

MILLS & BOON



Vintage INTRIGUE

To Wed and Protect

CARLA CASSIDY

Carla Cassidy

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Аннотация

Luke Delaney was the sexiest—and most scandalous—man Inferno, Arizona, society had ever bred. Though he'd broken all the rules, he was coming to terms with the past and moving on with his future—until he met tempting single mother Abby Graham and did an about-face. Running for her life, Abby had come to Inferno to elude the dangerous man who threatened the safety of her children. She needed Luke. And Luke wanted her enough to wed and protect her. But could she ask him to put his very life on the line...

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Luke silently vowed to do anything to help Abby keep custody of her kids.

Admiration for her fluttered through him, and he became aware of several things at once, like the fact that Abby's sweet scent filled the room and that she was clad in only a pale, frilly nightgown.

He had an overwhelming desire to learn every inch of her. His body reacted to his thoughts, filling with a tension that seemed unbearable.

But it was a tension he wouldn't, couldn't, follow through on.

And in that instant, he knew exactly what he wanted to do. It wouldn't solve the problem, but it just might give Abby a fighting chance.

"Abby." He stood and faced her. "Marry me."

Dear Reader,

Happy New Year! And happy reading, too—starting with the wonderful Ruth Langan and *Return of the Prodigal Son*, the latest in her newest miniseries, *THE LASSITER LAW*. When this burned-out ex-agent comes home looking for some R and R, what he finds instead is a beautiful widow with irresistible children and a heart ready for love. His love.

This is also the month when we set out on a twelve-book adventure called *ROMANCING THE CROWN*. Linda Turner

starts things off with *The Man Who Would Be King*. Return with her to the island kingdom of Montebello, where lives—and hearts—are about to be changed forever.

The rest of the month is terrific, too. Kylie Brant's *CHARMED AND DANGEROUS* concludes with *Hard To Tame*, Carla Cassidy continues *THE DELANEY HEIRS* with *To Wed and Protect*, Debra Cowan offers a hero who knows the heroine is *Still the One*, and Monica McLean tells us *The Nanny's Secret*. And, of course, we'll be back next month with six more of the best and most exciting romances around.

Enjoy!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Leslie J. Wainger". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Leslie J. Wainger
Executive Senior Editor

To Wed and Protect Carla Cassidy



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CARLA CASSIDY

has written over forty books for Silhouette. In 1995, she won Best Silhouette Romance, and in 1998, she won a Career Achievement Award for Best Innovative Series, both from Romantic Times Magazine.

Carla believes the only thing better than a good book to read is a good story to write. She's looking forward to writing many more and bringing hours of pleasure to readers.

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Chapter 1

The place looked as if it had been abandoned for years, but Luke knew it had only stood empty for a little less than a year. However, before abandonment the house and surrounding acreage had been owned by a cantankerous, eccentric old man who, rumor had it, had believed himself from the planet Zutar and spent most of his time attempting to contact fellow space creatures.

But Zutarian Arthur Graham had died almost a year earlier, and as far as Luke Delaney knew, the ramshackle house had not been entered since.

The early morning sun beat relentlessly on Luke's head as he got out of his car and approached the front door. If not for the car sitting out front, Luke would have assumed the house was still vacant. There were certainly no signs of life and no indication that any work at all had been done to make the house look more inviting.

The wood on the house was weathered to a dull gray, and thick weeds choked the path that led to a dangerously sagging front porch.

Luke had received a call the day before from a Mrs. Abigail Graham, asking if he'd be interested in meeting her here first thing this morning to discuss some carpentry work she wanted done on the place.

He'd been surprised. First and foremost because he hadn't heard any rumors that anyone had moved into the old Graham place, and usually the minute a stranger appeared in or around town, the gossipmongers went into action.

Luke had instantly agreed to meet with her, intrigued to see the interior of the place. After all, it wasn't everyday you got to see the living environment of a space alien.

And he had to admit, he was equally intrigued to meet the woman who owned the smoky, deep voice that had called him the day before. That voice had instantly conjured up visions of a lush brunette or a sultry blonde and had reminded Luke that it had been far too long since he'd enjoyed the company of a pretty lady.

Of course, Abigail Graham was probably sixty years old and as crazy as her infamous relative, he thought as he stepped up on the front porch.

With his first step onto the wooden porch, it instantly became apparent how imminent repairs were needed. The wood was rotten, and a hole was just in front of the door, indicating that somebody'd had a foot go completely through the rotten wood.

He carefully maneuvered around the hole and knocked on the door. It was opened immediately. The woman who stood before him was certainly no sixty-year-old. With long dark hair cascading around her slim shoulders and framing her slender face, she was definitely on the right side of thirty.

"Abigail Graham?" Luke asked, noting that her eyes were the

shade of spring...a soft, lovely green that shimmered like the sea in the bright sunshine.

However, one of those beautiful green eyes appeared slightly swollen, and a hint of a bruise peeked beneath makeup at the corner.

“Yes, and you must be Luke Delaney.”

He backed up as she stepped out and across the hole. “I’m assuming this is what you called me about?” he asked, gesturing to the porch.

She nodded. “I knew it was rather unstable but didn’t realize just how dangerous it was until my son’s foot went through it yesterday.”

That sexy voice of hers shot a new wave of pleasure through him. Looking at her certainly wasn’t difficult, either. Mrs. Abigail Graham, he reminded himself. A married woman sporting the hint of a black eye—and certainly none of his business.

“Was he hurt?” Luke asked, eyeing the hole.

“Thankfully no. His tennis shoe got scuffed and it scared him, but he wasn’t hurt.” She smiled, and Luke felt the jolt of that gorgeous smile deep in the pit of him, like that lick of heat he got when he took a swallow of good Scotch.

“Why don’t you come on inside and we can discuss the repair work,” she suggested. She stepped over the hole to the front door.

He followed her into the house and tried not to notice how sexy her shapely bottom looked in her tight jeans. The

living room, although starkly furnished, was spotlessly clean and decorated in desert shades.

From someplace else in the house he could hear the sound of a television playing what sounded like cartoons.

She gestured him to the sofa, and he sat. "The man at the lumberyard said you were the best carpenter in town," she explained. "He was the one who gave me your name and number."

She perched on the edge of a chair facing the sofa. "So, what will it take to repair the porch?"

"I can't repair it. It needs to come down altogether and a new one built."

A frown creased her forehead, and she caught her lower lip between her teeth. She had luscious full lips, and Luke wondered idly if they would be as soft and inviting as they looked.

"How much is all this going to cost?" she finally asked with a sigh.

Luke stood and pulled a measuring tape from his pocket. "Why don't we go out and get some measurements, then I can give you an estimate." He had a feeling he wasn't going to make much profit on this job.

It was obvious that money was an issue. Anyone who chose to live in this ramshackle place had to have made the decision because they couldn't afford anything better.

"Okay, I'll be right back." She got up, hurried down the hallway and disappeared into the first doorway on the right.

Luke once again looked around the room. On second glance, he saw the work that needed to be done. Windowsills needed to be refinished or painted. The hardwood floor was scuffed and worn. But those things were cosmetic. The rotten porch was something different. She was lucky nobody had been seriously hurt on it.

She returned from the bedroom and they gingerly stepped out on the rotten porch. "This is a bad accident waiting to happen," he said as they stepped off the porch. "If you have me build you a new one, would you want it to be the same size?"

He watched as she gazed at the porch thoughtfully. Lordy, but she was pretty. Her clear, creamy skin looked soft and touchable, and her dark hair was a perfect foil for her startling green eyes.

"It's a pretty good size, isn't it?" she said thoughtfully.

"Sure," he agreed. "It's big enough to hold a couple of chairs and a potted plant or two."

"Then let's keep the new one the same size."

He nodded. "Let's get the measurements."

As she took the end of the tape measure from him, he smelled her fragrance, a soft whisper of something sweetly feminine and clean. It was probably a good thing the woman was married. Otherwise she would be a huge temptation, and Luke was trying not to walk the path of temptation.

"How long have you been here?" he asked as he gestured for her to go to the opposite side of the porch.

"We arrived on Tuesday and have spent the last couple of days

having trash hauled off. Apparently my uncle was a bit of a pack rat.”

Luke made a mental note of the measurement, then motioned her to the side of the porch. “Arthur was your uncle? Nobody around here knew he had any relatives.”

“Actually, he was a great-uncle, but I never met him in person.”

“That’s all I need,” he said and hit the button on the tape measure to retract the tape. “He was a bit of a character, your great-uncle Arthur.”

Her cheeks flushed prettily as she met him at the base of the steps leading to the porch. “Poor Uncle Arthur. My father used to say he was a bolt whose nut was screwed on crooked.”

Luke laughed at the apt description of the old man. “He was certainly colorful,” he agreed. “He sometimes showed up in town with aluminum foil antennas wrapped around his head, said he was picking up signals from space.”

She winced, then gave another one of her pretty smiles. “Well, I hate to disappoint the town gossips, but I don’t intend to take up where Uncle Arthur left off,” she replied.

Luke grinned. “Don’t worry, we’ve got plenty of other odd people here in Inferno to keep the gossips busy.” He hated to think how often in the past he had kept the gossip mill busy.

“Where are you from?” he asked curiously.

“Uh...back east.”

He grinned. “Back east as in New York or back east as in East

India?”

“Uh...Chicago. We're from Chicago.”

Luke didn't know exactly how he knew, but he was fairly certain she was lying. Her gaze didn't quite meet his, and there was a hint of unnatural color to her cheeks that let him know she wasn't being truthful. Again he reminded himself that the lovely lady was none of his business.

At that moment the front door opened. Two children stood in the doorway. The little boy looked to be about five or six, and the girl standing next to him appeared to be slightly younger. Both were dark-haired and dark-eyed, and each of them eyed Luke warily.

“Don't come out here,” Abigail cautioned. “We've been using the back door since yesterday,” she explained to Luke.

“Who is he?” the little boy asked from the doorway, his voice slightly belligerent.

“Jason, this is Luke Delaney. He's going to build us a front porch that we won't fall through. And Luke, that's Jason and Jessica.”

“Hi, kids.” Luke smiled at the two rug rats, but neither of them returned his smile. Their dark eyes continued to gaze at him with suspicion.

Luke turned to Abigail. “I'll get some estimates together and call you with them later this evening.”

“That will be fine,” she replied and again offered him that beautiful smile that ignited a small flame in the pit of Luke's

stomach.

Yes, it was definitely a good thing Abigail Graham was a married woman with two children, he thought as he nodded goodbye and headed for his pickup truck. Although he found himself incredibly physically attracted to her, the fact that she was married with children assured him he wouldn't follow through on that attraction.

The last thing Luke was looking for was any kind of a permanent relationship. Even if Abigail were single and available, she had that look in her eyes that told him she probably wasn't a short-term-relationship kind of woman.

He dismissed thoughts of the lovely Abigail and her children from his mind as he pointed his pickup toward the family dude ranch.

Adam Delaney, Luke's father, had passed away a little over five months earlier, leaving Luke and his three siblings as heirs to the successful Delaney Dude Ranch. However, Adam Delaney, who had been a mean bastard in life, had kicked his kids one last time in death.

He'd left them the family ranch with a condition attached, that each of them spend twenty-five hours a week working on the ranch for a year. If before that time any one of them defaulted and didn't spend the required time there, the entire estate would transfer to Clara Delaney, Adam's old-maid sister.

Although Luke had no real love for the place where he'd been born and had spent a miserable childhood, he wasn't about to be

the one to make his brothers and sister lose their inheritance.

His plans were to remain here in Inferno for another seven months, then when the inheritance was won, he'd sell his interest in the ranch, take the money and chase after his real dream of being a star in Nashville.

And there was no way that dream included a woman, children or anything that remotely resembled a long-term relationship.

"I don't like him." Jason was tucked into bed, the red Kansas City Chiefs sheet pulled up to his stubborn chin. "I don't think he should be here. I don't like the way he looks."

Abby knew who he was talking about, and she also knew it had nothing to do with like or dislike. It had everything to do with fear.

Men frightened both Jason and Jessica ever since that night a year and a month ago...the night their lives had been irrevocably shattered, the night Abby had lost the one person most dear to her heart.

But Abby couldn't think of that. She couldn't dwell on all she'd lost because then she would be lost in grief. She and the kids were in survival mode now, and the only way to survive was to forge ahead and not look back.

"Jason, Luke seemed like a very nice man. I'm sure he won't hurt your sister or you. Besides, we need him. We can't live here if we don't fix the porch."

Jason frowned thoughtfully. "And if he fixes it we can live here together forever?" His dark little eyes pled with her for assurance.

“That’s the plan,” she replied and leaned forward to kiss his forehead. “Now, go to sleep. We have a big day tomorrow. We’ve got all kinds of boxes to unpack and maybe tomorrow evening we’ll go into town and eat at a restaurant.”

“And I can get a chocolate shake?”

Abby laughed. “If the restaurant has them, then you can get one, but now you need to get to sleep.”

Dutifully, Jason closed his eyes. After checking to make certain the night-light was burning brightly, Abby shut off the overhead light and left the room.

She went into the smaller bedroom next door where Jessica awaited a night-time kiss. Five-year-old Jessica smiled as Abby entered her bedroom. It was the bright, beautiful smile of a little angel.

“Hi, pumpkin. All tucked in?” Abby sat on the edge of the bed as Jessica nodded. “You didn’t eat very much for supper. Are you hungry?”

Jessica shook her head, and Abby wished for the millionth time that she could hear Jessica’s voice. Just one word. It had been over a year since the little girl had uttered a word, and Abby could no longer remember what her voice sounded like.

“Good night, sweetheart.” Abby kissed Jessica’s forehead, checked on her night-light, then left the room.

She went into the kitchen where she poured herself a cup of coffee, then headed for the sofa in the living room. Curling up on one end, with a television sitcom making white noise, she tried to

make sense of the million things that were playing in her mind.

School had already begun, and she needed to get the two kids enrolled, Jason in first grade and Jessica in kindergarten. She hoped the school wouldn't check too deeply into the medical and miscellaneous records needed for enrollment. She'd changed the kids' last name to adhere to their new identity.

She'd done everything she could to cover their tracks, hoped that she'd made no mistakes. Coming here had been a risk, but she'd weighed her options and realized they had no place else to go.

Once the children got settled in school, she'd have to find a job, at least a part-time one. She hoped she could find something that would pay her in cash, where her social security number would not be recorded. She didn't want to leave a trail that somebody might be able to follow.

But eventually a job would become a necessity. It wouldn't be long before their money would be gone, especially with the unforeseen expense of a new porch. It was ironic that there were three trust funds sitting in a bank in Kansas City, each containing enough money to see them living comfortably for the rest of their lives. But she was afraid to access them.

Finding the television noise distracting, she shut it off then went into the kitchen to pour another cup of coffee. She was about to leave the kitchen when the phone rang.

"Mrs. Graham?" a smooth, deep voice inquired.

"Mr. Delaney," she replied, instantly recognizing his voice.

“I’ve got some figures for you on building a new porch. Is this a good time?”

“Yes, it’s fine,” she assured him and set her cup on the counter.

As he spoke about the figures and dimensions of the deck, she tried to focus on his words and not on the sexy deepness of his voice. The man had a voice that was positively seductive.

The conversation only took a few minutes. She agreed to the overall price he gave her, and he told her he would have lumber delivered to her home and get started first thing in the morning.

When they hung up, Abby grabbed her coffee cup and headed through the living room and out the front door. Carefully stepping over the hole in the porch, she moved to sit on the rickety steps.

Night had fallen, and the silence was profound. The house was just far enough on the outskirts of Inferno that no city noise was audible. And that was good. The quiet would be good for them all. No ambulance or police car sirens screaming urgency, sounds that always thrust the children into their painful past.

She tilted her head to look at the stars that glittered against the black sky. Instantly she was reminded of Luke Delaney’s eyes. His eyes were gray with just enough of a silvery shine and with sinfully black lashes to make them positively breathtaking.

She set her coffee mug aside, wondering if it was the hot brew that was making her overly warm—or thoughts of Luke Delaney.

He’d definitely been a hunk, with his thick, curly black hair and those eyes with their devilish glint. The moment she’d seen him her dormant feminine hormones had whipped into life.

It wasn't just his beautiful eyes, rich dark hair or bold, handsome features that had instantly attracted her. It had also been the lean length of his legs in his tight, worn jeans and the tug of his T-shirt across impossibly broad shoulders.

He'd filled the air with his presence, his scent, his utter masculinity, and he'd reminded her of all the things she'd given up when she'd chosen the path she was on.

She'd hated lying to him, telling him they were from Chicago, but lying was not only necessary, it was positively vital to survival.

She had invented a story for herself that she intended to adhere to. The story was that she was a widow from Chicago who had left the windy city because it held too many painful memories of her husband. A husband who, in reality, had never existed.

Sighing, she wrapped her arms around herself and for just a moment allowed herself the luxury of imagining what it would be like to be held through the night in strong, male arms. She closed her eyes and tried to remember what it felt like to have male lips touching hers in a combustible kiss. Oh, how she used to love to kiss!

She snapped her eyes open, recognizing that she was indulging in a perverse game of self-torture. Those days and nights of Ken were gone, lost beneath family tragedy, lost because he had turned out to be less than half the man she'd believed him to be.

Ken was gone from her life, and there would be no more men for her. The most important things in her life were the two children sleeping in the house where she intended to make a

home.

Draining her coffee, she stood and went into the silent house. Although it was still early, she decided to go to bed. Luke had said he'd begin work on the porch early in the morning, and she was exhausted.

She entered her bedroom and stifled a moan as she saw the chaos. Since arriving here, all the unpacking had been done in the kids' rooms, the living room and kitchen. Little had been done in this room.

Boxes were everywhere, and clothes spilled out of an open suitcase on the floor. The only items she'd unpacked were the sheets that were on the bed, her alarm clock that sat on the nightstand and a colorful porcelain hummingbird that was also on the nightstand.

She sank on the edge of the bed and picked up the hummingbird, the delicate porcelain cool beneath her fingertips. It had been a birthday present two years ago, given to her by her older sister.

"You always accuse me of flitting around like a hummingbird," Loretta had said. "So, I figured I'd give this to you and whenever you look at it you can think of me."

Abby's vision blurred with tears as she set the figurine on the nightstand. She couldn't think of Loretta. She didn't have time for grief, didn't have the energy for mourning. The best thing she could do was carry on, remain strong, and that's exactly what she intended to do.

She undressed and got into her nightgown, then turned off the light and slid beneath the sheets. The moonlight poured through the window and painted silvery streaks on the bedroom walls.

The moon seemed much bigger, much brighter here in Inferno, Arizona, like a giant benign night-light chasing away the deepest darkness of the night. She hoped it would keep the bogeyman away.

As always, just before she closed her eyes, she prayed. "Please...please don't let him find us," she whispered fervently. "Please don't let Justin find us."

Justin.

Her personal bogeyman.

The man they'd been running from for the past eleven months. If he found them, then he would destroy them. If he found them, then all would be lost.

Chapter 2

For the thirty-sixth day in a row, Luke woke up stone-cold sober. He opened his eyes and waited for the familiar banging in his head to begin, anticipated the nasty stale taste in his mouth.

Then he remembered. He didn't drink anymore.

He sat on the edge of his bed and looked around. There was no denying it, without the hazy, rosy glow of an alcoholic buzz, the room where he lived in the back of the Honky Tonk looked grim.

The room was tiny and held the battle scars of a thousand previous occupants. It boasted only a single bed, a rickety nightstand and chest of drawers and its own bathroom.

He'd taken the room because he'd wanted to be off the family ranch and because most nights he worked at the Honky Tonk, playing his guitar and singing and, until a little over a month ago, drinking too much.

Until a little over a month ago he'd thought he'd had a perfect life. He'd had his music and he'd had his booze and there had been nights when he hadn't been sure what was more important to him.

It had taken a crazy deputy trying to kill his sister, Johnna, to change Luke's life.

Luke had stumbled into the scene of the almost crime and, had he not immediately beforehand downed a couple of beers, he might have realized Johnna was in trouble. But, with reflexes

too slow and a slightly foggy brain, Luke had become a victim, as well. He'd been knocked unconscious, and it had been up to somebody else to save not only Johnna, but Luke, as well.

He'd awakened in the hospital with a concussion and a firm commitment to change his life. He was twenty-nine years old, and it was time to get his life together. And part of that new commitment included no more drinking, and working hard at his carpentry business, buying time until he could leave Inferno behind forever.

But making the choice to change his life and actually doing it were two different things. There wasn't a moment of the day that went by that he didn't want a drink, had to consciously fight the seductive call of a bottle of Scotch or whiskey.

He gazed at the clock on the scarred nightstand. After seven. He'd shower, dress and get right out to the Graham place to start work. Old Walt Macullough, who owned the lumberyard, liked to get his deliveries done early, before the infamous Inferno heat peaked midday.

It wasn't until he was standing beneath a hot spray of water that he remembered the dreams he'd had the night before. Crazy dreams...erotic dreams of a dark-haired woman with sexy spring-green eyes.

He adjusted the temperature of the water to a cooler spray as his memories of the dream hiked his body temperature higher. In the dream he and Abigail had been splendidly naked and locked in an intimate embrace.

His fingers tingled with the imaginary pleasure of stroking her silky skin, tangling in her length of rich, thick hair. And in his dream her sexy, husky voice had cried out with pleasure as he'd taken complete and total possession of her.

Crazy. He shut off the water and grabbed a towel, shoving away the sensual imaginings. All the crazy dreams proved only that he'd been incredibly physically attracted to Mrs. Abigail Graham, but he certainly didn't intend to follow through on his attraction. After all, she was a married lady, and Luke had never and would never mess with any woman who was married.

But one thing was certain. Luke loved women. Maybe it was because his mother had died when giving birth to Luke's sister, Johnna. Luke had only been a year old.

He'd been raised by a parade of housekeepers, most of whom had stayed only for a month or two before being driven away by Luke's father. Adam Delaney had been a son of a bitch, and keeping household help had been a real problem.

The result was that women entranced Luke. He liked the way they smelled, the feel of their soft skin. He was fascinated by the way their minds worked, but that didn't mean he wanted to bind himself to any woman for anything remotely resembling forever.

Within minutes he was in his truck and headed for the Graham place, pleased to have a big job to keep him busy even though he would have to divide his time between the Graham house and the ranch.

Still, there was nothing Luke liked better than working with

his hands. At the family ranch he was in charge of maintenance, mending fences and outbuildings. But what he loved the most was cabinetry work, taking a piece of wood and transforming it into a piece of furniture.

Macullough had already been there, Luke discovered as he parked in front of the ramshackle Graham place. A large pile of supplies had been unloaded by one side of the house.

Before letting Abigail know he'd arrived, Luke walked to the supplies and did a mental checklist, making sure everything he needed had been delivered. In the back of his truck he'd loaded the power tools he knew he would need.

When he was finished with the inventory, he grabbed his bulky toolbox from the truck bed, then approached the front door and knocked. Abigail answered the knock wearing a pink T-shirt and jeans and a warm, inviting smile.

"Mr. Delaney."

"Good morning, and please make it Luke. I just thought I'd tell you that I was here." He tried not to focus on the sweet scent of her that seemed to waft in the air all around him.

"You weren't kidding when you said the lumberyard would probably be here early," she said as she stepped across the hole in the porch and pulled the door closed behind her. "The truck pulled up at six-thirty this morning. How about a cup of coffee before you get started?"

"No, thanks," Luke replied. "I'd like to get most of this porch torn down before the heat of the day gets too intense. Are your

kids still in bed?”

She smiled. “Not hardly. For the most part they’re on the same schedule as the sun... up at dawn and in bed at dusk. I’ve got them unloading boxes in their rooms.”

Pink was definitely her color, he silently observed. The T-shirt put the hint of roses in her cheeks and made the green of her eyes appear more intense. He couldn’t help but notice the firm thrust of her breasts against the cotton material.

He wondered where her husband was, if he’d already left for work or if it was possible he hadn’t yet joined his family in their new home. None of my business, he reminded himself firmly.

“I think probably the best thing to do is once I get this all torn down, I’ll nail your front door shut so your children don’t forget and try to exit the house this way,” he said in an attempt to focus his thoughts on the task at hand. “You said you have a back door you can use to exit and enter the house?”

“Yes, a door in the kitchen, and I think nailing this door shut is a terrific idea. As much as I like to think I’m always in control of the children, sometimes they escape my radar.” She flashed him a gorgeous smile that shot an arrow of heat directly into the pit of his stomach. “Do you have children?”

“Nope. No children, no wife. I’m just footloose and fancy-free.”

She nodded. “Well, I guess I’ll just go inside and let you get to work. Don’t hesitate to come on in if you need anything.” She took a step backward and instantly teetered on the edge of the

hole in the wood.

“Whoa,” Luke exclaimed. He reached out and grabbed her by the upper arms to steady her. Instantly she winced, and he quickly released her. “I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?” he asked, wondering if he’d used more force than he’d intended in grabbing her.

“No...no, I’m fine.” She carefully stepped over the hole and flashed him a quick smile that did nothing to reassure him. “I’ll just be inside if you need anything.” With those words she disappeared into the house.

Luke expelled a deep breath, trying not to think about the fact that her skin had been as soft, as silky, as he’d imagined in his crazy dreams the night before.

And, in that moment when his hands were on her, he’d felt an unexpected quickening of his pulse, an instantaneous surge of heat rising inside him.

She was definitely a sweet temptation, but Luke had fought against temptation before. Besides, he was certain it was because he’d dreamed about her so intimately the night before that he was slightly unsettled around her this morning. Of course, that didn’t explain what on earth had prompted him to dream about the woman.

He pulled a sledgehammer from his truck bed. A little hard physical labor, that’s all he needed. With grim determination, he set about pulling down the rotting old porch.

For the next couple of hours, Luke worked nonstop. The sun rose higher in the sky, relentless in intensity. It was just before

noon when he decided he needed a tall glass of iced water before doing another lick of work.

He walked around the house and nearly ran into Abigail, who was coming out the back door. "I wondered if I could get a glass of iced water," he said.

"Of course. I was just coming around to ask you if you'd like to eat lunch with us," she replied. "I can't offer you anything extravagant, but if you like ham and cheese sandwiches, you're welcome to eat lunch here."

"Sounds good," he agreed. "Normally, I just take a quick break and drive through someplace for a burger."

"Well, as long as you're working here, I'll be more than happy to provide your lunch."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

Together they entered the kitchen, and again Luke smelled the sweet, floral scent of her. The children stood near the table. He greeted them, but neither of them returned the greeting.

"If you'd like to wash up while I get the food on the table, the bathroom is the second door on the right down the hallway."

He nodded and left the kitchen. As he went down the hallway to the bathroom, his gaze shot into each of the rooms he passed.

The first room on the right obviously belonged to the little girl. It was decorated in shades of pink, and several dolls were on the bed. The first room on the left was the boy's room, with trucks and cars strewn about and a Kansas City Chiefs bedspread on the bed.

He stepped past the bathroom door to peek at the room at the end of the hallway. A double bed was neatly made up with crisp white sheets, but it was apparent by the stack of boxes that unpacking the children's things had taken priority over Abigail and her husband's creature comforts.

Luke liked that. There had been a time in his life when he'd desperately wished he'd been a priority in any adult's life. It was good and right that parents thought of their children first.

Aware he was out of line peeking into the room, he hurried into the bathroom. The only soap he could find was a bar in the shape of a cartoon character that smelled of bubble gum.

He quickly washed his hands and face, then returned to the kitchen where Abigail was busy pulling things out of the refrigerator and the two kids were setting the table.

His gaze swept around the kitchen. He noted the wooden cabinets looked nearly as weak and rotted as the front porch. The floor was covered with linoleum that was ripped and faded.

"As you can see, we need some work done inside, as well," she said, apparently noting where his gaze had lingered. "When Jason's foot went through the porch, getting it fixed was a priority. Sturdy cabinets are next on my list. Please, have a seat." She gestured him to the table.

"I really appreciate this, Abigail," he said.

She flashed him one of her gorgeous smiles. "Oh, please call me Abby," she said as he slid into a chair.

Abby. Yes, it suited her far better than the more formal

Abigail. Luke sat at the end of the table, and the two children silently slipped into the chairs on either side of him.

He'd never seen two kids so quiet, nor had he ever seen kids with such shadows in their eyes. He thought of the black eye Abby had sported the day before, a black eye that was less visible today. That, coupled with the unchildlike behavior of the kids, caused a knot to twist in Luke's stomach.

He knew all about child abuse. His father hadn't thought twice before backhanding, punching or kicking his kids. The Delaney children had been quiet, too. Quiet and careful, with dark shadows in their eyes.

He frowned and tried to dismiss these thoughts, aware that his own background and experience were probably coloring how he was perceiving things. Besides, thoughts of his father always triggered an unquenchable thirst for a drink of something far stronger than water.

Abby set several more items in the center of the table, then sat across from him. "Please, don't stand on ceremony. Just help yourself."

Luke complied, taking a couple slices of bread and building himself a sandwich. He added a squirt of mustard, then turned and smiled at the little girl next to him. "Jessica, you need some mustard on that?"

"She doesn't talk," Jason exclaimed. "She doesn't talk to anyone 'cept me. She won't talk to you 'cause she doesn't like you."

“Jason,” Abby reprimanded softly. Luke looked at the young boy in surprise.

“She probably doesn’t like me because she doesn’t really know me yet. But once she gets to know me, she’ll find out I’m quite lovable.” He winked at Jessica, who quickly stared at her plate.

“You know, I noticed this morning when I was checking out the lumber in the yard that there’s a big old tree in the backyard that looks like it would be perfect for a tire swing,” Luke continued.

“A tire swing?” Jason eyed him with a begrudging curiosity.

“Yeah, you know, a tire on a rope that you can climb in and swing on,” Luke explained.

Jason gazed at him for another long moment then frowned at his plate. “I don’t think we’d like that,” he finally said, but his voice lacked conviction.

“I’ll tell you what, why don’t I bring the stuff to make the swing tomorrow, then if you and Jessica want to swing on it that’s okay, and if you don’t want to, that’s okay, as well.”

“I don’t want you to go to any trouble,” Abby said, her gaze warm on him.

He shrugged. “No trouble. It will just take a few minutes to tie a tire to that tree.” He smiled at her. “I always wanted a tire swing when I was little, but my father wouldn’t let us have one.”

Once again Jason looked at him. “Is your daddy mean?” he asked.

“My daddy was the meanest man on the earth,” Luke replied

truthfully.

“No more questions, Jason. Let Mr. Delaney eat his lunch,” Abby said to the child, then turned her gaze once again to Luke. “Would you like some potato salad?”

“Sure. Sounds good.”

She half stood to pass the bowl across the table to him. As she stretched out her arm, her T-shirt sleeve rode up, exposing a livid bruise on her underarm.

That’s why she’d winced when he’d grabbed hold of her earlier, he thought. He took the bowl from her and spooned a portion on his plate, his mind racing.

A black eye, an ugly-looking bruise...was the lovely Abigail Graham being abused by her husband? The bruises, coupled with Jason asking him if his daddy was mean, caused ugly speculation to whirl inside him.

He tried to tell himself it was none of his business. He tried to tell himself to stay out of it. But the thought of some man angrily putting his hands on the delicate, fragile woman before him, or hurting the children beside him, enraged him.

He set his fork down and looked at her. “Uh...could I speak with you for a moment out in the living room?”

She gazed at him curiously, then wiped her mouth with her napkin. “Sure,” she agreed. She stood and looked at the kids. “You guys go ahead and keep eating. We’ll be right back.”

Luke allowed her to precede him into the living room. “Is something wrong?” she asked, a worried frown appearing on her

forehead as she turned to face him.

“I don’t know. You tell me.” Luke drew a deep breath, aware that he was about to invade deep into her personal territory. “I know this is really none of my business, but does your husband have a problem?” he finally blurted.

Her eyes widened in obvious surprise. “What do you mean?”

“I couldn’t help but notice that you have the evidence of a black eye and a big bruise on your arm.” Luke gazed at her intently. “What I really need to know is if you need some help.”

Abby stared at the big, handsome man before her and swallowed hard against the tears that suddenly pressed at her eyes. Help? She needed help in a thousand different ways, but certainly not in the way he meant.

“There is no husband,” she confessed. Shock swept over his features. “There’s no abusive husband, no abusive boyfriend. I’m a widow, and now it’s just the kids and me and I can be incredibly clumsy at times.” The lie tripped smoothly off her tongue but left a bitter taste in her mouth.

She wasn’t sure he believed her, but her heart expanded with warmth that he’d cared enough to ask. She offered him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “This moving business has been far more physical than I anticipated. A box fell off a shelf and hit me in the eye, and I’m not sure how I got the bruise on my arm. But we’re getting settled in enough that bumps and bruises are at an end.”

She reached out and touched his forearm, trying not to notice

the hard muscle beneath the warmth of his skin. "But thank you for asking." Self-consciously she dropped her hand.

"I just had to make sure nobody was hurting you."

Abby nodded, finding the fact that he cared far too appealing. "Nobody is hurting me, so that's that. We'd better go finish our lunch."

He nodded, and together they returned to the table. The meal was finished in relative silence, and Abby was grateful when the food was once again put away, Luke was back at work, and she could escape to her bedroom to finish unpacking.

It had been slightly disconcerting to sit at the table across from him and feel the silvery gray glow of his eyes on her. She was far more aware of him than she should be.

She pulled her bedspread from a box and opened it up to air out. The room would feel more like her own with her sunflower spread on the bed and her favorite knickknacks and perfumes on the dresser top.

She had peeked in on Jessica and Jason before coming into her room and knew they were having a pretend picnic on the floor in Jason's room. As usual, Jason was doing all the talking, but occasionally she heard a girlish giggle from Jessica, and the sound warmed her heart.

As she worked unloading the last of the boxes, she heard the sound of banging coming from the porch. For a moment she allowed her mind to visualize Luke swinging the sledgehammer. She could vividly imagine the play of the firm muscles in his

arms and across his back. Her fingers tingled as she remembered the warmth of his skin beneath her touch.

From the moment she'd told him she was a widow, she'd sensed a subtle change in him. He seemed less standoffish, smiling at her with a gleam in his eyes that made her breath catch in her chest.

She shook her head, as if to dislodge the thoughts. The last thing she could do was invite a man into any area of her life. She was living a lie, and to allow anyone in meant the possibility of danger and heartbreak.

It was nearly an hour later that she heard the sound of the back door opening and closing and knew Luke had entered the kitchen. She left her bedroom and hurried into the kitchen just in time to see him gulping a glass of water.

"Whew, it's definitely warm out there," he said.

Abby nodded, trying to keep her focus on his face. At some point he had taken off his shirt, and his broad, tanned chest shimmered with a light sheen of perspiration. The dark, springy hair that sprinkled his chest formed a valentine pattern, the faint tail disappearing into the waistband of his low-slung tight jeans.

She suddenly realized he was looking at her expectantly as if waiting for her to say something, and a flush of heat warmed her cheeks. She leaned against the table, hoping he hadn't noticed her intense perusal of his firmly muscled, gorgeous chest. "I meant to ask you, I'm going to take the kids out to dinner tonight, but we haven't been in town to really see what's there. Any suggestions

on a good place to eat?”

He set the glass on the counter and swiped a hand through his beautiful thick hair. “My personal choice is the diner on Main Street. It’s nothing fancy, but the food is good, and it’s where most everyone in town eats.”

“With two kids, I’m not in the market for fancy. Do they have chocolate shakes?”

He grinned at her, that wide, sexy grin that did amazing things to his sinfully gorgeous eyes. “Do I feel the kinship of another chocolate shake addict?”

“Not me,” she protested with a laugh. “Jason is a chocoholic. I prefer anything with strawberries.”

“Hmm, the best way to eat strawberries is lying down on a blanket beneath a big old shade tree.” His gaze seemed to hold the glint of blatant flirtation.

“And they taste best of all when somebody else is feeding them to you, rather than you eating them by yourself.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” she said, her insides trembling at the picture he’d painted with his words.

“I’ve never had anyone feed me anything.”

“That’s an oversight that will have to be addressed,” he replied. He studied her for a long moment. “You mentioned earlier that you’re a widow. How long has it been?”

There was a gentleness in his voice that made her regret the lies she was about to tell. “A little over a year. He died in a car accident.”

"I'm sorry. It must have been tough for you and the kids."

She nodded and averted her gaze from his. She didn't want to see the sympathy there, sympathy for a dead husband who had never existed. "We've managed okay on our own."

"Yeah, well, if you ever need a man around here, you know, to do any heavy lifting or whatever, don't hesitate to call me."

She looked at him again, and something in his metal-flecked eyes made her feel as if he were offering her more than strong arms to lift heavy items. Her cheeks burned with a blush as she wondered if perhaps she was reading more into his offer than he'd intended.

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

"If you really want to eat at the diner, I recommend you go around five. By six the place is packed on most evenings, but Friday night is always the worst."

She nodded, then turned and headed out the kitchen door. She drew a deep breath as she entered her room, wondering why a man she hadn't exchanged more than a hundred words with affected her so. Maybe it was because the sight of him evoked thoughts and images that had little to do with conversation.

"Jason," she said as she entered his room. "Time for a bath, buddy."

"A bath? But it's not bedtime," he protested.

"If I'm taking my best boy into town for dinner, then I want him scrubbed sparkly clean." His face screwed up for another round of protest. "And I hear the place we're going to eat has the

most super-duper chocolate shakes in the world.” The promise of his favorite drink did the trick, and he headed for the bathroom.

Within minutes Abby had Jason in the tub with Jessica waiting to bathe next. Abby had just pulled Jason from the tub and was fixing fresh water for Jessica when Luke appeared in the doorway.

“Sorry to bother you,” he said, “but I’m going to nail the front door shut, then knock off for the day.”

She quickly turned off the faucets, gestured Jessica to get in the tub, then stepped into the hallway and pulled the bathroom door closed behind her to afford the little girl her privacy.

The first thing she realized was that the hall seemed far too small. He stood close enough to her that she could smell the masculine scent of him, a mixture of fresh cologne and a whisper of hot male. The heat from his body radiated outward. “You’ll be back tomorrow?” she asked.

“Yeah, but before I leave, I wanted to talk to you for a minute about my hours here.”

She wanted to move him out of the hallway, step back enough from him that she didn’t feel so vulnerable, so overwhelmed by his presence.

“If it’s all right with you, I’ll work here each day until about three. Then I need to knock off. I work on the family ranch in the afternoons, then in the evenings I work at the Honky Tonk, a little bar on the edge of town.”

“Three jobs? You must be an overachiever.”

He laughed, a deep, rumbling sound that echoed in the pit of his stomach. “Not hardly. In fact, most people would tell you the opposite is true, that I’m just kind of drifting through life, dabbling here and there.”

“And what would be closer to the truth?” she asked curiously.

“I’m not sure. I’m still trying to figure it out,” he admitted with a wry grin. He started down the hallway toward the kitchen, and she followed.

“I’ll be back around seven in the morning,” he said as he reached the door.

“That would be fine,” she agreed.

“Then I’ll see you first thing in the morning.” With another of his beautiful smiles, he turned and left the house.

To Abby, his parting words felt like a nice promise, and that worried her. She closed the door after him and for a moment leaned against it.

What was wrong with her? Why did Luke Delaney make her feel so shaky inside, so vulnerable and needy? And why did she have the feeling that once he’d discovered she wasn’t married, he’d been subtly flirting with her?

She knew exactly what was wrong with her and knew she couldn’t trust her own perceptions. For the first time in a little over a year, she was feeling relatively safe, anticipating the beginning of a normal life...a new beginning.

For a moment, as Luke had looked at her with his flirting gray eyes, she’d been taken back in time, back to a time of innocence,

before tragedy had taken its toll.

She responded to Luke because for the first time in a very long time she felt the stir of wonderful, frightening hope. But she knew how quickly hope could be destroyed, how fast lives could shatter. She knew better than to hope for anything.

Chapter 3

Abby and the children had driven into Inferno the day they had arrived for a brief visit to the grocery store, but this was their first real foray into town.

As far as Abby was concerned, it was a delightful little town, with a main street typical of hundreds of other small towns across the United States.

When they'd been driving from Kansas City, Missouri, to Inferno, they'd gone through dozens of towns just like this one, and each time Abby had thought how nice it would be to call one of those small towns home.

The businesses were all in one-or two-story buildings, and each had a charming facade that spoke of what lay inside. The barbershop had an actual barber pole just outside its doors, and the floral shop had two barrels of wildly blooming flowers. The sidewalks were wide and shaded with small trees planted here and there.

It was just after five when she pulled her car into a parking spot directly in front of the Inferno Diner. The kids tumbled out of the back seat as Abby stepped out of the car. In the past month, the kids had grown accustomed to diners in small towns.

Stepping inside the establishment, Abby sniffed appreciatively. The air spoke of good home cooking and strong black coffee. She gestured the kids into a booth near the jukebox,

knowing they would eventually end up there, feeding coins to the brightly lit machine to hear songs they didn't know.

"I want a cheeseburger, French fries and a chocolate shake," Jason pronounced as they got seated.

Abby nodded and looked at Jessica, who sat next to her brother in the red plastic booth. "What about you, sweetheart?"

Jessica shrugged.

"How about a grilled cheese sandwich with fries and a soda?" Abby suggested, knowing it was the little girl's favorite. Jessica nodded.

"Hi folks." An older woman with gray hair and a big smile greeted them and handed Abby a menu.

"The special today is meat loaf, but I highly recommend you steer clear away from it."

Abby laughed. "Thanks for the honesty."

The waitress grinned. "The cook here does just about everything to perfection, but there's something scary about his meat loaf." She tilted her head and eyed Abby. "You just passing through, or one of the dude ranch guests, or are you new in town?" the woman asked with unabashed curiosity.

"We've just moved into the old Graham place on the edge of town," Abby replied.

"Whooee, you've sure got your work cut out for you. By the way, I'm Stephanie...Stephanie Rogers, head waitress of this fine establishment."

"Abby Graham. The local space alien was a great-uncle of

mine.”

Stephanie laughed, a loud, robust sound of one accustomed to laughing often. “Ah, honey, every family has at least one in their family. I’ve got a brother we all try not to claim because he’s nuttier than a fruitcake.” The laughter in her blue eyes faded and she looked at Abby seriously. “But that old Graham place is kind of a wreck.”

“It isn’t as bad on the inside as it looks on the outside,” Abby replied. “Besides, I’ve already hired a carpenter to work on the place...Luke Delaney. Do you know him?”

Stephanie rolled her eyes. “Honey, every woman in the four-state area knows Luke Delaney.” She leaned closer to Abby. “That man is sin walking on two legs.” Her gaze flickered to the children. “Course, if you’re married, then you’re safe.”

“I’m widowed,” Abby replied.

“Then you’d better watch yourself. That handsome devil drips charm from every pore in his body, and he can seduce a woman before she knows what’s happened.”

Stephanie used her order pad to fan her face. “There are days when I see him and wish I wasn’t so long in the tooth and could have a go at him.”

“At the moment all I want from him is a new front porch,” Abby replied with a laugh, although she was more than a little unsettled by Stephanie’s characterization of Luke.

“Famous last words,” Stephanie replied with a wry grin. “Now, what can I get for you all?”

She took their orders and small talked a moment longer, then left the booth and disappeared into the kitchen area.

“Can we have money for the jukebox?” Jason asked.

“Not until after we eat,” Abby replied. “You know the rule, eat first, play the jukebox afterward.” It was a rule she’d instigated the first time she and the kids had eaten at a place that had a jukebox.

She’d mistakenly allowed them to play songs before their meals were served and had had to fight with them to get them in their seats to eat.

Before Jason could lodge any real protest, Stephanie returned to their table with their beverages. A thick chocolate shake effectively stilled any complaint Jason might have uttered.

“Cute kids,” Stephanie said as she lingered for a moment at their table.

“Thanks, I think so,” Abby replied.

“What’s your name, cutie?” Stephanie asked Jessica.

Jessica’s gaze instantly went to her brother. “She doesn’t talk,” he explained soberly. “She doesn’t talk to anyone but me.”

“Shy, huh. My oldest boy was like that,” Stephanie said to Abby. “He’s twenty-five now and still doesn’t talk much unless he’s got something really important to say.”

“Hey, Stephanie, how about some fresh coffee over here,” a guy hollered from the counter.

“No rest for the wicked,” she said with a wink, then hurried away.

Abby took a sip of her soda and settled back in the seat. She wished it were just shyness that kept Jessica silent. But she knew it was much more than that, and it ached inside her that after a whole year Jessica still didn't trust Abby enough to speak to her, that the little girl trusted and depended solely on her brother.

Within a few minutes, Stephanie had served them their meals and they were all eating. It was only then that Abby allowed the conversation with the waitress to replay in her mind.

Sin walking on two legs. Yes, that was certainly an apt description, at least physically, of Luke Delaney. From the moment she'd seen him standing at her doorstep, with those gorgeous eyes and that drop-dead lean body with his mountain-broad shoulders, she'd been affected on a purely hormonal level.

But Stephanie's words warned Abby away from what she knew would be foolishness in any case. She could not get involved with any man, not yet...not until she knew for certain they were safe and her secrets were secure.

Even if she was in the market for a relationship with a man, the last kind of man she wanted was a handsome charmer with seduction on his mind.

If and when she decided to invite a man into her life, it would be a man who had the capacity to parent two wounded children, a man who could be a source of strength, support and love for Abby. She certainly didn't need a good-looking cowboy carpenter with a reputation of being a ladies' man.

As they ate, the diner began to fill with people, and Abby was

glad she'd taken Luke's advice and come early enough to beat what appeared to be a dinner rush in the making.

She felt the curious gazes of other diners on her and the kids and knew that probably strangers in town were a topic for gossip. It wouldn't be long and everyone would know she was Inferno's newest resident, and not just a passerby who had stopped in for a meal.

"How about some dessert?" Stephanie asked when they had finished the meal. "I've got a fresh apple pie back there that's still warm from the oven."

Abby looked at the kids, who both shook their heads. "I'll take a piece, and a cup of coffee," she said, deciding she could enjoy the pie and coffee while the kids played the jukebox.

Minutes later, the kids stood at the music maker armed with a handful of quarters, and Abby nursed her coffee and cut into the luscious-looking apple pie.

She'd just taken her first bite when Luke Delaney walked into the diner. Instantly, she felt as if the air pressure in the room subtly increased.

He paused inside the door, his long-lashed eyes scanning the room. When his gaze landed on her, a slow smile curved his lips. As he sauntered toward her, she was aware of every other woman in the room watching his progress.

He stopped at her table and smiled. "I see you got here okay." He flickered his gaze to the empty space beside her. "Mind if I join you?"

She wanted to tell him no but found herself scooting as close to the wall as possible to allow him plenty of room to sit next to her.

“Stephanie.” He raised a hand to the waitress.

“Bring me the usual.” The waitress nodded, and Luke slid into the booth next to Abby. “Where are the munchkins?” he asked.

She pointed to the jukebox near the door where the two were feeding in coins and punching buttons. “On the cross-country drive they discovered the joys of the jukebox,” she said.

“Do they know what they’re playing? I mean, can they read the titles?”

“Jason can read a little, enough to recognize all the Alan Jackson songs.”

He laughed. “At least the kid has good taste in music.”

“You like country music?” she asked, trying to ignore the clean male scent of him that seemed to wrap around her so effectively. His body warmth seeped to her even though their bodies weren’t touching.

He turned sideways so he could look at her, his thigh suddenly pressing against hers. “As far as I’m concerned, there’s no other kind of music. What about you? What’s your listening pleasure?”

She tried to focus on what he was saying and not on the sensory overload of his nearness. Despite the material of his jeans and hers, she could feel the heat of his thigh intimately against her own. “I used to enjoy old rock and roll, but when we were driving across country, there were times when we could only pick up

country stations, so I have to admit, I've grown pretty fond of it."

"You should come down to the Honky Tonk one night."

"The Honky Tonk?" She was intensely aware of speculative glances being shot their direction from the other diners, particularly the female diners.

"It's a little tavern on the north side of town. I pick a little guitar and sing there most nights."

"Really? So you're a singing carpenter cowboy rancher."

"Yeah, although I'm hoping eventually I can drop carpenter cowboy rancher from my résumé."

She looked at him in surprise. "So, you want to be a performer?" He was certainly handsome enough. She wondered if he had any talent, other than the one of seduction that Stephanie had mentioned earlier.

"In seven months' time I'm Nashville bound," he said, his eyes sparkling with good humor. "And in the meantime, I've got a front porch to build."

She returned his smile with one of her own. "Why seven months? I mean, if Nashville and fame are your dream, then why wait to chase after it?"

Abby knew all about the danger of waiting to reach for dreams. She knew that far too often if you waited too long, fate destroyed any chance of gaining the dreams you might entertain. No, fate hadn't destroyed her dreams, Justin Cahill had seen to that.

She shoved this thought aside and listened as Luke explained

to her about his father's will. "Anyway, the short of it is that if I don't want my brothers and sister to lose their inheritance, then I have to hang around here for the next seven months and put in twenty-five hours a week at the family ranch."

He grinned, that slow, lazy smile that ignited heat in the pit of her stomach. "But, with a new pretty lady in town, hanging around here isn't going to be so bad, after all."

"I already warned her about you, Luke Delaney." Stephanie placed a dinner platter before him and eyed him in mock sternness. "I told her to watch out for you, that you're a charming devil without a heart."

Luke laughed and turned to Abby. "Don't pay any attention to her. She knows the only reason I don't have a heart is because she stole it from me long ago." He turned to look at the waitress. "You know you're the only woman for me, Stephanie."

She slapped him on the shoulder with her order pad. "And you are utterly shameless. You drink too much, you don't take care of yourself and you never take anything seriously." With these words and a wry shake of her head, she turned and left their table.

"She always gives me a hard time," he explained, his features still lit with humor.

"She did warn me about you before you got here," Abby replied. "She said you were a charmer." Abby bit her bottom lip, unwilling to tell him what Stephanie had said about his powers of seduction.

Luke looked at her once again, and she wondered if he had any

idea that his eyes seduced by merely gazing at her. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“Well, no...” She felt breathless beneath the power of his bedroom eyes. “That is, unless the woman you’re charming takes you too seriously.”

He grinned. “I take my charming of women very seriously.”

She broke the eye contact with him and gazed to where the two kids stood at the jukebox, tapping their feet and wiggling their bottoms in the unself-consciousness of children.

He didn’t speak until she looked at him once again, then he smiled that sexy grin that released a million butterflies in the pit of her stomach. “I’ll tell you what, I’ll give you fair warning before I attempt to charm you, and that way you won’t be caught unprepared.”

Despite the fact that Abby felt as if she had suddenly plunged into deep waters over her head, she laughed. “Okay,” she agreed. “That sounds fair to me.” Once again she broke their eye contact and looked at the kids. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, it’s time for me to get home and get those two ready for bed.”

In actuality, it was time for her to get away from Luke Delaney’s smile, his body warmth and the heated light that shone from his eyes. He was making her feel things she hadn’t felt for a very long time.

She sighed in relief as he stood to allow her to slide out of the booth. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning,” she said.

“Bright and early,” he replied, and in his smooth, deep voice

she heard promise that had nothing to do with a new front porch.

She nodded, turned and walked to the cash register, refusing to follow her impulse to turn and look at him one last time.

The man was a definite temptation, but she knew the temptation he offered was not what she needed or wanted in her life at the moment. He could try his talent at seduction with her, but what he would eventually discover was that at this point in her life, she was absolutely, positively unseduceable.

Luke had been in a tailspin ever since learning that Abigail Graham had no husband and no boyfriend. It was as if fate had given him the thumbs-up to follow through on his initial attraction to her.

There was nothing Luke liked more than a challenge and the excitement of a new, fresh relationship. It had been several months since he'd even taken a woman on a date and months before that when he'd last been intimate with a woman.

He knew he had a reputation as a womanizer, and in truth had dated most of the single, eligible women in town. But since his father's death, Luke had not been living up to his reputation.

As he ate, he thought about the lovely Abby, whose clean, lightly floral perfume still eddied in the air around him. A year was a long time to be alone, and there had been loneliness in her eyes, a loneliness that touched something deep inside him.

He shook his head as if to dislodge this thought. He certainly wasn't lonely. His life was merely in a holding pattern until the seven months he had to spend at the ranch were over. And there

was no reason he shouldn't spend some of his holding-pattern time with a lovely woman named Abigail Graham.

By the time he'd finished his meal, the dinner rush had come and gone. Stephanie poured herself a cup of coffee and sank down across from him in the booth.

"I shouldn't even talk to you," Luke teased with an affectionate grin at Stephanie. "What are you doing maligning my good name behind my back to the new people in town?"

Stephanie snorted. "You don't need any help maligning your name. I told that pretty lady the truth, that she needs to watch out for you. You're a heartbreaker, Luke Delaney, and you've already broken half the hearts in this town."

"But I'm good friends with every single woman I've ever dated," he countered.

"And that's part of your charm, dear Luke. You somehow manage to make every woman happy they got a moment of your time even though they wanted a lifetime."

Stephanie took a sip of her coffee and shook her head with a smile. "But, mark my words, Luke. Someday you're going to mess with the wrong woman and you'll have one of those obsessive stalkers on your hands like in the movies."

Luke laughed in genuine amusement. "Ah, Stephanie, you always did have a flair for the dramatic. I'm twenty-nine years old and I'm not cut out for marriage or family life. I play fair and make sure all the women I date know that ahead of time."

Stephanie waved her hands to dismiss his statement. "If

anyone in this town wasn't cut out for marriage, it was your sister, Johnna. And look at her now, the picture of happily married bliss." Stephanie finished her coffee and stood. "All you need Luke, is one good woman to tame you and you're finished."

Luke laughed, certain that no woman was ever going to tame and domesticate him. "Trust me, Stephanie. Growing up in my family gave me all the family experience I ever want in my life."

Stephanie frowned. "You can't judge marriage and family by what your daddy did to you kids. Every man needs a good woman, Luke. And that's exactly what you need in your life." With these final words, Stephanie turned and left his booth.

Luke sipped his coffee, thinking of Stephanie's words. It had always amazed him that everyone in town seemed to know what a mean, hateful son of a bitch Adam Delaney had been as a father, but nobody had ever stepped in to help the four children who suffered at his hands.

He shoved away thoughts of his father. Thinking of Adam Delaney always caused a knot of fire to form in the pit of his stomach, a knot that only a good stiff drink could unkink. Instead, he focused on a vision of the lovely Abigail Graham.

Not only did she interest him on a physical level, but she intrigued him, as well. Along with the loneliness he'd thought he'd seen in her eyes, he'd sensed secrets. She certainly hadn't been forthcoming about where they had come from.

Back east, she'd said, then had finally said they were from Chicago. But, when he had gone past the bedrooms, he'd noticed

that Jason's room was decorated in a Kansas City Chiefs motif. Why would a kid from Chicago want items from the Kansas City football team in his room? Why not the Chicago Bears?

Luke sipped the last of his coffee and wondered if perhaps he was making too much of nothing. Maybe the kid's father had been a Chiefs fan, or perhaps he'd had a friend from the Kansas City area who had gotten him to follow the team. In any case, it didn't much matter. He didn't really care where she'd come from.

"More coffee?" Stephanie pulled him from his thoughts.

"No, thanks," he replied, and reached in his back pocket for his wallet. "I've got to get out of here. I need to get out to the ranch for a couple of hours before I head over to the Honky Tonk."

"Tomorrow is my night off, and I already told Tom that I want to go to the Honky Tonk and have a drink and listen to you croon a few tunes."

Luke grinned at the older woman. "You and Tom come in, and your first round of drinks is on me." He tossed enough money on the table to pay for his meal and a generous tip.

"Then for sure we'll be in," she agreed.

Luke left the diner, climbed into his pickup and within minutes was headed to the family ranch. He'd surprised himself by telling Abby of his plans to head to Nashville. That was something he hadn't shared with anyone, not even his siblings, who he knew probably didn't give a damn what he did or where he went. To say the Delaney heirs weren't tightly knit was an

understatement.

Still, he had a feeling he'd told Abby his plans for a reason. He was interested in her, but he certainly wasn't interested in anything long-term. By telling her that in seven months his plans were to leave Inferno and never look back, he'd subtly told her that he wasn't a man to pin a future on.

Chapter 4

“How about a glass of iced tea?” Abby asked Luke.

“Sounds great,” he agreed. “I’m ready to take a break.”

It was late afternoon, and Luke had been working on knocking down the old porch since early morning.

The first thing he had done when he arrived that morning was follow through on his promise to hang a tire swing from one of the thick branches of the tree in the backyard. While the kids had played on the swing, Abby had picked weeds and promised herself to buy a lawnmower in the near future.

She had consciously stayed away from the front of the house where Luke was working.

The heat of the afternoon had finally driven them inside. The kids were playing in their rooms, and Abby had guessed Luke would be ready for a tall drink of something cold.

As Luke put down the sledgehammer, Abby tried to keep her gaze focused everywhere but on his broad, naked chest. She handed him the glass of tea, then stepped back from him and watched as he downed half a glass in long, thirsty gulps.

Condensation from the bottom of the glass dripped onto his chest, and despite her desire to the contrary, she watched the droplet trail down his chest.

“I was hoping I’d be able to salvage some of this wood,” he said, and she was grateful for anything that took her attention

away from his physique. “But I don’t think I’m going to be able to. Most of it is beyond rotten.” He took another deep drink, then continued. “I should have the last of this pulled down in the next hour or so, then first thing tomorrow morning I’ll start on the new structure.”

“It will be nice to be able to walk out the front door and not be afraid of falling through the porch.”

“You know, I’d be glad to give you an estimate on some new kitchen cabinets. If I build them from pine, they’d be relatively inexpensive.”

“New cabinets would be wonderful,” she said thoughtfully. “I’ve been afraid to put too many canned goods in the ones that are there because they look so weak.”

“I’ll work up an estimate and you can decide if you want to go ahead then.”

“Okay,” she agreed, then sighed. “There’s so much work here that needs to be done.”

“And Rome wasn’t built in a day,” he replied with one of his killer smiles.

“You’re right. And hopefully we’ll be here a long time and eventually get the house done the way we want it.” She returned his smile with one of her own.

“Patience isn’t one of my strong suits.”

“I’ve never been one to want to wait for what I want, either,” he replied with a wicked grin that instantly drew heat into her cheeks.

He held out his empty glass to her. As she took it from him, their fingers touched and Abby felt a spark of electricity tingle in the air between them. She took another step back from him and clutched the glass tightly in her hand.

There was a silence, an uncomfortable one that she instantly worked to fill. "You mentioned last night at the diner that you had to stay here in Inferno for several months and work on your family dude ranch so your brothers and sisters wouldn't default. So, you have a big family?"

"Two brothers and one sister. And we've recently added a sister-in-law and a brother-in-law." He swiped a hand through his thick hair, and Abby tried not to notice how handsome he looked with the afternoon sun playing on his features.

He had strong, bold features. Midnight dark brows, a straight Roman nose, high cheekbones and a sensual mouth. He was once again clad in customary tight, worn blue jeans that rode low on his hips.

"What about you? Big family? Small family?" he asked.

"No other family. Just me and the kids."

A frown creased his forehead. "I might as well have no family. We aren't very close."

"Do they all live here in town?" she asked curiously.

Luke nodded. "Yeah, Matthew lives at the family homestead. Mark and his wife, April, and son live on a house Mark built on the ranch. Johnna and her husband, Jerrod, live in a house here in town." His frown deepened. "So, we're all here, but we might

as well live a million miles away from one another.”

“You don’t realize how lucky you are to have brothers and a sister,” Abby replied. “My sister died a year ago, and there isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t wish I had spent more time with her, talked to her more often.”

As always, thoughts of Loretta brought with them a dark, dangerous well of grief. If only she’d known what had been going on in Loretta’s life. If only she’d known the danger. Abby had encouraged her to make the break that had ultimately resulted in her death.

Before Abby could plunge into the dark depths of despair, she mentally shook away thoughts of the sister she missed so much. “Take my advice, Luke and don’t waste time where your family is concerned. Enjoy their company while you still have them.”

He nodded, his gaze steady, thoughtful as it lingered on her. “So, you lost your sister a year ago. That means you had two tragedies about the same time?”

“Two?” She looked at him blankly.

“Your husband and your sister.”

Warmth swept over her as she realized she’d momentarily forgotten all about the husband she’d supposedly lost. “Yes, that’s right,” she agreed hurriedly, then averted her gaze. “It’s been a long, hard year.”

He took a step toward her and reached out to grab her hand. She looked at him, surprised by the warmth, the strength of his touch. “I hope Inferno will be good to you and you’ll be able to

put all the sad times behind you and find happiness here.”

For a moment, as she gazed into his beautiful sooty eyes, she wondered if happiness was possible. She hoped so, not so much for her own sake, but for the sake of the two children who meant more to her than anything on the earth.

“Thank you,” she replied. She knew she should pull her hand away yet was reluctant to break the warmth and comfort of the contact. It had been so long since she’d felt any kind of masculine touch, even one as simple and uncomplicated as the touch of hands.

He smiled and increased the pressure of his hand on hers. “There’s nothing I’d like more than to see those pretty green eyes of yours light up with pleasure, with happiness and laughter.”

A dangerous, provocative heat rose inside her as their gazes remained locked, and she saw flickering flames in the depths of his eyes. “Are you trying to charm me, Mr. Delaney?” She forced a light laugh and pulled her hand from his, suddenly realizing his touching her was anything but simple. “Is this the beginning of the seduction that Stephanie warned me about?”

He laughed, a low, sexy rumble that was as disturbing as his touch. “Trust me, darlin’, when I start seducing you, you’ll know it and you won’t have to ask.”

His words sent a new flood of heat through her and made the mere act of breathing difficult. “Then trust me, all I really want from you, Luke, is a new front porch and maybe some new kitchen cabinets,” she replied quickly, appalled to hear her voice

slightly breathless.

Again he laughed. "It's been my experience that women rarely know what they really want."

"And from what Stephanie told me, you certainly have had plenty of experience with women." She shook her head wryly. "Three jobs and an overactive social life. I don't know how you have the strength to get up in the mornings."

Flirting. Someplace in the back of her brain she recognized that's what she was doing. Flirting with Luke Delaney.

He grinned that lazy devastating smile. "My strong suit has always been my terrific stamina."

He laughed as her cheeks grew hot and she knew a blush reddened them. "Besides, my reputation as a womanizer has been greatly exaggerated. You will discover that this town thrives on idle gossip, and I'm not sure why, but I seem to be a favorite topic of that gossip."

Abby certainly knew why. The man was not only as handsome as a pinup model, he had a kind of animal magnetism that she had a feeling could stir the hormones of a female statue.

"So, tell me about your brothers and sister," she said, suddenly desperate to change the topic, get away from the subject of seduction and gossip, neither of which she wanted or needed in her life.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

"What do they do? What are they like?" She realized she was intrigued by Luke and wondered what kind of family he came

from.

“Matthew is the oldest. He’s thirty-five and he runs the family dude ranch.” Again a frown etched across his forehead. “Matthew is distant and aloof, but he’s a good businessman. All that matters to him is the ranch. Mark is thirty-three and he’s more easygoing. He’s thoughtful and quiet or at least he was until he married April. She’s really brought him out of his shell.”

The frown disappeared. “Then there is Johnna. She’s twenty-eight, a year younger than me.” He grinned with obvious affection. “She’s stubborn and mule headed, impetuous and opinionated. She’s a lawyer who spends most of her time trying to right the wrongs of the world.”

“You’re close to her,” Abby commented.

“I’m closer to her than I am to my brothers, but there’s a lot of distance even between me and Johnna.”

“Why? I mean, why aren’t you and your siblings close?”

He grinned wryly. “What is this? Twenty questions? I don’t know the answer to that question.” His eyes shadowed slightly. “All I can tell you is that the four Delaney heirs share common parentage, but nothing else. It would take nothing short of a miracle to make us into a real family.”

Abby thought she heard a wistful tone in his voice, as if there was a part of him deep inside that longed for a family connection. It echoed inside her, touching a chord of commonality.

Still, as attractive as she found Luke Delaney, she knew she’d be a fool to somehow get the notion into her head that he was the

man who could fulfill her dream of a complete and happy family.

Dusk was falling as Luke pulled up in front of the family homestead. He hadn't intended on coming here this evening, but Matthew had called one of the infrequent family meetings, which meant something was amiss.

Luke's stomach tied itself in a knot as he got out of his truck and approached the house where he'd spent the miserable hours and days of childhood.

Family meetings had never been particularly pleasant. Most of the time Matthew called a meeting when something had to be decided, and a final decision among the four very different siblings never came easily.

Each Saturday a late midday meal was served to the guests as a welcome and get-acquainted gathering. But it was late enough in the day that there was no evidence such a gathering had taken place.

The pit fire that cooked burgers and beans had been extinguished, and the tables and chairs put away. The grounds were relatively quiet.

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