-wet lock of blond hair hanging in front of her right eye. She didn't want to let go of the calf long enough to shove her hair and what was left of her veil off her face. The poor little thing was so scared it would probably take off, and she'd never manage to catch it again, running in the mud.

The trembling calf shifted position, leaning into her. She staggered under its surprising weight and looked back into those big brown eyes. "Do you know something? Your eyes are a lot like my fiancé's. Or rather, my ex-fiancé's." She frowned slightly before adding, "But don't worry, I won't hold that against you. They look better on you, anyway."

The animal snorted and bawled again.

"I felt like crying myself earlier," she murmured sympathetically. "You might not know this, but I was supposed to get married today."

Her little friend shivered heavily.

"I know. It gives me cold chills just to think about it now." Casey leaned down and rubbed her cheek against the back of the animal's head. Her feet felt like two blocks of muddy ice and she was beginning to lose feeling in her fingers altogether. Stupid weather. Trying to ignore her own discomfort, she kept talking to her little friend. "The worst part was telling everyone that there wouldn't be a wedding. You should have seen their faces, pal."

He mooed quietly.

"Who?" she asked with a choked laugh. "The people in the church, of course." She sniffed. "And my parents. It's a good thing for Steven that his note said he was going to Mexico. If my father had been able to get his hands on that jerk…" She sighed and lifted her head to look at her new friend again. "It's not every day a girl gets jilted, you know. Don't you think I should be feeling worse than I am about all this?"

The calf shook its head.

"I don't, either," Casey's fingers stroked the animal's rough yet smooth hide. She shivered hard before saying, "Now don't be offended because I said your eyes were like Steven's. It's not your fault, after all. Besides," she pointed out with a wry smile, "you seem to have a much more pleasant personality."

The calf moved and stomped on her toes.

She yelped and dragged her foot out from under the animal's hoof. "You dance like Steven, too."

The wind kicked up, snatching at her veil and flinging it

out around her. “I know it’s hard to believe now,” she told the squirming calf, “but a few hours ago, I looked pretty good.”

An image leaped in her brain. Of her, standing at the back of the church, waiting for her cue to start down the incredibly long pine-bough-decorated aisle at her father’s side. She’d looked at her ten maids of honor lined up in front of her and realized she didn’t really know any of them.

Oh, they went to the same functions. Told the same stories. Laughed at the same jokes. But not one of those ten women would she have considered a friend. Then it had struck her that the one real friend she had wasn’t even attending her wedding. Annie had refused to watch her friend make what she called a “giant mistake.”

The doubts she’d been battling for months had risen in her again. But then the organ music had started, swelling out into the church and stealing away her breath. The first bridesmaid had been about to start her staggered walk down the aisle when an usher had brought Casey the note from Steven.

During the next few interminably long minutes, she’d endured curious stares, hushed whispers and even a muffled laugh or two. She hadn’t been able to find a friendly face anywhere in the crowd of surprised disappointed guests.

Even her parents had been too stunned to offer comfort to her. Her father, grim-faced and tight-lipped, stood awkwardly patting her mother’s shoulder as she wept quietly into her hanky. The twins, Casey’s older brothers, looked as though they just wanted

to find someone to punch.

Naturally, when she ran out of the church a few minutes later and jumped into her sports car—which one of her brothers had thoughtfully driven to the church—she'd instinctively headed for her one real friend.

The only person she could count on to listen to her. To tell her that she wasn't crazy. That she was right to feel as though she'd just escaped from prison.

Annie Parrish.

Casey yanked her full skirt a little higher over the animal's back and told herself that all she had to do now was find the Parrish ranch. Hopefully before she froze to death. It had been only five years since her family had moved out of Simpson. Why did everything look so different?

The rain, she thought. She was only disoriented because of the rain. When the storm passed, she would find the ranch. If the storm passed, her mind added silently. She glanced up at the black clouds overhead, noted the wind-whipped trees surrounding the meadow and fought down her first thread of worry. For all she knew, it could start snowing any minute. By morning she would be nothing more than the ice statue of a haggard-looking bride.

The Irish lace and ivory silk dress she wore felt as though it weighed five hundred pounds. The fabric had soaked up the rain like a dime-store sponge, and the heavy mud along the hemline wasn't helping the situation any. Idly she wondered what the

gown's designer would say if she could see her creation now.

The world's most expensive tent for water-logged calves.

And what, Casey asked herself, would her father say?

She groaned quietly and closed her eyes for a second or two. Henderson Oakes wasn't going to be a happy man for quite a while. No doubt he would take Casey's being jilted as a personal affront. Though basically good people, her parents were far more concerned about how things looked than with how things really were.

Better not to even think about them yet.

The rain came down harder and began to feel like a thousand cold knives stabbing her body. Her back ached from hunching over the calf. Her arms were scratched from clawing her way through barbed wire to rescue the little beast. She'd lost one shoe to the muck and she definitely felt a cold coming on.

With any luck it would develop into pneumonia.

"Here comes the bride," she sang softly, then stopped abruptly. If she wasn't so blasted tired and if she wasn't afraid she'd sink neck deep in mud, Casey would have plopped right down on the ground and had a good cry.

"What in hell are you doing, lady?"

The deep gravelly voice seemed to come out of nowhere. She jumped, staggered and fell across the calf's sturdy little body. Throwing one hand down onto the muddy ground, Casey broke her fall and ignored the tiny twinge of pain that shot through her wrist. She cocked her head to one side and looked through her

veil's saturated netting at a man on a horse.

Finally. Help.

At least she hoped it was help.

She really had to start paying more attention to her surroundings. She'd been so wrapped up in her own thoughts she hadn't even heard the horse and rider approach.

Pushing herself upright, Casey kept one hand on the calf and looked at the man carefully. His hat was pulled down low on his forehead, and an olive green rain slicker covered the rest of him, except for his lower legs and the worn boots shoved into stirrups.

The rain continued to pound relentlessly around them and Casey lifted one hand to shield her eyes, hoping for a better look at the cowboy.

"Cassandra Oakes," he muttered. "I don't believe it."

The obvious displeasure in his tone struck a chord of memory within Casey. How many times had she heard that same raspy voice say, "Get the hell away from me!"? And how many of her dreams had that same raspy voice invaded?

Goosebumps that had nothing to do with the rain and the cold suddenly leaped up on Casey's arms, then raced across her shoulders and down her spine.

Only one man could have such an effect on her.

Even if it had been five years since she'd seen him.

Five years since he'd broken her heart.

"Hello, Jake."

Two

Hello, Jake?

That was all she could say? Standing in the middle of his field in a soaking-wet wedding gown, hovering over a mewling calf, and she says, “Hello, Jake”?

A groan rattled through him. When Jake had spotted that convertible on the side of the road, he’d figured someone was in trouble. That road only led to his and Don Wilson’s ranches, so there never was much traffic on it. Jake had expected to find some tourist lost in the storm or someone on their way to Don’s place.

He sure hadn’t expected a bride.

Let alone this particular bride.

Man, a day could really go to crap in a hurry, he told himself. Not twenty minutes ago he’d been feeling great. He should have known it wouldn’t last. But dammit, he never would have guessed that it would be Casey showing up out of nowhere just in time to ruin his good mood.

Ruefully, though, he admitted that her appearance did make a sort of karmic sense. He mentally bowed to the inevitable and asked, “What the hell are you doing here, Casey?” His gaze swept over her ruined bridal gown quickly. “Looking for a church, are we?”

“Running from a church, actually.”

“Uh-huh.” He leaned forward in the saddle. “And where’d you bury the groom?”

“It’s a long story.” Her face paled a bit.

“Naturally.”

Tipping her head back, she managed to swing her soggy veil out of her face long enough to look at him. Those green eyes of hers locked onto him, and Jake felt his insides tighten into knots.

“I’ll tell you all about it later,” she said stiffly. “But right now, would you mind helping me?”

No one should be able to look that good covered in mud, he thought absently. Then when desire began to rear its ugly head, he heard himself ask gruffly, “Help you what?”

“Save him.” She wagged her head at the calf still cradled in her arms.

No animal had looked less in need of saving. In fact, Jake admitted silently, he wouldn’t mind trading places with the damn thing. But he remembered clearly that even years ago, she’d had a soft heart for animals. He chuckled slightly as he recalled the year she’d realized hamburgers actually came from cows. She’d been horrified. Probably came from living in town all her life. Hell, the only time she or her brothers ever even saw an animal up close was when they came out to the ranch. Their parents had never allowed their children to have a pet of any kind.

Her brothers. Jeez, it had been a long time since Jake had seen the twins. Of course, between working twenty-five hours a day on the ranch and his brief but memorable marriage to Linda, he

hadn't had time for any of his old friends.

"Jake? Earth to Jake."

"Huh?" He frowned and forced himself back to the problem at hand. "Oh, yeah. The calf. Save him from what?" He was too wet and cold and tired to be dealing with this. He'd learned long ago that when talking to Casey, it paid to stay alert. Even then, it often wasn't enough.

"He's scared," she said.

"Scared?" Jake's fingers tightened on the reins. Knowing he would regret it, Jake heard himself ask a question, anyway. "And just what is he scared of?"

"The storm, of course."

The wind howled through the trees as if to underline her statement, and the calf squirmed against her. Casey's eyebrows lifted and she nodded shortly as if to say, "See?"

Jake's teeth ground together. She was as stubborn as ever. And as beautiful, his brain added, even with her hair hanging in limp soggy strands along her cheeks. Even with her wedding dress splotched with mud. Even with her emerald eyes squinted against the downpour. Uneasily Jake watched her widen her stance and wiggle her behind as she struggled to get a better grip on the animal.

Something hard and tight settled in his chest, wrapping itself around his lungs and heart. He struggled to draw a breath. Even after five years she still had the same old effect on him.

For the first time since leaving the ranch house, he was

beginning to wish his Jeep wasn't out of commission. At least then he'd be seated on a nice comfy bucket seat, instead of futilely trying to find a comfortable position in the saddle. Dammit. He'd always enjoyed riding in the rain.

Until now.

Immediately he told himself to get a grip. She was wearing a damned wedding gown. She'd said she was running from a church. But she hadn't said whether she'd started running before or after the wedding.

The notion of Casey's being someone else's wife tightened that cold band around his chest another notch.

Rain pelted his hat and slicker. He felt the slap of each drop and welcomed it. At least he knew what to do about rain. She was another matter entirely.

"Are you going to climb down and help me or not?"

Jake shook his head, tightened his grip on the reins with one hand and rubbed his jaw viciously with the other. There was no way he'd be able to climb down from his horse and walk. Even if his rain slicker did hide his body's reaction to her, his discomfort would be all too visible.

But he had to do something.

This ridiculous conversation was getting them nowhere.

"Cows live outside," he said.

The calf bawled piteously.

Casey cooed in sympathy, then flashed Jake a hard look. "He's just a baby."

"Who weighs more than you do."

A deep reverberating sound rolled out around them and Casey half straightened, still keeping her arms around the animal beside her.

"What was that?"

"That would be his mama, I'd bet," Jake told her when she swiveled her head to look at him.

The calf called a quavering answer and its mother mooed back.

"Here she comes," Jake said, and dipped his head toward the distant line of trees.

She looked in the direction he indicated and sucked in a quick breath. Mama indeed. A huge cow was lumbering toward her, moving much more quickly than Casey would have thought possible. Apparently her friend didn't need saving as much as she did at the moment. Immediately she released the calf and started for the man and relative safety.

She grabbed up fistfuls of skirt, hiked the hem past her knees and trudged through the mud. The cow's hoofbeats pounded against the sodden ground and sounded like native war drums to Casey. It seemed to take forever to cross the few feet of space separating her from the horse, and naturally Jake wasn't offering the slightest bit of help.

Just as that thought raced through her mind, though, he urged his mount closer, kicked free of a stirrup and held out one hand to her.

She looked up at him and didn't see even the tiniest flicker of welcome in his blue eyes. She hesitated, glanced over her shoulder at the approaching two tons of offended motherhood and chose the lesser of two evils.

Slapping her hand into his, she felt his long callused fingers fold around hers in a firm grip. Ignoring the warm tingle of awareness sparking between them, she stuffed one muddied stockinged foot into the stirrup and allowed him to pull her up behind him on the saddle.

Immediately Jake turned his horse around and kneed it into a fast walk. After a few feet he pulled back on the reins, bringing the horse to a stop. He turned in the saddle to look behind him, and she shifted to follow his gaze.

She smiled as she watched the calf dip its head below its mother's belly and nuzzle around for milk. Of course, the cow still didn't look very happy with the two interfering humans, but at least Casey's young friend was safe.

And so was she.

"Here," Jake said, and dropped his hat onto her head.

She tipped the brim back and looked at him.

Rain flattened his thick black hair to his skull, and he reached up to brush it out of his way. His blue eyes were hard as he stared at her, but there was a spark of something else there, as well. Then in a heartbeat it was gone.

"I'll take you to your car."

"Don't bother," she told him, remembering that loud snap

when she'd stomped on the brakes. "I think it's broken down."

"Perfect," Jake grumbled, and turned the horse's head. "Wrap your arms around my waist," he said. "It's about a ten-minute ride to the ranch from here."

"What about my car?" She pointed at the abandoned convertible.

Jake frowned and spared the car a quick glance. "We can call for a tow from the house."

When the big animal beneath her jumped into a canter, she jolted backward into nothingness. Quickly she reached for Jake and folded her arms around his hard flat stomach. Scooting in closer to him, she pressed herself against his back and felt his muscles bunch beneath her touch. A warm curl of something she hadn't allowed herself to think about in five years began to thread its way through her body. She squeezed her eyes shut. She'd thought those feelings were gone forever. Lord knew, she'd worked hard at forgetting them.

But apparently she hadn't worked hard enough. Here she was, less than ten minutes with the man, and her knees had turned to rubber. Maybe what she should do was dredge up that memory of the last time she'd seen him. Remember the embarrassment. The humiliation. Surely that would be enough to quell whatever lingering feelings she had for the man.

No. Immediately her mind rejected the plan. She wasn't going to relive that night again. Not for any reason. Not if she could help it, anyway. Besides, she told herself, her reaction to Jake no

doubt had more to do with her already emotional state than with the man himself.

She was so cold. So tired. She thought about resting her head on his back, but then reconsidered. No sense racing out to meet problems with open arms.

Deliberately she sat up straight and loosened her hold on his waist a bit. Instead of letting her mind wander down dangerous paths, she concentrated on moving with the familiar rhythm of the horse's steps. Years of riding lessons at exclusive stables were finally paying off.

Jake sucked in a gulp of air and she thought he muttered something.

She shifted to one side, tipped her head back and asked, "What did you say?"

"Nothing," he snapped. "And sit still, will you?"

He dropped her off at the back door to the house, then took his horse to the barn. In no hurry to join the woman waiting in the kitchen, he took his time in unsaddling his mount and drying him off. Only when the horse had been fed, watered and put away for the night did he step to the open doorway and look across the open ground at the house.

Bright light spilled out of the windows, layering the ground's puddled water with brilliant splashes of color. He turned his head to look at the guest house, two hundred yards away. The lights there were off but for a single lamp left burning in what he knew was the living room. The blue Ford pickup was gone from the

front of the house.

So, the foreman and his wife had gone into town despite the storm.

That left him and Casey entirely too alone for comfort.

And he couldn't get rid of her anytime soon, either. With his Jeep not working and the pickup gone for who knew how long, they were stuck together.

Dammit, why did she have to show up here? And why was she still able to take his breath away with a single glance?

Grumbling at his own foolishness, he stepped out of the barn, shut the double doors behind him and walked into the wind and rain. He crossed the yard slowly, as if hoping the cold would erase the spark of heat she'd created when she'd wrapped her arms around him. But it didn't help. The fire in his blood remained, and as he recalled the feel of her legs pressed along his own, his body tightened uncomfortably. Halfway to the house, he stopped dead and tilted his head back to glare at the stormy sky.

Hard heavy rain pummeled his face and chest. A cold fierce wind rushed around him, tugging at his coat with frigid fingers. He squinted against the icy pellets and noticed an occasional spot of feathery white drifting down toward him.

Perfect.

Snow.

"What did I ever do to you?" he demanded hoarsely of a silent heaven.

The snowflakes thickened amidst the raindrops.

Jake straightened, shook his head, then loped across the muddy ground to the back porch. He stripped off his slicker and snapped it in the air, shaking off most of the water. Then he dropped it onto the closest chair, stomped the mud from his boots and opened the door to meet trouble face-to-face.

She was standing in front of the kiva fireplace staring into the flames still dancing across the logs he'd laid earlier in the afternoon.

"You're shivering," he said lamely, and she turned to look at him.

"I'm warmer than I was."

Maybe. But her teeth were chattering. His gaze swept over the sodden once-beautiful white dress, and he wondered again about the mysteriously missing groom. What kind of idiot would let a woman like this escape him at his own wedding?

Wet fabric clung to her like a determined lover, outlining her small breasts and the curve of her hips. What should have been a full skirt now hung straight down her legs, wrapping her in a blanket of muddy lace.

A sharp pain pierced his chest as he let himself actually think about her being married to someone else. But in the next instant he buried the pain. What was done was done. He'd made his decision five years ago and he still believed it had been the right one.

No matter what it had cost him.

He lifted his gaze to hers, pushed both hands through his wet

hair and said gruffly, "What are you doing here, Casey?"

She sniffed, snatched her veil from her head and twisted it between her hands. Dirty water streamed from the sodden netting. "I came to see Annie."

"Oh." His sister. He nodded. Of course she was there to see Annie, you idiot. Why in hell would she have come to see him? He inhaled deeply, blew the air out of his lungs with a rush and said, "Annie doesn't live here anymore." At her questioning look, he added. "She moved back to town about six months ago."

"Stupid," Casey muttered, and gripped her soggy veil more tightly. Shifting her gaze back to the fire, she said, more to herself than to him, "I should have known that she'd want to be back out on her own as quickly as possible."

She darted a quick look at him and he saw disappointment shadowing her eyes.

"How's she doing?"

"Pretty well." He lifted one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. "You know Annie. Divorce is hard on anyone, but she'll be OK."

"I know she will."

"Yeah. I made it. She will, too."

"That's right." She straightened slightly and turned those green eyes on him. "Annie told me about your divorce. I'm sorry, Jake."

Discomfort rattled through him briefly as he looked into her eyes and saw sympathy and understanding. He shifted uneasily under her steady regard and wished she would change the subject. He didn't want to discuss Linda with her or anyone else. In fact,

except for the valuable lesson Linda had taught him, he preferred to forget all about her.

"It was a long time ago," he said.

"Not so long. Only three years."

His gaze narrowed. Hell, he hadn't seen Casey in five years, but apparently his little sister kept the woman up to date on his life. "Is there anything Annie left out?"

"Not much," she admitted.

"Remind me to have a talk with my sister, huh?"

"How's Lisa?"

A small smile erased Jake's frown. Happened every time he thought about his three-year-old niece. It was simply impossible not to smile when thinking about the little terror.

"She's great. Driving Annie nuts."

For a too-brief moment Casey's smile joined his. "I haven't seen her in so long I probably wouldn't even recognize her." Her smile faded. "What about Lisa's father?"

He stiffened and unconsciously his hands curled into fists. As thoughts of Lisa could bring a smile, thoughts of her no-good father gave birth to sudden bursts of rage.

"Like you, he's been gone so long he wouldn't know his own daughter. Unlike you, he wouldn't care."

"That's a shame."

"Among other things."

Long silent minutes passed, and the only sounds were the rain drumming on the tiled roof and the snap and hiss of the fire.

Finally Casey broke the tension-filled quiet.

"I don't suppose you could give me a ride to town?"

"Can't."

"Why not?"

He frowned and shook his head. "Jeep's broken down and my foreman used the pickup to take his wife dancing. From the looks of this storm, they probably won't make it back until morning."

She stared at him as if she couldn't believe what he was saying. Well, he wasn't thrilled with the situation, either. She would just have to get used to it.

"Surely you have more than one Jeep and one truck on a ranch this size."

"Well, now," he drawled deliberately, "I surely do, ma'am. But I'm afraid my city car wouldn't fare any better than your car did in this mud."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh."

"Can this day possibly get any worse?" she muttered.

"It's snowing," he offered.

A short strangled laugh shot from her throat. "Of course it is."

He watched her as she began to rub her hands briskly up and down her arms. As he stood there, a violent tremor rocked her. He felt like an idiot. While he was questioning her, she was no doubt catching pneumonia.

"You're never going to warm up while you're wearing that."

Her perfectly arched brows lifted high on her forehead. "Why,

Jake," she said. "Are you trying to get me undressed?"

"Knock it off, Casey." He headed for the stove where he picked up the teakettle and carried it to the sink. As he filled it with water, he told her, "We've known each other too long for this. Just get out of the damned dress. You know where the bathroom is. I'll find you a robe or something."

When the kettle was half-full, he carried it to the stove, slammed it down on one of the burners, then turned on the fire underneath it. Then he stomped out of the kitchen without waiting to see if she was following his orders. The truth was, he admitted silently, he sure as hell didn't want to be anywhere near her when she started peeling off that dress. His little sister's friend or not, what she was doing to him was downright dangerous.

He marched down the long hallway to his bedroom at the back of the sprawling adobe-and-wood house. Throwing the door open, he absently noted the crash as the heavy oak panel hit the wall. But he was on a mission. Find something concealing for her to wear. Yes, he thought. Definitely concealing.

A burlap bag with a matching hood should do the trick.

Unfortunately he told himself as he stepped into the bathroom and glared at the garment hanging from the hook on the back of the door, all he had was a terry-cloth robe.

And a short robe at that.

Doesn't matter, he thought grimly. The important thing here was to get her dry. Then he'd dig out an old pair of sweats or something. Somehow, he had to survive the night, then get her

the hell out of his life.

Again.

Clutching the robe in one fist, he marched back into his bedroom and came to a sudden stop at the foot of his bed.

In the past five years many things had changed. For one, he now slept in the master bedroom, not down the hall in the room where he'd grown up or even the guest house where he'd lived for a few years. He had changed most of the furnishings, painted the walls, installed new drapes. But the huge four-poster was the same. The same bed he'd slept in all his adult life.

And the same bed he'd found Casey in one night five long years ago.

Instantly the past was all around him, and he shuddered with the force of the memories.

There'd been a party in town. Casey's brothers had thrown themselves a farewell get-together. Since the Oakeses were leaving Simpson for the relatively big city of Morgan Hill, they'd decided to stage one last event for their friends.

He had left the party early, hoping to find some peace and quiet before his parents and sister returned to the ranch. He'd been living in the guest house then. A consideration, his father'd called it. A necessity was how Jake had thought of it. Even though working the family ranch was all he'd ever wanted to do, a thirty-year-old man needed more privacy than living in his parents' house could afford.

He'd walked through the dark guest house, not even bothering

to turn on a lamp. In his mind, he could still hear the echo of his own footsteps in the empty rooms. He remembered feeling a little sorry for himself that the twins—and Casey—were moving away.

In his bedroom he'd plopped down onto the mattress to tug off his boots. He'd gotten one off and had just started on the other when her voice stopped him.

That so familiar voice had sounded different that night. Throaty, deep, filled with unspoken promises and just a quavering hint of nerves.

"I think you should know you are not alone."

Three

Jake had jumped to his feet, taken two quick steps to the bedside table and fumbled for the lamp switch.

Soft light dazzled the darkness, spilling over the woman waiting in his bed. Propped up with pillows behind her back, Casey lay beneath the covers. The sheet-topped quilt folded neatly across her breasts, she displayed just enough creamy flesh to let him know she was naked.

Jake drew one long unsteady breath, then deliberately took a step away from the bed. "What are you up to?"

She looked at him, then let her gaze slide to one side nervously. "Jake, I—"

"How did you get in here?"

"Annie gave me a key."

"Annie?" Damn, his little sister was in on this! Was this setup some kind of a joke? But no. Instinctively he knew that whatever else she was up to, Cassandra Oakes wasn't kidding.

He flashed her another quick look and had to swallow back a groan. Her long blond hair lay across her shoulders and bare arms. Her green eyes shone with a passion he hadn't expected and didn't know quite how to handle.

Oh, he knew how he'd like to handle it. For months he'd been noticing his younger sister's friend—much to his disgust. God, he'd known Casey since she was ten! She was just a kid. At least

he'd always thought of her as one. And yet lately, every time she showed up at the Parrish ranch, he was drawn to her. He'd found himself looking for her, hoping to see her.

And that worried him.

Hell, he was thirty years old. He was ready to settle down. He'd been to college. He'd had a chance to taste the rest of the world and had finally realized that the life he wanted was here. On the ranch.

But Casey Oakes was only nineteen—and barely out of high school.

What did she know about life? Or herself, for that matter? She didn't need him cluttering up her future just when it was beginning to open up in front of her.

So he had made up his mind to keep his desires in check. To keep a watchful distance from Casey until she'd had a chance to explore the world a bit.

But he'd never counted on having her ambush him in his bedroom.

"You'd better get out of here," he said past the hard knot of need lodged in his throat.

"But I've been waiting for you," she said. Jake watched as she held the covers to her and came up on her knees. She looked at him and shook her hair back away from her face.

He dragged a short harsh breath into straining lungs. Almost unwillingly his gaze shot to the swell of her breasts, where her armor of quilt and sheet was beginning to dip. Every breath she

drew tantalized him, pushing him closer to the limits of his own endurance. His palms itched to cup her breasts. He could almost taste her sweet warmth.

Deliberately he clenched his hands at his sides and let his angry frustration color his voice.

"Well, now that I'm here," he said, "you can go."

"No."

"No?"

"Oh, Jake…" She leaned toward him, unknowingly letting that quilt drop another inch or two until the tops of her breasts were bared to his view. She held out one hand to him. "Don't you see? I've wanted this to happen for so long—and now we're moving away. I don't know when I'll be back."

That had occurred to him, as well. In fact, it was the main reason he'd left the party early. He hadn't felt like celebrating the fact that the one woman he was interested in was being spirited out of town. He wasn't a big believer in the old adage "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." No doubt, Casey would forget all about him in a year or two. As would he forget about her.

Which made it even more imperative that he got her the hell out of his bedroom.

"Casey, you shouldn't be here."

"This is exactly where I should be," she countered, and scooted to the edge of the bed, dragging the bed-clothes with her. Climbing off the mattress, she walked to him and laid one hand on his forearm.

His skin seemed to burn at her touch, right through the fabric of his shirt. He clenched his jaw tight, determined to ignore the almost electric feel of her so close to him.

"I couldn't wait for you to take the first step anymore," she said softly, breathlessly. "I'm out of time. I had to tell you."

"Tell me what?" Say it, he pleaded silently. Say it and go.

"I love you."

Like a powerful fist to his midsection, Jake felt the blow. He stared into her eyes and saw everything he'd ever hoped to see shining back at him. Lord, how he wanted to tell her the same thing. He wanted to grab her, pull her tightly against him and lose himself in her. He wanted to slide into her warmth and hear her quiet moans of pleasure as they discovered each other. But he couldn't. It didn't matter if she claimed to be in love with him.

Nothing had changed. She was still too young. Too inexperienced to know what she wanted. She was still the kid who had followed him around the yard, peppering him with questions until he'd wanted to lock her in Annie's bedroom.

Despite the fact that she didn't look or feel like a kid at the moment, he couldn't take advantage of her feelings to ease the ache throbbing inside him. And he certainly couldn't expect a kid her age to make some kind of lifelong pledge of love.

Although he thought it might kill him, he forced himself to say, "Thank you, Casey. I appreciate it."

Her eyes mirrored the questions racing through her brain.

"You appreciate it?"

“Casey, I know you don’t want to hear this—”

“Then don’t say it. Please, Jake.” Her fingers curled into the front of his shirt. “Don’t say it.”

“I have to.” He reached up and covered her hand with one of his own. “I’m thirty years old, honey. You’re just nineteen.”

“I turn twenty next month.”

“Twenty, then,” he conceded. His thumb smoothed across her knuckles and he felt the warmth of that touch right to his bones. “You haven’t even finished college yet.”

“What does that have to do with us?”

“There is no ‘us,’” he said, despite the pain that statement cost him.

“There could be.”

He shook his head.

“Are you saying you don’t feel anything for me?” she demanded.

“Casey…”

“I know you do, darn it. I know you feel something. I’ve seen the way you look at me. It’s the same way I look at you.”

Damn.

“Please, don’t turn me away. I don’t want to leave you.” She stepped closer, reached up and cupped the back of his neck. Slowly she drew his head down to hers, then pressed her lips to his.

Jake groaned and forced himself to stand perfectly still under her gentle assault. The touch of her mouth was electrifying.

Something sparked between the two of them. Something rare and magical. Still, he made no move to hold her, instead calling on the strength of his will to resist the incredible temptation she offered.

Then she dropped the quilt and sheet and reached up to wrap both arms around his neck. She pressed herself to him and he felt her hardened nipples rubbing against his chest. Desire rocketed through him, hard and hot. He wanted to do the right thing here, but Lord, he was only human.

When his arms closed around her bare back, a purr of satisfaction rumbled from her throat. His hands moved up and down the length of her spine, touching, exploring. Her lips parted and his tongue swept inside her mouth, tasting her for the first time. She was sweeter, more intoxicating than he had ever imagined. Instantly he knew that if he didn't stop that minute, he would never be able to let her go.

Abruptly he released her and took a step back.

"What's wrong?" she whispered. Her eyes were glazed with the smoldering fires of a passion just born. It was almost enough to make him forget his blasted attempt at nobility. Almost.

"What's wrong?" he repeated. "This." He bent down, scooped up the quilt and quickly draped it around her. "This whole thing is wrong," he snapped, then took another step away from her.

"How can it be when it feels so right?"

"Damn, Casey! I'm not made of stone, all right?" He glared at her briefly, then stomped past her to stare out the windows at

the darkness outside. “Do us both a favor and leave, huh? Now. Before we both do something that can’t be undone.”

He heard her sniff and knew she was crying. Something cold settled in his chest, but he didn’t look at her. He knew that if he turned and saw tears on her face, this hard-won battle would be lost. An eternity-filled moment later she spoke again.

“All right then, I’ll leave.”

Thank God.

“You’re wrong, you know,” she said, and he flinched at the pain in her voice. “About us. Age has nothing to do with love, Jake Parrish. And someday you’re going to be sorry you sent me away tonight.”

The memories ended abruptly as those last whispered words echoed in his mind.

He had been sorry.

Every night since.

But especially so tonight.

“So,” she asked, “were you ever sorry?”

Jake turned slowly, inevitably, to face the woman standing in the open doorway of the bedroom. She’d finally gotten out of that wet wedding gown and was now draped in an oversize turquoise bath sheet.

“Sorrier than you’ll ever know,” he admitted finally.

“Good.” Casey walked into the room holding his gaze with hers. Strange, the last time she’d been alone with this man she’d been stark naked. Now she wore only a towel. Judging by the

flash of awareness in his eyes, he'd certainly noticed.

She'd only had to glance at him to know that he was reliving that long-ago night. Somehow it made her feel better to know that Jake, too, had regrets. She wondered what he would think if he knew her main regret was that she had allowed him to chase her away.

"Here." He held out his robe toward her. "You can wear this while I try to find you some sweats or something."

"Thanks," she said, and took the robe. She slipped into the garment, pulling it on right over the towel already covering her. Once the terry-cloth belt was tied at her waist, she turned back to him.

"I tossed my dress across the shower rod since it's still dripping mud. I hope that's OK."

"Sure."

He looked as uncomfortable as she felt.

History repeating itself?

"This isn't exactly how I imagined my wedding night turning out," she said suddenly on a laugh that held more nervousness than humor.

"What happened?" he asked. "Why are you here and not on some elaborate honeymoon?"

Another choked laugh shot from her throat before she could stop it. "I think the rules are you have to actually be married to go on a honeymoon."

His gaze narrowed and even in the semidarkness, she could

see his familiar scowl.

Casey reached up and pushed her towel-dried but still-damp hair back from her face. Walking to the bed, Casey perched on the edge of the mattress, bracing her heels on the bed frame.

"What happened, Casey?" he asked again.

She set her elbows on her knees, glanced at Jake and shrugged. "Oh, nothing much. My groom decided at the last minute that marrying me wasn't such a good idea, after all." Her fingers plucked at the robe's worn fabric as she talked.

"He didn't show up?"

How much more humiliation was she supposed to survive in one day? It had been bad enough being jilted. Admitting the facts to Jake was another trip down embarrassment lane. But she supposed she might as well get used to the question. Lord knew she would probably be hearing it from everyone for the next several months.

"Yes," she finally said, "he was there. Long enough to give one of the ushers a note for me."

"A note?" Jake's voice was hard and disbelieving.

She held her breath when he walked to her side and sat down next to her. He made no move to touch her, though, and she didn't know whether she was relieved or disappointed.

"Yeah." She glanced at him and smiled halfheartedly. "It seems Steven suddenly had an urge to visit Mexico."

"Bastard."

"My thoughts exactly," she said, and unconsciously patted his

hand. “At least at the time.” But now that she thought about it, she was amazed to discover that the anger that had burst into life so swiftly had disappeared again almost as swiftly. Strange. All she felt now was relief—tinged with lingering traces of humiliation.

She hadn’t been madly in love with Steven. Now she wasn’t sure if she had even loved him at all. She had certainly liked him. Well, at least until today. He was a nice man, from what her mother liked to call a good family. Translation, Casey thought, rich.

Their parents had wanted the match and she and Steven had simply drifted into it. She couldn’t even recall her ex-fiancé actually proposing. It had simply been taken for granted.

She scowled, lifted one hand and rubbed at her forehead. The mother of all headaches was just beginning to throb.

“I’m sorry, Casey.”

“Why?” she asked. “You weren’t the one rejecting me this time.”

“Let’s not go there, all right?”

“Why not?” She turned her head and looked directly into his eyes. The eyes she used to dream about. “This is my wedding night, after all. What better thing to at least talk about than sex? Or the lack thereof.”

“I left the kettle on,” he said, and moved to get up. “Why don’t we go and get you some hot tea?”

“I turned it off when the water boiled,” she told him, and waved him back down to the mattress.

“Casey,” he said, and shifted a bit farther from her, “you’ve had a bad day. Why not just get some sleep, huh?”

“I don’t want to sleep, Jake.” In fact, she’d never been more awake. Ordinarily she wouldn’t have considered seeking him out and asking him about that night—but now that the fates had provided her with the opportunity, she really wanted to know just why he’d turned her away.

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