MILLS & BOON

Vintage SUPER ROMANCE

You're My Baby

LAURA ABBOT

Laura Abbot
You're My Baby

Аннотация

There's one test that a single woman doesn't want to come out positiveFor Pam Carver, trouble comes in the form of a home pregnancy kit. She wants her baby, but with the father completely out of the picture, she's all on her own. Then her friend and colleague Grant Gilbert makes her an incredible offer. Marriage for one year.Pam needs a father for her baby. Grant needs help with his estranged son. Marriage in name only is a good idea. But it isn't easy trying to fool your family and friends into thinking you're in love. It's even harder trying to convince your spouse that you're not in love–especially when you actually are.

Содержание

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 6
You’re My Baby 7
CONTENTS 8
CHAPTER ONE 9
CHAPTER TWO 34
CHAPTER THREE 53
CHAPTER FOUR 72
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 83

Dear Reader,

I'm very excited about this book, which revisits Class Act's Keystone School. When I finished Class Act (Harlequin Superromance #803) I hated to walk away and leave Pam Carver, the attractive head of the English department, without her own happily-ever-after romance.

Bless her heart, she'd been looking in all the wrong places. Sometimes, you know, love is right under our noses, and if we're very, very lucky, we get to marry our best friends. So it is for Pam.

And so it was for me. Larry was my CPA, my fellow church member and my sounding board at a difficult time in my life. In short, he was my friend. I can pinpoint the exact moment in our relationship when I looked at him and something went "zap." My "friend" had morphed into something more—much more. And nothing was ever the same. Only better!

Like Grant Gilbert, the hero of this story, Larry welcomed my family without reservations—including my three children. I don't want to spoil the ending of the book for you, but Andy, Grant's teenage son, has truths to tell about the meaning of family—truths Larry and I learned through living them.

With best wishes,

Laura Abbot

P.S. Readers' comments are important to me. Write to me at P.O. Box 2105, Eureka Springs, AR 72632 or e-mail me at LauraAbbot@msn.com. And don't forget to check out these Web

sites: www.eHarlequin.com and www.superauthors.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A Kansas City native, Laura graduated from Kansas State University with a bachelor's degree in English literature, later studying at the graduate level at the University of Central Oklahoma. She spent twenty-five years as a high school English teacher in Kansas and Oklahoma, finishing her career as the advanced placement senior English teacher and dean of Faculty at an independent college preparatory school in Oklahoma City. Along the way, she and husband Larry reared five children—her two daughters and one son, his daughter, and his orphaned nephew. In the mid-seventies, Larry and Laura discovered Beaver Lake in northwest Arkansas and began working on a plan to move there permanently. Their dream was realized in 1992 when Laura took early retirement and the couple built a home overlooking the lake near Eureka Springs, Arkansas. It was then that Laura began pursuing her own dream—nurtured since grade school—of writing fiction. She sold her first novel to Harlequin Superromance® in 1994 and has been happily writing for the line ever since. Between entertaining the couple's children and thirteen grandchildren, curling up in the hammock with a good book, and spinning stories that always end happily, Laura says life doesn't get any better.

You're My Baby
Laura Abbot

www.millsandboon.co.uk

With respect, affection and appreciation,
this book is dedicated to my editor, Laura Shin,
whose discerning eye, steady editorial hand
and understanding heart have challenged me to
reach beyond my self-imposed limitations.

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
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER ONE

YOU THOUGHT you were so careful? So smart? That things like this only happen to other people?

Pam Carver slumped against the bathroom counter. With effort, she swallowed an onslaught of nausea, then studied the white-faced, big-eyed image staring back at her from the mirror. A stranger.

She could maybe have found comfort in the familiar reflection of a thirty-plus, rosy-skinned redhead, with hazel-green eyes and laugh lines. She knew that woman. Good old Ms. Carver, popular spinster English teacher. Spinster. She'd grown to hate the prudish, spitlike quality of the word. It sounded like a woman who didn't want a man and had never known one. Certainly not in the Biblical sense.

A ragged snort escaped the stranger's mouth. Pam leaned closer, mocking the shocked reflection in the glass. "Well, think again, sweetie. Condoms aren't foolproof." Her voice, unnaturally loud, reverberated off the ceramic-tile walls. "I wonder, is 'pregnant spinster' an oxymoron?"

A fat tear oozed out of the left eye of the figure in the mirror. Pam swiveled, grabbing the cardboard remnants of the EPT kit, and in slow motion sank onto the plush bath mat.

A baby. Oh, God, a baby. Just when she'd about given up hope of ever being a mother. This was not at all the way it was

supposed to happen. She was supposed to be married to a man who adored her, who wanted children as much as she did, who would cherish this new life growing within her.

But that could never be. Not with Steven. Nor, in fairness, could she blame him. From the beginning, he'd been totally honest with her, and they'd both agreed there could be no follow-up to their summer together. She had accepted her responsibility in the matter, just as he had. He was a fine man. He would've been a fine father. A happily-ever-after love. In another time. Another place.

Yet every nerve in her body urged her to pick up the phone. To tell him. But that was not an option. All he had ever asked of her was that she respect his situation.

No, she couldn't betray his trust. His right to know about her pregnancy was far outweighed by the devastation the truth would cause.

Even if it meant her child would be fatherless.

Even if that reality left her heart in tatters.

Fumbling in the pocket of her robe, she located a crumpled tissue, wiped her nose, sniffled a few times, then shakily got to her feet.

Now the woman in the mirror cradled her abdomen, the regret and fear in her face turning to resolve. Child support wasn't the issue. She was capable of taking care of the baby, and she would. "I didn't mean for it to be this way, my sweet little one. I'm all you've got. And that'll have to do. Somehow."

Pam splashed cold water on her burning cheeks. Right now, she had no idea how she would manage, but there was no question of choices. She was keeping this child. However, she couldn't continue teaching. The parents and administrators at the private school where she taught would hardly consider an unwed mother an appropriate role model.

She wiped her face, then wandered into her bedroom, where she flopped on the bed, a forearm shielding her eyes. School was starting in less than two weeks. Was there a way she could carry on, at least for a while? Before anyone knew? She needed the time to rearrange her life. How long did it take before you could no longer conceal a pregnancy? At that point, she would resign. She had no intention of embarrassing herself or the school by forcing the issue of her employment and possibly getting involved in a discrimination suit. But what about her health insurance if she quit?

She felt a slight bounce and, looking up, welcomed Viola, her velvet-gray cat, who studied her with knowing green eyes. "Am I in a fix or what, Vee?" As if intuiting her anxiety, the cat stretched, then settled in the crook of Pam's arm, her steady purr a calming influence. Drawing a ragged breath, Pam stroked Viola, willing away panic. The problems, which at first had seemed insurmountable, could surely be handled. One by one.

Lulled by Viola's reassuring presence, Pam concentrated on the child within her. Wonderingly she caressed the flat of her stomach, imagining the microscopic being growing and

developing there even now. Boy or girl? Would the baby have her red curls? Or Steven's black hair? So many questions. So many surprises to come.

And then she felt it—the smile softening her mouth, relaxing her features. And with it, a humbling rush of gratitude.

A baby. My baby.

FORTY-NINE, FIFTY. Grant Gilbert replaced the weights in the rack and, using the tail of his T-shirt, wiped the sheen of perspiration from his face. At least he was in the school's air-conditioned weight room, not on the football field with the kids, broiling under the Texas sun, enduring the afternoon segment of their two-a-day preseason practices. At times like this, it paid to be the basketball coach.

This year, though, he had bigger problems than a winning season. No amount of sit-ups, curls or leg work had driven away the worry settling in his gut. His ex-wife Shelley demanded an answer, and to do the best by his son, Andy, Grant had to find a solution. Immediately.

In the coaches' locker room, he undressed, then stepped into the shower. Steamy water eased tension in his shoulders he knew wouldn't disappear until he figured out what he was going to do.

Although he and Shelley had been divorced for thirteen years, she still manipulated him and Andy to suit her own selfish needs. This latest caper was no exception. Already divorced from husbands two and three, she was currently in hot pursuit of number four, a wealthy businessman—read "Sugar Daddy,"

Grant thought bitterly—who, she had just learned, was spending the upcoming year on assignment in the United Arab Emirates. Of course, didn't Grant understand, she had to go along. And, "of course," it would be impractical to take Andy.

Damn right!

Emerging from the shower and toweling down, he couldn't rub away the memory of her patronizing voice. "He's fifteen. The ideal time to go to boarding school where he can begin making those all-important contacts. I've found the perfect place in New England. I suppose maybe he could come visit you out there in Texas for vacations."

For vacations? After intense, sometimes acrimonious negotiations, he'd finally convinced her that maybe, just maybe, it made better sense for Andy to come live with him while she was gone. But "sense" wasn't a concept customarily part of Shelley's modus operandi.

Heck, it had made "sense" for him to be involved all along with Andy. But Shelley was the master of excuses and evasions, moving whenever she had a new love interest, shifting Andy from school to school. Though she talked a good game about "roots," Shelley interpreted that to mean Andy should rarely have to make further moves simply to visit his father. With few exceptions, whatever contact they had resulted from Grant's traveling to Florida. During the school year, that was difficult, and even summers were restricted by coaching summer leagues, running basketball camps and taking college courses.

He'd been nuts not to appeal the custody arrangement. But who could've foreseen how difficult Shelley would be? There was a time early in their marriage when she'd seemed sweet, gentle. Even accommodating. But that was before she fixed her sights on what she chose to call "more promising opportunities."

Disgusted, he threw the towel into the laundry bin, then sauntered to his locker. Dressing slowly, he tried to analyze why being separated from Andy hurt more with every passing year. Obviously part of it was regret for what he'd missed. Firsts. Fun father-son times. A bonding that had never happened. In fact, he often thought Andy resented him, and Grant suspected Shelley preferred it that way.

Now, after weeks of wrangling, she was handing him a golden opportunity. He could have Andy for one year. At least this was a stage on the growth and development charts he ought to know something about. His son would live with him here in Fort Worth, attend Keystone School, maybe even try out for the basketball team.

If.

Grant buttoned his shirt, feeling in his pocket the weight of the letter that had arrived today. He grimaced, recalling the dispassionate legalese. Count on Shelley to require an attorney instead of handling communication about Andy like a civilized adult.

He shook his head. Typical. As usual, she'd found a way to stick in the knife, as she had later in their marriage when

the "new" had worn off. She had expected a husband to arrive home before dinner and stay there, dancing attendance on her throughout the evening. Late practices, road trips and school events were not part of her plan. In retrospect, it was a wonder the marriage had lasted even four years.

As he walked toward the exit, he heard the clatter of cleats hitting the cement floor. He backed up against the wall to let the football team thunder by. Sweat poured off their wet heads, and several grunted with each step. Two or three mustered a tired grin and a "Hey, Coach G." as they passed.

Jack Liddy, the head football coach, paused beside Grant. He sniffed the air. "Hey, Gilbert, you smell way too good." Then he grinned. "I'm still lookin' for some help with the ends. Sure you're not interested?"

Grant laid a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "You know darn well the last time I played football was in high school. You can't be that desperate."

"I'll remember that when you're scrounging for a seventh-grade basketball coach."

"Seriously, I'll be pretty tied down this year."

"How come? They giving you extra classes?"

"Nothing like that." Grant raked a hand through his still-damp hair. "My son's coming to live with me."

"Hey, that's great!"

"Maybe."

Jack frowned. "What's to doubt?"

“My ex has laid a little stipulation on the deal. I have to locate a live-in housekeeper in the next several days, or she’s sending Andy to boarding school.”

Jack slapped Grant on the back. “Surely there are some honeys who’ve been tracking a bachelor like you.” Then the coach sobered. “All kidding aside, do you have any prospects?”

“I’ve called a couple of agencies and I’m putting an ad in the paper this weekend, but I’m not optimistic. I mean, it can’t be just anybody.”

“No, of course not. Hey, I’ll talk to my wife, ask around.” He glanced over his shoulder at the assistant coaches coming in from the field, clipboards tucked under their arms.

“I’d appreciate that, Jack.” Belatedly Grant thought to ask about the prospects for the football team.

“We could win a few, if we get some breaks.”

“Like Beau Jasper’s eligibility?”

“That would sure help. He’s okay for now, but I’ve gotta have him at the end of the season, after midterms.”

“I need him for basketball, too. I hate to say it, but without him, we could be in deep trouble.”

“We’ll be set if we can just get him through Pam Carver’s senior English class.”

Grant grinned. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Pam’s a good egg. Maybe she’ll cut him some slack.”

“If anybody can pull him through, she can.” Half the boys in school were in love with Pam. Grant hoped that would be

sufficient motivation for his high-scoring forward to make a decent grade. He turned to leave. “Hey, Coach, you, too, can smell good. Have a great shower.”

Jack laughed, then joined his assistants headed for the locker room.

Grant ambled to the door, stepping out into the sultry August afternoon. The low whir of a riding mower cruising between the lower and middle schools, the splash of sprinklers and the smell of new-mowed grass had him pausing for a cleansing breath. His gaze fell on the upper school building, its red-tile roof highlighted by the angle of the sun. Late August—the calm before the storm of the school year. Although he enjoyed the more relaxed pace of summer, he was always eager for school to start.

Despite Shelley’s dim view of his calling, he couldn’t imagine doing anything else. Working with teenagers kept a guy young. Every day was different, and it was never dull.

As schools went, Keystone was special. He glanced fondly around the campus—attractive, colorful landscaping, architecturally pleasant Southwestern-style buildings, well-maintained playing fields.

Gosh, he hoped Andy would come to love it, too. But how many new schools had the poor kid attended? Could this one be any different for him?

Grant turned abruptly and walked to his car. He could skip the daydreaming. Andy’s satisfaction would be a moot point unless he could find—and afford—the cool teenager’s version of Mary

Poppins.

Hell.

PAM GRIPPED her straw purse and rounded the corner of the brick wall encircling Ginny Phillips's patio. A profusion of colorful sundresses and the babble of high-pitched laughter greeted her. She faltered, a wave of stage fright threatening her composure. Act normal, she told herself, before sweeping across the lawn to join her female colleagues at Ginny's annual back-to-school brunch.

The first to greet her was henna-haired Jessie Flanders, self-proclaimed grande dame of the faculty. "Making a big entrance, Pamela?" Heads turned at the shrill of Jessie's voice.

Pam spread her arms and struck a pose. "Hello, dahlings," she cooed, batting her eyes. Then she relaxed. "What else would you expect of the drama coach at our beloved Keystone?"

A smiling Ginny hurried toward her. "I'm so glad you're here. I was afraid you weren't coming."

"What? And miss all of this?" Pam gestured to the pool, sparkling in the morning sun, and the lavishly spread buffet table. She could hardly tell Ginny she'd been delayed by a bout of morning sickness, even though Ginny, the upper school counselor, would be more understanding of her predicament than most.

Ginny ushered her toward the beverage table. "You're way behind the rest of us. Would you prefer chardonnay or white zinfandel?"

Pam's stomach did a half-gainer. Fortunately, just beyond her hostess, she spotted Connie Campbell. "Nothing right now, thanks." She waved at Connie, who excused herself and walked toward them.

Pam embraced her closest faculty friend. "Long time no see. How was Canada?" Connie and her husband Jim, the Keystone headmaster, had been married only a short time, and the trans-Canada rail trip had been their first true vacation.

Ginny chuckled. "Don't ask if you don't really want to know. She'll give you an hour's worth of travel information."

"Listen to the woman." Connie affected sternness. "You're just jealous, Ginny, that you were stuck here in simmering Texas all summer."

"That makes two of us," Pam said.

"How was your summer session at U.T., by the way?" Connie asked.

You'd be surprised. Really surprised. "Okay. I had a so-so seminar in literary criticism, but a dynamite course in post–World War II American fiction."

Just then the caterer appeared at Ginny's elbow. "Excuse me," Ginny said. "I'm needed in the kitchen. Help yourself to the wine."

Darn. Pam had hoped she'd sidestepped the issue of drinking. Her TGIF buddies Connie and Ginny would be the first to suspect something when she turned down chardonnay. She poured herself a glass of ice water.

“No wine? You must be sick.” Connie made a show of laying her palm on Pam’s forehead.

“Maybe later. I’m really thirsty from my rush to arrive more or less on time.”

“Well, now that you’re here, let me introduce you to our new faculty members.” She leaned closer. “Is it my imagination, or do they get younger every year?”

Pam raised her eyebrows in mock horror. “Surely it couldn’t be that we’re getting older?”

Grateful to be led away from the wine and the potential for discovery, Pam circulated through the crowd. Without fail, several colleagues asked her the standard question: “Are you ready for school?” Ready? It would be miraculous if she could overcome her morning sickness each day before her first-period class.

By the time the food was served, Pam had no trouble downing the curried chicken salad, fresh fruit compote and three of the lemony poppy-seed muffins. She refused to feel guilty about her gluttony—she was eating for two, after all. Thankfully no one noticed that water remained her beverage of choice.

Jack Liddy’s very pregnant wife, Darla, sat at Pam’s table, reveling in talk of babies. “The only problem is that Jack’ll be in the middle of football season when Junior makes his appearance. Let’s hope I don’t deliver on game night.”

“Not the best planning, huh?” Carolee Simmons, the French teacher said.

Darla winked mischievously. “You have to do something in the off-season, you know.”

“Will you be teaching until the baby comes?” Pam asked, as much for herself as because of her interest in Darla.

“I’m trying to make it to the end of the first quarter, then a substitute will take over until I can return at the semester.”

Carolee, single herself, leaned forward. “Won’t it be hard to leave the baby to come back to work?”

Darla shrugged. “It’ll be awful. But what choice do I have? We’ll need the money.”

Pam pursed her lips. “Occupational hazard of educators.” She, too, would have no option but to work. Otherwise, how could she afford her condo, car, insurance and day care?

“Anyway,” Darla continued, “my doctor says I should be fine by January.”

Pam’s mouth felt dry. “Who is your doctor?”

“Belinda Ellis. She’s wonderful!”

Pam stored the name in her memory. Initially she would have to find a doctor in another part of town, one with no connections to the school—if that was possible. So Dr. Ellis was out. At least for now. Despite the Texas sun, her hands had turned to ice.

When the party broke up, Connie fell in beside Pam as they walked to their cars. “Inquiring minds want to know. Did you meet any interesting men in Austin?”

Pam knew Connie and Ginny worried about her. Each had tried sporadic matchmaking attempts, with disappointing results.

Finally she had met someone—a man she could happily have followed to the ends of the earth. And she couldn't say one word. Even to her best friend. "Interesting? They were all interesting, sexy, and, naturally, hot for li'l ole me."

"Give me a break," Connie said, calling her bluff. "No one?"

Pam opted for a half-truth. "There was one."

"And?"

"He's gone home, I've come home, and that's that."

"No letters? No scheduled visits?"

Pam shrugged. "Nope. The cookie has crumbled, as they say."

Connie laid a comforting hand on Pam's shoulder. "I'm sorry. Someday your prince will come. I just know it."

Well, he'd better hurry the hell up. Pam mustered a laugh. "Hope springs eternal. See you at the opening faculty meeting?"

"Sure thing. I've told Jim to make the headmaster's address short and sweet."

"Gee, you have that kind of influence?"

"It's amazing what the love of a good woman can accomplish."

Pam hugged Connie, then climbed into her hatch-back. Connie was, indeed, a good woman. Before she married Jim, she'd been single for many years, supporting her mother and daughter Erin. If Connie could do it, Pam reasoned, so could she. But Connie hadn't had to give up a job she loved.

With a sinking heart, Pam acknowledged that she herself faced exactly that eventuality.

GRANT PAUSED in the doorway of his sterile classroom,

looking at the blank, freshly painted walls, the student desks shoved into the corner, the newly carpeted floor. He crossed to the windows, raised the blinds, then stood, hands on his hips, studying the boxes and rolled posters piled along one wall. Time to tackle decorating his room, if you could dignify what he did by that term.

Tearing open the top box, he began stacking supplementary geometry texts in the built-in bookshelf. Next week teachers' meetings started and he didn't want to wait until the last minute to bring order to his space. Besides, he needed to be organized if Andy came. But that continued to be a big "if." So far, responses to his ads had been discouraging. Few applicants wanted to live-in, and, of those, they either demanded exorbitant wages or had personalities that never in his wildest dreams would be considered adolescent-friendly.

Savagely he attacked the next box. Shelley was pressuring him for an answer, and if he didn't find someone from the ad running this weekend… Surely she wouldn't follow through on her threat to send Andy to boarding school. Maybe, since it wasn't basketball season yet, she'd let Andy come whether or not a housekeeper was in place. Doubtless, in a matter of weeks, he could locate a suitable person.

By the time he arranged his texts between the book-ends on his desk and finished tacking up the exhibit of geometric forms on his bulletin board, his stomach was growling. Taking one last glance at the transformed classroom, he stepped into the eerily

quiet hall and locked the door behind him.

He ran down the stairs and passed the first-floor office before becoming aware of music emanating from Pam Carver's room. He'd thought he was alone in the building, but apparently not. He'd stop by, say hello, find out about her summer. Pam was one of his favorite co-workers—devoted to her students, realistic about school politics, often the voice of reason amid the cacophony of rumor and complaint and, besides that, fun to be around. Who else could have talked him into making a fool of himself annually in the faculty pep skit?

Outside her classroom Grant paused, hearing above the soft strains of classical music the muffled sounds of weeping. Her door was ajar. Slowly he eased it open. Pam sat hunched over her desk, head cradled in her arms, shoulders shaking. Sure, she taught drama, but this was way too convincing to be an act. He took a tentative step forward. "Pam, are you all right?"

Her head shot up, revealing a tear-streaked face. "G-Grant?" She grabbed a tissue from the box on her desk and hastily blotted her eyes. "I didn't know anyone else was in the building today." Her voice, usually warm and vibrant, sounded thin, and he had a sudden urge to protect her.

"I wanted to get my room set up."

"Me, too." She hiccuped, then flung an arm in the direction of the books and boxes piled haphazardly along the far wall. "The summer painting project is wreaking havoc, though. It's been years since I've had to box up my stuff."

"Is that what's upset you?"

She glanced away briefly, before turning back, a watery smile in place. "Stupid, isn't it, to let something so minor throw me."

He watched her mask of bravado slip back into place. He'd bet it would take a whole lot more than a little mess to shake Pam Carver. "I'm willing to help."

"Somehow I can't imagine you draping my bookcases with Indian shawls or putting together a montage for my bulletin board."

He pointed to a stack of cardboard leaning against a file cabinet. "Maybe not, but I can certainly assemble your Globe Theatre replica."

"You've just made me an offer I can't refuse. I never was any good at inserting tab A into slot B."

They worked quietly side by side for half an hour. Every now and then she'd stifle a sigh. Her shoulders, usually held back confidently, sagged periodically, as if she bore a huge weight. He didn't want to pry, but something was going on with her.

She finished with the bulletin board about the same time he put the flag atop the Globe. He stood and faced her. "Feeling better?"

Her eyes were too bright, her smile too brittle. "Much. I needed a little nudge, that's all." She laid a hand on his sleeve. "Sorry if I upset you."

He put an arm around her and snugged her close. "What are colleagues for, anyway? Remember, our school motto is Caring,

Character, Curiosity. This was the caring part." Then, struck by a new idea, he laughed. "And curiosity, too, I guess. Pam Carver reduced to tears? I couldn't picture it."

"If you live long enough, you see everything."

Although her tone was light, he had the disturbing sense she was making a joke of something very serious. Then he became aware he still had his arm around her waist, his hand on her hip.

She moved away at the same time he dropped his arm. "Thank you, Grant. I'm fine now. Really."

"Take care, then. See you at Tuesday's meeting?"

"Sure thing." She extended her arms, more like the old Pam, and said, "Let the games begin."

He chuckled at her final remark as he left the school. But gradually his smile faded, replaced by a sadness he couldn't identify. He had always been fond of Pam. Heck, tell the truth. He was attracted to her. But she was like a tropical bird—colorful, flamboyant, dramatic. He'd always figured she'd never go for a plodding, meticulous math teacher who just happened to be tied up several months a year with a high school basketball team.

Driving home, he couldn't shake the feeling that her brave front had been just that. A front. He didn't think she was fine. Not at all.

And he didn't like that. He wanted her to be fine.

PAM BANGED AROUND the small kitchen of her condo, fixing a salad and warming leftover corn bread for dinner. What

kind of idiot Grant must think she was! All afternoon she'd replayed the scene in her mind. Why there? Why then? To fall to pieces like some fragile Melanie Wilkes. Unthinkable.

It was the notes that had done it. She'd been rummaging in her desk drawer for the key to her filing cabinet when she'd come across them. She made a habit of saving complimentary correspondence from students and parents. Then on bad days she'd pull them out and read them to remind herself why she loved being a teacher. She'd been okay until she came to Cissy Philbin's scrawled message. Poor Cissy, who struggled to make B's and had been devastated by the death of a sibling and later by her parents' divorce.

"Dear Ms. Carver,

I couldn't have made it through high school without you. You always believed in me and demanded my best. You knew what I was going through and willed me through bad time after bad time. You wouldn't let me quit. Or be a crybaby. You made me believe that like the saying says, there can't be a rainbow without the storm. You are my rainbow. Thank you."

Now, recalling the words, Pam felt a flood of emotion similar to what she'd experienced at school. It wasn't just hormones, although they were certainly doing a number on her. When she'd read Cissy's words, she'd felt a painful void. If she had to quit teaching because of the baby, she wouldn't be there for the Cissys of the world, nor would they be there to infuse her life with purpose and meaning.

Picking up her plate, she moved to the living room couch and turned on the evening news. But she scarcely heard the newscaster. Grant, of all people. They'd worked on faculty committees together. She admired his no-nonsense approach to problems and his well-deserved popularity with the students. Several years ago she'd toyed with the idea of exploring a relationship with him. But they were very different. He was quiet; she was not. He was steady; she was mercurial. Finally she'd concluded it would be foolish to risk a valued friendship in the unlikely search for romance.

Any other time she might have found it comical to watch him sitting on the floor of her classroom, his rangy six-foot-four body hunched over the myriad components of the Globe replica. But today she had studied him intently out of the corner of her eye, noticing how his big hands worked dexterously with the tiny tabs, grateful for his understanding and concern.

After supper she settled on the couch with the book she'd stopped to purchase on her way home. What to Expect from Your Pregnancy. She'd had no idea it would be so thick, so full of information. As she read, she found herself almost unconsciously rubbing her palm back and forth across her still-flat stomach and humming along with the Phantom of the Opera CD playing in the background.

She was intently studying diagrams of the stages of fetal development when the doorbell rang. She jumped up, curious. She wasn't expecting anyone. She ran a hand through her hair,

then stuffed the book under a pillow. At the door she peered through the peephole. Grant?

She undid the chain and unlocked the dead bolt before easing the door open. He loomed above her, his eyes twinkling, his mouth quirked in a grin. “You’re probably wondering what I’m doing here, right?”

She held the door open wider, by way of welcome. “It had crossed my mind. I would think you’d had enough of me for one day.”

“Apparently not. May I come in?”

“Of course.” She ushered him inside, then pointed at the only easy chair in the room. “Have a seat. Can I get you anything? A soda? Iced tea? Sorry, but I’m out of beer.” And will be for nine months.

“A soda would be fine.” When he followed her into the kitchen, the room seemed to shrink.

She took her time at the refrigerator, bewildered. Grant Gilbert had never been to her home. Why was he here tonight? When she turned back, he was leaning over the counter, his chin propped in his hands, studying her. Maybe it was because they were at eye level, but she’d never noticed before what gentle blue eyes he had. Or how his short, wavy brown hair was silvering just a bit above his ears. Flustered, she handed him a Sprite and watched him pour it over the ice. Then with the grace of a born athlete, he moved back to the living room and eased into the armchair.

She sat back down on the sofa, then decided to get to the heart of the matter. “About this morning—”

He waved his hand in dismissal. “I’m glad I could help with the theater. Were you able to get your room finished?”

Had he deliberately misinterpreted to help her save face? “Finished? You know better than that. My room is a constant work in progress.”

“Speaking of works in progress, I’d like your advice about one of my own. That’s one reason I came over.”

One reason? Were there others? “How can I help?”

As he talked, he slowly rotated the glass between his palms, every now and then pausing to see if she was following him. The need in his eyes was apparent as he explained how much he wanted to have his son with him for the year. Pam had had no idea his ex-wife was such a bitch, nor that she had made it so difficult for Grant to be with his son. “…so I’m desperate. I’m asking everyone I know if they can recommend somebody. Anybody.”

She smiled. “Not just anybody, I hope.”

He shrugged, then grinned ruefully.

She thought for a moment. “Have you contacted area colleges? There might be an older woman going back to school who would need some extra income.”

He brightened. “I hadn’t thought of that. It’s worth a try. Finding a qualified person within my budget will be a problem.”

Like having a baby within my budget. “I can imagine.”

Although he had obviously accomplished what he came to do, he didn't seem inclined to leave. In truth, she found his presence welcome.

They sat quietly for a few moments. "Nice music," he said. "What show is that?"

She told him.

"I like show tunes, but I'm more of a jazz buff myself. Vintage Erroll Garner is about as good as it gets."

The longer they talked, the more she relaxed, even enjoyed herself. Usually all colleagues wanted to talk about was school, but Keystone hadn't been mentioned since the beginning of their conversation. She was delighted to discover he enjoyed movies as much as she did and was something of an expert on Jack Nicholson. They disagreed on whether Anthony Hopkins should make a third Hannibal Lecter appearance, but both thought Schindler's List was a work of genius.

"And all along, you probably assumed I was just a dumb jock," Grant joshed.

"No telling what you think of me. An artsy, impulsive broad, maybe?"

"Don't put words into my mouth." He stood and placed his empty glass on the kitchen divider. Then, to her surprise, he sat down next to her. Not too close, but definitely not at the other end of the sofa. "Pam, I had another reason for dropping by."

Something shifted in the vicinity of her stomach. "Oh?"

He bent one leg and stretched his arm along the back of the

couch so he could face her. “Those tears this morning? I don’t think they had much to do with a messy room.”

His sensitivity nearly did her in. She owed him some kind of answer. “I have…things going on in my life right now. Things I can’t talk about. Not yet.” She looked into his eyes. “It’s not just you. I can’t talk about them with anyone. They’re…very personal.”

“I respect that. But whatever is upsetting you, maybe I can help. You don’t have to go it alone.”

Oh, but I do. “Thank you. That means a lot.” She didn’t know what to say next, how to break the thread of intimacy his offer had woven. Fortunately she didn’t have long to worry about it. The ringing phone saved her. Quickly excusing herself, she took the call in the kitchen. It was her widowed father in West Texas, who phoned her nearly every Saturday night. She loved him for the gesture. Undoubtedly he thought his call made her feel less dateless, less lonely.

After concluding her conversation, Pam returned to the living room, surprised to find Grant standing, his hands behind his back. “That was my father. He—” She faltered, the perplexed expression on his face stopping her in her tracks. She stared at him, confused.

He took a step toward her. “I—I was looking for the TV remote. You know, to catch the ball scores.” Slowly he brought his hands in front of him. “And I found this instead.” He held up the book she’d hidden beneath the sofa pillow.

The walls whirled and his voice seemed to be coming from a great distance.

“Pam, you’re not just doing research, are you?”

There was no turning away from the question, nor from the compassion in his eyes. “No.” Helpless, she felt tears threatening once more. She gulped, then, for the first time, whispered the words aloud. “I’m pregnant.”

CHAPTER TWO

WHERE THE HELL was Ann Landers when a guy needed her? Grant stared at Pam, questions racing through his head. Carefully he set the book on the arm of the sofa and moved toward her. “That’s good news, er, isn’t it?”

She lowered her eyes, standing before him defenseless and vulnerable. “Yes,” she said quietly. “Just wonderful.”

The hitch in her voice tugged at him. “Come here.” Before he could stop to think, he had wrapped her close, cradling her head against his chest.

He held her for long minutes, feeling her shoulders tremble beneath his hand, listening to the muted sounds of her weeping. She had to be scared to death. How could this have happened? Pam was smart, savvy. She had to know where babies came from.

He scanned her living room, desperately trying to focus on something besides the feminine body pressed against him. Okay, two cats reclining on the window ledge, books piled randomly in the bookcase, a baker’s rack crowded with candles and figurines, multihued pillows everywhere and an eclectic collection of prints and pictures on her walls. Nothing matched, but it was somehow…homey. Comfortable. The same way she felt in his arms.

The faint citrus scent of her hair and the way her cheek nestled against him stirred a surprising hunger. Gilbert, don’t be a jerk.

The last thing this woman needs is you coming on to her.

He stepped back then and tilted her chin so he could look at her. “Are you okay?”

She ran her hands down his arms, then, clutching his wrists, ducked her head. “I’m sorry. Tears are stupid. They don’t accomplish a thing.” She let go, then turned away from him. “Two times in one day. That must be something of a record for you.”

“Probably, but who’s counting?”

“I promise not to make it three.”

“Sure? Third time’s the charm, you know.”

“There isn’t any charm to help with this.”

What did a guy say to that? He led her back to the couch, then wrapped a purple mohair throw around her. “Sit down and let me fix you a cup of tea. That was my mother’s solution to everything.”

“It can’t hurt. Tea’s on the top shelf of the pantry.” Almost without seeming to notice what she was doing, she picked up the baby book but didn’t open it, her fingers tracing a path around the edges of the cover.

While he waited for the water to boil, Grant paced, considering his options. Should he keep his big mouth shut? Or ask the tough questions? Like where the father was. Who he was. There had to be a rational explanation for this bombshell. He was no dummy, he’d read about the biological clock. Maybe she’d deliberately gotten pregnant. But then what about her job? Talk

about an awkward, potentially litigious situation.

The whistling kettle startled him. He was in way over his head. He hadn't a clue how to help her.

When he presented her with the steaming cup of tea, she took two dainty sips before setting it on the antique trunk that served as a coffee table. Then she gave him a wan smile. "Your mother was right."

Holding his cup and saucer carefully, he lowered himself into the easy chair. And waited. A car horn sounded outside; inside, the ticking of a wall clock created a hypnotic rhythm. The bigger cat, a black one with white spots, leaped from the window ledge and hopped into Pam's lap and curled into a ball.

"Who's your buddy?"

"This is Sebastian." She nodded toward the window. "And that's Viola. They were littermates."

Cat names had always struck him as pretentious. He was a dog man himself. Dogs had forthright names like Buster and Max. "Where'd you get those handles?"

"The bard. Viola and Sebastian are the sister and brother in Twelfth Night."

"Oh." Shakespeare. It figured. If he ever had a cat, God forbid, did that mean he should call it Euclid?

They sat in silence, slowly drinking the tea. She appeared lost in thought, but finally looked up. "I'm scared."

That was an admission he'd never have anticipated from the Pam Carver he knew. "You don't need to tell me, if—"

"It's time I talked to somebody, and it looks like you're elected."

"You can trust me, Pam."

"I do."

Her sincerity touched him. "Is there a man in the picture? Are you planning to marry?"

"No man." Then she gave a short, derisive laugh. "Obviously there was one. But marriage isn't an option."

Grant was confused by his reaction. How could he be relieved to hear that? "Does he know?"

"No. And he's not going to."

"Is that fair? Maybe he would want to be involved. Help."

"Please." Her eyes begged. "You'll have to take my word for it. I'm in this by myself. For good."

The enormity of her predicament was hard to imagine. "It'll be tough being a single mother. I'm sure you've thought of that. Have you considered…you know…?"

Her cheeks flamed. "That's not an option. I want this baby very much. This may be my only chance to become a mother. You've surely noticed I'm not getting any younger." The edge in her voice cut off any inept, glib response. "So I simply have to figure out where to go from here."

"Does anyone else know?"

"No. And I don't plan for them to until it has to come out." She drew the throw closer around her shoulders. "I'll have to resign then."

That would really be a blow for her. She was a born teacher, but schools—especially private schools—couldn't overlook what might be viewed as "immoral" behavior. And Keystone? For the second time that day, the school motto came to him. Caring, Character, Curiosity. Jim Campbell, the headmaster, was big on character, but even if he found a way to ease Pam's situation, would the trustees go for an unmarried, pregnant English department chairman? Pam was in a no-win situation. "Jeez, I suppose you're right. What then?"

She looked directly at him. "I don't know. I wish I did." She crossed her arms over her stomach, as if protecting her womb. "But I'll tell you one thing." Her voice held the old spark. "I will do whatever I must to love and support this baby."

"You've got guts." Pam had always been a fighter. She'd need to be now.

"I figure I'll be able to make it at school until Thanksgiving, at least. That should give me time to line up some other type of work."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"I'm not very far along. Except for morning sickness, I feel fine. I'll try to locate a doctor this week. One that has nothing to do with Keystone School." She reached for her cup, then took several sips. "I'm sorry to burden you with this."

He rose to his feet. "It's no burden." He picked up his cup and saucer and carried them to the kitchen divider, then returned to her. "You're brave. You'll manage." He stood awkwardly, feeling

helpless. “What about your family? Can they help?”

“Not really. My mother’s dead. My father and I are very close.” She ducked her head. “He’ll be disappointed in me at first.”

He waited.

Then she looked up. “But he’ll love this baby.”

“I’m sure he will. What about sisters? Brothers?”

“One sister. I can forget about any help from her.”

The uncharacteristic bitterness surprised him, especially in light of the bond he and his brother Brian had shared. “Why’s that?”

“We rarely see each other. I think it’s safe to say Barbara doesn’t have much use for me. She has her life in California with her dentist husband and her three children. For as long as I can remember, she’s made it clear I’m the baby sister who made her life miserable. Never mind that we’re grown-ups now. Supposedly.”

He identified with the hurt in her voice. He knew from his own father and from Shelley what rejection felt like.

She placed Sebastian gently on the floor and stood. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to be alone now.”

Every instinct said, hug her, but instead he nodded his head. “I understand.”

She accompanied him to the door. “Thank you for coming. It helps just knowing I can talk to someone if I need to.”

He hesitated in the doorway, admiring the way she stood

tall, determined, as if she could take on the world. “Call on me anytime if there’s something I can do.”

“I will.”

He studied her coppery hair, her wide hazel eyes, her full lips—as if he’d never seen them before. She was not only courageous, she was beautiful. “Good night,” he finally managed, turning to leave.

“Good night. And, Grant?”

He paused. “Yes?”

“The father is a good person. I knew what I was doing. But accidents happen.” She studied the floor and he knew she was going to say something more. Finally she raised her eyes. “But this is the last time you or anyone else will hear me refer to this precious child as an ‘accident.’”

Then she came closer, stood on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. “Thanks for being my friend. Now, go,” she said, gently nudging him in the small of his back.

He stood on her walkway long after she had closed the door. The night was warm, and above him a nearly full moon was on the rise, the stars hidden beyond the city lights. The universe was as it eternally had been, its orbits fixed.

But something—Pam—had knocked him out of his.

HOLDING THE BASKETBALL in the crook of his arm, Brady Showalter gaped toward the azure swimming pool, bordered by palm trees swaying in the Florida breeze. “Your mom’s a fox.”

Andy Gilbert shot his friend a disgusted look. “So?”

“It’s cool, that’s all. My mom, all she wears are these dumpy-looking pantsuits. And I don’t even wanna tell you about her swimsuit.”

Andy knew what Brady meant. His friend’s mother wasn’t the hottest babe he’d ever seen. Still, it was embarrassing to have your own mother parading around the pool in her bikini, kinda like she was deliberately showing off her bod for his buddies. “Gimme the ball.”

Brady bounced it to him and Andy feinted, then lofted a shot that whistled through the hoop. Diving after the rebound, he whirled and went in for a layup. “Four points!” he crowed.

“You gonna play basketball in Texas?”

Andy banged the ball off the backboard. “You gotta be kidding. Play for my father? No way in hell.” What was with Brady? He oughta know the last subject in the world Andy wanted to discuss was this freakin’ move to Fort Worth! It was bad enough he couldn’t stay here where—finally—he would’ve been eligible to try out for the varsity. But play for his dad? No way.

“You’re weird, Gilbert.” Brady stole the ball from him and darted to the basket.

Andy stood, rooted. Weird. That was the truth. His whole life was weird. Mom was running off to some stupid foreign country with Harry, the biggest dork so far of Mom’s boyfriends. Which was saying something. Harry had a gut-busting paunch, fuzzy

gray chest hair and a pinkie ring like some Mafia mobster. And he insisted on calling Andy "Sonny." Like in "Hey, Sonny, how's it goin', big guy?"

"Andy? You wanna play or not?" Brady held the ball in front of his chest, waiting to pass off.

"Nah, I'm going inside. Mom's been on my case. I gotta start organizing my stuff."

"For the move, you mean?"

"Yeah. So I'll see you later."

"Here." Brady tossed him the ball. "Call me if you wanna go with the guys to crash Liz's slumber party."

"Okay." Andy dribbled angrily along the sidewalk to the back door of the house—the third one he'd lived in in two years. What was the point of going with Brady tonight? He'd never see any of these kids again after next week. Oh, no. He had to go live with his dad, Coach Cheeseball of Keystone School. The father who'd walked out when he was three.

What did Dad know about him, really? Maybe he'd squeezed in some visits between teaching, coaching and running basketball camps, but it wasn't like they ever spent any length of time together. Dad had never once made it to one of his basketball games.

His mom kept telling him just to forget about it. "He's devoted to that school, Andy. You have to understand. Everything else comes second. Maybe it's better this way. Just you and me, sweetie." Yeah, you and me and whatever dickhead was after

Mom. He didn't want to go to the friggin' United Arab Emirates and he sure as hell didn't want to go to Fort Worth. But did he have a choice? No, he was just the kid. The victim.

He slammed the back door on his way to his room. Divorce sucked.

GRANT USHERED the smilingly officious woman out the front door, closed it and sagged against it, the headache he'd had all day continuing to play racquetball against his temples. How many applicants was this? Seven? Two who spoke minimal English, one who smoked like a chimney and had insisted she be allowed to bring her bulldog with her, two who claimed they'd had no idea he actually expected them to stay over the weekends, and one—the only real possibility—who wouldn't be available until at least November.

He walked toward the kitchen, wiping his palms on his pants, aware of a buzzing in his ears and an uncomfortable shift in his stomach. He was running out of ideas, and he had to let Shelley know something by Friday. Before the upcoming Labor Day weekend. Because, if all went well, Andy would arrive Labor Day evening. And school started the day after.

But all wasn't going well. He'd interviewed everyone who'd applied through the agency or the newspaper ad. Texas Christian University and U.T. at Arlington had both been dry holes. So where did that leave him?

Desperate.

He reached in one of the cupboards and pulled out the aspirin

bottle, shook out two tablets and chased them with a glass of water. He had so much riding on this year with Andy. Although he knew he couldn't make up for all the time he'd missed, he hoped to God they could build their relationship. The boy needed a family. Stability.

A family. It had all been so promising in the beginning. Sure, he and Shelley had been young and naive, but when Andy was born, he'd been certain they could raise a fine son, have more children. Live happily ever after.

But that hadn't happened. He could never please Shelley. And Andy, poor kid, had been the one who'd suffered most. Damn.

Grant had to do something. He couldn't let this opportunity pass him by.

A family. More than anything, that's what Andy needed.

Prickles cascaded down Grant's spine. A hammering sensation reverberated in his chest. No. It was a crazy idea.

Lunacy.

Grant raked both hands through his hair. But if…?

Pros and cons rocketed through his brain. He shook his head. "Crazy" didn't even begin to get it.

Somewhere outside a neighbor's dog barked. The air-conditioner compressor cranked on. But Grant didn't move. Maybe, just maybe, it could work.

He turned and grabbed his car keys from the counter and, before he could reconsider, strode toward the garage.

Hell, what did he have to lose?

PAM SAT on her living room floor, the multiple pages of her senior English syllabus spread all around her. Collating was hard work when Viola and Sebastian insisted on regarding the papers as playthings. Finally she'd had to close the cats in the utility room. She compiled one complete set, tamped it on the coffee table, then stapled it. As she gathered the next sheets, she deliberately avoided looking at the headings, especially those for second semester. It hurt too much to realize that someone else would be teaching the Romantic poets, Thomas Hardy and Wilfred Owen.

Sorting and stapling, she mentally reviewed her search through the Sunday want ads. There were openings for secretaries, of course, and receptionists. She'd thought about real estate, but what would she live on while she took the licensing course and established her clientele? College teaching might be a possibility, but openings were scarce.

She sighed. Tomorrow teachers' meetings started. And after that when would she have time to follow up on job opportunities? She'd read in the pregnancy book that the lethargy she was experiencing was common in the first trimester. How ironic that when she most needed her energy, she was so bummed out.

She scooped up the collated syllabi and got to her feet, feeling oddly top-heavy. Eventually she'd have to tell her father she was pregnant. Although he might not approve, she knew he'd stand by her. That's just the way he was. She smiled fondly. He'd be the greatest grandpa. Soft-spoken Will Carver had a heart as big

as the West Texas skies.

In fact, it would be far easier to tell him than her sister, twelve years older than she and impossibly narrow-minded and sanctimonious.

Barbara, who'd always blamed her for their mother's death. No doubt her sister had suffered a devastating loss at an impressionable age. But Pam had never understood how she could continue to hold an infant responsible for the difficult delivery, the hemorrhage, the loss. Barbara had, though, apparently steeling herself against any show of affection for her baby sister. Finally Pam had had to make up her mind not to let her sister's indifference matter. But it still hurt. Big time.

Overwhelmed with helplessness, Pam set the syllabi on the counter. She'd never know the comfort of a mother's love and advice during this pregnancy. Or a sister's.

Maybe it would be a blessing when her condition became known. She hated hiding things. Perhaps from her friends would come the support Barbara couldn't give. Above all, Pam didn't want the baby to suffer—not from lack of affection and certainly not from stigma. Whatever it took, she'd protect this child.

She liberated the cats from the utility room, then changed out of her jeans into her pajamas. She wanted to get to bed early. She'd need all her strength for the teachers' meetings tomorrow—and for the days ahead.

Curling up on the sofa with a copy of the English lit text, she yawned as she reread—as she did each fall—the introduction to

the first unit of study. Keeping her eyes open was a challenge, and the book slid out of her lap.

When the doorbell rang, she reared up, looking around dazedly. What? Who? Had she fallen asleep? The bell pealed again.

She tiptoed to the door, amazed to find Grant Gilbert standing outside. Again? She reached for the robe lying on the back of the sofa and, glancing in the hall mirror to be sure she was presentable, opened the door.

Whatever Grant had intended to say had been lost apparently. "Oh. I…I'm sorry. You were in bed? I'd better leave."

She checked her watch. It was only eight-fifteen. "I was planning an early evening, but not this early. Please come in."

He hesitated. "You're sure? I don't want to intrude. I should've called first."

She hid a smile. It amused her to see the normally self-possessed Grant flustered. She resisted the impulse to take his face between her hands and tell him it was all right. "Please. Come in."

When he stepped across the threshold, Viola emerged from under the couch and twined herself between his feet, purring audibly. The look on his face was priceless. Pam chuckled. "You're not much of a cat lover?"

"Does that make me a bad person?" His features relaxed into a sheepish grin.

"Not exactly. But you'll have to demonstrate other redeeming

qualities."

He studied Viola, who refused to budge. "I would if I could move."

Scooping up Viola and cuddling her, Pam settled cross-legged into the armchair. "There. You're free. Have a seat and tell me what brings you out on D-Day eve."

"D-Day?" He plopped onto the sofa. "The invasion doesn't really start until next Tuesday when the students show up."

"Okay, then. D-Day minus seven." Despite the bantering, he seemed uncomfortable, crossing and recrossing his legs, then stretching them out in front of him, his arms spread-eagled along the back of the couch.

"Did you get to the doctor?"

"Not yet, but I will. Soon."

"It's important to take care of yourself."

For some reason, he seemed nervous, plucking the sofa fabric between his thumb and index finger. Surely he hadn't come over merely to inquire about her health. "How's the interviewing coming?"

"You don't want to know. 'Disaster' about sums it up. Nannies expect babies, not a hormone-driven fifteen-year-old."

She leaned forward, clutching her knees. "So what are you going to do?"

"Throw myself on Shelley's mercy, I guess. Unless…" He shifted his weight and turned to look directly at her.

"Unless what?"

“I don’t quite know how to suggest this.”

“Spit it out, that’s how.”

He rose to his feet. “Nah, it’s a crazy idea. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

She went to him and guided him back to the sofa, then settled beside him. “Get it off your chest, Gilbert.”

“I didn’t want to do it like this.” He looked miserable.

“Do what?”

He lifted her hand, studying her fingers, then said in a hoarse voice, “Propose.”

Her ears echoed with the word—a preposterous word. Propose? “Come again?” She leaned forward to be sure she had heard correctly.

“I should get on my knees, present you with a rose or something,” he went on lamely. “Isn’t that how it’s done?”

She held up her hand, as if asking for a time-out. “Wait a minute. Are you actually suggesting we get married?”

“I told you it was a crazy idea.” His shoulders slumped. “But I thought maybe we could work out some sort of arrangement. You need a father for your baby, I need a housekeeper. I know it wouldn’t be easy, but…”

Chaotic thoughts whirled in Pam’s head. “Marriage? That’s a pretty extreme solution.”

“It was just a thought.”

For one idiotic moment Pam actually considered the idea. “Why would you be willing to marry me?”

"You'd be a great influence on Andy. Not a housekeeper, really. But Shelley would be off my case. Besides, if we were married, you could keep your job and you'd have a name for your baby's birth certificate."

She sat speechless, skeptical, but helpless to ignore the benefits of his idea. Marriage was sacred. It was about much more than mutual convenience.

"We're friends," he continued.

"That's a start," she conceded.

"I'm suggesting a kind of open-ended arrangement, but it would help me out if we could agree to live together for at least a year. After that, Andy'll go back to his mother. So, come September, we can terminate our formal relationship. You know, we can—"

"Divorce?"

"Yes."

"I don't know, Grant. It's a drastic step." Just then, he put his arm around her shoulder. The embrace made her feel warm, protected—and unexpectedly fluttery, like when she was in junior high and the boy she had had a crush on smiled at her.

"It would be what we make of it."

She looked up into his eyes, so serious yet hopeful. "Even if I were to entertain the notion, how would we ever carry it off?"

"You're the drama teacher. The imaginative one. Surely we could think of something." He massaged the sore spot between her shoulders as he went on speaking. "Somehow we'd have to

convince everyone at school that we're so in love we acted on impulse."

"What do you mean?

"It would make sense for us to be married this weekend. Before school starts. Before Andy comes. We could pass it off as a whirlwind courtship."

"But…but…"

"You're right, they'd suspect. It's not like we have a dating history." His hand stilled on her back.

"Weren't you here in town all summer?" She couldn't help herself. She was actually playing out the scenario in her mind.

"No. I attended a three-week coaches' clinic in Austin the end of July and the beginning of August."

Pam studied the ceiling, wondering why fate was playing into their hands when she desperately needed a reason to say no. "I was there, too," she said quietly.

"In Austin?"

"For summer school."

He smiled for the first time since he'd arrived on her doorstep. "Do you think we might have fallen in love there?"

Her heart thudded. "It's possible," she found herself whispering.

"I don't want you to think I'm using you. I would never do that. I would genuinely welcome your baby for whatever time we're together. In fact, if the kid needs a father—" He stopped as if he'd realized he was presuming too much. "I mean, well, my

name would be on the birth certificate."

Pam studied his face—the plane of his cheeks, the set of his mouth, the depth in his eyes. Implicitly she knew he would never hurt her or her baby. Outlandish as it was, his offer was tempting. A momentary panic fluttered in her stomach. She needed time. "You've given me a lot to consider."

He smiled. "Then you're not rejecting the proposal outright?"

"I should." She took a deep breath. "But I can't."

"If we're to pull this off, we don't have much time."

"I know."

"Tomorrow evening, then?"

Twenty-four hours to make a life-altering decision? Impossible. "Okay."

He nodded thoughtfully, then excused himself. She trailed him to the door, her emotions in turmoil. Before leaving, he paused to say one last thing. "I would take good care of you, Pam." Then he was gone.

She wandered back to the sofa, pulling the throw around her as a shield against all the doubts, anxieties, questions.

She had some serious thinking to do. Fast.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ONCOMING HEADLIGHTS, the flashing neon of fast-food joints, the intricacies of traffic—none of it penetrated. Grant drove more by instinct than conscious action. Had he made an utter mess of things? What had seemed like a reasonable, if somewhat far-out suggestion an hour ago now could be categorized as sheer idiocy. Although he'd wanted to help Pam, too, she had to interpret his proposal as self-serving. And it was.

But not entirely for the obvious reasons.

The idea appealed to him on another level, one he wasn't yet ready to put into words. He'd dated lots of women since his divorce, one or two rather seriously. But none had been as fascinating to him as Pam, who embraced life and didn't give a darn what other people thought.

Turning onto his street, he tried viewing his neighborhood as Pam might. An older section of town with taller trees, these few blocks were in the process of making a comeback. Most of the houses, like his two-story, had been rehabbed by young professionals interested in preservation and renovation. A few, though, bore signs of neglect—fading paint, overgrown yards, seedy porch furniture. Would she be willing to move into his home? He hadn't even mentioned that restriction, but Andy needed the yard and neighborhood, not a cramped condominium. And what about the sleeping arrangements? Swerving at the last

minute to avoid a neighbor kid's bike abandoned in the gutter, he pulled into his driveway.

Sleeping arrangements? A sudden image of Pam's smooth, rosy-hued skin and full breasts unnerved him. He was a red-blooded male, for Pete's sake. Could he withstand the temptation? There was a vast difference between being a husband in name only and the real McCoy.

He parked the car and sat brooding. Was he nuts? He was acting as if this was a done deal when, in fact, Pam had to be wondering if he'd lost his mind. Heck, he was wondering that himself.

Well, the die was cast. He walked toward the house, experiencing the same kind of jitters he felt before a crucial game. While he was still unlocking the back door, he heard the phone. He caught it on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for over an hour."

Typical Shelley, always diving right in. No pleasantries. "I'm home now." Darned if his whereabouts were any of her business. Especially tonight.

"We need to talk about Andy. Are we all set?"

"I think so." He took a deep breath. "But I may have a delay on this end."

"Delay?" With her emphasis, she managed to convey both incredulity and exasperation. "What delay?"

"I'll have someone, but she may not be in residence right when

Andy comes."

"We have an agreement, you know."

"I know, but surely a few days won't matter. It's important that Andy begin school with the others. Basketball practice for me doesn't start until mid-October, so I'll be around to supervise him."

"Grant, don't you be pulling a fast one."

Ordinarily he'd resent the hell out of that remark, but is that what he was doing? Pulling a fast one? "Like you, Shelley, I have Andy's best interests at heart."

"I certainly hope so." He could hear her long fingernails rat-a-tatting on the receiver. "All right, then. But as soon as you employ a housekeeper, I expect you to give me and my attorney the particulars—her name, social security number, and so on."

For the first time since Grant had entertained the wild hope that Pam would accept his offer, he had an admittedly unworthy thought. He'd sacrifice a first-place finish in the prep league to see Shelley's face when he told her his housekeeper just happened to be his wife. "I'll be in touch." He pulled a kitchen stool close and sat down. "Is Andy there? Could I speak to him?"

He waited for what seemed a long time while Shelley went to find their son. When Andy finally picked up, Grant could hear the frantic beat of a rap tune in the background. "Andy?"

"Yeah."

"It's Dad. How're you doing, buddy?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Looking forward to the move?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm jumping through hoops."

So that's how it was. "It's gotta be tough, leaving your friends and all."

Nothing.

"I think you'll like Keystone, once you get used to it. I'm really looking forward to having you live with me this year."

"Well, I have to stay somewhere."

Like Fort Worth was the last alternative. "I'm glad that 'somewhere' is with me."

"Whatever."

Andy wasn't going to let his father slip easily into his life. Hopefully things would be better when they could communicate face-to-face. Grant had dealt with surly, unhappy kids before, but the challenge was different when it was your own son. Could he rise to it? He had to. He might never have another chance. They talked then about the arrangements for meeting at the airport. Finally there didn't seem to be anything further to say. "Good night, son."

"See ya."

Grant hung up. Pam had to say yes. For so many reasons. Not the least of which was how lonely and helpless he felt.

TUESDAY MORNING the Student Council officers, the boys dressed in crisp khakis and sport shirts and the girls in sleeveless sundresses, greeted the teachers as they slowly filtered into the cafeteria for the coffee-and-doughnut reception

preceding the kickoff faculty meeting. Pam stopped to chat with Brittany Thibault, the StuCo secretary, who had been in her junior English class last year.

"Can you believe it?" The girl gestured to the other officers. "We're actually seniors."

Pam smiled. "Yes, I can believe it. The faculty's expecting great things from you."

"We won't let you down."

"Good. I'm counting on a nice, easy year." At least at school. It was a cinch nothing else in her life would qualify as easy.

Connie caught up with her at the food line. "You're in luck, Pam. They've got your gooey doughnuts with those disgusting sprinkles," she said, reaching for a maple stick.

Pam eyed her favorite confection and realized that the nauseating whiff of freshly brewed coffee was up-ending her stomach. "I've eaten, so I'll settle for an apple." She plucked the piece of fruit from a tray and bypassed the coffee.

Connie stirred a packet of sugar substitute into her own coffee. "What's up with you, caffeine addict?"

Pam waved her fingers airily. "Didn't I tell you? I'm on a health kick. All those veggie, whole-grain restaurants in Austin convinced me." Surely that inspired explanation would satisfy Connie, because nothing right now sounded more purely revolting than black coffee.

"Gee, we'll have to be careful in the future about letting you out without a keeper. No coffee? That's practically sacrilege."

Pam chomped down on the apple. “But think how healthy I’ll be.”

After ten minutes of chitchat, Jim Campbell stepped to the microphone and asked everyone to take a seat. Out of the corner of her eye Pam saw Grant enter with a group of coaches. Why had she never noticed him before? Really noticed. He was by far the best-looking. He was the same tall, attractive, loose-limbed man he’d always been, but this morning she reacted to him in an entirely different and disturbing way. A physical way.

Before she could process that reaction, Jim Campbell began his opening remarks. He was a good speaker, mixing humor with motivational anecdotes. But today she couldn’t concentrate on a word he was saying. A single thought kept drumming in her brain. Grant Gilbert was willing to marry her.

Looking around the room at her colleagues and the self-important Student Council officers, she was moved by a wave of love, nostalgia and regret that tripped her breath. How could she leave all of this?

But people don’t get married to fulfill a bargain. She’d lain awake until the wee hours of the morning considering what was best for her child. If Grant was willing to give the baby his name, how could she refuse? Yet the logistics were overwhelming. How could they live together with Andy? Convince their friends and colleagues that they’d had a mad summer romance culminating in an elopement? And then carry on the charade every day for a year under intense scrutiny? She was a good actress, but this

was an impossible role.

She studied Grant's profile. And what about him? He was candor personified. Such duplicity wasn't in his nature. They'd be discovered. And never mind that Andy sounded like anything but the ideal teenager. She wasn't afraid of that, exactly, but he was a big unknown in the equation.

No, it was too complicated, too devious, too desperate.

Then she thought about the tiny person growing in her womb. Who was she kidding? Was there such a thing as "too desperate"?

GRANT COULDN'T HELP HIMSELF. The first thing he did when he entered the cafeteria was scope out the room for Pam. She was sitting next to Connie Campbell, her face animated. From his vantage point, no one would guess Pam was weighed down by vital decisions.

Grant moved toward an empty row of seats near the podium. Just in time. Jim Campbell had begun his address—the usual welcomes and platitudes about having a great year—but Grant had difficulty concentrating. All he could think about was his offer to Pam. Had expediency overwhelmed reason? Had he crossed some line between right and wrong?

Finally Jim's words penetrated. "…and so I urge you to give equal attention—or more—to the kids in your classes who, let's face it, try your patience. There's an old saying, 'Children need love most when they seem not to deserve it.' It's easy to single out and enjoy the friendly, cooperative, motivated youngster. But as teachers, we have to go further. The boys and girls who

need us most are often least capable of reaching out. They feel unappreciated, alienated, lonely. So here's my challenge to you for the coming year. Reach out to your students—all of them—so not one leaves us at the end of the day feeling ignored or unworthy."

Grant shifted uncomfortably. Jim's remarks were hitting way too close to home. Parents could heed his words, as well. Is that how Andy felt? Alienated? Unappreciated? Would one year be enough to make a difference in their relationship?

He turned slightly in his chair to glance at Pam. She was staring at her lap, her shiny hair obscuring her face. Was it fair to burden her with his problems? Marriage was a huge step. Was he trying to kill a wasp with an atom bomb? Beside him Jack Liddy coughed. Sitting here, surrounded by his co-workers and friends, Grant felt truly crummy. How could he ever have entertained the idea of deceiving so many who trusted him? Sure, he wanted to help Pam. No infant deserved to come into the world with the label "illegitimate." But he'd insinuated his own situation with Andy into her life. That wasn't fair.

With a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, he made a decision. His "solution" sucked. They'd have to find another way.

The meeting broke up shortly, and he managed to locate Pam in the hallway on her way to a department meeting. He fell in beside her. "Could we meet for dinner tonight?" Up close, he noticed the dark shadows under her eyes, the uncharacteristic paleness of her complexion. He felt like a cad. His proposition

had probably led to a sleepless night for her, as it had for him.

She continued walking, looking straight ahead. “If we make it early.”

“How’s six? I’ll pick you up. Maybe I’ll show off my barbecue skills.” Home would be good. They certainly didn’t need to have their discussion in a public venue.

She paused outside her classroom and looked up at him. “Okay. We do need to get some things straight.”

He was drawn into the amber depths of her eyes and realized belatedly that he needed to say something. “Yes, we do. I’m afraid—”

“Is this where the English department meeting is?” A young man who looked scarcely old enough to shave paused in the doorway. “I’m Randy Selves, the new journalism teacher.”

“Yes, please go on in.” Pam shrugged apologetically. “Sorry, Grant, but I need—”

“No problem. See you tonight.” He watched her adopt a professional face and turn to address her department members.

He headed down the corridor toward the math meeting, for once not caring that he’d be late. Pam deserved the best. A man who would love and honor her.

His proposal had been ill-conceived. Unworthy of her. But at least he’d figured that out before he made a huge mistake.

GRANT HAD BEEN ten minutes late to pick her up, but that had suited Pam fine. She’d laid out three different outfits, but none of them worked. They were too frilly or too loud or

too…something. Then her hair decided to have a mind of its own. Finally in desperation, she'd pulled on purple crinkle-cloth slacks and the matching boat-necked caftan top, knotted her hair on top of her head, put in big gold hoop earrings and called it good. All the while, though, she'd wondered why she was going to such trouble. After all, Grant saw her every day at school. What difference did it make how she looked tonight?

Her attempts at small talk in the car had gone nowhere. He had seemed unusually preoccupied, though that was understandable given the nature of the serious conversation looming ahead of them.

"Here it is. My neighborhood." He glanced at her, apparently expecting some sort of reaction.

"I love it when people rehab these beautiful older areas. There's much more individuality and artistic expression in these homes. I've never been a cookie-cutter subdivision kind of person. I bought my condo because it was the one thing close to school I could afford."

"I needed a yard for the rare occasions when Andy visits. Although I had to do a lot of painting and refinishing, the basic structure of the house is sound." He slowed in front of a two-story brick home with a full front porch and a detached garage. "Here we are."

Tall trees shaded the yard and a hardy arborvitae hedge obscured the foundation. He pulled in the driveway beside the kitchen door.

“Aha! I knew it. There it is.” She pointed toward the backyard, half of which was devoted to a large concrete patio with a basketball hoop at the far end.

He chuckled. “What’d you expect? This way, when I miss a shot, I’m not visible from the street.”

“You? Miss a shot?” She poked him playfully. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

He ushered her to a chaise longue near the grill and excused himself. When he returned, he carried a glass of lemonade for her and a beer for himself. “I guess you’re off alcohol now?”

“Yes, thanks. That’s thoughtful of you.” She didn’t have the heart to tell him that citrus ate at her stomach lining.

He busied himself at the grill, while she studied the yard. It could do with a feminine touch. No flowers had sprouted here in a long time and the patio furniture was rusty and mismatched. She studied the lawn, trying to visualize a sandbox or a swing set. It was odd that he hadn’t invited her inside. Maybe that would come later.

When, at last, he finished swabbing the chicken pieces with a lemony sauce that smelled wonderful, he pulled up a chair at right angles to her and sat down.

She smiled. “All set?”

“For now. I hope you don’t mind not going out to a restaurant.” He folded his hands, nervously circling his thumbs.

“We can talk better here.”

“That’s what I figured.” He drew himself upright. “I’ve been

doing a lot of thinking—"

"Me, too."

"I owe you an apology."

"What on earth for?"

He placed his hands palms-down on his thighs. "For assuming you would welcome my crazy idea. You must think I'm about as self-centered as they come."

The lemonade soured in her throat. "Wait. What are you trying to say?"

"This isn't a business proposition. You need a real family. Not—what do they call it—a marriage of convenience."

Pam could literally feel the color draining from her face. "Are you reneging?"

He leaned forward, his expression anguished. "I would never do that. It's just that…I took advantage of your…position."

"And you don't think my marrying you would take advantage of yours?"

"Jeez, Pam, I never should have mentioned it. Logically, I suppose, it made sense, but marriage has to be about more than what's good for Andy, what's good for the baby. It would need to be about us. Otherwise, we could never pull it off."

"Are you afraid?"

"Of course I am. Aren't you?"

"Is that why you're calling this off?"

His jaw dropped. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

She closed her eyes briefly, then looked straight into his. "I'm

saying yes, I'll marry you."

"But—"

She swung her legs to the ground to face him. "It can be about us. It can be about two friends who have mutual respect for each other. Love may be an overrated emotion. I can't speak for you, but I've never had much luck with it. Surely we can reach an understanding, somehow compromise to make this work." She hesitated. "Unless you've totally changed your mind."

"You're certain about this?"

"My baby needs a name. And I can't think of a better one than yours. But I do think it would be prudent to put our understanding in writing. Just so we're clear."

"You mean some kind of contract?"

"Exactly."

He took hold of her hands, then rose to his feet, pulling her up, too. He took a deep breath, then said in a husky voice, "I'll do my best to make this arrangement as comfortable for you as I can."

They stood motionless, their eyes locked. Pam's face was flushed with an emotion she couldn't name. It was beyond gratitude, beyond fear. Finally she broke the spell. "Looks like we have an agreement to formalize and a wedding to plan, Mr. Gilbert."

PAM AMAZED HIM. Calmly, confidently, she'd agreed to marry him. With a tectonic shift, his plan had lurched from the theoretical to the actual. Detecting the odor of seared meat, he edged toward the grill. "We'll think better on full stomachs."

Grateful for the excuse to turn his back, he took the chicken pieces off the fire, all the time trying to master his confusing emotions—relief mixed with panic, excitement tempered by anxiety. And fear. Not of the day-to-day stuff—that he could handle. But fear that the unexpected elation welling within him would be short-lived. He'd promised not to hurt her. But, he suddenly realized, he'd given her the power to hurt him, if he let himself care—and it was going to be almost impossible not to.

Over dinner they agreed to obtain the marriage license in another county the next morning and be quietly married on Saturday. Further, she consented to live in his home. Naturally they would maintain separate bank accounts and, for legal purposes, Pam would retain her maiden name. Besides, all the school rosters would already list her as Carver. That way, she said, it would be easier when…

But he noticed she didn't complete the sentence.

Then, clearing his throat nervously, he said, "I guess I need to reassure you about something. This is a business deal. I wouldn't expect we'd, uh, have—"

"Sex." She completed his thought. "Of course not. That never crossed my mind. We're just friends, and friends we'll remain."

With all the details committed to writing, they dug into the meal with gusto. Pam even apologized for her hearty appetite. "The little guy needs to grow," Grant suggested.

"Little guy?" She looked up with a smile that turned him to mush. "It could be a girl, you know."

"Do you have a preference?"

"Healthy. That's my preference."

He couldn't get over it. Here they sat, talking babies, as if it was the most natural of conversation topics. He hadn't discussed babies, not really, since Shelley was pregnant with Andy. And to tell the truth, for all his brave front, the thought of Pam's pregnancy terrified him. What if something went wrong?

"How about the house tour? We'll have to figure out where to put your stuff and where you'll…sleep." Leading the way toward the house, he cursed under his breath. The word "sleep" echoed and reechoed with each step he took. And the visuals were equally disturbing.

Pam stopped at the kitchen stoop. "That's a problem, isn't it?" She furrowed her brow. "Unless you plan to tell Andy about our little charade."

He groaned. "No, that can't happen. Everybody, and I mean everybody, has to believe we're for real, especially for you and the baby."

"Then we'll simply have to work something out."

He held open the back door and she stepped into the small kitchen and stood, speechless, studying the aqua sink and countertop, the cocoa-brown appliances, the wallpaper sporting aqua and brown steaming coffee cups on a yellow background. With a sinking feeling, he saw it from her fresh viewpoint. "Uh, I haven't gotten around to doing much with the kitchen."

She tried a smile. "Vintage 70s decor. All we need is the Brady

Bunch."

"Maybe, um, we could redecorate."

"Don't be silly, it's only for a year."

"Oh, yeah." Why hadn't he realized how dated and ugly his kitchen was? He hastened to put distance between him and the Martha Stewart disaster. "Down this hallway on the left is the dining and living room combination." He stopped and made a vague gesture. "The master bedroom, bath and den are on the right. What first?"

"And up there?" She gestured at the staircase.

"Two bedrooms and a bath."

"Where does Andy sleep?"

"Upstairs."

"I guess, then, you'd better show me the master bedroom."

He stood aside and let her precede him. The plaid bedspread was drawn barracks-tight over the king-size mattress. His dresser top was bare except for a pewter dish for pocket change, a small portable television set and a basketball trophy. The bedside table sported a lamp, an alarm clock and the biography he was reading. The bare wood floor suddenly looked utilitarian. When, after a few moments, she hadn't said anything, he couldn't stand it. "Well?"

She screwed up her face as if searching for the word. "Spartan. Masculine."

"Is that bad?"

She shrugged, then smiled. "C'mon, you've seen my place.

The kindest thing that can be said of my taste is organized chaos."

"But you can bring your things." He looked around helplessly. "Do whatever you like."

"Plants?"

He nodded.

"Wall hangings?"

"Sure."

"A big, old braided rug?"

"Why not?"

"A nest for Viola and Sebastian in the corner?"

"In here?"

"My kitties always sleep with me."

That stopped him. The darned felines were going to be better off than he was. "Uh, where did you have in mind for us to sleep?"

"Show me the den."

He led her through the bathroom to the small room crowded by his desk, bookcase and a beat-up daybed. He noticed her studying the bed. "I suppose I could sleep in here," she said, eyeing the sagging mattress dubiously.

"I thought I would."

"Grant, look at it. You're a foot taller than that thing is long. If anyone's going to sleep in here, it'll be me."

"Okay, we'll try it that way, but I don't want you and Barney to be uncomfortable."

"Barney?"

He reddened. “You know. The baby.”

She shook her head, seemingly bemused. “Or Barnette, don’t forget.” She started back through the bathroom, then stopped. “Are you sure you’re ready to share a bathroom with a woman again?”

He had a sudden disturbing image of wet hosiery, like slimy tentacles, draped all over the towel rack and shower curtain rod. He gulped. “I’m sure.”

By the time they reached the living room, which she proclaimed “austere,” he was worn-out.

“I don’t want to intrude into your lifestyle, but—”

“Nonsense,” he said. “This will be your home, too. I want you to be comfortable.”

She sank down into the brown tweed sofa he’d bought at a going-out-of-business sale. It had been cheap and matched his cushy, man-size rust recliner.

She eyed the mantel. “Do you think we could get a shelf for those?” Move his team pictures and state championship trophies? He enjoyed looking at them while he watched TV. “Sure, if that’s what you’d like.”

Her eyes, like some malevolent detecting device, raked the room. “And maybe we could move your chair and turn the sofa this other way, so my chair would fit.”

“I guess.” What was it with women? Did they come wired with the rearranging-furniture gene? Just as he acknowledged his irritation, she relaxed against the sofa, spreading her arms in a

gesture of contentment. “It’s going to be fine, Grant, really fine.”

He sought the comfort of his recliner before answering. “I hope so. But it may require more patience than we imagined.”

She eyed him thoughtfully. “Having second thoughts? It’s not too late.”

Second thoughts? Not about her. She looked just right sitting in his living room, even if she was discussing upsetting his ordered existence. “No. I want to marry you, Pam.” Then, grinning, he added, “And that’s my final answer.”

She pulled her knees up to her chest and propped her chin on them, a peaceful expression on her face. “Good,” she said softly.

They sat in silence for several minutes, and he thought how pleasant it was to have this kind of quiet companionship. Finally she spoke up. “If we’re going to hit the county clerk’s office before our eleven-o’clock upper-school meeting, I think you’d better take me home soon.”

“I will, but first…” Curiosity had been eating at him for several days, waiting to be satisfied. “Could you tell me about the man? The father?” Needing to risk the rest, he blurted out the difficult question, “Do you love him?”

CHAPTER FOUR

SLOWLY PAM EASED her feet to the floor, caught off guard by the question, by Grant's sudden earnestness and by her own disturbing flashbacks. Steven—devilishly handsome in an intense, scholarly sort of way. High cheekbones, dark eyes, thick black hair, and long, tapering fingers with a magic of their own. She couldn't resist him, even after he told her the truth. But love?

In fairness, she owed Grant an honest answer. This man, not Steven, would be the baby's father on record. She focused on the emotions Grant's question had aroused—joy, passion, sadness, resignation. "In a nostalgic, romantic sense, a part of me will always love him. I would never have been intimate with him otherwise."

She paused, remembering the yearning and pain in Steven's brown eyes, recalling the apology he'd tried to voice before she had hushed him—before they had come together in mutual need and desire. Pam looked directly at Grant. "I was not promiscuous. Nor did I intend to get pregnant."

"Have you reconsidered telling him about the baby?"

"No." She paused, letting the sound of the word die away. "And I won't. Fate threw us together in unusual circumstances. But he never deceived me."

Grant appeared to be mulling over what she'd said. He probably wasn't even aware of the furrow on his brow.

She pulled forth her deepest, most painful memory—one she'd never considered sharing. Until now. "I knew he was married. That he had two daughters, ten and twelve. He'd told me all about Julie, his wife." Why couldn't she catch her breath? "But what he said didn't register until I saw her for myself."

So vivid and distressing was the memory she was hardly aware of her surroundings or of the man sitting across from her. She struggled to go on. "He was being honored by the university. His family had flown in for the occasion. I hadn't intended to go, but at the last minute, I couldn't help myself. That's when I saw her. That's when I truly realized why he could never see me again. Never have anything further to do with me."

"If this is too difficult, Pam—"

"No. I need to tell you." She drew a deep breath, then went on. "He loves his wife. Dearly, devotedly. I saw that when he pushed her wheelchair onto the platform. When he leaned down to kiss her so very tenderly." Tears filled her eyes. "Grant, she's paralyzed from the shoulders down. A skiing accident." She pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed her cheeks. "Now do you see? I was lonely. He was a kind man with needs. I guess you could say nature took its course, and here I am—pregnant. Even so there's no decision to be made. What do you suppose knowing about the baby would do to her? To him?" She let the question hang in the air before continuing. "I've given this considerable thought, and I know the time may come when, either for personal or medical reasons, my child will need the truth. But I'll wait

until that day arrives."

He ran his hands up and down the arms of the recliner before speaking. "Thank you. I know it wasn't easy for you to talk about this. After tonight, I won't ask you any more questions about him. It's just that, well, for the baby's sake, I didn't want there to be, you know, complications down the road."

His earnest, troubled face swam before her. She was missing something implied by the faltering nature of his explanation. Was he prepared to care for this baby? To want to claim more than merely the title of "father"? Could he be thinking beyond the one year limit of their agreement?

SUNDAY AFTERNOON of Labor Day weekend Pam stood in her living room knee-deep in boxes. It was difficult to know what to take with her and what to put in storage. As if sensing an impending shift in their tranquility, Viola and Sebastian scampered from chair to table to windowsill, unsettled by the disruption of their space. Pam could empathize.

She studied the solid gold band on her left hand as if it were an encoded alien object. Though small, it served as the exclamation mark on her life-changing circumstances.

The wedding had gone off flawlessly, if you could call a three-minute ceremony in a farmhouse living room with two elderly ladies as witnesses—one playing a dirgelike rendition of "Oh, Promise Me" on a wheezing pump organ—a wedding. But it would do, Pam rationalized. She was beyond virginal wedding dresses, a flower-bedecked church and multiple chiffon-clad

bridesmaids. At least she would be able to tell her son or daughter about the ceremony. About the champagne-hued tea dress she'd worn, about Grant standing tall and resolute in his navy suit and about the chaste kiss he'd dropped on her cheek at the urging of the beaming justice of the peace.

But the wedding night was a different story. Non-traditional in every sense of the word. After an awkward dinner at one of Dallas's finest restaurants, Grant had delivered her to the condo and gone home to begin sorting his things to make room for hers. Since no one knew yet about their marriage, they'd decided to postpone her move until Tuesday evening to allow Andy to settle in and Grant to break their news to him in person. Meanwhile, Pam would see about leasing her condo.

Sun streamed through the picture window, illuminating the dust motes stirred by the packing. What next? The chore seemed suddenly overwhelming. Nor could she continue to ignore the difficult task she'd been putting off—telling her father about her marriage. Even though hers hadn't been a normal wedding day, not having him by her side had hurt.

She picked up the phone, settled in her cozy chair and summoned the kitties to her lap for moral support. She uttered a silent prayer, then dialed, waiting patiently for several rings. Her father's knees weren't what they once were and he moved slowly. Finally he answered.

"Daddy, it's Pam."

As it always did when she called, his monotone voice

brightened. “I’ve been wondering when I was going to hear from you, since I couldn’t get hold of you yesterday.”

Oh, yes. The ritual Saturday night call. “I was out.”

“On a date?” he asked hopefully.

She gathered her courage. “Not exactly. But something like that.” She hesitated, then, before she lost her nerve, rushed on. “Daddy, I have some news. Are you sitting down?”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“It’s not bad. Just something that may surprise you.”

“Girl, the cows’ll come home before you get around to telling me. What in tarnation is it?”

“There’s no easy way to say this, so here goes. I got married yesterday.” No response. Darn, she should’ve cushioned the shock somehow. “Dad, are you all right?”

“A Texas tornado gives more warning to a fella than you do. Gimme a minute.” There was a long pause, then he said, “Did you say ‘married’?”

“I did.”

“Who the hell to?” His voice betrayed the bafflement and hurt she’d been worried about.

“A good man, Daddy. His name is Grant Gilbert and he teaches with me at Keystone.”

“Why haven’t I heard anything about him before?”

“Well, this has been kind of a whirlwind relationship.”

Her father snorted. “That’s putting it mildly.” He was quiet for a time. Then he said, “I would have come, you know. If you’d

invited me."

Pam bit her lip. She'd disappointed her father, and the sadness in his voice spoke volumes. "I know you would have. But we… eloped. It was a brief ceremony, just the two of us, and now we're getting packed so I can move in with him, so it just seemed—"

"Better to take the biggest step in your life without your old dad?"

She pinched her forehead and searched for the right words. "There wasn't time. School starts Tuesday, Grant's son is coming to live with him and—"

"Son? What son? Slow down and start over."

So she did, telling him about Andy, about Grant, about everything except the baby.

When she finished, in a low voice he said, "Do you love him?"

She had never lied to her father. Could she start now? "He's a wonderful, caring man, Daddy. You'll love him as much as I do." That was close to the truth, wasn't it?

"Well, then." He sighed heavily. "That's all that matters. When do I get to meet my son-in-law?"

"Soon. Let us get school underway and my move completed. Then we'll all come visit you."

"Honey—"

She sensed he was about to ask a question, perhaps the dreaded "Are you pregnant?" But he must've reconsidered, because all he added was "Be happy."

After she hung up, she sat for several minutes, absentmindedly

stroking Viola and Sebastian. Eventually she'd have to tell Barbara. But not right now.

Her father's acceptance had reinforced her obligation to commit to this marriage, in appearance if not in fact.

SUNDAY EVENING Grant called Jim Campbell to ask if he and Pam could drop by on a matter of school business. The Campbells needed to be told first, not only because Jim, as headmaster, needed to know, but because Connie and Jim were their friends. But now, approaching their attractive ranch-style home near the campus, Grant had a walloping case of stage fright. This would be his and Pam's first attempt to pull off their fabricated story. Could they possibly convince anyone they were in love?

He glanced at Pam, who was giving undue attention to the passing scenery. His eye caught the gleam of her wedding band and, with his left thumb, he fingered his. "Nervous?" he asked.

"Try terrified. Connie has a radar capability metropolitan police would envy."

"Things'll go smoother after we get the telling over with."

"I hope so. Dad wasn't easy, and when I called my sister, she wasn't very understanding, much less congratulatory. She'll freak out when she learns I'm pregnant."

"My folks didn't have much reaction when I told them, but after thirty years in the military, little fazes them. They couldn't have come to a wedding on short notice anyway." Time enough later to reveal "strained" accurately described his relationship

with his hard-nosed father.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Her question stopped him short. How little they really knew about each other despite working together for several years. "I had an older brother." He swallowed, the memory still painful. "He died of brain cancer when he was twenty-nine."

She laid a comforting hand on his thigh. "I'm so sorry. How devastating for you and your family."

"Yeah, it was. Brian and I were eighteen months apart. We shared a room, played together on the high school team, fought over the same girls. I guess you could say he was my best friend." He didn't add that Brian had also served as a buffer between him and his father. From the time his dad had returned from Vietnam, he'd been difficult, distant. Brian had been the golden boy who could do no wrong. But Grant? In his father's eyes, he'd never been anything but a disappointment. And the hell of it was, he'd never understood why.

"Your family's had a lot to deal with in recent years."

He smiled ruefully. "So maybe a baby'll help, huh?"

She looked thoughtful. "Maybe," she said quietly, removing her hand from his leg.

Why had he gone and said a fool thing like that? As if he had any claim to the baby beyond next September. He couldn't start thinking of the child as his in any way except name.

"Here we are," he said, pulling to a stop in front of the rambling brick home. On the porch was a white deacon's bench

illuminated by an antique lamppost. He turned off the ignition and sought her eyes, which reflected the same uncertainty he was feeling.

Neither of them moved. Finally she drew a deep breath and jabbed him on the shoulder. “Show time!”

“Is this where I say, ‘Break a leg’?”

“This is where,” she answered just before he left the car to come around and escort her up the walkway.

After greeting them, Jim ushered them into the inviting family room, displaying many of the primitive American pieces he and Connie collected. When Jim had first filled the interim headmaster position, before accepting the job permanently, the faculty had been stunned to find out he and Connie had known each other in their distant past. It hadn’t taken long for them to renew their friendship, culminating in a marriage much approved by Connie’s mother, daughter and the entire Keystone community.

Jim settled in a wing chair, and Grant and Pam sat together on the sofa. “I gather there’s some urgency to the matter you want to discuss,” Jim began.

Grant found his voice—and Pam’s hand. “There is.”

Pam looked around. “Connie needs to hear this, too.”

“I’ll get her.” Jim stepped down the hall and summoned Connie, who took a seat in the antique rocker by the hearth.

“Pam, Grant? You’re sure this isn’t confidential?” she asked uncertainly.

“We’re sure. In fact, we imagine everyone at school will know in a matter of days,” Pam said.

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense.” Connie eyed Pam curiously, as if unsure whether concern or elation was the expected response.

Grant seized the initiative. “Although this may come as a shock, yesterday, happily, Pam and I were married.”

Connie’s eyes widened in bafflement. “Wait. I’m having trouble taking this in.”

“It’s true.” Pam cast Grant an adoring look—a convincing, adoring look.

Jim glanced from one to the other. “Married?”

Connie studied Pam as if searching for a key to the mystery, before facing her husband. “That’s what they said.”

“It’s understandable,” Grant managed, “that our news is a surprise.”

“You can say that again, but surprise or not,” Connie said over her shoulder as she moved toward the kitchen, “this definitely calls for champagne. And then—” she paused for emphasis “—we want to hear the whole story.”

She returned bearing a tray of filled champagne flutes, which she distributed, then indicated they should all stand up. With a bemused smile, she raised her glass. “To our friends Pam and Grant. May their love grow with each day they spend together and may their home be filled with joy and peace.”

“Hear, hear,” Jim said, as the four touched their glasses and

drank.

Grant noticed that Pam took only a token sip.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.