

JUDITH
MCNAUGHT

DOUBLE
EXPOSURE



FROM THE
COLLECTION

A GIFT
OF LOVE

Read by Melissa Emma

Double Exposure by Judith McNaught

One

OBLIVIOUS TO THE SPECTACULAR VIEW BEYOND THE GLASS wall of the Houston high-rise that housed the offices of Foster's Beautiful Living magazine, Diana Foster paced in front of her desk with a telephone cradled between her shoulder and ear.

"Still no answer at the house?" asked Kristin Nordstrom, a production assistant at the magazine.

Diana shook her head and hung the phone up, already reaching into the credenza behind her desk for her handbag. "Everyone is probably out in the garden, reinventing mulch or something," she joked. "Did you ever notice," she continued with a rueful smile as she shrugged into a lime green linen jacket trimmed in white, "that when you have really exciting news, the people you want to share it with are never where you can reach them?"

"Well, how about if you tell me the news in the meantime," Kristin suggested teasingly.

Diana paused in the act of smoothing wrinkles from her white skirt and flashed the other woman a smile, but she had to look up to do it. At thirty-two, Kristin was two years older than Diana and a full six feet tall, with the fair skin and blue eyes of her Nordic ancestors. She was also conscientious, energetic, and detail-oriented, three traits that made her an ideal member of the production department.

"Okay, you've got it. I've just decided to shoot some of the photos for the "Perfect Weddings" issue on location in Newport, Rhode Island. The opportunity dropped into my lap this morning, and it's going to put us under tremendous deadline pressure, but it's too good to pass up. In fact, if you're available I'd like to send you to Newport a week before the wedding to help our crew. Mike MacNeil and Corey will arrive a few days later. You can work with them while they shoot the

actual photos. They're going to need an extra pair of hands, and it will give you an opportunity to find out what it's like to work on location, under pressure, in difficult conditions. How does that strike you?"

"Like a bolt of lightning," she said, her face illuminated by a broad smile. "I've always wanted to go on location with Corey's crew. Newport should provide a gorgeous setting for the layout," she said as Diana started for the door. "Diana, before you go, I want to thank you for everything you've done. You're a joy to work with—"

Diana waved off her gratitude with a smile. "Just keep trying to find Corey. Oh, and keep calling the house. If anyone answers, tell them to stay put until I get there. Tell them I have great news, but I want Corey there to hear it."

"I will. And when you see Corey, please tell her I'm excited about the chance to work with her." She paused, a funny, uncertain smile on her face. "Diana, does Corey realize how much she looks like Meg Ryan?"

"Take my advice and don't mention it to her," Diana warned with a laugh. "She gets accosted all the time by strangers who refuse to believe her when she tells them she isn't Meg Ryan, and some of them become downright unpleasant because they think she's trying to trick them."

The telephone rang, interrupting them, and Kristin reached across the desk to answer it. "It's Corey," she said, holding the receiver toward Diana. "She's on the car phone."

"Thank heaven!" Diana said as she hurried forward and took the phone. "Corey, I've been trying to reach you all morning. Where have you been?"

Corey registered the excitement in her sister's voice, but at the moment her attention was concentrated on the driver of an orange pickup truck who was determined to merge into a space on the

expressway that was already occupied by Corey's car. "I was at the printer's all morning," she said, deciding it was wiser to change lanes and let him win the bluff than to have an orange "pin stripe" embossed on the door of her burgundy car. "I wasn't happy with some of the shots I got for the barbecue layout for the next issue, and I brought him some different ones."

"Don't worry about that issue, it'll be fine. I have something more important to tell you – it's great news. Can you meet me at the house in twenty minutes? I'd like to tell everyone at once."

"Did I just hear you say not to worry about an issue?" Corey teased, amused and surprised by this unusual attitude of optimism from her eternally cautious sister. Glancing in the rearview mirror, she changed lanes so that she could take the exit for River Oaks, rather than continuing to the office as she'd originally intended. "I'm heading for the house, but I insist on some sort of hint now."

"Okay, here goes: What would you say if I told you an unbelievable opportunity for the "*Perfect Weddings*" issue just fell into my lap! The mother of the bride, who is clearly anxious to further bolster her social status, wants us to feature her daughter's wedding in *Beautiful Living*. If we are willing to do that, she is willing to guarantee us that it will be done in authentic "Foster Style," under our supervision, and she is willing to pay whatever that costs, as well as all travel expenses for our staff."

For months, Corey and Diana had been discussing possible locations and themes for the "ideal" wedding they wanted to stage and feature in that issue, but so far they'd discarded all of them either because Diana thought they were too expensive or because Corey thought they were artistically unacceptable. Diana bore the full burden for all Foster Enterprises' financial matters, but the responsibility for the beautiful photographic layouts that appeared in Foster's publications was Corey's. "It sounds good from a budget standpoint, but what about the location? What sort of setting would we have?"

“Brace yourself,” Diana said.

In the car, Corey smiled with helpless anticipation. “I’m braced. Tell me.”

“The wedding is to take place on the lawn of the bride’s uncle’s home... a lovely little forty-five room ‘cottage’, built in 1895, complete with frescoed ceilings, fabulous plasterwork... and undoubtedly hundreds of other little architectural goodies, you could include in our next coffee-table book – you know,” she said, “those big, fancy, beautiful books that you turn out in your spare time?”

“Don’t keep me in suspense.” Corey laughed, her enthusiasm soaring. “Where’s the house?”

“Are you ready for this?”

“I think so.”

“Newport, Rhode Island.”

“Oh, my God, how perfect!” Corey breathed, her photographer’s mind already envisioning scenic shots with fabulous yachts floating on sparkling blue water in the background.

“The bride’s mother sent me pictures of her brother’s house and grounds and then called me this morning after the package arrived. Based on something she let slip, I got the funny feeling he may be paying for the entire wedding. Oh, I forgot, she promised to provide us with six local people who’ll work under our supervision. That should enable us to put some special touches in a few of the main rooms, so you’ll have even more to photograph. All materials and freelance labor are at their expense, of course, and our people will have private rooms at the house. The hotels are already booked for the season, and you’ll all need to work late anyway, so that’s a practical solution. Also, they have servants and they’ll have houseguests, so staying there to make certain no one tampers with our handiwork becomes a necessity.”

“No problem, for an opportunity like this, I would work and sleep in Bluebeard’s house.”

Diana’s voice lost a little of its happy confidence. “Yes, but can you do that in Spencer Addison’s house?”

Corey’s reply was instinctive and instantaneous. “I’d prefer Bluebeard.”

“I know.”

“Let’s find another wedding to feature.”

“Let’s talk about it when you get home.”

Two

BY THE TIME COREY TURNED OFF INWOOD DRIVE AND ONTO the long, treelined driveway that led to the house, she already knew she was going to go to Newport. Diana undoubtedly knew it too. Whatever either of them needed to do for the good of the other, or the good of the family, or the good of Foster Enterprises, they would do. Somehow, that had always been understood between them.

Corey's mother and grandmother would also have to go to Newport, because they were the creators of what was now popularly called the "Foster Style". It was a concept that Corey and Diana had managed to showcase and market on a national scale, via the magazine and a variety of books, but it was still a joint family venture. Her mother and grandmother would undoubtedly regard the chance to see Spencer again as a delightful side benefit rather than a repugnant drawback, but then he hadn't hurt them the way he'd hurt Corey.

Diana's car was already parked in front of the house, a sprawling Georgian-style mansion that served as the family's home as well as a sort of "testing ground" for many of the menus and home improvement projects that appeared regularly in *Foster's Beautiful Living*.

Corey turned off the ignition and looked up at the house that she and Diana had helped to protect and preserve. So many momentous events in her life were linked to this place, she thought as she leaned her head against the headrest, deliberately postponing going inside, where she would have to listen to a discussion of the Newport wedding. She had been thirteen and standing in the foyer when she had met Diana for the first time, and she'd met Spencer Addison a year later on the back lawn, where she attended her first grown-up party.

And here, in this house, she had learned to love and respect Robert Foster, a broad-shouldered giant of a man with a gentle heart and brilliant mind who later adopted her. He had met Corey's mother in Long Valley, when he bought the manufacturing company where she worked as a secretary, and the rest had seemed like a fairy tale. Entranced by Mary Britton's lovely face and warm smile, the Houston millionaire had taken her to dinner his first night in town and decided that same evening that Mary was the woman for him.

The following night, he appeared at Corey's grandparents' house, where she and her mother lived, and began a whirlwind courtship that included the entire close-knit little family. Like a benevolent wizard, he materialized each evening with an armload of flowers and little gifts for everyone, and he stayed until the early hours of the morning, talking to the entire family until they went to bed and then sitting out on the swing in the backyard with his arm around Mary's shoulders.

Within two weeks, he'd befriended Corey, soothed all of her grandparent's possible objections to the marriage, and overridden Mary's own marital misgivings, then he whisked his new bride and her daughter from their little frame house on the outskirts of Long Valley into his private plane. A few hours later, he laughingly carried first Mary and then Corey over the threshold of his Houston home, and they had lived there ever since.

Diana had been vacationing in Europe with some school friends and their parents when the wedding took place, and Corey had dreaded meeting her new sister when she finally came home at the end of the summer. Diana was a year older, and supposed to be very smart. Corey was morbidly certain that besides all that Diana would be beautiful and sophisticated and the world's biggest snob.

On the day Diana returned from Europe, Corey hid on the balcony eavesdropping while her stepfather greeted his daughter in the living room and informed her that while Diana had been "lazin' around in Europe all summer," he had gotten her a new mother and a new sister.

He introduced Diana to Corey's mother, but Corey couldn't quite hear what they said to each other because their voices were too soft. At least Diana hadn't had a temper tantrum, as Corey had feared, and Corey tried to take some solace in that when her stepfather brought Diana into the foyer and called Corey to come downstairs.

Her knees knocking together, Corey had thrust out her chin and affected an "I don't care what you think of me" attitude as she walked stiffly down the staircase.

At first glance, Diana Foster was the personification of Corey's worst fears: Not only was she pretty and petite, with green eyes and shiny brown hair that tumbled in mahogany waves halfway down her back, she was also wearing an outfit that looked like it came right out of a teen magazine – a very short tan skirt with cream-colored tights and a plaid vest in shades of tan and blue, topped off by a tan blazer with an emblem on the pocket. She had breasts, too, Corey noticed glumly.

In comparison, Corey, who was two inches taller and wearing jeans, felt like a washed-out, overgrown lump of ugly clay with her ordinary blue eyes and streaky blond hair pulled up in a ponytail. In honor of the occasion, Corey was wearing her favorite sweatshirt – the one with a running quarter horse emblazoned in white across her flat chest. She tried to take some comfort from that as Diana stared at Corey in silence and Corey stared right back.

"Say something, girls!" Robert Foster commanded in his cheerful but authoritative voice. "You're sisters, now!"

"Hi," Diana mumbled.

"Hi," Corey replied.

Diana seemed to be staring directly at Corey's sweatshirt, and Corey's chin lifted defensively. Her grandmother in Long Valley had lovingly painted the horse on that sweatshirt, and if Diana Foster said

one nasty word about it, Corey was fully prepared to shove her right off her dainty feet.

Finally, Diana broke the uneasy silence. “Do you – do you like horses?”

Wary, Corey shrugged and then nodded.

“After dinner, we could go over to Barb Hayward’s house. The Haywards have a great stable with racehorses. Barb’s brother, Doug, has a polo pony, too.”

“I’ve only ridden a few horses and they’ve been pretty gentle. I’m not good enough for racehorses.”

“I’d rather pet them than ride them anytime. I got thrown last spring,” Diana admitted, putting a hesitant foot on the first step and starting up toward her bedroom.

“You have to get right back on if you get thrown,” Corey sagely advised, felling remarkably buoyed by Diana’s easy admission of her own shortcomings. She’d always wanted a sister, and maybe – just maybe – this dainty, beautiful brunette girl would do after all. Diana didn’t seem like a snob.

They walked upstairs together and hesitated in the hallway in front of their separate doorways. From the living room below, they heard their parents merry laughter and the sound was so youthful and carefree that both girls smiled at each other as if they’d caught their grown-up parents acting like children. Feeling that she owed Diana some sort of comment or explanation, Corey said with frank honesty, “Your dad is real nice. My dad ran out on us when I was still a baby. They got divorced.”

“My mom died when I was five.” Diana tipped her head to the side, listening to the happy voices coming from the living room, “Your mom makes my dad laugh. She seems nice.”

“She is.”

“Is she strict?”

“Sometimes. A little bit. But then she feels guilty and she’ll bake up a batch of brownies or a fresh strawberry pie for me – I mean us – before I – I mean we – go to bed.”

“Wow, brownies,” Diana muttered. “And fresh strawberry pie.”

“My mom believes in everything being fresh whenever possible, and my grandma’s the same way. No canned stuff. No boxed stuff. No frozen stuff.”

“Wow,” Diana muttered again. With a shudder she confided, “Conchita – our cook – puts jalapeño peppers in everything.”

Corey giggled. “I know, but my mom’s already kind of taken over the kitchen.”

Suddenly she felt as if she – and her mother – had something nice to offer to Diana and her father, after all. “Now that my mom’s your mom, too, you won’t have to eat any more of Conchita’s jalapeños.” Teasingly, she added, “Just think, no more chocolate cake with jalapeño frosting!”

Diana fell into the game at once. “No more jalapeño waffles with jalapeño syrup!”

They broke off, giggling, then their eyes met and they stopped, each feeling awkward and desperate, as if their future might somehow teeter on saying just the right thing during these first minutes together. Corey gathered the courage to speak first. “Your dad gave me a great camera for my birthday. I’ll show you how it works and you can use it whenever you want.”

“I guess he’s ‘our dad’ from now on.”

It was an offer to share him, and Corey bit down on her lip to keep it from trembling with emotion. “I – I always wanted a sister.”

“Me, too.”

“I like your outfit. It’s neat.”

Diana shrugged, her gaze on the flashy horse that seemed to be racing across Corey’s shirt. “I like your sweatshirt!”

“You do? Really?”

“Really,” she said with an emphatic nod.

“I’ll call Grandma and tell her you like it. She’ll make one just like it for you, only in your favorite color. Her name is Rose Britton, but she’ll want you to call her Grandma, like I do.”

A glow appeared in Diana’s eyes. “Grandma? You come with a grandma, too?”

“Yep. Grandma’s a terrific gardener, besides being an artist. And Grandpa loves to garden, too, but he grows vegetables instead of flowers. And he can build anything! He can put a deck on your house, or build you a playhouse, or design neat things for the kitchen, just like that.” Corey tried to snap her fingers for emphasis, but she was still a little nervous and failed. “He’ll build you anything you’d like. All you have to do is ask him.”

“You mean I’m going to have a grandpa, too?”

Corey nodded, then she watched in delight as Diana lifted her gaze to the ceiling and happily proclaimed, “A sister, and a mom, and a grandma, and a grandpa! This could be very cool!”

It only got better.

As Corey had predicted, her grandparents fell in love with Diana on her first visit, and both girls began spending so much time in Long

Valley with Rose and Henry Britton that their father irritably announced he was feeling left out. The following spring, when Mary gently mentioned that she wished her parents lived closer, Robert happily solved everyone's problems by instructing an architect to draw up plans to renovate and enlarge the estate's guest cottage, then he stood back in considerable awe as Henry insisted on doing most of the carpentry. After that, it was only a small concession to add a greenhouse for Rose and a huge vegetable garden for Henry.

Robert's magnanimous gesture was repaid a hundredfold with savory meals of fresh fruits and vegetables grown on his own land and artfully presented amid centerpieces of flowers or whimsical baskets, or in "canoes" made from hollowed-out loaves of French bread. Even the location of meals changed according to the whim and mood of what Robert routinely referred to as "his ladies".

Sometimes they ate in the vast kitchen with its brick walls and copper pots hanging from an arched wall above the row of ovens and gas burners; sometimes they ate in the garden on place mats made from green and white striped cloth to match the umbrella above the table; sometimes they dined beside the pool on the low recliner chairs that Corey's grandfather had fashioned and built from strips of wood; sometimes they ate on a blanket on the lawn, but with crystal goblets and fine china for what Mary called "a special touch."

This flair for dining and entertaining earned Mary a great deal of praise a year after her wedding, when she gave her first big party as Robert Foster's wife. At the outset, she was alarmed and intimidated at the thought of entertaining Robert's friends, people who she feared would think they were her social superiors and who she was certain would look upon her as an interloper, but Corey and Diana weren't worried at all. They knew whatever she did, she did with love and with flair. Robert Foster felt the same way. Wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he said, "You'll dazzle 'em, darling" - You just be your sweet self, and do things your own special way."

After a week of consultations with the entire family, Mary finally decided to have a Hawaiian luau at poolside beneath the palms on

the lawn. And as Robert had cheerfully predicted, the guests were indeed dazzled – not only by the sumptuous food, gorgeously decorated tables, and authentic music, but by the hostess herself. On the arm of her husband, Mary moved among her guests, her slim figure wrapped in a lovely sarong, her free arm draped from wrist to elbow with spectacular leis made of homegrown orchids from their own greenhouse, and as she encountered each female guest, she presented her with a lei that matched the lady's apparel.

When several men complimented her on the amazingly tasty food and then expressed amused shock at the discovery that Robert Foster had plowed up part of his lawn for a vegetable garden, Mary signaled her father, who proudly offered tours of the garden by moonlight. As Henry Britton showed the tuxedo-clad gentlemen along the neat rows of organically grown vegetables, his enthusiasm was so contagious that before the night was over, several of the men had announced their desire to have vegetable gardens of their own.

When the ladies asked for the name of her caterer, Mary stunned them by naming her own family. Marge Crumbaker, the society gossip columnist for the *Houston Post* who was covering the party, also asked her what caterer as well as what florist she had used, and Mary grew tense, knowing she might seem like a fool, but she admitted the truth: despite the popular notion that all domestic duties were sheer drudgery, and that any intelligent woman would want to find other, more appropriate uses for her time, Mary loved to cook, garden, and sew. Sue was in the midst of confessing that she also enjoyed canning fruits and vegetables when she noticed an elderly, white-haired woman who was sitting slightly off to one side, rubbing her arms as if she were chilled. "Excuse me," Mary explained with an apologetic smile, "but I think Mrs. Bradley is cold, and I need to find her a wrap."

She sent Corey and Diana into the house to find a shawl, and when they returned, they found Mary talking to their grandmother about the interview with Marge Crumbaker. "I just know I made us all sound like *The Beverly Hillbillies!*" she confided miserably. "I don't even

want to know what she says about us in that column.” She shook the shawl from the girls and asked her mother to bring it to Mrs. Bradley, then she melted into the crowd to look after her guests.

Corey and Diana were stricken at the possibility of being held up to public ridicule. “Do you think she’ll make fun of us?” Diana asked.

With a reassuring smile, Rose put her arms around their shoulders. “Not a chance,” she whispered encouragingly, then she headed off to give Mrs. Bradley the shawl, hoping she was right.

Mrs. Bradley was glad for the lacy, handmade shawl. “I used to love to crochet,” she said, holding it up to admire, her long, aristocratic fingers gnarled with arthritis. “Now I can’t hold a hook in my hands, not even those big ones they sell in the stores.”

“You need a hook with a large handle that’s specially made to fit your hand,” Rose said. She looked about for Henry, saw him standing nearby, talking to a middle-aged man about growing edible flowers, and signaled him to come over. When Henry heard the problem, he nodded at once. “What you need, ma’am, is a hook with a big, fat, wooden handle that’s shaped to the grip of your hand, with small indentations low on the handle, so it won’t slip out of your fingers.”

“I don’t think they make any like that,” Mrs. Bradley said, looking hopeful and despondent at the same time.

“No, but I can make you one. You come by the day after tomorrow and plan to stay for a couple of hours so I can fit it to your grip.” He touched her twisted fingers and added sympathetically, “Arthritis is a curse, but there’s ways to work around it. Got a touch of it, myself.”

As he walked away, Mrs. Bradley watched him as if he were some sort of mythical knight in shining armor. Slowly she transferred her gaze to Rose and politely excused her to return to the other guests. “My grandson, Spencer, is attending another party nearby. I asked him to come for me at eleven o’clock to take me home. You needn’t stay here on my account.”

Rose passed a sweeping glance over the banquet tables and, satisfied that she wasn't needed elsewhere, she sat down beside Mrs. Bradley. "I'd rather talk with you. You'll need to use thick yarn with Henry's hook. I intended to teach Diana how to crochet and I showed her a picture of a place mat, hoping to spark her interest. She turned up her nose at the notion of crocheting rectangles. She suggested we make them in the shape of apples, lemons, strawberries, and things like that. She drew up some sketches. They were simple and bold. You'd enjoy making them."

"Diana?" Mrs. Bradley interrupted doubtfully. "You don't mean little Diana Foster?"

Grandma nodded proudly. "I do, indeed. That girl has an artistic streak a mile wide – they both do. She paints and does charcoal sketches that are excellent. And Corey's fascinated with photography, and quite good at it. Robert bought her developing equipment for her fourteenth birthday."

Mrs. Bradley leaned forward and followed Rose's gaze, smiling a little when she spotted the girls. "I don't envy your life when the boys discover those two," she chuckled.

Unaware that they were being scrutinized and discussed, Diana and Corey observed the festivities from the sidelines near the dessert tables. It was not the sort of gathering to which teenagers were invited, and so they were pretty much on their own. At their father's request, Corey had been acting as "roving photographer," moving from group to group, trying to capture the mood of the party and the faces of the guests without being too obvious or in the way.

"Are you ready to go inside?" Diana asked. "We could watch a movie."

Corey nodded. "As soon as I use up the rest of this roll of film." She looked about for a face she hadn't photographed yet, realized she hadn't taken many pictures of her own family, and scanned the crowd to see where they were.

“There’s Grandma, over there,” she said, starting forward. “Let’s get a pict-“ She stopped short, and her breath seemed to catch in her throat as a tall young man in a white dinner jacket suddenly strolled out of the crowd. “*Oh, wow!*” Corey breathed, unknowingly clutching Diana’s wrist in a vice and stopping her short. “*Oh, wow...*” she whispered. “Who is that? He’s over there, being introduced to Grandma,” she clarified.

Diana followed the direction of her stare. “That’s Spencer Addison. He’s Mrs. Bradley’s grandson, and when he isn’t away at SMU, he lives with her. He always has.” Racking her brain for any other tidbits of information she’d heard over the years, she added, “He has a mother somewhere and a half-sister who’s a lot older, but he doesn’t have much to do with them... Wait! I remember why he lives with his grandmother. His mother kept changing husbands, and so Mrs. Bradley decided Spencer should live with her a long time ago. He’s nineteen or twenty, I don’t know which.”

Corey had never had a crush on a boy in her life, and until that moment she’d harbored considerable derision for all the girls she’d known who had. Boy were just boys and no big deal. Until that moment.

Choking back a surprised giggle at Corey’s mesmerized expression, Diana said, “Do you want to meet him?”

“I’d rather marry him.”

“First you have to meet him,” Diana said with typical practicality and attention to protocol. “Then you can propose. Come on, before he leaves-“

In her haste, she grabbed Corey’s hand but Corey yanked it back in panic. “I can’t, not now! I mean, I don’t want to just barge up to him and shake his hand. I can’t. He’ll think I’m a jerk. He’ll think I’m a kid.”

“In the dark, you can pass for sixteen.”

“Are you sure?” Corey asked, ready to rely completely on Diana’s judgement. Although there was only a year’s difference in their ages, to Corey, Diana was the epitome of youthful sophistication – poised, reserved, and outwardly confident. Earlier, Corey had felt she herself looked especially nice that night in her “nautical” outfit of wide-legged, navy blue pants and a short navy jacket trimmed in gold braid at the wrists with gold anchors appliquéd at the shoulders and gold stars on the lapels. Diana had helped her choose the clothes, then she’d styled Corey’s heavy blond hair into a fashionable knot atop her head, which they’d both agreed gave Corey a more mature look. Now Corey waited in an agony of uncertainty while Diana gave her a close once-over.

“Yes. I’m sure.”

“What if he thinks I’m a troll?”

“He won’t think that.”

“I won’t know what to say to him!” Diana started forward, but Corey pulled her back again. “What’ll I say? What’ll I do?”

“I have an idea. No, bring the camera with you,” Diana said when Corey started to put the camera down on a vacant lawn chair. “Don’t worry.”

Corey wasn’t worried, she was petrified, but in the space of a moment, fate had thrust her out of childhood and onto a new path, and she was too brave and too excited to try to retreat to the safety of the old path.”

“Hi, Spencer,” Diana said when they reached their destination.

“Diana?” he said in the flattering tone of one who can scarcely believe his eyes. “You’re all grown up.”

“Oh, I hope not,” she joked with a regal ease that Corey mentally vowed to copy. “I wanted to end up taller than this by the time I grew

up!” Turning to Corey, she said, “This is my sister, Caroline.”

The moment Corey yearned for and simultaneously dreaded had arrived. Grateful to Diana for using her real name, which sounded older and more sophisticated, Corey forced her gaze up the front of his white pleated shirt, past his tanned jaw, until it finally collided with his amber eyes, and she felt a jolt that made her knees knock.

He held out his hand, and as if from far away, she heard his deep voice – a velvet voice, intimate and caressing as he repeated her name. “Caroline,” he said.

“Yes,” she breathed, gazing into his eyes and putting her trembling hand in his. His palm was warm and broad, and his fingers closed around hers. Her fingers tightened involuntarily on his, inadvertently preventing him from breaking the handclasp.

Beside her, Diana was rushing to her rescue, trying to distract Mrs. Bradley and their grandmother from Corey’s enraptured pose. “Corey still has some film in her camera, Mrs. Bradley. We thought you might like to have a picture taken of you and Spencer, together.”

“What a lovely idea!” Mrs. Bradley said, leaning around Diana and breaking the spell by addressing Corey directly. “Your grandmother tells me you’re quite the young photographer!”

Corey looked over her shoulder at Mrs. Bradley and nodded, still gripping Spencer Addison’s hand.

“How would you like Spencer and his grandmother to pose, Corey?” Diana hinted.

“Oh, pose. Yes.” Corey loosened her grasp on his hand and slowly pulled her gaze from his. In a sudden flurry of motion, she stepped back and raised her camera, looked through the viewfinder, and aimed the camera straight at Spencer, nearly blinding him with the unexpected glare of her flash. He laughed, and she shot another picture.

“That was a little too quick,” Corey said in breathless apology, hastily focusing again. This time he looked straight at her and smiled – a lazy grin that swept across his tanned features and touched his tawny eyes. Corey’s heart did a somersault that she feared made her camera hand shake as she took that picture and the next one. Thrilled with the opportunity to have lots of pictures of him to look at in the morning, she forgot all about poor Mrs. Bradley and took two more shots of him in rapid succession.

“And now,” Diana said, sounding as if she was about to choke on something, “how about a few shots of Mrs. Bradley with Spencer. If the pictures turn out,” she added in a deeply meaningful voice aimed directly at Corey, “we could bring them over to *their house* in a couple days.”

The realization that she’d completely forgotten about taking Mrs. Bradley’s picture made Corey flush to the roots of her hair, and she immediately vowed to produce a photograph of the two of them that would do credit to a professional portrait photographer. With that goal in mind, the technicalities of photography temporarily replaced her preoccupation with her handsome subject. “The torchlight makes it tricky,” she said. With the camera to her eye, she addressed Spencer. “If you could move over behind your grandmother’s chair... Yes, just like that. Now, Mrs. Bradley, look at me... and you, too... Spencer...”

Saying his beautiful name sent shivers down her spine, and she paused to swallow. “Yes, that’s good.” Corey took the shot, but when the pair started to part, she wasn’t at all satisfied with the stiffness of the pose she’d arranged. “Let’s take just one more,” she pleaded. She waited while Spencer stepped back into the frame. “This time, put your hand on your grandmother’s left shoulder.”

“Aye-aye, Admiral,” he said, teasing her about her jaunty naval outfit, but following her order.

Corey held on to her composure at the endearing little joke, but she tucked his words away in her heart, to be savored later. “Mrs.

Bradley, I'd like you to look at me. That's good," she said, scrutinizing the light playing on Spencer's features and its effect on the ultimate outcome. She liked the way his large hand looked as it rested almost protectively on his grandmother's shoulder. "Now, before I take the picture, I'd like you each to take a second and think of a really special time that you spent together, just the two of you when Spencer was a little boy. A trip to the zoo, maybe... or the day he got his first bicycle... or an ice cream cone he dropped and still wanted to eat..."

Through the viewfinder, she saw a fond grin drift over Spencer's face, and he glanced down at his grandmother's white head. At the same moment Mrs. Bradley's face softened with a smile of remembrance that made her eyes twinkle, and she looked up at him, spontaneously lifting her right hand and laying it over his. Corey snapped the shot and another immediately after, her heart pounding with delight at the unexpectedly intimate moment she was almost sure she'd captured on film.

She let the camera slide down and smiled at both of them, her eyes shining with hope. "I'll have these developed at a camera shop. I don't want to try to do it myself, they're too important."

"Thank you very much, Corey," Mrs. Bradley said with gruff pleasure, but her eyes were still shining with whatever memory Corey had evoked.

"I'd like a picture taken with you, too, Spence, and then we have to go or well'be late!" a plaintive female voice said, and for the very first time, Corey realized that there was a girl with Spencer. A beautiful girl, with a small waist and big breasts and long, slender legs. Corey's heart sank, but she obediently stepped back to take the picture, then she waited until the flickering torchlight threw a shadow over her rival's face.

The following week, Corey's pictures were ready to be picked up and Marge Crumbaker's column appeared in the *Post*. The entire family gathered around the dining room table and held their breaths while Robert opened it to the society section. An entire page was covered with pictures of the guests and decorations, the food and flowers, and even the greenhouse and garden.

But it was Marge Crumbaker's column that made the family beam as Robert Fraser proudly read her words aloud: "As she presided over this lovely party and looked after her guests, Mrs. Robert Foster III (the former Mary Britton of Long Valley) displayed a graciousness, a hospitality, and an attention to her guests that will surely make her one of Houston's leading hostesses. Also present at the festivities were Mrs. Foster's parents, Mr. And Mrs. Henry Britton, who were kind enough to escort many fascinated guests and would-be gardeners and handymen (if we only had the time!) through the new garden, greenhouse, and workshop that Bob Foster has erected on the grounds of his River Oaks mansion..."

Three

THE PARTY HAD BEEN A GREAT SUCCESS AND SO WERE THE pictures Corey took of Spencer Addison and his grandmother. Corey was so excited that she ordered two enlargements of the best picture . one for Mrs. Bradley and one for herself.

The day they arrived, she placed her framed copy on her nightstand, then she stretched out on the bed on her back to make certain she could see his picture with her head on the pillow. Lifting her head, she peered at Diana, who was sitting at her feet. "Isn't he gorgeous?" she sighed. "He's Matt Dillon and Richard Gere rolled into one – only better looking. He's Tom Cruise and that guy Harrison whathisname-"

"Ford," Diana provided with typical attention to details.

"Ford," Corey agreed, picking up the picture and holding it above her face. "I'm going to marry him someday. I just know I am."

Although Diana was a little older, and definitely wiser and more practical, she wasn't immune to Corey's contagious enthusiasm or the energy with which Corey always tackled life's obstacles. "In that case," Diana said, getting up and reaching for Corey's phone, "we'd better make sure your future husband is home before we take the other copy to Mrs. Bradley. We can walk over there, it's only two miles."

Mrs. Bradley didn't merely like the photograph, she loved it. "What a talent you have!" she exclaimed, her arthritic hand trembling a little as she touched Spencer's face in the picture. "I shall place this on my dresser. No," she said, getting up, "I shall place it here in the living room where everyone can see it. Spencer," she called out as he bounded down the staircase, heading for the front door. In answer to her summons, he strolled into the living room, wearing tennis

whites and carrying a tennis racket – looking to Corey even more gorgeous than he had in a tuxedo.

Oblivious to Corey's hectic color, Mrs. Bradley gestured toward the girls. "You know Diana, and I'm sure you remember Corey from the party Saturday night?"

If he had said no, Corey would have died of humiliation and disappointment right there – expired on Mrs. Bradley's Persian carpet and had to be carried out and buried.

Instead, he looked at Corey with a smile and then nodded. "Hi, ladies," he said, making Corey feel as least twenty.

"The girls have just brought me a very special gift." She handed him the picture in its frame. "Remember when Corey asked us to think of a special moment while she took the picture? – look how it turned out!"

He took the picture, and to Corey's almost painful joy she saw his expression go from polite interest to one of surprised pleasure. "It's a wonderful picture, Corey," he said, turning the full force of his deep voice and magnetic gaze on her. "You're very talented." He returned the photograph to his grandmother, bent down, and brushed a quick kiss on her brow. "I have a tennis date at the club in thirty minutes," he told her. To the girls, he said, "Can I give you a ride home? It's on my way."

Riding beside Spencer Addison in his blue sports car with the convertible top down soared straight to the top of Corey's "Major Events of a Lifetime" list, and during the next several years, she managed to create a great many more events of a similar nature. In fact, she developed a positive genius for inventing reasons to visit his grandmother, whenever Spencer was home from college for an occasional weekend. His grandmother inadvertently collaborated in Corey's grand desing by sending Spencer over to the Forters' to deliver things she'd baked or to pick up some recipes or patterns she wanted to try with Grandpa's specially made crochet hook.

As the weeks passed, Corey used her interest in photography as an additional excuse to see Spencer and capture more treasured shots of him. Under the ploy of wanting to perfect her ability with “action photography,” she went to Spencer’s polo matches, his tennis matches, and anywhere else she could possibly go where he was likely to be. As her collection of his pictures grew, she started a special scrapbook and kept it under her bed, and when that was filled, she started another, and then another. Her favorite shots of him, however, were always displayed around her bedroom, where she could see them.

When her grandmother asked why most of the pictures in her room were of Spencer Addison, Corey dissembled with a long, involved, and mostly trumped-up explanation about Spencer’s unique photogenic qualities and how concentrating on a single “subject” in a variety of settings helped her to gauge her improvement as a photographer. For good measure, she threw in a lot of jargon about stop-action photography and the effect of aperture settings and shutter speeds on the final result. Her grandmother walked out of Corey’s bedroom looking a little dazed and thoroughly confused, and did not broach the subject again.

The rest of the family undoubtedly suspected Corey’s true feelings, but they were all kind enough not to tease her about them. The object of her unflagging devotion seemed perfectly at ease around her, as if he had no idea that she lived for his visits, and he visited often, although mostly on errands for his grandmother. The reasons he came to the house didn’t matter to Corey; what mattered was that he was rarely in a hurry to *leave*.

If she had advance notice of his arrival, she spent hours in her room frantically restyling her hair, changing her clothes, and trying to decide on a good topic for conversation when she had a chance to talk to him. But regardless of how she looked, or what topics she chose, Spencer unfailingly treated her with a gentle courtesy that evolved into a kind of brotherly affection by the time she was fifteen. He took to calling her “Duchess” and teasing her about being

beautiful. He admired her latest photos and joked with her and talked to her about college. Sometimes he even stayed for dinner.

Corey's mother said she thought he came over to the house and stayed for a while because he'd never had a real family, and so he enjoyed being with theirs. Corey's father thought Spencer enjoyed talking with him about the oil business. Corey's grandfather was equally certain that it was his garden and greenhouse that interested Spencer. Corey's grandmother was adamantly of the opinion that he knew the value of healthy cooking and eating, which was her forte.

Corey clung to the hope that he enjoyed seeing and talking to *her*, and Diana was young enough and loyal enough to completely agree with Corey.

Four

SOMEHOW, COREY MANAGED TO MAINTAIN THE FACADE OF wanting only a platonic friendship with him until she was sixteen. Until then she'd kept a tight rein on herself, partly because she was terrified of overwhelming him with her ardor and losing him completely, and partly because she hadn't found a risk-free opportunity to show him that she was old enough and more than ready for a romantic relationship with him.

Fate handed her that opportunity the week before Christmas. Spence had come over to the house to deliver an armload of Christmas gifts from his grandmother to each of the Fosters, but for Corey there was a special gift for him to her. He stayed for dinner and then for two games of chess with her grandfather. Corey waited until afterward, when the family had gone upstairs, then she insisted he wait while she opened his gift to her. Her hands shook uncontrollably as she spread the tissue in the big box aside and lifted out a large beautifully bound book of photographs by five of the world's leading photographers. "It's beautiful, Spence!" she breathed, "Thank you so much! I'll treasure it always."

She knew he was on his way to a Christmas party being given by some friends of his, but as she ushered him across the foyer in her new high heels, long plaid skirt, white silk blouse, and wine-colored velvet blazer, she had never felt more confident and mature. Because she'd known he was coming that night, she'd put her hair up into a chignon, with tendrils at her ears, because the style made her look older, and because Diana and she agreed it made her blue eyes look bigger.

"Merry Christmas, Corey," he said in the foyer as he turned to leave. Corey acted on sheer impulse because if she'd thought about it, she'd never have had the nerve. The house was decorated for the Christmas season in pine boughs and holly – and hanging from the

crystal chandelier above the foyer was a giant bunch of mistletoe tied with red and gold ribbon. “Spence,” she burst out, “don’t you know it’s bad luck not to honor the Christmas traditions of your friends when you’re in their home?”

He turned, his hand already on the front door handle. “It is?”

Corey nodded slowly, her fingers clasped behind her back in a pose of nervous expectation.

“What tradition am I violating?”

In answer, she tipped her head back and looked meaningfully at the mistletoe overhead, “That one,” she said, struggling to keep her voice steady. He looked up at the mistletoe, then down at her, and his expression was so dubious and hesitant that Corey abruptly lost much of her nerve.

“Of course,” she fabricated hastily, “the tradition doesn’t require you to kiss me. You can kiss anyone who lives in the house.” Trying to turn it into a joke, she continued. “You can kiss a maid. Or Conchita. Or our cat. My dog...”

He laughed then and took his hand off the doorknob, but instead of leaning forward and kissing her cheek, which was about all she’d let herself hope he’d do, he hesitated, looking at her. “Are you sure you’re old enough for me to do this?”

Corey got lost in those tawny eyes, mesmerized by something she saw flickering in their depths. Yes, she told him silently, beckoning him to kiss her. *I know I’m old enough. I’ve been waiting forever.* She knew the answers were in her eyes, and she knew he saw them, and so she smiled a little, and with her hands still clasped behind her back, Corey softly and deliberately said, “No.” it was an instinctive piece of highly effective flirtation, and just as instinctively he recognized it... and succumbed.

With a husky, startled laugh, he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger, tipped her head back, and brushed his lips slowly back and forth across hers... just once. It took only a moment for the kiss, but it was another, longer, moment before he took his hand from her chin and an even longer one before Corey opened her eyes. "Merry Christmas, Duchess," he said softly.

Corey felt the blast of icy air as he opened the door. When it closed behind him, she reached out automatically and switched off the foyer lights; then she stood there in the dark, reeling from the tenderness she'd heard in his voice after the kiss. For two years, she had fantasized about Spencer Addison, but not even in her fantasies had she ever imagined that his voice could be as stirring and as tender as a kiss.

Five

THE ONLY BLIGHT ON HER HAPPINESS WAS THAT SPENCER HAD said he planned to stay at college over spring break, studying for final exams, and that he didn't intend to be back in Houston until after he graduated in June.

Corey, who hadn't had much interest in dating, decided to use the months between January and June to broaden her knowledge of the workings of the male mind by going out regularly with a variety of boys. Spence was almost six years older than she, and a hundred times more worldly, and she was beginning to worry that her lack of dating experience would eventually embarrass him or somehow stop him from getting any more deeply involved with her.

She was popular at school and there were a gratifying number of boys who were eager to take her out, but it was Doug Hayward who quickly became her favorite and most constant escort, as well as her confidant.

Doug was a senior at her high school, the captain of the debate team, and the quarterback of their football team, but his greatest attraction from Corey's standpoint was that he, too, was hopelessly in love with someone else who lived far away. As a result, she could talk to him about Spence and get some male insight from an older boy who, like Spence, was smart and athletic and who also regarded her more as a sister than a real girlfriend.

It was Doug who tutored her on what "older men" liked in their girlfriends and who helped her come up with ideas to capture Spencer's attention and then his heart. Some of Doug's ideas were useful, some impractical, and some downright hilarious.

In May, just after Corey's seventeenth birthday, they had a long discussion about kissing techniques – a subject in which Corey felt

woefully inexperienced – but when Doug earnestly attempted to demonstrate some of the techniques they'd discussed, they ended up convulsed with laughter. When he told her to slide her hand around his nape, Corey made a comic, threatening face and slid her hand around his throat instead. When he attempted to lightly kiss her ear, she got the giggles and laughed so hard she bumped his nose.

They were still laughing as he walked her to her front door that night. "Do me a favor," Doug joked, "if you ever tell Addison what we did tonight, don't mention my name. I don't want my right arm broken by some jealous running back before I ever get to play college football."

They'd already discussed the possibility of making Spence jealous as a way of forcing him to notice Corey, but the methods Doug came up with had seemed trite and transparent to Corey, and the outcome far too uncertain. "I can't see Spence getting jealous over anything connected with me," she said with a sigh, "let alone having him get physical about it."

"Don't bet *my* life on it. There's nothing like knowing your girl has been kissing someone else to make a sensible guy lose his mind. Believe me," he added as he left, "I know from experience."

Corey watched him walk down the sidewalk to his car in the driveway, her imagination running away with itself as his words revolved in her mind and an idea took shape.

She was still standing on the porch long after his taillights disappeared. By the time she finally went inside, she'd made a decision and was working out the fine details of the plan.

As soon as Spence came home in June, she had Diana suggest to their mother that Spence be invited to the house for dinner later in the week. Mrs. Foster readily complied. "Spence seemed delighted," she announced to the family when she hung up the phone in the kitchen.

“That young man appreciates the benefits of healthy home cooking,” Rose said.

“He likes those father-son chats he and I have about business and making money,” Mr. Foster asserted. “I’ve missed them, too.”

“I’d better finish that project in the workshop,” Henry mused aloud. “Spencer has an eye for fine woodwork. He should have gotten his degree in architecture instead of finance. He’s fascinated with anything that has to do with building things.”

Corey and Diana looked at each other with a conspirational smile. They didn’t care why Spence came, so long as he came and stayed after dinner so that Corey could get him outside and execute her plan. Diana’s contribution was to get everyone else to go to the movies once they’d had dinner and a little time to visit with him. Diana had chosen a movie that Corey had already seen so that no one would think it odd when Corey decided to stay home.

By the time Spence finally rang the doorbell, Corey was a mass of quivering nerves ,but she managed to look serenely composed as she smiled into his eyes and gave him a quick, welcoming hug. She sat across from him at dinner, surreptitiously studying the changes that a half year had made in his beloved face, while he talked about attending graduate school in the fall. His tawny hair seemed a little darker to Corey, and the masculine planes of his face harder, but that lazy, heart-stopping smile of his hadn’t changed a bit. Every time he grinned at some quip of hers, Corey’s heart melted, but when she smiled back at him, her expression was teasing, not worshipful. By her own count, she’d been out on forty-six dates with boys since he left her in the foyer at Christmas, and although the majority of them had been with Dough, her sixmonth crash course on dating, flirtation, and men in general had served her very well.

She was counting heavily on it as Diana herded the entire family into the car and Spence picked up his sport jacket, obviously intending to leave also. “Could you stay for a little while longer?” Corey asked,

giving him what she hoped was a vaguely troubled look. “I – I need some advice.”

He nodded, his forehead furrowing with concern. “What sort of advice, Duchess?”

“I don’t want to talk about it here. Let’s go outside. It’s a beautiful evening, and I won’t have to worry about our housekeeper overhearing us.”

He walked beside her, his sport jacket slung over his shoulder and hooked on his thumb, and Corey wished she could feel one tenth as relaxed as he looked. The night was balmy, devoid for once of the awful humidity that made Houston summers into a steam bath. “Where do you want to sit?” he asked as she walked by two umbrellaed tables and headed toward the swimming pool further back on the lawn.

“Over here.” Corey gestured to a lounge chair next to the swimming pool, waited until he sat down on it, then she boldly sat down beside him. Tipping her head back, she gazed up through a canopy of blooming crape myrtles to the stars twinkling in the moonless sky while she fought desperately to recover her fleeing courage. She made herself think only of his Christmas kiss and of the tenderness in his eyes and voice afterward. He had felt something special for her that night. She was still positive he had. Now she needed to make him remember it and feel it again. Somehow.

“Corey, what did you bring me out here to ask me?”

“It’s a little difficult to explain,” she said with a nervous laugh that caught in her throat. “I can’t ask my mother because she’ll get all upset,” she added, deliberately eliminating what she knew would be his only escape routes from the discussion. “And I don’t want to talk about it with Diana. She’s all excited about starting college in the fall.”

She stole a glance at him and saw him watching her with narrowed eyes. Drawing a fortifying breath, she plunged in. “Spence, do you remember when you kissed me at Christmas?”

His answer seemed a long time in coming. “Yes.”

“At the time, you may have known I didn’t have much experience... Did you know – notice – that?” The last question hadn’t been in her rehearsed speech, and so she waited, wanting him to deny that he’d noticed. “Yes,” he said flatly.

Irrationally, Corey was crushed. “Well, I’ve gotten a lot more experience since then! A *whole lot* more!” she informed him haughtily.

“Congratulation,” he said shortly. “Now get to the point.”

His tone was so sharp and impatient that Corey’s head snapped around. Not once in all the times that she’d been with him had he ever spoken to her like that. “Never mind,” she said nervously rubbing her palms on her knees. “I’ll find someone else to ask,” she added, abruptly abandoning the whole scheme and starting to stand.

“Corey,” he snapped, “are you pregnant?”

Corey gave a shriek of horrified laughter and dropped back to her seat, gaping at him. “From *kissing*?” she laughed, rolling her eyes. “What did you do, skip health and hygiene class in the sixth grade?”

For the second time in moments, she saw Spencer Addison exhibit another unprecedented emotion – chagrin. “I guess you aren’t pregnant,” he said wryly, shooting her a rueful smile.

Utterly delighted to have him off balance for a change, Corey continued to tease him, trying without success to control her wobbly grin. “Don’t football players take biology at SMU? Listen, if *that’s* why you have to go to graduate school, save the tuition and talk to Teddy Morris in Long Valley, Texas. His dad’s a doctor, and when Teddy

was only eight years old, he told us everything there is to know on the playground by the swings.” Spencer’s shoulders were shaking with laughter as Corey finished. “Of course, he used a pair of turtles for teaching tools. They *may* have mated by now.”

With traces of a grin still tugging at the corners of his mouth, he shifted position so that his shoulders were against the raised back of the chaise lounge and his left leg was bent at the knee, resting beside Corey’s hip. His right leg, which had been injured twice in games last year, was stretched out beside the chair, his heel resting on the flagstones. “Okay,” he said mildly, folding his arms over his chest and lifting his brows, “let’s hear it.”

“Is your right knee bothering you?”

“Your *problem* is bothering me.”

“You don’t know what it is yet.”

“*That’s* the part that’s bothering me.”

The banter was so endearingly familiar, and he looked so relaxed and powerful – as if he could carry the entire world’s problems on his wide shoulders – that Corey had a crazy impulse to simply curl up beside him and forget kissing. On the other hand, if she executed her plan successfully, she might end up stretched out beside him *and* being kissed. An infinitely preferable alternative, she decided as she paused for a quick mental check of her appearance to make certain she looked as desirable as possible. Something slinky and low-cut would have been preferable to the white shorts and sleeveless knit top she was wearing, but at least they showed off her tan well.

“Corey,” he said in a no-nonsense tone, “the problem?”

Corey drew a long, fortifying breath. “It’s about kissing...” she began haltingly.

“I already got that part. What do you want to know?”

“How can you tell when it’s time to stop?”

“How can you-?” he repeated in disbelief; then he recovered and said flatly and piously, “When you’re enjoying it too much, it’s time to stop.”

“Is that when *you* stop?” Corey countered.

He had the decency to look ashamed of his answer; then he looked annoyed. “This discussion is not about me.”

“Okay,” Corey said agreeably, rather enjoying his discomfiture, “then it’s about someone else. Let’s call him... Doug Johnson!”

“Let’s drop the pretense,” Spence said a little testily. “The fact is that you’re seeing someone named Johnson and he’s pushing for more than you want to give. If you want advice, I’ll give it to you: Tell him to pound sand!”

Since she hadn’t been certain what tactics Spence would use to evade her trap, Corey was ready with several variations of the same scheme, all of which were designed to maneuver him back onto the path. She tried out the first variation. “That won’t help, I’m seeing lots of *different* people, actually, but things seem to go too fast after the kissing gets started.”

“What are you asking me?” he said warily.

“I’d like to know how to tell when things are getting out of hand, and I’d like some specific guidelines.”

“Well, you aren’t going to get them from me.”

“Fine,” Corey said, defeated, but bluffing to save her pride. “But if I end up in a home for unwed mothers because you wouldn’t tell me what I need to know, then it’s going to be as much your fault as mine!”

She made a move to stand, but he caught her wrist and jerked her back down onto the seat. “Oh, no you don’t! You aren’t going to end this discussion with a remark like that.”

A moment ago, Corey thought she was defeated, but now she realized that victory was actually in her grasp. He was floundering. Uncertain. Retreating from his original position. Corey prepared to advance, but very cautiously.

“What – exactly – do you need to know?” he asked, looking sublimely uncomfortable.

“I’d like you to tell me how to know when a kiss is going to get out of hand. There has to be some sort of clue.”

Defeated by his own uncertainty, Spence leaned his head back and closed his eyes. “There are several clues,” he muttered, “and I think you already know damned well what they are.”

Corey widened her eyes and innocently said, “If I knew what they are, why would I be asking you about them?”

“Corey, it is impossible for me to sit here and give you a play-by-play description of the stages of a kiss.”

Corey opened the trapdoor and got ready to shove him in. “Could you demonstrate?”

“Absolutely not! But I can give you a good piece of advice: You’re dating the wrong bunch of people if they’re all pushing you for more than you want to give.”

“Oh, I guess I didn’t make myself clear. What I’m trying to say is that I think I might be the one who is giving the guys the wrong idea.” Mentally, she stood beside the open door and made a sweeping gesture to him. “I think the problem may be how I kiss *them*.”

Spence walked straight into her trap. “How the hell do you kiss?” he demanded, then he looked furious at his blunder. “Never mind,” he said, leaning forward suddenly.

Corey put her hands on his shoulders and gently forced him back. “Now, don’t get hysterical,” she said in a soothing voice. “Just relax.”

Beneath her palms his shoulders were still tensed, as if he wanted to bolt, and she had a fleeting image of him on the football field, only tonight he’d caught a pass he hadn’t expected and didn’t want, and now he couldn’t find anyone else to hand it off to.

The thought made her smile into his narrowed eyes; it made her feel as if she, not he, were calling the plays for a change. It gave her confidence. It made her absurdly happy. “Spence,” she said. “Just run the ball down the field. It’s very simple. Honest.”

Her ability to find humor in his predicament only made him more irritable. “I cannot believe you seriously want me to do this!”

From beneath her lashes, Corey gave him a look of limpid appeal. “Who else can I possibly ask? I suppose I could ask Doug to show me what I do that-?”

“Let’s get on with it,” he interrupted shortly.

His knee was still beside her hip, preventing her from moving closer to him. “Could you move your knee?”

Wordlessly, he shifted his left leg out of the way without altering the position of his upper body. Corey scooted closer, turning so that she could look at him.

“Now what?” he demanded, his arms crossed obstinately over his chest.

Corey had a rehearsed answer in mind for exactly this moment. “Now you pretend you’re Doug – and I’ll be me.”

“I don’t want to be Johnson,” he said, sounding bitter about everything.

“Be anyone you like, but be a good sport, okay?”

“Fine,” he clipped. “Now I’m being a good sport.”

Corey waited for him to move, to reach for her, to do *something*. “You can start whenever you’re ready,” she said when he didn’t budge.

He looked resentful. “Why do I have to start?”

Corey looked at his balky expression and felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to burst out laughing. She had started out tonight hoping to fulfill the most cherished dream of her lifetime – to be kissed by him – really kissed – by him. As badly as she’d wanted that, the prospect of it had made her feel nervous and inadequate. Now it was a foregone conclusion that she was going to be kissed, but it was Spencer who was uneasy and off balance, and it was she who was amused and very relaxed. “You have to start,” she informed him, “because that’s the way things... start.” When he still didn’t seem able to move, she peered at him with sham concern. “Do you *know* how to start?”

“I think so,” he drawled.

“Because if you aren’t certain, I can give you a hint. Most guys-“

Corey broke off as the absurdity of her suggestion registered on him, banishing his annoyance over his assigned task and making his eyes gleam with amusement.

“Most guys do what?” he asked with a grin as he reached out and moved her closer to his chest. “Is this how Johnson starts?” He bent his head and Corey braced herself for some sort of wild kiss that would make her faint. What she got was a swift clumsy kiss that was slightly off center and made her shake her head in the negative.

“No?” he joked. He pulled her forward into a bear hug and nipped her ear. “How was that?”

He was being playful, Corey realized, and she suddenly feared that this sort of kissing was all there was going to be. She resolved not to let all her carefully made plans lead only to this, but she couldn't help laughing as he quickened his demonstration of how he pictured poor imaginary Doug Johnson treating her. “I'll bet this technique is a real favorite of his,” he said, starting to kiss her and deliberately bumping her nose instead.

“Did I miss? He switched to the other side and bumped her nose again. “Did I miss again?”

Laughing, Corey leaned her forehead against the solid wall of his chest and nodded.

He caught her chin, turned her face aside, and rubbed his nose against the side of her neck like a playful puppy. “Let me know when I'm driving you out of your mind with passion,” he invited, and Corey laughed harder. “Am I great?” he asked, nuzzling the other side of her neck. “Or am I great?”

Her eyes swimming with mirth, Corey raised her gaze to his and nodded vigorously. “You're completely great –” she said, “but you just aren't – Doug.”

He grinned back at her, sharing the joke, and in that prolonged moment of silent companionship, with his hands linked loosely behind her back and his eyes smiling into hers, Corey felt utterly content. Alive. At peace. So did he – she knew it with every beat of her heart. She knew it as surely as she knew he was about to kiss her again and that the joking was over.

His gaze holding hers, he tipped her chin up and slowly lowered his head. “It's time,” he said softly, as his mouth descended, “for a more scientific approach to the problem.”

At the first touch of his lips on hers, Corey's entire body stiffened with the shock of the contact. He obviously noticed her reaction, because he took his mouth away and touched it to her cheek, kissing her there as he continued in a throaty murmur, "In order for us to obtain reliable data..." His mouth slid slowly to her jaw. "... both parties have to..." His lips traced a warm path to her ear. "...collaborate in the..." He lifted his mouth slightly, his hand curving around her nape, tilting her face into better position. "... experiment."

His mouth captured hers in a slow, insistent kiss that steadily increased in pressure, forcing Corey's lips to part beneath his and setting off tremors of passion inside her that began to collide and combine with stunning force. With an inner moan of pleasure and need, Corey slid her hands up his chest and gave herself over to the kiss, letting him part her lips, yielding to the probing of his tongue, then welcoming it with mindless desperation.

His fingers shoved into the hair at her nape, loosening the pins that held her hair, and suddenly the mass of golden strands were pouring over them like a veil, and everything was out of control. She was kissing him back, falling forward into his arms while his tongue plunged into her mouth, breathlessly insistent, stroking and caressing.

His hands slid over her breasts, cupping them possessively, and Corey crushed her mouth to his, her nails digging into his arms, her body pressing intimately against his surging erection while his arm clamped around her hips, pressing her tighter to him, holding her as he rolled her onto her side.

Years of love and longing more than compensated for lack of experience, and Corey returned each endless, scorching kiss, her hands sliding over the bunched muscles of his back and shoulders, her parted lips surrendering to and then boldly conquering the man whose long fingers were caressing her breasts, tormenting her, tantalizing her with the same promise of pleasure her mouth was giving him. Time ceased to exist for her, obliterated by the turbulence of raging desire and a sensual mouth that was hungrily devouring

hers with increasing urgency... and a knee that was nudging her legs apart while his hands... stopped.

He tore his mouth from hers and lifted off her so abruptly that Corey felt completely disoriented, and when she saw the awful expression on his face, she was afraid to breathe.

His brows were drawn together into a dark frown of utter disbelief as he stared down at their bodies, then he seemed to notice that his hand was still on her breast and he jerked it away, glaring at his own palm as if it had somehow offended him. His accusing gaze snapped from his hand to her face, and his expression slowly transformed from angry to utterly thunderstruck.

Understanding dawned, and Corey expelled her breath on a rush of joyous relief. He had lost control and he didn't like it. He hadn't imagined she would ever be able to do that to him, but she had done it. She had done that to him. Filled with pride and satisfaction and a world of love, Corey smiled slumberously at him, her hand still resting on his chest. "How'd I do?"

"That depends on what you were trying to do," he said curtly.

She leaned up on her elbow, so happy that she had been able to make him want her that nothing he could have said would have spoiled her joy. "Now that you've had a demonstration," she teased, "would you care to tell me at what point things got out of hand?"

"No," he said, and sat up.

Corey sat up beside him, thoroughly enjoying the situation, her smile disarmingly innocent. "But you were supposed to notice and tell me if things got out of hand because of something I did. Do you need another demonstration?"

"No more demonstrations." He stood as he said it. "Your father would get out his shotgun if he knew what happened out here tonight, and he'd be justified."

“Nothing happened.”

“If this is your idea of ‘nothing’, then that’s why the boys in your life are trying to take things too far.”

She walked beside him trying to look deeply concerned when she felt like laughing with delight. “Would you say, then, that things went too far between us?”

“They didn’t go too far. They *could* have gone too far.”

Six

HE LEFT, AND COREY DIDN'T SEE HIM AGAIN UNTIL THE following Thanksgiving. When he finally came over to the house, Corey had the feeling that she couldn't have gotten him off to a solitary spot if her life depended upon it, and she told herself that if the kiss hadn't affected him, he wouldn't be so wary.

Diana was inclined to agree, and Corey again enlisted her aid in helping to accomplish her dream, a dream she'd cherished for years. She wanted it to come true so fiercely, so completely, that she couldn't believe fate would ever prevent it. In order to accomplish her goal, she was careful toward the end of Spence's visit to seem a little distracted and just a touch sad. Once she'd made certain he couldn't help but notice, Corey left him alone in the living room with Diana, then she hid around the corner to see how things went. "Poor Corey," Diana said – as they'd rehearsed.

"What's wrong?" Spence asked quickly, and Diana's heart soared at how concerned he sounded.

"She's been looking forward to the Christmas dance at school all semester. She's on the decorations committee and everything. She's had the dress she's going to wear for months."

"What's the problem?"

"The problem is that Doug Johnson was going to take her – he's on Baylor's football team – but he phoned this morning to tell her that his family had decided to go to Bermuda for Christmas, and they won't even consider letting him stay behind. I feel terrible for Corey."

"She's better off not going out with jocks, anyway. You know what they're like and what they think they're entitled to from any girl they honor with a few hour of their time."

“You were a jock,” Diana said with a laugh.

“And that’s how I know what I know.”

“The point is, she’s not going to be able to go. The dance is a big thing, especially for graduating seniors.”

“Why doesn’t she ask someone else to take her?” he suggested, sounding puzzled that Diana was bringing the problem to him.

“Corey has lots of friends, but they already have their own dates.”

To Corey it seemed like hours before he said, “Are you suggesting I take her?”

“That’s entirely up to you.” Diana got up then and headed out of the room, and as she passed Corey in the dining room, they exchanged a silent “high five”. Corey was halfway into the living room before she remembered to wipe the grin off her face and replace it with a more woebegone expression, but Spencer didn’t notice; he was putting on his jacket to leave.

“My mother is coming home for Christmas,” he said.

“That will be nice.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing her,” he admitted, looking a little embarrassed by his sentimentality. “The point is,” he continued abruptly, “I haven’t seen her in three years. Diana explained that you don’t have a date for the Christmas dance. I’ll be in Houston, so if you don’t mind having an old man take you to your dance, and you can’t find anyone else, then I will.”

Corey felt faint with joy and relief, but she was wise enough to refrain from a display of too much exultation and risk suffocating him. “It’s very nice of you to offer.”

“I’m on my way back to Dallas. You can tell me when I come home Christmas week if you want me to take you.”

“Oh, I do,” Corey said quickly. “I can tell you right now. The dance is the twenty-first. Could you pick me up at seven?”

“Sure. No problem. And if you get a better offer, just let me know.” He turned on the front step as he zipped up his jacket, and Corey said in a daring, grown-up way, “You’re a complete sweetheart, Spence.”

In answer, he chucked her under the chin as if she were a six-year-old and left.

Seven

ON DECEMBER 21 AT SEVEN, WHEN COREY CAME DOWNSTAIRS in her gown of royal blue silk and matching blue high heels, she didn't look or feel like a child. She was a woman, her eyes shining with love and anticipation; she was Cinderella on the way to her ball, watching for her Prince Charming at the living room window.

Prince Charming was late.

When he hadn't arrived by seven forty-five Corey called his house. She knew his grandmother wasn't planning to return from Scottsdale until the next day and that she'd given the servants some time off before Christmas, so when no one answered the phone at the Bradley's, Corey was certain it was because Spence was on his way.

When he still wasn't there at eight fifteen, her father gently suggested that he go over to the house and see what was keeping Spence or if something was wrong over there. In an agony of suspense and foreboding, Corey waited for her father to return, certain that only death or injury would keep Spence from honoring his commitment.

Twenty minutes later, Mr. Foster came back. Corey took one look at his angry eyes and hesitant expression, and she knew the news was bad. It was worse than bad; it was devastating: Her father had spoken with the family chauffeur, who lived in an apartment above the garage, and the chauffeur had told him that Spencer had decided not to come home for the holidays, after all. According to the chauffeur, Spencer's mother, who'd been expected for Christmas, had decided to go to Paris instead, and as a result, Spencer's grandmother had decided to extend her stay in Scottsdale until the New Year.

Corey listened to that shattering recitation in anguished disbelief, fighting back tears. Unable to bear either sympathy or righteous indignation from her family, she went upstairs to her room and took off the beautiful gown she'd chosen with such care to dazzle and impress him. For the next week, she jumped every time the phone rang, convinced he would call to explain and apologize.

On New Year's Day, when he had not done either one, Corey calmly removed the blue gown from her closet and carefully packed it in a box, then she removed every single picture of him from all the walls, mirrors, and bulletin boards in her room.

Afterward, she went downstairs and asked her family never to mention to Spencer that she had waited for him or had been disappointed in any way that he failed to show up. Still furious at the hurt Corey had suffered, Mr. Foster argued vehemently that Spencer was getting off much too lightly and deserved to be horsewhipped, at least verbally if not physically! Corey calmly replied that she didn't want to give Spencer the satisfaction of knowing she'd waited and watched and worried. "Let him think I went to the dance with someone else," she said firmly.

When Mr. Foster still argued that, as Corey's father, he was entitled to the satisfaction of "having a few words with that young man", Corey's mother had put her hand on his arm and said, "Corey's pride is more important, and that's what she's saving with her plan."

Diana, who was as angry with Spencer as her father was, nevertheless sided with Corey. "I'd love to give him a good swift kick, too, Daddy, but Corey's right. We shouldn't say anything to make him think he was ever that important to her."

The next day, Corey donated the beautiful blue gown to a charity resale shop.

She burned the unmounted photographs.

The photo albums she'd kept under her bed were too big and too handsome to burn, so she packed them into a large box along with the framed photographs she'd taken of him. She lugged them up to the attic, intending to remove the pictures some day and use the albums and frames for photographs of more worthy subjects than Spencer Addison.

When she went to bed that night, Corey did not cry, nor did she let herself ever again fantasize about Spencer Addison. She had packed away more than his pictures that day; she had put away the last traces of adolescence with all its lovely, impossible dreams.

After that, fate presented her with only two opportunities to see Spencer, had she wanted an excuse to talk to him . his grandmother's funeral that spring and his wedding to a New York debutante that summer. Corey attended the funeral with her family, but when they went to talk to Spencer, she deliberately let herself be obscured by the crowd of mourners. With her gaze on the flower-strewn coffin, Corey paid her last respects to the elderly woman in silence, with a prayer, while tears of sorrow slid unnoticed down her cheeks. And then she left.

She did not attend Spencer's wedding with her family either, even though it took place in Houston, where the bride's maternal grandparents lived, nor did she attend the reception. She spent his wedding night doing exactly what she knew he would be doing that night: she went to bed with Doug Hayward.

Unfortunately the young man to whom she had chosen to surrender her virginity was a much better friend and confidant than he was a lover, and she ended up weeping her heart out in his awkward embrace.

In time, she forgot about Spencer entirely. There were other, better, things to concentrate on, to anticipate and celebrate.

For one thing, the Foster family was becoming quite famous. The family's joint interest in gardening, cooking, and handiwork that had

seemed like a lark to many had become something of a trend, popularized by Marge Crumbaker, who continued to give it glowing mentions in her column.

During Corey's freshman year at college, an editor at *Better Homes and Gardens* saw one of the columns, and after coming out to the house and attending a Fourth of July party, the editor decided to do a huge feature on what she dubbed "Entertaining – Foster Style."

When the magazine came out, there were pictures featuring tables set with Grandma's hand-painted china and handmade place mats, with beautiful flower arrangements that Corey's mother created from flowers taken from their own garden and their little greenhouse. Also included were pictures of some of the family's favorite meals, beautifully photographed and described in detail, with recipes and directions for growing the fresh herbs, fruits, and vegetables that were used for the family meals. But the most memorable part of the article came at the end, where Corey's mother had tried to describe her feelings about what she and her family did and why they did it: "I think the real pleasure of having a party, or preparing a meal, or planning a garden, or creating a furnished room, comes from doing it with people you love. That way there's satisfaction in the effort, no matter how that effort turns out."

The magazine dubbed that last sentence, "The Foster Ideal," and the phrase stuck. After that, other magazines contacted the Fosters asking for articles and pictures, for which they were willing to pay. Corey's mother and grandparents were only able to produce the raw material, so Diana wrote the articles and Corey took the photographs.

In the beginning, it had all been a family hobby.

Robert Foster died of a stroke five months after the stock market made its downward plunge in 1987. When his attorney and accountant gave the family the details of his dire financial situation, they understood why he'd been so tense and preoccupied during the last year, and why he had wanted to shield them. After that the family

hobby became a business that enabled them to survive. Marge Crumbaker's columns had already made Mary Foster into a celebrity hostess, but in the aftermath of Robert's death, that no longer had any meaning to anyone, particularly his grieving family.

In the end, it was Elyse Lanier, the wife of one of Houston's leading entrepreneurs, who hit upon a way to help them stay afloat. A few weeks after Robert's death, she phoned Mary and gently asked her if she'd be willing to accept the responsibility for the food and decorations for the Orchid Ball. When Mary said yes, Elyse used her considerable influence to make the rest of the ball's committee agree.

It was the first time in the ball's history that one person had ever been entrusted with so much. On Elyse's part, it had been an act of friendship and support, one that Mary never forgot. Several years later, when Elyse's husband was elected Houston's mayor, Mary finally found a way to express her gratitude. She did it in the form of a large picnic basket, the size of a compact car, which bore a huge red, white, and blue ribbon when it was delivered to the Laniers.

In it were hand-painted dishes, wineglasses, coffee cups, candlesticks, napkin rings, and salt and pepper shakers, along with handmade napkins and place mats. It was a full picnic service for twenty-four people. Each piece was lovingly crafted. Each item bore the Laniers' monogram in red, white and blue.

Despite the Fosters' instant renown as Houston society's "caterers of choice" after the Orchid Ball, there would never have been enough money to maintain their house or their living style from catering alone, and the hard work quickly began taking a heavy toll on Corey's mother and grandparents.

In the end, it was Diana who decided the family should be capitalizing on the fame they'd acquired in various home and entertainment magazines, rather than trying to run a catering business for which they were actually ill-equipped. She was the daughter of an entrepreneur, and although Robert Foster had

suffered the fate of many other wealthy Texans in the seventies and eighties, Diana had clearly inherited his proclivity for business.

She drew up a business plan, packed up the magazine articles and recipes that had been published over the years, and put together a large collection of Corey's photographs taken of family projects.

"If we're going to do this," she announced to Corey as she left to see a banker friend of her father's, "we have to do it big and with plenty of financial backing. Otherwise we'll fail, not from lack of ability, but from lack of funds to keep us going for the first two years."

Somehow, she got the funds they needed.

The first issue of *Foster's Beautiful Living* magazine came out the following year, and although there were some difficult, and even terrifying, setbacks along the way, the magazine caught on with the public. Foster Enterprises began putting out recipe books and then coffee-table books, where Corey's photography won acclaim and generated even more income for the family.

All of that had led up to Newport, Corey thought wryly. After more than a decade of years and dozens of cameras, she had come full circle: she was about to take a camera with her and go see Spencer Addison again...

Corey pulled out of her reverie, glanced at her watch, and hastily opened the car door. As she walked up the front steps of the house, she suddenly realized that the prospect of seeing Spencer again no longer upset her. For more than a half hour, she'd been sitting in the car, dredging up old and awful memories that she'd buried in the attic with all his pictures and photo albums. Now that she'd taken out the memories and examined them as an adult, they no longer hurt.

She had been a dreamy adolescent with an enduring crush on "an older man." He had been the unwilling, and in the end, unkind, recipient of her adoration. It was as simple as that.

She was no longer an adolescent, she was nearly twenty-nine, with a large group of friends, a long list of accomplishments behind her, and an exciting life ahead of her.

He was... a stranger. A stranger whose marriage had ended five years after it began and who had stayed on the East Coast, where he'd developed some sort of pleasant relationship with his only remaining relatives – his half-sister and his niece, who was about to be married.

Now that she'd thought the whole thing through, she could hardly believe she'd reacted so badly to the thought of seeing him. The prospect of photographing that wedding and featuring it in *Beautiful Living* was challenging and exciting to her professionally and she was a professional. In fact, her feelings for him were so totally impersonal, and her infatuation with him so silly in retrospect, that she decided she really ought to ship the box in the attic to Newport, along with the other supplies that would be sent ahead. She had no use for those photographs, but they were a chronicle of his youth, and he might like to have them.

Her family was seated at the kitchen table with lists spread everywhere. "Hi, guys," Corey said with a grin as she slid into a chair. "Who's going to Newport with me?"

Her answer was relieved smiles from her mother, her grandmother, her grandfather, and Diana.

"Everyone is going but me," Henry Britton said, glancing at the walker he used now to get around. "You girls always get to have all the fun!"

Eight

COREY'S PLANE WAS TWO HOURS LATE, AND IT WAS NEARLY SIX o'clock by the time the taxi turned down a quiet street lined with palatial homes built at the turn of the century when the Vanderbilts and Goulds spent summers in Newport. Spence's house was at the end of the road, and one of the most imposing of them all.

Shaped like a wide U that faced the street, it was a three-story masterpiece of architecture and craftsmanship with soaring white columns that marched across the front and joined both wings. No matter how Corey felt about Spencer Addison, she adored his house on sight. A high wrought-iron fence surrounded the lush lawns, and the driveway was secured by a pair of ornate gates that swung open electronically after the cab driver gave her name on the intercom.

A butler answered the front door, and she followed him across an octagonal foyer that was easily sixty feet across with pale green marble pillars supporting a gallery above. It was a rotunda meant to welcome bejeweled women in fabulous ball gowns and furs, Corey thought wryly, not modern businesswomen in dark suits and definitely not a female photographer in a turquoise silk shirt and white gabardine pants with a matching jacket over her arm. If jewels were the ticket of admission, she'd never have gotten in the front door of this place, not even with the wide gold bracelet at her wrist or the turquoise and gold earrings at her ears. These were authentic pieces and very fine, but this place called out for emeralds and rubies. "Could you tell me where I'll find the group from *Beautiful Living* magazine?" she asked the butler as they approached the main staircase.

"I believe they are out on the back lawn, Miss Foster. If you wish, I can show you to them now and have your suitcases taken upstairs to your room." Corey was more anxious to see how things were

progressing outside than she was to unpack, so she accepted the butler's offer and followed in his wake.

In contrast to the foyer, which had been quiet and serene, nearly all the other rooms she passed were hotbeds of activity, with furniture being rearranged and wedding decorations being put up.

Her mother's handiwork was clearly evident in the dining room, where a forty-foot table had been set with exquisite china and crystal on handmade lace cloths, but the unmistakable "Foster Signature" would be the individual centerpieces that would be placed on the table the morning of the wedding for each pair of diners. All of the centerpieces would contain the same kinds of flowers, but each arrangement would be unique, and all of them were meant to be taken home by the ladies whose places at the table they had adorned during dinner, a token – Mrs. Foster said in her monthly column in *Beautiful Living* magazine – of the hostess's affection for her guests.

The author of that column was standing on the back lawn, oblivious to the glorious expanse of blue water or the pink and gold sunset taking place on the horizon as she directed four of the six freelance helpers that Spencer's sister had provided. Corey's grandmother was standing beside her, irritably shooing away her two assistants with the obvious intention of rearranging the wires that were being wound in and around the framework of the flowered arches the bride would walk under on her wedding day.

Corey came up behind them and gave them both a hug. "How's it going?"

"About like you'd expect," Corey's mother said, kissing her cheek.

"Chaos!" Her grandmother said flatly. Age had not made many changes in her except that she had acquired a disconcerting bluntness that her doctor said was common to many of the elderly. If something was true, she came right out and said it, though never

with any malice. “Angela – the bride’s mother – is interfering with everything and getting underfoot.”

“How’s the bride holding up?” Corey asked, avoiding asking about Spencer.

“Oh, she’s a sweet enough girl,” Gram said. “Pretty, too. Her name is Joy. She’s dumber than a box of rocks,” she added as she walked off to correct one of her helpers.

Stifling a nervous laugh, Corey glanced over her shoulder, then exchanged knowing glances with her mother, who said a little worriedly, “I know how important it is to use real events like this for our magazine layouts, but they’re very wearing on Gram these days. She doesn’t like working under any sort of deadline pressure anymore.”

“I know,” Corey said, “but she always insists she wants to be part of it.” She looked around at the bustle and activity taking place on the grounds, at the newly erected gazebo being covered in climbing roses, at the banquet tables beneath the big white tent near the water, and she smiled at the transformation taking place. “It’s going to be splendid.”

“Tell that to the bride’s mother before she drives us all crazy. Poor Spence. If he doesn’t strangle Angela before this is over, it will be a miracle. When she isn’t worrying, she’s complaining, and she’s nipping at his heels like a hyperactive terrier all the time. She’s the one who wanted Joy’s wedding to take place here, and she’s the one who wanted *us* here, and it’s Spence who’s paying the bill. Diana was right about that. Spence never complains and Angela never stops.”

“I wonder why he’s paying for the wedding when Angela’s husband is supposedly a German aristocrat with relatives all over the social register.”

Mrs. Foster paused to pick up a long strip of crepe paper skittering across the grass near her foot. “According to what Joy told me – and the child is quite a chatterbox – Mr. Reichardt has noble ancestor but little money to go with it. At least not the sort of money Spence has, and when you think about it, Angela and Joy are really his only family. I mean, his father remarried when Spence was still a baby and never wanted anything to do with him, and when his mother was alive, she was too busy enjoying herself to ever bother with him. To be fair to Mr. Reichardt, Joy isn’t his daughter. Joy’s father was Angela’s second husband. Or was it her third? Anyway, according to Joy, Spence is paying the bill because his sister thinks it’s important to Joy be married in a style that befits the step-daughter of a fancy German aristocrat.”

Corey chuckled at the problems of the rich and multimarried. “What’s the groom like?”

“Richard? I don’t know really. I haven’t seen him, and Joy doesn’t talk about him. She spends most of her time with the caterer’s son, whose name is Will. I gather they’ve known each other for several years, and they seem to enjoy each other’s company. By the way, have you seen Spence yet?”

Corey shook her head as she reached up to shove her hair off her forehead. “I’m sure we’ll bump into each other sooner or later.”

Mrs. Foster nodded toward three people walking their way. “Here come Mr. and Mrs. Reichardt with Joy. Dinner is in two hours, and I suggest you say hello to them and then excuse yourself to go unpack. The next two hours will be the last peace and quiet you get until you leave this madhouse in three days.”

“Sounds like a good idea. I have some phone calls to make before dinner, anyway.”

“By the way,” she added, “Gram and I eat in the little room by the kitchen, not in the dining room with the family.”

Corey heard that with a sharp twist of annoyance. “Are you telling me that Spencer is treating us like servants?”

“No, no, no,” Mrs. Foster said with a laugh. “We prefer to eat in the kitchen. Believe me, it’s much more pleasant than listening to Mr. and Mrs. Reichardt and the two other couples who are friends of theirs and staying here for the wedding. Joy usually eats in the kitchen with us. She likes it better there, too.”

Mrs. Foster had likened Angela to a terrier, but Corey thought it a false analogy after meeting the trio. With close-cropped, white-blond hair and brown eyes, Angela was as exotically elegant – and as nervous – as a Russian wolfhound. Her husband, Peter, was a Doberman pinscher – sleek, aristocratically aloof, and temperamental. Joy was... Joy was a cute cocker spaniel, with wavy, light brown hair, and soft, inquisitive brown eyes. As soon as the introductions were over, the wolfhound and the Doberman ganged up on Corey’s poor mother and dragged her off to show her something they didn’t like about the way the living room was being decorated, leaving Corey alone with Joy.

“I’ll show you up to your room,” the eighteen-year-old volunteered as Corey started toward the house.

“If you have something else to do, I can ask the butler where it is.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Joy said, coming to heel on Corey’s left and trotting off beside her toward the house. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. You have such a nice family.”

“Thank you,” Corey answered, a little startled by what she instantly sensed was a very genuine girl who was far more interested in getting to know Corey than she was in talking about herself or her wedding.

A flagstone terrace with French doors wrapped around the back and right side of the house, which both had spectacular water views. Corey started across the terrace toward the doors at the back, but

Joy turned right. “Come this way, it’s quicker,” she told Corey. “We’ll cut through Uncle Spence’s study and avoid-“

Corey stopped short, intending to insist on not using that entrance, but she was too late. Spencer Addison was walking across the terrace, heading toward the steps that led down to the side lawn, and even if she hadn’t seen his face, Corey would have recognized that long, brisk stride.

He saw her and stopped abruptly, a welcoming grin sweeping over his tanned face as he shoved his hands into his pockets and waited for her and Joy to reach him. Once that special smile of his had made her heart thunder, but now she felt only a swift, sharp jolt of recognition. At thirty-four, wearing casual gray pants and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled back on his forearms, he still managed to look every bit as handsome and sexy as he had when he was twenty-three years old.

He turned up the heat of his smile as she came close, and when he spoke, his baritone voice was richer, more intimate than she remembered. “Hello, Corey,” he said as he slid his hands out of his pockets and made a move to hug her.

Corey responded with a smile that was appropriate for greeting a casual acquaintance whom one hasn’t seen for many years – a friendly, serene smile, but not too personal. “Hello, Spence,” she replied and deliberately held out only one hand so that he had to settle for a handshake. No hug.

He understood it and he settled for it, but his handclasp lasted longer than was necessary, and so she ended it.

“I see you’ve already met Joy,” he said, shifting the conversation to include his niece. To her he added a mild reproof, “I thought you were going to tell me when Corey arrived.”

“I just arrived a few minutes ago,” Corey said. Once, the thought that he wanted to see her or was eager to see her, as his words implied,

would have sent her spirits soaring. Now, she was older and wiser and doing a rather excellent job, she thought, of handling this first meeting and remembering that Spencer was and had always been all charm and sex appeal and no substance. She glanced at her watch and then apologetically at him. "If you'll excuse me, I have some phone calls to make before dinner." On the off chance that Spencer intended to volunteer, she directed her request specifically to Joy, "Would you mind showing me where my room is now?"

"Oh, sure," Joy said happily, falling into step beside her. "I know exactly where it is."

With a polite nod in Spence's direction, Corey left him standing on the terrace. He turned and watched her walk away; she knew he did because she could see his reflection in the glass panes of his study doors, but the knowledge scarcely affected her. She was completely in control and proud of it. She couldn't deny the jolt of nerves she'd felt at the first sight of him, or the increase in her pulse rate when he smiled into her eyes and took her hand in his, but she attributed all that to a natural phenomenon, a sort of irritating but understandable response to an old, forgotten stimulus. Long ago, he had affected her that way, and even though her emotions were no longer engaged, her body was reacting like one of Pavlov's dogs to the sound of a bell.

Joy led her through the foyer and up a sweeping staircase with beautiful wrought-iron scrollwork. The staircase ended in a wide gallery that wrapped around the foyer on the three sides. Long hallways branched off the gallery at regular intervals, and Joy headed down the first of them, then continued walking until they came to a pair of double doors at the end. As she reached for the brass door handles, she confided with a smile, "My mother and stepfather wanted their friends to have this, but Uncle Spence said it was 'reserved' for you." She threw open the doors with a flourish and stepped aside to give Corey her first, unobstructed view, then she looked expectantly at her, waiting for reaction.

Corey was speechless.

“It’s called the Duchess Suite,” Joy provided helpfully.

In dumbstruck silence, Corey walked slowly into a vast room that looked as if it belonged in Nicholas and Alexandra’s summer palace. The suite was decorated entirely in pale blue and gold. Above the bed an ornately carved golden crown secured panels of ice blue silk that draped the bed at its corners, ending in graceful swirls on the pale blue carpet. The thick, tufted coverlet was of blue ssatin and so was the headboard with its arched gilt frame.

“It’s called that because the original owner of the house had a daughter who became the duchess of Claymore when she married. This was the room she used whenever she came home from England, and it was called the Duchess Suite from then on.”

Corey found it hard to concentrate on Joy’s narrative as she looked around. The draperies at the windows were of blue silk with elaborate swags fringed in gold, and in the corner was a French secretary with carved panels on the doors and a dainty chair pulled up in front of it that was also upholstered in blue.

“When my uncle bought the house a few years ago, he had the entire place renovated and all the furniture in all the guest rooms restored, so that they all look pretty much the way they did a hundred years ago, when the house was built.”

Corey pulled out of her daze, and turned to Joy. “It’s – breathtaking. I’ve only seen rooms like this in pictures of European palaces.”

Joy nodded, and added with a grin, “Uncle Spence said he used to call you Duchess when you were my age. I guess that’s why he wanted you to have this suite.”

That announcement had a definite softening effect on Corey’s attitude toward Spence. He’d been inexcusably thoughtless of her feelings as a young man, but he’d evidently mellowed a little with age. It hit her then that she was giving him far too much credit for

what was a very small gesture that hadn't inconvenienced him in the slightest.

"Dinner's at eight o'clock. I'll see you then," Joy added as she left.

Nine

FROWNING WITH INDECISION, COREY HESITATED IN FRON OF the mirror in her room and studied her appearance. The black jersey jumpsuit she'd decided to wear had narrow black shoulder straps attached to the bodice with a pair of golden loops, a scooped neckline, and a low back. It clung to her figure like a soft glove, ending in a gentle flair at her ankles, but she wasn't certain if it was too dressy for dining next to the kitchen, or perhaps too casual for this house. It would definitely make a good impression on Spencer though... *Spence!*

Angry at herself for even considering his reaction, she stepped into a pair of flat-heeled sandals, clipped on a pair of gold disks at her ears, and snapped the wide gold cuff she'd worn earlier onto her wrist. She took a step toward the door, then a step back toward the mirror to check her face and hair. She was wearing her hair down tonight, loose around her shoulders; she no longer had to worry that Spencer Addison might think she was too young for him. She needed a little more lipstick, she decided, and quickly applied some. She glanced at her watch and could not believe how late it was. It was fifteen minutes after eight. She had just taken exactly twice as long to get ready as she had the night of the last Orchid Ball in Houston. Thoroughly disgusted, she turned her back on the mirror and marched to the door.

The little room by the kitchen was not the dark cubbyhole Corey had imagined, but rather a cozy alcove behind the kitchen that had a large, semicircular booth in it surrounded by tall windows that looked out on the darkened lawn. Corey heard her mother's voice as she rounded the corner, and she was already smiling at the sound when she walked into the room.

And saw Spence.

He was sitting at one end of the booth, his left arm stretched casually across the top of it, grinning down at Corey's mother, who was seated on his immediate left. Corey's grandmother was next to Corey's mother, facing the kitchen doorway, and Joy was seated next to her. The table had been set for five people. Four of them were already there. He was staying to eat with them.

Corey's smile froze, her step faltered, but she recovered just as her grandmother saw her and announced her arrival to the gathering. "Here's Corey, now. You're late, dear. My, you look nice tonight! Is that a new outfit?"

Corey felt like sinking through the floor. The implication was that she'd dressed especially for the occasion, which of course she had, and she was horribly certain that Spencer had noticed.

Spencer Addison had definitely noticed how she looked.

At the moment, what he noticed most was that her entire body had stiffened when she saw him sitting at the table. She hadn't expected him to be there, Spencer realized. And she didn't want him there. The realization baffled and hurt him.

He watched her moving toward the booth with that same easy grace she'd had as a teenager, and he smiled at her. In return, she smiled through him, and he had a sudden insane impulse to get up out of the booth, block her path, and say, *Dammit, Corey, look at me!* He still could hardly believe that this cool, composed young woman who seemed to scarcely remember him was the same Corey Foster he'd known.

One thing hadn't changed about her, Spencer noted – she still lit up a room when she walked into it. Within moments after she slid in across from him and started talking with the others, the entire atmosphere at the table seemed to brighten. At least that much about tonight was the same as it had been so long ago. Except, in those days, Corey had been glad to see him.

An image of those days danced in his mind... recollections of an adorable kid with a camera around her neck who popped up at his tennis matches. *"I got a great shot of your first serve, Spence."* It had been a lousy serve, and he'd said as much. *"I know"*, she'd agreed with that infectious smile of hers, *"but my shot of it was just great."*

He remembered the times when he'd gone over to the house unexpectedly. She had been so glad to see him there, her smile dawning like sunshine. *"Hi, Spence! I didn't know you were coming over."*

And then, one day, when she was about fifteen, he looked around and saw her walking toward him across the back lawn, her honey-colored hair blowing around her shoulders, sunstreaked and glinting in the sun, her eyes the bright clear blue of a summer sky. A golden girl – all sparkle and zest, long legs and laughing face. She had been his golden girl from that day on – changeable, constant, glowing.

Even now, he could see her standing beneath the mistletoe, her hands clasped behind her back. She was sixteen and looking very grown up.

"Don't you know it's bad luck not to honor the Christmas traditions of your friends in their homes..."

He had hesitated. *"Are you certain you're old enough for this?"*

Of course, he'd known she had a fierce crush on him, and he'd known the time would come when she would grow up, grow out of it, and grow away from him. It was natural, inevitable that boys her own age would replace him in her heart. It was right that should happen.

He'd expected it, and even so, it had bothered him a little when it happened. More than a little. He hadn't even seen the change coming until the night she asked him to be a kissing partner in an experiment. God, he had felt like such a pervert for what he'd done to her that night, and even worse for what he had wanted to do to her – to a seventeen-year-old girl!

His golden girl.

He'd forgotten about her Christmas dance, and that was all it took to sever whatever feeble feelings she had left for him. She went with someone else, a last-minute substitute, which was what he had been. According to his grandmother, she went with someone closer to her own age "and a far more suitable companion for an innocent girl" than Spence was. Corey was so involved with her own life by then that she hadn't even bothered to say anything to him at his grandmother's funeral a few months later. Diana had excused her by saying Corey had an afternoon date. She hadn't bothered to attend his wedding either, even though she could have brought her date...

The conversation swirled around him at the table as one course followed another, and he participated now and then, but with only half his attention. He preferred to watch Corey when she wasn't looking at him, and since she never glanced in his direction for more than a moment, he had plenty of opportunity. He was genuinely surprised when dessert was served; he'd eaten without tasting his food, and he certainly didn't want any dessert.

What he did want he could not have: just this one night, just for this one meal, he had wanted it to be the way it had been the last time he had had dinner with her family. That was the night Diana has asked him to volunteer to take Corey to her school dance. She had a new man in her life by then – Doug somebody – and several others, as well.

Spence had already been relegated to least-important man in her life, but at least she'd still been able to spare a smile for him. The fact that she now found him completely dispensable in his own damned house at his own damned table was worse than annoying; it was terribly disappointing. And he knew exactly why it was. He'd been looking forward more than he wanted to admit to seeing her again, to having her happy family around him again. When he'd seen her coming across the back lawn earlier today, with her sunstreaked hair blowing in the breeze, he'd thought... He'd thought a lot of stupid, impossible things.

“Uncle Spence?” Joy’s puzzled voice cut through his thoughts, and Spence looked at her. “Is something wrong with your glass?”

“My what?”

“Your water glass. You’ve been staring at it and turning it around in your hand.”

Spence straightened in his seat and prepared to pay attention to the present and forget the past. “I’m sorry. My mind was on something else. What have you all been talking about?”

“The wedding mostly, but we’re all bored with that subject. Anyway, everything’s all taken care of.”

Corey sensed instinctively that Spence was about to join in the conversation, and since she was more comfortable not having to talk to him, she tried to keep everyone focused on Joy. “We’re not bored with the wedding at all,” Corey said quickly. “And even though you think everything is taken care of, there are always last-minute details that people forget. Sometimes they’re really important.”

“Like what?” Joy asked.

Corey thought madly for something to discuss that hadn’t already been covered. “Well, um... did you remember to apply for a marriage license?”

“No, but the judge is going to bring it with him.”

“I don’t think you can do that,” Corey said, wondering if Angela, in her preoccupation with making the wedding into a social extravaganza, had failed to handle the more mundane, less showy details. “I’ve been a bridesmaid in several weddings, and you always have to apply for a license in advance, then there’s a waiting period of a few days, oh – and blood tests.”

Joy shivered at the mention of blood. “I get faint at the sight of needles, so I don’t have to have one. The judge who’s performing the wedding is a friend of Uncle Spence’s, and he has the right to decide. He said I didn’t need one.”

“Yes, but what about the license and the waiting period?”

Spencer spoke for the first time in fifteen minutes, and even though Corey was braced for the sound of his deep voice, it still did funny things to her heart. Nostalgia, she was learning, was not a feeble force. “It’s all taken care of,” he said. “There’s no waiting period in Rhode Island.”

“I see,” Corey said, looking away from him the instant he finished speaking. Rather than try to think of another topic, she did what the others were doing and began to eat her dessert. Unfortunately, Joy wasn’t interested in her own slice of cheesecake; she was interested in Corey and Spence. “It’s funny,” she said, looking from Spence to Corey and back to Spence, “but I thought you two used to be good friends.”

Spence was so annoyed with Corey for treating him like an insignificant nonentity that he abruptly decided to make his presence, and his feelings, known. “So did I,” he said curtly. He had slammed the conversational ball directly into Corey’s court, and with amused satisfaction, he noticed that the “gallery” of three all turned to her to see how she was going to return it.

Corey lifted her head and met his challenging look. Mentally she reached across the table and flipped his plate into his lap, but all she did was smile and shrug. “We were.”

“But you don’t seem to have anything to say to each other,” Joy said, looking baffled and a little disappointed. The gallery looked to the right at Spence, then to their left, at Corey, but Corey had cleverly eaten a bite of cheesecake, effectively forcing Spence to deal with that issue. “It was a long time ago,” he said flatly.”

“Yes, but Uncle Spence, only *two days ago* you were upset because Corey delayed her flight for a day. I started thinking maybe there’d been a – like, relationship – between you two when you were younger.”

Now, when he didn’t want Corey’s attention, he got it. In fact, he got everybody’s attention. Corey lifted her brows and gave him a serenely amused look that managed to convey that he deserved whatever embarrassment he suffered in a conversational confrontation that he had provoked. The other three spectators waited expectantly. “I was not upset because she delayed her flight,” Spence said. “I was upset because I thought she had canceled her trip.” They continued to look at him until he was prodded into a half lie. “Corey is an excellent photographer, and she was a part of the ‘deal’ your mother made with the magazine to cover your wedding. It was a legal, binding contract. Naturally, I expected Corey to honor her commitments.”

Corey’s mouth dropped open at that enormous piece of hypocrisy, and her mother, who sensed Corey’s impulse to throw her cheesecake into Spence’s face, rushed to the rescue. “Corey always honors her commitments,” she told Joy with gentle firmness. “She has very strong feelings about that.”

“Actually,” Corey added, heading off what she felt certain would be another probing question from Joy, “Spence was a friend of the whole family’s, not of mine in particular.”

Corey was pleased with that explanation, and Joy looked satisfied, but unfortunately Corey’s grandmother was neither. “I don’t think that’s entirely true, Corey.”

“Yes, Gram,” Corey said in a warning voice, “it is.”

“Well, maybe it is, dear, but you were the only one in the house who wallpapered your bedroom with his pictures.”

Corey wanted to kill her, but at the moment all she could do was argue on a technicality. “I did not *wallpaper* my room with his pictures.”

“That room was a shrine to Spencer,” the elderly lady argued. “If you’d lit candles in there, people would have prayed. Goodness, you even had photograph albums filled with his pictures under your bed.”

“Then what happened?” Joy asked.

“Nothing happened,” Corey said, aiming a quelling look at her grandmother.

“You mean, one day you just – just stopped caring about Uncle Spence and took down his pictures? Just like that?”

Corey gave her a bright smile and nodded. “Just like that.”

“I didn’t know it could happen that way,” Joy said somberly. “A person can just stop caring – for no reason?” For the first time since her questions had begun, Corey had the feeling that Joy wasn’t merely curious, she was troubled.

Corey’s grandmother obviously noticed the same thing and attributed Joy’s anxiety to bridal nerves. Patting Joy’s clenched hand, she offered reassurance: “Corey had a very good reason, dear. One you will never have, I’m sure.”

“She did?”

“Yes. Spence broke her heart.”

Mentally, Corey threw up her hands and yielded to the inevitable. Short of gagging her grandmother with a napkin and dragging her out of the booth by her ankles, Corey knew there was nothing to stop what was to come. Torn between misery and mirth, she waited for her dignity to be sacrificed on the altar of truth, for the sake of a nervous bride-to-be. Since she couldn’t prevent it, and since she

knew Spence was also going to suffer some unpleasant moments, she leaned back, folded her arms, and decided to enjoy his discomfort. He looked completely flabbergasted, Corey noted with some amusement, his coffee cup arrested halfway to his mouth.

“I did what?” he said irately, and actually looked to Corey as if he expected her to come to his rescue by denying it. In answer she lifted her brows and gave him an unsympathetic shrug.

“You broke her heart,” Corey’s grandmother asserted.

“And just exactly how did I do that?” he demanded.

She gave him a deeply censorious look for failing to own up to his wrongdoing and retaliated by addressing her answer to his niece, instead. “When Corey was a senior in high school, your uncle asked to take her to the Christmas formal. I’ve never seen Corey so excited. She and Diana – Corey’s sister – shopped for weeks for just the right gown to dazzle him, and they finally found it. When the big day arrived, Corey spent most of it in her room primping. Then, just before Spence was due to arrive, she came downstairs. My, how she sparkled in that gown! She looked so beautiful and grown-up that her grandpa and I had tears in our eyes. We took pictures of course, but we saved some film so Corey would have pictures of Spence with her.”

She paused for a sip of water, letting the suspense build, and Corey had the fleeting thought that her grandmother had a previously undiscovered flair for high drama. Poor Joy was on the edge of her seat, frowning at her uncle for whatever he’d done to spoil such a night. Spence was frowning at Corey’s grandmother, and Corey’s mother was frowning at her plate. Corey was beginning to enjoy herself.

“Then what happened?” Joy implored.

Corey’s grandmother carefully put her glass where it had been, then she lifted her sorrowful gaze to Joy. “Your uncle stood her up.”

Joy turned a look of such disbelief, such accusation on Spence that Corey almost pitied him. “Uncle Spence,” she breathed, “you didn’t!”

“He did,” Corey’s grandmother averred flatly. Spence opened his mouth to explain, but she wasn’t through with him. “It broke my heart the way Corey kept watching for him at the window. She could not believe he wasn’t coming.”

“And so you missed the formal?” Joy asked Corey, displaying the sort of appalled sympathy that only females are capable of feeling for each under those particular circumstances.

“No, she did not,” Spence said.

“Oh, yes she did.”

“I think you’re mistaken about that and some other things,” Spence said, his jaw tight with annoyance at being made to look like an even bigger villain than he’d actually been. “I did stand Corey up that night,” he said, addressing his defense mostly to his wide-eyed niece. “I forgot I was supposed to take Corey to the dance, and I went to Aspen for the holidays instead of going home to Houston. It’s obvious now that I shouldn’t have let my grandmother handle my apology, but she was very upset and very insistent. I’m guilty of those two things, but the rest of the story you just heard” – he hesitated, searching for a respectful way to say Corey’s grandmother was completely wrong – “isn’t the way I remember it. Corey already had a date for the dance, and she already had her gown, but her date had to cancel at the last minute. The other boys she knew who would have taken her already had dates of their own, so Diana suggested I offer to take Corey, which I did. I was not a volunteer, I was a recruit, and the only reason Corey wanted to go with me was there wasn’t anyone else available – except for her very last choice, which was whoever she called in as a last-minute substitute for me. I,” he finished bluntly, “was her next-to-last choice.”

Having had his say, he gave Corey’s grandmother a conciliatory smile and say, “My memory isn’t greatest either, but I have a very

clear recollection of all that because I felt very badly when I realized I'd forgotten about the dance. I was very relieved when I was told that Corey went with someone else."

"You would have had a clearer recollection," Gram informed him smugly, "if you had been there, as I was, when she went upstairs in that beautiful blue gown – the gown she bought had to be royal blue because that was your favorite color – and took it off. I don't know what gave you the idea you weren't her first choice, but I do know that if you had heard her crying herself to sleep, as I did that night, you would never forget the sound of it either. She was beyond heartbroken. It was pitiful!"

although some of what he'd heard didn't make sense, as Spence stared at the elderly woman, he knew instinctively she was telling the truth. His niece knew it, too. Filled with shame, he looked at their accusing faces while his mind tormented him with images of his golden girl coming down the stairs in her royal blue gown and waiting for him at the windows. He thought of Corey crying herself to sleep in a bedroom filled with his pictures, and he felt physically ill. He didn't know why she'd invented a story about needing a substitute date for the dance, but when he looked at Mrs. Foster, who was avoiding his gaze, one thing was obvious: everybody had known how Corey felt about him back then, but him.

He looked at Corey, but she had leaned her elbows on the table and covered her face with her hands, and he couldn't see her face. His jaw tight with self-disgust, he glared at his water glass, thinking of the barb he'd thrown earlier about honoring commitments. No wonder she couldn't stand the sight of him!

Across the table, Corey looked between her fingers at the stricken expression of Spence's face and then the satisfied smile on her grandmother's, and the whole scenario was so beyond her worst imaginings that she had an uncontrollable impulse to... giggle.

"Corey," Spence said, lifting his eyes to her covered face, prepared to take whatever verbal flogging she wanted to give him. "I didn't

know. I didn't realize-" he began awkwardly, and to his horror, her shoulders started to shake. She was crying!

"Corey, please don't-!" he said desperately, afraid to reach for her and make things worse.

Her shoulders shook harder.

"I'm sorry," he said in an aching voice. "I don't know what else to say-"

Her hands fell away, and Spence stared in disbelief at a pair of laughing blue eyes that were regarding him with amused sympathy, not animosity. "If I were you," she advised in a laughter-choked voice, "I'd leave it right there and say good night. If Gram isn't convinced you feel guilty enough, this could actually get worse." Her transformation from cool stranger to his enchanting ally was so sudden, so undeserved, and so poignantly familiar that Spence felt a surge of pure tenderness pour through him.

He slid out of the booth, gave Corey's grandmother a wink, and held his hand out to Corey. "In that case, I'd rather do my groveling outside, and deprive her of the opportunity to witness it."

"I really ought to let you do it," Corey said with that infectious smile he'd always loved, "but you're already too late. I'd already forgiven and forgotten the whole thing. In fact, I shipped those old photograph albums here with some of my equipment and supplies. I intended to give them to you. So, as you can see, there's no need to go outside or grovel."

Spence put his hand firmly beneath her elbow. "I insist," he said with quiet implacability.

Joy slid out of the booth behind Corey. "I guess I'd better spend some time with Mom and Peter and their guests."

Mrs. Foster waited until the three were well out of earshot. "Mother," she said with a sigh, "I cannot believe you did that."

"I only said what was true, dear."

"Sometimes the truth hurts people."

"Truth is truth," the elderly lady said smugly as she eased her way out of the booth. "And the truth is that Spencer deserved a thrashing for what he did that night, and Corey deserved an apology. I accomplished both tonight, and they're both better off for it."

"If you're hoping that they'll fall in love now that you've cleared the way, you're very wrong. Corey is the living example of 'once burned, twice shy'. You've said that a hundred times about her."

"Well, that's the truth, too."

"Do you think," Mrs. Foster said, her mind shifting away from Corey and Spence and back to the basic problem, "you could just think about the truth, and not say it quite so often?"

"I don't think so."

Mrs. Foster stepped aside so that her mother could precede her down the hall. "Why not?"

"I'm seventy-one years old. I don't think I should waste any more of my time on words that don't mean anything. Besides, at my age, I'm allowed to be eccentric."

Ten

LAUGHTER AND RAISED VOICES ECHOED FROM THE DINING room, where Angela's dinner party was in full swing, but outside the night was soft and hushed as they strolled across the side lawn toward the water. Corey was amazed at how utterly relaxed and at peace she felt, walking at Spence's side. She could not remember ever being near him when she'd felt anything but an excited, nerve-racking tension, and she vastly preferred this new feeling.

She no longer had anything to hide or regret – her grandmother's dissertation at dinner had exposed her girlhood infatuation, laid it bare for all to see, and in the process she'd revealed it to Corey for exactly what it was – a very sweet, adolescent infatuation with an unknowing victim, not the painfully embarrassing, neurotic obsession with a selfish monster she'd feared it was. Spence's tanned face had actually paled while he listened to her grandmother's eloquent description of what Corey had "suffered" at his hands.

Before she had left for Newport, Corey had forced herself to view the whole awful debacle with philosophical indifference, but she was still hurt by it. Tonight, she had ended up laughing at herself in her grandmother's dramatic tale, and then laughing at the "villian" and trying to rescue him from any more guilt than he was already being made to feel. Confession, she decided, was definitely good for the soul, even if that confession was forced out of you by your grandmother. She had finally put an end to any all attachment she ever had to Spence; all that was left was nostalgia, and her freedom gave her a sensation of sublime serenity.

He stopped beneath a big tree near the water's edge, and Corey leaned her shoulders against, looking out at the crescent of twinkling lights from houses in the distance, waiting for him to say whatever he'd brought her out here to say. When he didn't seem to know how

to begin, she found his uncharacteristic uncertainty a little touching and extremely amusing.

Spence gazed at her pretty profile, trying to gauge her mood. "What are you thinking about?" he asked finally.

"I'm thinking that I've never known you to be at a loss for words before."

"I don't quite know where to begin."

She crossed her arms over her chest, lifted her brows, and tipped her head toward the water in a silent, joking suggestion. "Want some help?"

"I don't think so," he said warily. She laughed, and the sound of it made him laugh, and suddenly everything was the way it had always been with them, only better, richer for him because he was beginning to understand its value. He was shamefully pleased that she'd had his pictures all over her room and belatedly delighted that she'd evidently wanted him to take her to her Christmas dance from the very beginning.

Rather than start with the dance, he started with the pictures. "Did you really have my pictures all over your room?" he teased, gentling his tone so she wouldn't think he was gloating.

"Everywhere," she admitted, smiling at the memory; then she looked up at him and said, "you surely had to have known I had a terrible crush on you when I was tagging after you taking pictures of you."

"I did. Only I thought it ended when you were seventeen."

"Really? Why?"

"Why?" he uttered, a little dumbfounded that she didn't know. "I suppose I regarded it as a clue when you asked me to help you

practice kissing techniques so that you could use them on some guy named..." He searched his memory for a name. "Doug!"

Corey nodded. "Doug Johnson."

"Right. Johnson. In fact, Diana told me Johnson had planned to take you to the Christmas dance and then had to cancel at the last minute, which was why I volunteered. I naturally assumed you had a crush on him after that, not me. How could I have possibly thought you cared about me after all that?" He waited for her to see the logic in his thinking, and when she only regarded him in amused silence, he said, "Well?"

"There was no Doug Johnson."

"What do you mean 'there was no Doug Johnson'?"

"I wanted you to kiss me, so I invented Doug Johnson and used him as an excuse. I wanted you to take me to the Christmas formal, so I used Doug's name again. The only reason I dated boys was so that I'd know to act on a date with you, when you asked me." She gave him a sideways smile, and Spence had an insane impulse to lean down and kiss it off her lips – an impulse that approached a compulsion when she shook her head at the memory of her infatuation and added softly, "It was you. It was always you. From the night I met you at the luau until a week after the dance, when you didn't call to apologize or explain, it was only you."

"Corey, there was another reason I forgot about the dance and went to Aspen. I'd expected my mother to come to Houston for Christmas, and I was looking forward to it more than I let anyone know. I'd been making excuses for her absence and lack of interest my whole life, and although it sounds absurd now, I actually thought that if she got to know me as an adult, then maybe we could have some sort of relationship. When she phoned at the last minute to say she'd decided to go to Paris instead, I ran out of excuses for her. I got drunk with some friends, none of whom had 'normal families', and

we all decided to go to Aspen, where one of them had a house, and forget Christmas.”

“I understand,” Corey said. “You’d told me you were looking forward to her visit, but I’d already guessed she was more important to you than you wanted anyone to know. You were a hobby of mine, remember. There wasn’t much about you I didn’t know or try to find out.”

Flattered and touched, Spence braced his palm high on the tree trunk, longing to lean down and kiss her, but there was one more thing he needed to say. “I should have called you to explain, or at least apologize, but I let my grandmother convince me that I’d already done enough damage and that I should stay completely out of your life. She told me that you went to the dance with someone else – which she believed – and that I was not a fit companion for an innocent young girl – which she also believed. I already felt like a complete pervert for what I did to you that night by the pool, so her tirade hit me in a very vulnerable place.”

Corey saw his gaze drop to her lips and a little of her newfound serenity deserted her even before he said in a husky voice, “Now that we’ve finished the explanations, there’s only one thing left to do.”

“What’s that?” Corey asked warily.

“We have to kiss and make up. It’s traditional.”

Corey pressed further back against the tree trunk. “Why don’t we just shake hands, instead.”

He smiled solemnly and shook his head. “Don’t you know it’s bad luck not to honor the traditions of your host?”

The forgotten sweetness of the memory was nothing compared to what she felt as he laid his palm against her cheek and whispered, “A golden girl told me that one Christmas, a long time ago.” He bent

his head and brushed a kiss slowly over her lips, and Corey managed to savor the moment without participating, but Spence wasn't finished. "If you don't kiss me back," he coaxed, sliding his mouth over her cheek, "the tradition isn't fulfilled. And that means very bad luck." His tongue lazily traced the curve of her ear, sending shivers down her spine to her toes, and Corey smiled helplessly, tipping her head back a little as he traced a warm path down her neck. "Extremely bad luck," he warned, retracing his path, and then the teasing was over. He cradled her face in his palms, his thumbs slowly caressing her cheeks, and Corey was mesmerized by the intensity in his eyes. "Have you any idea," he said gruffly, "how much I hated Doug Johnson after that night?"

Corey tried to smile and felt the sudden, inexplicable sting of tears instead.

"Have you any idea," he whispered as his mouth descended purposefully toward hers, "how long I've wanted to do this..."

Corey felt her defenses crumbling and tried to forestall him with humor. "I'm not completely sure I'm old enough."

A sensual smile curved his lips, and she watched them form a single word: "Though," he said, and curved her into his arms, capturing her lips in a kiss that was as rough and tender as his answer had been.

Corey told herself there was no danger in a kiss, no defeat in cooperating just a little, as she slid her hands up his hard chest and yielded to the coaxing insistence of his tongue. She was wrong. The instant she did, his arms tightened and his mouth opened over hers in a fierce, demanding kiss that assaulted her newfound serenity and made her clutch his broad shoulders for balance in a world that was beginning to spin. His tongue drove into her mouth, and with a silent cry of despair, Corey wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

She leaned into him and forced him to gentle the kiss by softly stroking his tongue with hers and felt the gasp of his breath as he

drew her tighter to him, his arm angling over her hips to hold her pressed to his rigid thighs. She kissed him slowly, sliding her fingers over his jaw and around his nape, and he let her set the pace, his hand drifting in a slow caress over her spine and bottom, his mouth moving endlessly on hers, following her lead. And just when Corey was beginning to feel in complete control, he took it away. His fingers shoved into the hair at her nape, and he ground his lips into hers, pressing her back against the tree with his body, freeing his hands to rush over her breasts, then slowly covering and caressing them until Corey thought she would die of the sweet torment and the longing for more.

Time ceased to exist, measured only in a series of endless, shattering kisses and arousing caresses that began slowly and built toward a crescendo; then they pulled apart. So they could begin all over again.

Corey heard herself moan when he tore his mouth from hers for the very last time. He buried his face in her neck, then he drew a long, labored breath and tightened his arms around her, holding her face against his heart.

She stayed there, her eyes closed tightly against the moment when her mind would take over and rage against the stupidity, the insanity of what she'd just done to herself, but it was already too late. Reality was setting in. She was clearly mentally ill! She had some sort of sick obsession with Spencer Addison. She had tossed away her adolescence on him, and now, all he had to do was say something sweet – and she fell into his arms like a lovesick idiot. She had never in her life felt as she had tonight except once... long ago on a summer night by the swimming pool. A tear dropped from her eye and raced down her cheek. She did not mean anything to him, and she never had...

“Corey,” he said in a roughened voice as he touched his lips to her hair. “Would you care to explain to me why I seem to lose my mind the moment I touch you?”

Her heart did a somersault, her mind went into silent shock. For the second time tonight, she had an absurd impulse to laugh and cry at the same time. "We are both clearly insane," she said, but overall, she felt much better than she had the moment before. She moved away from him, and he put his arm around her shoulders, walking with her back to the house.

Lost in her own thoughts, Corey scarcely noticed that he was walking her to her room until he'd turned down the hall and she saw the double doors of the Duchess Suite in front of her. She turned in front of them and looked up at him. This last half hour was the closest thing to a date they'd ever had, and she had an irreverent impulse to smile at him and say, "Thank you for a lovely evening." Instead, she said, "Since we've already kissed good night, I guess there's nothing else to do or say."

He grinned at her and braced his hand against the doorframe, relaxed and confident. A little too confident, she thought. "We could always do it again," he suggested.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," she lied.

"In that case, you could invite me in for a nightcap."

"I think that's an even worse idea," she primly informed him.

"Liar," he said with a grin, then he bent and gave her a hard swift kiss and opened the door. Corey walked serenely into her room, closed the door, and collapsed against it, dazed by the last half hour she'd spent in his arms. Her gaze landed on the clock on the little secretary. It was almost midnight. They'd been outside for well over an hour.

Eleven

STANDING ON THE BACK LAWN, COREY WATCHED MIKE MacNeil and Kristin Nordstrom setting up some of the camera equipment for exterior shots of the work underway, but there was little the pair could do until tomorrow, when the flowers were in place on the bridal arches and the banquet tables beneath the white tent were decked out in “Foster Style”. At the moment, there was a small army of gardeners, carpenters, and florists bumping into the caterers, who were scheduled to serve a rehearsal dinner on the terrace tonight after the rehearsal itself was over.

To Corey’s trained eye, everything looked as if it was going very well. She saw Joy talking earnestly to one of the caterer’s staff, and whatever she was saying to the young man made him smile at her and the rest of his companions guffaw. The caterers were a family operation, Corey knew, and besides being very good, obviously enjoyed working together. She saw Corey and waved, and Corey waved back, then she headed over to Mike and Kristin, who’d arrived that morning in a van. “How’s it going, Mike?”

“Everything’s under control. No problems.” He was five feet four inches tall, fifty pounds overweight, and he looked as if he were about to collapse on top of the heavy trunk he was dragging across the grass. Corey knew better than to offer to help. “How do you like your new location assistant?”

He looked over his shoulder at Kristin, who was effortlessly carrying an identical trunk. “Couldn’t you have found someone a little taller and a little more robust?” he asked wryly.

Since Corey had more than enough work to occupy her, she watched for a few minutes and then headed back to the house.

Back to Spencer.

She'd fallen asleep with her arms around her pillow, thinking of him, and today, she could think of little else. He wasn't helping, either. This morning, he'd strolled into the little breakfast room where they'd dined last night, and in full view of Corey's mother and grandmother and his astonished niece, he'd ruffled Corey's hair and pressed a kiss on her cheek.

At noon, she saw him coming down a crowded hallway near his study with a sheaf of papers in his hand that he appeared to be engrossed in reading. Without looking up, he nodded to a houseguest and moved around three servants. As he passed Corey, seemingly without seeing her, he made a sharp turn and walked straight into her, backing her through an open doorway and straight into a closet, closing its door behind them. While she was still sputtering, he dropped the papers, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her senseless- "I've missed you," he said just before he let her go. "And don't make plans for dinner. We're dining alone tonight on your balcony. My balcony overlooks the back lawn, which means we'd have as much privacy as we have in the halls."

Corey knew she should object, but she didn't want to. She was leaving on Sunday, which gave her only tonight and tomorrow night to see him. "Only if you promise to behave," she said instead.

"Oh, I will-" he agreed solemnly, then he pulled her back into his arms and kissed her until she was clinging to him, "-just like this." He let her go with a familiar smack on her rump. "Now get out of here before I decide to keep you here and we end up suffocating. There's no air in this damned closet."

The entire time they'd kissed there'd been a parade of footsteps down the hall and Corey shook her head. "No, you go first and make certain the coast is clear."

"Corey," he said, "I can't leave this closet right now. I'm in no state to greet houseguests, believe me."

Embarrassed and pleased, she put her ear to the door, then stealthily reached for the handle when the coast seemed clear. “I ought to lock you in here,” she tossed over her shoulder.

“Try it and I’ll pound on the door and tell everyone you’ve stolen the silver.”

Corey was smiling at that memory when she saw Joy walking slowly and dejectedly toward a stand of trees on the perimeter of the lawn. She looked so miserable that Corey hesitated and then went after her. “Joy – is something wrong?” she said, coming up behind her.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she said, hastily brushing her fingertips over her cheeks before she turned and gave Corey a watery smile.

“If you don’t want to tell my why you’re crying, then will you talk to your mother or someone else? You shouldn’t be upset like this on the day before your wedding. Richard will be here tonight. He won’t want to see you unhappy.”

“Richard’s very sensible, and he’ll say I’m being foolish. So will everyone.” She shrugged and started slowly to the house. “Let’s talk about something else. Tell me more about you and Uncle Spence.” She hesitated, and then said in a voice tinged with desperation, “Do you think you really loved him when you were my age?”

If the question had been asked in idle curiosity, Corey would have sidestepped it, but she had the feeling that Joy was turning to her for help and that anything other than the truth might somehow do a great disservice to her. “I want to answer you honestly, but it’s hard for me to look back at my feelings for him without also realizing how hopeless and one-sided they were, and then to discredit them because of it.”

“Would you have eloped with him?”

The question was so unexpected that Corey laughed and nodded. “Only if he’d asked me.”

“What if he hadn’t been from a wealthy family?”

“I only wanted him, nothing else would have mattered.”

“So you did love him?”

“I-“ Corey hesitated, looking back. “I believed in him. I admired and respected him. And I did it for all the right reasons, even then. I didn’t care that he was a football hero at college, or what kind of car he had. I wanted to make him happy, and he always seemed to enjoy being with me, so I truly believed I could.” With a rueful smile, she admitted, “I used to lie in bed at night, imagining that I was going to have his baby, and that he was asleep beside me with his arms around me, and that he was happy about the baby. It was one of my favorite fantasies, out of about ten thousand fantasies. If all those things add up to love, then yes, I did love him. And I’ll tell you a secret,” Corey finished wryly, “I have never felt that way about anyone else since.”

“Is that why you’ve never gotten married?”

“In a way, it is. On the one hand, I don’t want to risk feeling that way about anyone again – I was completely obsessed. On the other hand, I’d never settle for anything less if I were to marry someone.” They’d arrived at the house, and to Corey’s surprise, Joy gave her a hug. “Thank you,” she said fiercely.

Corey watched her walk back across the lawn toward the caterers, then she started slowly toward the dining room, where she was planning to spend the rest of the afternoon taking photographs, but she felt uneasy. She decided to talk to Spence about Joy. Something was wrong.

Twelve

TRYING NOT TO MAKE A SOUND, COREY REPOSITIONED AN antique candelabra on the dining room table. From the head of the table, out of range of the shot she was setting up, Spence said, "Don't worry about making noise. Do what you need to do."

He had brought his paperwork there so they could be together while she worked. Corey was afraid to admit to herself how much she loved his company and how wonderful it felt to have him pursuing her after all these years. "I don't want to distract you."

A lazy, intimate smile swept across his handsome face. "In that case, you'll have to pack up and leave Newport."

Corey knew exactly what he meant, but the sweetness of flirting with him, and even getting the upper hand, was too tempting to pass up. "Be patient. We'll be out of here Sunday morning, and you'll have this ramshackle old house all to yourself again."

"That isn't what I meant, and you know it," he said calmly, refusing to participate in her game.

That surprised her. Sometimes, she was positive they were indulging in a long-overdue flirtation, but just when she'd adjusted to that and tried to play by the rules, he ended the game and turned serious on her.

"Can you stay a few days longer?"

Corey hesitated, struggling to resist the temptation. "No, I can't. I have assignments already booked for the next six months."

She waited, half in hope, half in fear, that he'd urge her to stay longer and she would agree. He didn't. Evidently he wasn't that serious. Refusing to acknowledge that it hurt her, Corey turned her attention

to safer matters and glanced at the papers spread out in front of him. "What are you working on?"

"I'm considering the pros and cons of a business deal; weighing all the alternatives, balancing the element of risk with the possibilities of gain; going over the research. The usual process of decision making."

"It isn't usual for me," Corey admitted, crouching down and eyeing the effect of the flower arrangement with the candles and heirloom china. "If I went through all of that, I'd never be able to make any decision at all." Satisfied, she walked over to the tripod and took the picture, then she adjusted for a slightly different angle that would catch the rays of the sun dancing off the crystal and snapped off two more shots.

Spence watched her, admiring her deft skill for a moment, then turning his attention to her other more alluring attributes. He studied the curve of her cheek, the generous softness of her mouth, and watched the sunlight dancing on her hair. She'd pulled the wavy mass up into a ponytail with tendrils at her ears, and it made her look about eighteen years old again. She was wearing white shorts and a T-shirt, and he indulged himself with a leisurely visual caress of her long slim legs and her full breasts while he imagined how she was going to feel in his arms in bed tonight.

She could set him on fire with a kiss, and tonight he intended to fan that fire and let it blaze out of control until it consumed them both. And then he was going to build it up again. He was going to make love to her until she pleaded with him to stop, and then he was going to make her plead for him to start again.

They were meant for each other, he knew that now just as surely as he knew Corey didn't want to trust him with her heart again. He could persuade her to give him her body tonight, but he needed time to persuade her to give him her heart, and she was trying not to give him that time. He already knew how amazingly steadfast she was once she made up her mind; she had been steadfast in her devotion

to him years ago, and now she was just as dedicated to keeping her emotional distance from him. For the first time in his adult life, Spence felt powerless and fearful, because short of tying Corey up, he couldn't think of a way to make her give him the time to prove himself.

"Stop staring at me," she said with a smothered laugh, without glancing in his direction.

"How do you know I am?"

"I can feel your eyes on me."

He heard the tiny tremble in her voice, and he smiled, then he returned to the discussion they'd been having about decision making. "What method do you prefer for making your decisions?"

Corey looked over her shoulder. "Seriously?"

"I'm very serious," he said, his voice deep with meaning.

Corey ignored that. "For the most part, I act on instinct and impulse. I seem to know in here" – she touched her heart – "what decisions are best. I've learned that from experience."

"That's a risky way to handle important things."

"That's the only way I can handle them at all. The truth is, if I spend too much time weighing alternatives, balancing the risk against the gain, I become paralyzed with uncertainty, and I end up making no decision at all. My judgment is best when I rely on impulse and instinct."

"That's probably a part of your artistic nature."

Corey smiled. "Maybe, but it's just as likely that it's genetic. My mother is the same way. If you give either of us too much time to think, or offer us too many possibilities, we don't act at all. She told me once that if my stepfather hadn't rushed her into marriage before

she could sort out all the drawbacks from the benefits, if she hadn't been forced to act on instinct instead of logic, that she wouldn't have married him at all."

Mentally, Spence filed that revealing information about Corey away for future use.

"Is that why you're never married – too many possibilities for failure and too much time to think about all of them?"

"Could be," Corey evaded, and quickly turned the discussion back to him. "What happened to your marriage?"

"Nothing happened to it," he said dryly, then he realized that he wanted her to understand. "Sheila's parents had died the year before my grandmother died, and neither of us had anyone else. When we realized we had only that in common and very little else, we decided to get a divorce while we were still able to be civil to each other."

Corey opened her camera case and carefully slid the camera into its compartment, then she turned around and leaned against the dining room table, her forehead furrowed into a frown. "Spence... speaking of marriage, I wanted to talk to you about Joy. I don't know that she's certain she's doing the right thing. Does she have anyone she confides in? I mean, where are her friends, her bridesmaids, her fiancé?"

She half expected him to wave the matter off; instead he leaned his head back and ran his hand around behind his neck as if the subject somehow made his muscles tense. "Her mother has picked her friends, her bridesmaids, and her fiancé," he said bitterly. "Joy isn't stupid, she's simply never been allowed to think for herself. Angela has made every decision for her and then inflicted them on her."

"What's her fiancé like?"

"In my opinion, he's a twenty-five-year-old egomaniac who is marrying Joy because she's piabile and will reinforce his own inflated

opinion of himself. I also think he likes having a connection through marriage to German nobility. On the other hand, the last time I saw the two of them together, Joy seemed to like him very much.”

“Will you talk to her?” Corey asked as she turned back and finished packing up her equipment.

“Yes,” he said, his voice so near that his breath stirred the hair on her nape, then his lips grazed her skin and Corey felt an alarming jolt from even that simple contact. “Will you mind having a late dinner? Although I don’t give a damn about any of these people, I do have a duty as host to fulfill at the rehearsal dinner.”

He’d asked her to join him downstairs during the rehearsal festivities, but she’d declined. Corey knew it was insanity to have dinner with him in her room, but she told herself she’d keep things under control, and that they weren’t even eating on the bed, they were eating on the balcony – “A late dinner is fine. It will give me a chance to take a nap.”

“That’s a very good idea,” he said, and with such emphasis that Corey turned around and tried to see his face. He looked completely innocent.

Thirteen

ALTHOUGH COREY'S BALCONY FACED THE SIDE LAWN, ANOTHER set of her windows offered a perfect view of the party taking place on the terrace below and an ideal chance to observe Spence without fear of having him know it. It occurred to her that she'd been with him for only two days and she was right back where she'd begun – watching for a glimpse of him. Sighing, she leaned her shoulder against the window frame, but she continued to watch.

He was a man of great contrasts, she thought tenderly – a tall, powerfully built man who exuded a tough, hard-bitten strength that was at complete variance to the sensuality of his mouth and the glamour of his sudden smile. He looked as if he could still carry a football and plow his way through a defensive line, and yet he exuded the relaxed elegance of a man who was born to preside over a mansion like this one.

Tonight, he was playing his role of host with ease, appearing to listen intently to what a group of men were telling him, but Corey saw him look at his watch for the third time in en minutes. He'd had dinner sent up five minutes ago, and the table on the balcony was already set with china and silver and covered platters. She glanced at the clock and watched the minute hand make its last small lurch. It was ten o'clock. She looked out the window and smothered a laugh as Spence abruptly put his drink down, nodded briefly to the men who were talking to him, and left them there, his long, swift strides taking him straight toward the doors that led into the house. He'd fulfilled his social obligations; now he was in a hurry.

Because he wanted to have dinner with her.

And after dinner, he intended to have Corey for dessert.

Wryly, Corey glanced at the table on the balcony, where a hurricane lamp was already casting its mellow glow. It was a perfect seduction scene – a private balcony, candlelight, champagne chilling in a bucket, music in the distance, and a very large, luxurious bed with satin sheets within immediate reach. She was immensely flattered by his attention to detail, but she was not going to let him make love to her. If she did, the desolation she would feel when he kissed her good-bye and sent her on her way would make the episode eleven years old pale in comparison.

Corey was very clear on all that. What she was not clear about was why he suddenly seemed to find her so irresistible. Last night, as she had lain awake, trying to find a reason for his display of passion, she'd decided it was a case of guilt over the picture her grandmother had painted for him of Corey waiting at the window for him to take her to the dance.

That theory was invalidated by the way he'd behaved today – he was in serious amorous pursuit, and he was using an entire arsenal of sensual weapons on her, from his voice to his hands. He'd even asked her to extend her trip, though he'd backed off without pressing her. It didn't make sense. Outside, on the lawn, there were stunning women who put Corey completely in the shade, and she'd watched several of them trying to flirt with him. Spence was gorgeous, sexy, and rich. He had an unlimited supply of women who were just like him from which to choose. That was the real reason he'd never been interested in Corey, not even when she was almost eighteen and the age difference between them wouldn't have mattered so much.

Now he was suddenly pursuing her with single-minded determination, and she knew there had to be an explanation. It was possible he simply enjoyed the novelty of trying to seduce a childhood friend. She shoved that thought aside; it was completely unjust. Spence wasn't cynical or jaded; she wouldn't be so helplessly in love with him now if he was.

Corey moved away from the window so that he wouldn't see her there and guess she'd been watching him on the terrace.

When there was no answer to his knock, Spence tried the knob and let himself in. He was halfway across the suite when he saw Corey outside on the balcony, standing at the balustrade in a long, bright green silk shift that covered her from her neck to her ankles with the exception of a slash at the neck. She was waiting for him, he thought with an inner grin. After all these years, his golden girl was waiting for him again. Fate had given him a second chance he didn't deserve, and he intended to seize it any way he could.

Dinner with Corey was one of the most enjoyable meals he'd had in years. She regaled him with funny stories about events in his life that he'd almost forgotten. Afterward, they sipped brandy and Corey got out one of the photo albums she'd brought to give him. The light from the hurricane lamp wasn't very good, but Corey argued that bad lighting was a help, not hindrance, for viewing her earliest photographic attempts. Spence let her have her way because the champagne and brandy were having a mellowing effect on her, and he wanted her to be relaxed tonight.

With his elbow on the table and his chin on his fist, he divided his attention between her animated face and the pictures she was showing him. "Why did you keep that shot?" he asked, pointing to a picture of a girl in riding breeches who was sprawled on the ground in a sitting position, her hair half-covering her face.

Corey gave him a winsome smile, but he had the feeling she was a little embarrassed. "Actually, that was one of my favorites for a while. I gather you don't recognize her?"

"Not with her hair in her face."

"That happens to be Lisa Murphy. You took her out during your junior year of college when you were home during the summer."

Understanding dawned and Spence swallowed a laugh. "I take it you didn't like her very much?"

“Not after she took me aside and told me I was a pest and that I should stay away from you. We were all at a charity horse show that day. Actually, I didn’t even know you were going to be there.”

The last page contained one of the snapshots of Spence with his grandmother that Corey had taken at the luau. They looked at it in silence for a moment. “She was very special,” Corey said softly, touching her fingertip to the elderly lady’s cheek.

“So were you,” he said quietly, as he closed the album. “Even then.”

Corey knew instinctively that the part of the evening she longed for and dreaded was about to begin. She took the coward’s way and tried to forestall the inevitable with humor and change of location. “I’m sure you didn’t think I was ‘special’ when I was hanging out of trees taking pictures of you,” she joked, walking over to the balustrade.

He walked up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. “I always thought you were special, Corey.” When she didn’t reply, he said, “Would you be surprised if I told you I have a picture of you?”

“Was it one of the ones I used to stick in your wallet when you weren’t looking?”

An instant ago he was about to kiss her, and he ended up burying his laughing face in her hair instead. “Did you really do that?”

“No, but I considered it.”

“The picture I have of you is from the front of *Beautiful Living*.”

“I hope you found enough room for it somewhere,” she joked. “It’s only an inch tall.”

He brushed his lips over her temple, his voice a tender murmur. “I want a larger photograph that shows the way you glow in the moonlight when you’re in my arms.”

Corey tried not to let what he was saying or doing affect her, but warmth was already spreading through her entire body, and when he slid his arm around her waist and drew her against his full length, she felt an ache of longing begin to build. "I'm insane about you," he whispered.

"Spence," she pleaded softly, "don't do this to me." But it was too late, he was already turning her in his arms, and when his mouth opened over hers, insistent and hungry, Corey gave herself up to the torrid kiss, surrendered to the turbulence that followed in the wake of male hands that caressed her breasts and slid down her spine, forcing her into vibrant contact with his arousal. When he finally lifted his mouth from her, Corey felt seared by the kiss and branded with his body.

"Stay for a few days," he whispered, rubbing his jaw against her hair.

A few days... She deserved a few sweet days to remember and cherish. And then regret. "I – I have to work for a living – a schedule –"

He shoved his hands through the sides of her hair and turned her face up to his. "Put me on your schedule. I have work for you."

She thought he was joking about it being work, and she leaned her forehead against his chest. She was going to stay with him. God help her, she was going to do it. "What you're suggesting is not work," she said, her voice trembling with fear and love.

Spence sensed that she was wavering, and he pressed the advantage he'd gained before she could change her mind. "I'm serious," he said, using the only method he'd been able to think of all day that might make her agree to stay. "I've been putting together notes for a book on this house and several others built at the same time. I need photographs to accompany the text, and you could-"

She shoved him away so abruptly that he almost lost his balance. "So that's what this whole seduction routine had been about!" She

wrapped her arms around her middle and backed away, her voice shaking with tears and fury. “You wanted something!” He reached for her, but she jerked free and backed away. “Get out of here.”

“Listen to me!” Spence caught her just inside the open doors. “I love you!”

“If you want me to take pictures of this place, then call the William Morris Agency in New York and talk to my agent, but first you’d better send him a blank check!”

“Corey, shut up and listen to me. I invented all that about the book. I’m in love with you.”

“You lying, conniving – Get out of here!”

She was trying so damned hard not to cry, and he knew she’d hate him more if she broke down in front of him. He dropped his arms to his sides, but he wasn’t giving up. “We’ll talk about this in the morning.”

By the time Spence reached his own room, the enormity of his mistake had hit him. Not matter what he tried to tell her in the morning, she wasn’t going to believe him. After this, there was no way he could prove to her that he had no ulterior motives and that all he wanted was her.

Furious with his blunder, he yanked off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt while he let himself consider the one ugly possibility that had been there all along: Corey wasn’t in love with him. He knew damned well she felt something for him; it ignited the moment he touched her, but he could be mistaking that “something” for love. He was on his way to the liquor cabinet when he passed his bed and saw the note propped on his pillows.

It was a hastily written letter from Joy, telling him that she was eloping with Will Marcillo, the caterer’s son, and asking Spence to tell her mother in the morning. The rest of the letter was a desperate

effort on his niece's part to make Spence understand why a conversation she'd had with Corey earlier that day had convinced her she had to marry the man she loved. According to Joy's disjointed explanation, Corey had admitted to her that she had never loved anyone but Spence and she wanted to have his babies, but she was afraid to risk her feelings again. That, according to Joy, was exactly how she herself had felt about Will, only Joy was no longer afraid to take the risk.

Spence read the letter again, then he put it down on a table and stared at his bed, his mind whirling with Joy's revelations, fitting them together with the things he'd discovered about Corey and then coming to a full stop at the impossible predicament he'd put himself in tonight by lying to her about his motives for wanting her to stay.

According to Joy's note, Corey loved her. She wanted to have his babies. She was afraid to take a risk.

According to Corey, she either acted on impulse and instinct, or else she lost her courage and didn't act at all.

Spence had inadvertently fixed it so that nothing he *said* would make Corey believe he wanted only her. Tomorrow a wedding was scheduled to take place, but there was no bride and no groom. He couldn't say anything to make her believe him, but there was a possibility he might still be able to *do* something. He hesitated for a moment, and then he made his decision and picked up the telephone.

Judge Lattimer had just gotten home from the rehearsal dinner. He was very surprised to hear from Spence. He was more surprised when he understood why.

Fourteen

COREY WAS ALREADY SETTING UP EQUIPMENT FOR THE WEDDING shots on the lawn at seven o'clock in the morning when she was handed a note from Spence telling her to come to his study immediately. Convinced he had some new form of lie to tell her, she circumvented him by taking Mike and Kristin with her.

Anger made her steps long and fast as she walked across the lawn. She still could hardly believe he'd done what he had, merely to get free professional photographs for his damned book. On the other hand, Corey's freelance fees were very high, and she'd lived among the wealthy long enough to know how incredibly cheap some of them were when it came to spending money on anything other than themselves. Cheap was bad enough, but deceitful and manipulative were unforgivable, and to use her as he had – to touch her and kiss her – and then to tell her he *loved* her. That was obscene.

As soon as she stepped into his study, Corey realized she needn't have worried that he had any sort of cozy tryst in mind. Angela was seated in a chair wearing a dressing robe and clutching a handkerchief; her husband was standing rigidly beside her chair in his robe, looking poised to attack. Spence looked immune to whatever drama had taken place in there. With his hip perched on the edge of his desk and his weight braced on the opposite foot, he was looking out the window, idly turning a paperweight on his desk.

He looked up at Corey as she walked in with her assistants, but instead of the animosity or the cajolery she expected to see, he looked perfectly composed, as if last night hadn't happened. He nodded toward the chairs at his desk in an invitation for Corey, Mike, and Kristin to have a seat. Unable to bear the suspense, Corey looked from him to Angela. "What's wrong?"

“She’s gone, that’s what’s wrong!” Angela cried. “That nitwit has eloped with that – that busboy! I shouldn’t have named her Joy, I should have called her Disaster!”

Corey sank down into the chair, her shock giving way to happiness for Joy and then to the awful realization that Joy’s last-minute elopement was a calamity for Corey and the magazine. It was too late to substitute another wedding for the next issue, much too late. They were already at deadline now.

“I notified the groom’s family an hour ago,” Spence told her. “They’ll speak to as many of their guests as they can reach. Those guests who can’t be reached will be met here by one of their relatives, who will explain the situation.”

“This is a nightmare!” Angela gritted.

“It’s also created an enormous problem for Corey’s magazine. They’ve invested a great deal of time and money in all this.” He paused to let that sink in before he continued. “I’ve had longer than anyone else to consider alternatives, and I think I’ve come up with a plausible solution. I suggest we let Corey go ahead and photograph the wedding.”

“There isn’t going to be a wedding!” Angela burst out bitterly.

“What I’m suggesting is that Corey be allowed to photograph everything-“

“Except the bride and groom who *won’t be there!*” Angela exploded.

“Corey can use standins,” Spencer explained.

Corey understood exactly what he was suggesting, and she rushed in to help him explain, her mind already racing ahead to the angles she’d use to get appealing photographs without revealing the faces of the bride and groom. “Mrs. Reichardt, we can take shots of

another couple dressed as a bride and groom. What I need is a crowd in the background... It doesn't have to be a large one, but-

"Absolutely not!" said his sister.

"I won't have it!" Mr. Reichardt stormed.

Spence's voice had a razor edge to it that Corey had never heard before. "You haven't paid for it, I have." He shifted his attention back to his sister and continued, "Angela, I understand how you feel, but we have a moral and ethical obligation to do what we can to make certain Corey's magazine doesn't suffer because of Joy's... impulsiveness."

Corey listened to him in stunned silence, trying to understand how his mind worked. Last night, she'd decided that he was so cheap that he'd been romancing her in the hope of getting free photography for his book. This morning, he was lecturing about ethics and morality and passing up an opportunity to cancel everything associated with the wedding, forfeit what deposits he had to forfeit, and still save himself a small fortune.

"But what will we tell our guests?" Angela demanded. "Some of the guests are friends of yours, too, don't forget that."

"We will tell them we're delighted with the bride's decision, and sorry that she can't be here... but that we'd like them all to celebrate at the reception as if the newlyweds were present." Finished, he looked to Corey for approval, and she gave it to him in the form of a relieved smile, but in fairness to Angela she added, "It is very unusual."

"So are many of the wedding guests," Spence said dryly. "They'll probably enjoy the novelty of a reception for a canceled wedding. That's something they won't have already done. A new experience, you might say, for a bunch of jaded cynics."

Angela looked ready to hit him. She surged to her feet and stormed out of the room with Reichardt at her side.

Spence waited until they were gone, then he said briskly, "Okay, let's handle the details. We need a bride and a groom and a judge."

Corey knew he was waiting for her to speak, but as she looked at the forceful, dynamic man who was willing to help shoulder her burdens, her heart was reclassifying him from enemy, to ally and friend, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. He saw the change reflected in her eyes and his tone softened to a caress. "I'll find a standin for the judge."

"In that case, all we need are standins for the bride and groom." Corey looked at Kristin and Mike. "How about you two?"

"Get serious," Mike said. "I'm fifty pounds overweight and Kristin is six inches taller than me. The caption beneath our picture would have to read 'Pillsbury Doughboy Weds the Green Giant'."

"Stop thinking about food," Kristin chided, "and start thinking of solutions."

Silence ensued for a long moment before Spence finally said in a tone of exasperated amusement, "What am I, chopped liver?"

Corey shook her head. "I can't use you for the groom."

A look of surprised hurt flashed across his eyes. "As I recall you used to find me rather photogenic. Now that I'm older, are you afraid I'll break your lens?"

"You'd be more likely to melt it," she said wryly, imagining his tall, muscular physique in a raven black tuxedo with a snowy shirt contrasting against his tanned skin.

"Then what's the problem?"

"You'll be busy with the guests, making explanations and trying to keep them smiling." She paused to make her point. "Spence, it's imperative that I have lots of happy faces in these shots. Their

success depends much more on the mood of the crowd than of my technique.”

“I can accomplish that and still be the ‘groom’. I’ll tell the staff to open up all six of the bars on the lawn and keep passing drinks until the last guest leaves or we run out of liquor. If necessary, we’ll have taxis lined up in front in case they’re needed.”

“In that case,” Corey said with a relieved sigh, “the job is yours. Kristin, you get to be the bride. Spence is several inches taller than you.”

Spence opened his mouth to object, but Kristin beat him to it. “I’d have to lose twenty pounds to get into Joy’s wedding gown, and it would still only hit me at the knees.”

“Corey, there’s only one solution and it’s obvious,” Spence said flatly. “You’ll be to be the bride.”

“I can’t be the bride; I’m the photographer, remember? We’ll have to ask someone else.”

“Even I cannot trample on good taste to the extent of asking a wedding guest to put on Joy’s gown and play bride for us. You have several tripods here. You can set up the shot, rush into the picture, and have Mike or Kristin press the button. That’s all there is to it.”

Corey bit her lip, considering his suggestion. She didn’t need more than a couple shots of the bride of groom – one in the garden beneath the gazebo, the other somewhere at the reception off to the side, so using tripods wasn’t a problem. “Okay.”

“Would anyone like a glass of champagne?” Spence offered, looking completely satisfied with the situation. “It’s customary to toast Corey and me.”

“Don’t make jokes like that,” Corey warned, and the tension in her voice surprised everyone, including her.

“Bridal nerves,” Spence surmised, and Mike guffawed.

They got up to leave, but Spence laid a detaining hand on Corey’s arm. “I want to ask you for a favor,” he said when the others were gone. “I understand how you felt last night, but for the rest of the day, I’d like you to pretend it never happened.”

When Corey eyed him in dubious silence, he grinned and said, “No favor, no wedding. I’ll cancel it and the deal’s off.”

He was completely unpredictable, inscrutable, and utterly irresistible with that teasing glint in his eyes. “You are completely unscrupulous,” she informed him, but without any force.

“Lady, I am the best friend you’ve ever had,” he countered, and when she gaped at the arrogance of that claim, he explained, “I have, in my possession, Joy’s elopement letter. In it, she says very clearly that it was her conversation with you yesterday that convinced her she’d regret it for the rest of her life if she didn’t marry the man she loved. Contrary to what my sister thinks, you brought all this on yourself. Now, do I get my favor or do I cancel the wedding?”

“You win,” Corey agreed, laughing. She wasn’t certain whether she was relieved or disappointed that he didn’t want to talk about last night.

“No dark thoughts about me for the rest of the day – agreed?” When she nodded, Spence said, “Good. Now, is there anything else I can do to make things easier for you before the wedding?”

Corey shook her head. “You’ve already accomplished a great deal. I’m very grateful,” she said earnestly. “And very impressed,” she reluctantly admitted, tossing him a grin over her shoulder as she left.

Spence studied the easy grace of her movements while he considered her last remark. If Corey was “very impressed” by what she knew he’d accomplished, she’d be dazzled by the rest of it. Upstairs, Joy’s wedding gown was already being altered to the size

of one of Corey's dresses. In Houston, Spence's attorney was drawing up a letter notifying the tenants in his grandmother's house that their lease was being terminated, and preparing a large check from Spence to compensate them. In Newport, Judge Lawrence Lattimore was on the phone with a sleepy clerk from City Hall who was being talked into issuing a marriage license on a Saturday.

All things considered, Spence decided, it had not been a bad morning's work.

Even so, he had the disquieting feeling that he was forgetting something important – something other than informing Corey that she was about to become a bride. He hoped to God that she'd been sincere about her love of spontaneity and acting on instinct; he hoped she'd been sincere when she told Joy she'd always loved him and wanted to have his babies.

That last part didn't bother him as much as the first. Corey loved him, he knew she did, but he wasn't thrilled about the sort of wedding she was about to have.

Of course, based on their early history, she was bound to feel an enormous amount of satisfaction at having forced him to go to such bizarre lengths in order to get her to the altar.

He smiled to himself, imagining the tales she would tell their children about this day, but his smile faded as he walked out of his study and stood on the terrace, watching the sailboats gliding across the water. If he was mistaken, she was going to be furious, and if he wasn't mistaken, then he shouldn't be feeling quite this uneasy. On the other hand, he could merely be suffering from an ordinary case of wedding nerves.

Spence turned his back on the view and walked over to his desk to make some more phone calls. At the very worst, Corey could get an annulment and no one would ever need to know they'd been married.

Fifteen

STANDING NEAR A ROSE-COVERED GAZEBO WHERE HE WAS about to be married by a thoroughly inebriated judge to a totally unsuspecting photographer, Spence chatted amiably with two women who didn't know they were about to become his in-laws.

Corey had wanted happy faces for her pictures, and he'd provided two hundred of them for her, with the aid of an amazing quantity of French champagne, a fortune in Russian caviar, and a brief, amusing speech he'd given that had gained their full cooperation. In fact, all the guests seemed to be having a thoroughly enjoyable time.

The bridegroom certainly was.

Lifting his champagne glass to his mouth, Spence watched his bride-to-be study the angle of the sun as she readied the last of the tripods for the shots of the actual wedding. The long train of her ten-thousand-dollar wedding gown had gotten in her way, so she'd tied it up into a makeshift bustle, and her long lace veil was currently slung over her shoulders like a crumpled stole. He decided she was the most exquisite creature alive. Utterly fetching. Completely unself-conscious. And she was about to become his. He watched her hurrying toward him, her eyes glowing with pleasure at the shot she'd lined up. "I think we're all set," she told him.

"It's a good thing," Spence chuckled. "Lattimore is roasting alive in that gazebo in those robes you've made him wear for the last hour, and he's been quenching a very big thirst."

Corey's grandmother summed it up differently as she reached up to rearrange Corey's veil. "That judge is drunk!" she declared.

"It's okay, Gram," Corey said, twisting around to watch her mother unwind her train and stretch it out carefully behind her. "He isn't

really a judge. Spencer says he's a plumber."

"He's a lush, that's what he is."

"How's my hair?" Corey asked when they were finished.

Spence particularly loved her hair today, even though it wasn't loose around her shoulders the way he wanted to see it tonight, in bed. They'd pinned it up into curls at the crown to keep it from looking untidy in the pictures. "It looks fine," Mrs. Foster declared, reaching up to straighten the headpiece.

Spence offered Corey his arm and grinned. He was so damned happy, he couldn't stop smiling. "Ready?" he asked.

"Wait," Corey said as she straightened his black tie. Spence envisioned a lifetime of Corey straightening his ties.

Corey felt a sharp ache in her chest as she looked up at the elegant man in a tailor-made tuxedo who was smiling down at her with all the tenderness of a real bridegroom. She'd dreamed this dream a thousand times in years gone by, and now it was only make-believe. To her horror, she felt the sting of tears and hid them quickly behind an overbright smile.

"Will I do?" Spence asked, his deep voice strangely husky.

Corey nodded, swallowed, and smiled gaily. "We look like Ken and Barbie. Let's go."

Before they could take the first step onto the white carpet that stretched between the rows of chairs and into the gazebo, someone in the front row turned around and good-naturedly called, "Hey, Spence, can we get this thing going? It's hot as hell out here."

It hit Spence at that moment what he'd forgotten. He looked around for something to use and saw a piece of gold wired ribbon lying in the grass.

“Ready?” Lattimore said, running his finger around the collar of his robe.

“Ready,” Spence said.

“Okay if we make it sh... short?”

“That’s fine,” Corey said, but she was leaning back, trying to see where Kristin was with the spare camera they’d decided to use for extra shots.

“Miss... uh... Foster?”

“Yes?”

“It’s cushtomary to look at the groom.”

“Oh, sorry,” Corey said. He’d been very nice and very cooperative, and if he wanted to play his part to the fullest, she didn’t mind in the least.

“Place your hand in Spence’s hand.” On the right, Corey saw Kristin move into position and lift her camera.

“Do you, Spencer Addison, take Cor... er... Caroline Foster to be your lawfully wedded wife so long as you both shall live?” the judge said so quickly the words ran together.

Spence smiled into her eyes. “I do.”

Corey’s smile wavered.

“Do you, Caroline Foster, take Spencer Addison to be your lawfully wedded wife... husband... so long as you both shall live?”

Alarm bells began ringing in Corey’s brain, but they sprang from a source she couldn’t understand.

“For God’s sake, Corey,” Spence teased gently, “don’t jilt me at the altar.”

“It would serve you right,” she said on a breathless laugh, trying to concentrate on the whereabouts of Mike.

“Come on. Say yes.”

She didn’t want to. It seemed wrong to perpetrate this sham. “This isn’t a movie, these are still shots,” she said.

Spence reached out and took her chin between his thumb and forefinger, tipping her face up to his. “Say yes.”

“Why?”

“Say yes.”

He bent his head and as his lips moved closed to hers, she could almost hear Kristin rushing forward for this unexpected shot.

“You can’t kiss her until she says yes,” Lattimore warned in a slur.

“Say yes, Corey,” Spence whispered, his mouth so close to hers that his breath touched her face. “So the nice judge will let me kiss you.”

Corey felt a helpless giggle well up inside her at his cajolery and his insistence on being kissed. “Yes,” she whispered, laughing, “but it better be a very good k-“

His mouth swooped down, smothering her voice, and his arms closed around her with stunning force, gathering her to him, stifling her laughter while the judge happily proclaimed, “I now pronounce you man and wife, give her the ring.” The crowd erupted into laughing applause.

Caught completely off guard by the deep, demanding kiss, Corey clutched his shoulders for balance as her senses reeled; then she

flattened her hands, forcing him away. “Stop,” she whispered, tearing her mouth from his. “That’s enough. Really:”

He let her go, but he laced his fingers tightly through hers and kept them there while something round and scratchy slid against her knuckle.

“I need to change out of this gown,” Corey said as soon as they stepped out of the gazebo.

“Before you go – we have to –“ the judge began, but Spence intervened. “You can congratulate me in a few minutes, Larry,” he said smoothly. “I’ll meet you in the library, where it’s quiet, as soon as I take Corey upstairs. There’s a cab front to take you home after we talk.”

In the space of time it took to leave the gazebo and start down the hall to her suite, Corey’s emotions had plummeted from an enthusiastic high over the outstanding photographs she was certain she’d gotten to an inexplicable depression, which she tried to rationalize as a normal letdown after a day of extraordinary tension and hard work. She knew Spence wasn’t to blame. He’d played his role as surrogate bridegroom with a combination of unshakable calm and boyish enthusiasm that had been utterly charming.

She was still trying to sort out her tangled emotions when he opened the door to her suite and stepped aside, but when she started to walk past him, he stopped her. “What’s wrong, beautiful?”

“Oh, please,” she said on a choking laugh, “don’t say anything sweet, or I’ll burst into tears.”

“You were a gorgeous bride.”

“I’m warning you,” she said chokily.

He drew her into his arms, cupping the back of her head and pressing her face to his heart in a gesture that was so tender and so

unexpected that it moved her another step closer to tears. “It was such an awful farce,” she whispered.

“Most weddings are an awful farce,” he said in quiet amusement. “It’s what comes afterward that matters.”

“I suppose so,” she said absently.

“Think about the weddings you’ve seen,” he continued, ignoring the startled looks of several wedding guests who saw them through the open door as the guests walked down the hall. “Half the time the groom is hungover or the bride has morning sickness. It’s pitiful,” he teased.

Her shoulders shook with a teary laugh, and Spence smiled because the sound of her laughter had always delighted him, and making her laugh had always made him feel as if he were better, stronger, nicer than he really was. “All things considered, this is about as close to a perfect wedding as you could hope for.”

“Not to me it isn’t. I want a Christmas wedding.”

“Is that the only thing you dislike about this wedding – the season of the year, I mean? If there’s anything I can do to make you happier about all this, tell me and I’ll do it.”

You could love me, Corey thought before she could stop herself, then she pushed the thought aside. “There is absolutely nothing more you can do beyond what you’ve done. I’m being ridiculous and overemotional. Weddings do that to me,” she lied with a smile as she stepped back.

He accepted that. “I’ll deal with Lattimore, and then I want to change clothes. In the meantime, I’ll have some champagne sent up here, and then I’ll come up and share it with you, how does that sound?”

“Fine,” she said.

Sixteen

A SHOWER HAD PARTIALLY REVIVED COREY'S SPIRITS, AND SHE surveyed the selection of clothes hanging in her closet, wondering what the appropriate attire was for a standin bride who was about to have champagne with a surrogate groom after their pretend wedding. "This will work," she said with relief as reached for the billowy cream silk pants and long tunic she'd brought along because they were flexible enough to wear to almos any social event in a Newport mansion.

She was standing in front of the bathroom mirror, brushing her hair, when she heard Spence knock on the door and then let himself in. "I'll be right there," she called, pausing long enough to put on pearl earrings. She straightened and stepped back from the mirror. She looked much happier and more contented than she felt, she decided with relief. Because what she felt was... haunted. She had worn a bridal gown and veil and stood beside Spence in a rose-covered gazebo while he held her hand in his, smiling tenderly into her eyes. He had even slipped a ring on her finger afterward... The memories of their "wedding" seemed to be permanently imprinted on her mind. No, she told herself, not permanently, only temporarily. Memories would soon give way to the reality. The wedding had been a hoax, the "ring" a piece of gold ribbon with a wire in it. The reality made her ache.

Spence had taken off his tuxedo jacket, loosened his tie, and opened the top buttons of his formal shirt. He looked every bit as sexy and elegant that way as he had during the wedding; he did not, however, look nearly as relaxed. His jaw was rigid, and his movements were abrupt as he ignored the champagne chilling in a gold bucket and jerked the stopper out of one of the liquor decanters on the cabinet. He poured some into a crystal tumbler and lifted the glass to his mouth. "What are you doing?" Corey asked, watching him take two deep swallows of straight bourbon.

He lowered the glass and looked at her over his shoulder. "I'm having a very stiff drink. And now I'll fix one for you."

"No thanks," Corey said with a shudder. "I'd rather have the champagne."

"Take my advice," he said almost bitterly, "have a regular drink."

"Why?"

"Because you're going to need it." He fixed her a drink that at least had ice cubes and some club soda to dilute it and handed it to her. Corey sipped it, waiting for him to explain, but instead of talking, he stared at the glass in his hand.

"Spence, whatever is wrong, it can't be worse than you're making it seem to me right now."

"I hope you still feel that way in a few minutes," he said grimly.

"What is it?" Corey said desperately. "Is someone ill?"

"No." He put down his drink, then he walked over to the fireplace and braced his hands on the mantel, staring into the empty grate. It was a pose of such abject defeat that Corey felt a fierce surge of protective tenderness. She walked up behind him and laid her hand on his broad shoulder. It was the first time since coming to Newport that she had voluntarily touched him except when he was kissing her, and she felt his muscles tense beneath her hand. "Please don't make me wonder like this, you're scaring me!"

"An hour ago, my idiotic niece called to tell me she was now married to her beloved restaurateur."

"So far, that sounds good."

"That was the only good part of the phone call."

Visions of car crashes and ambulances flashed through Corey's mind. "What was the bad part, Spence?"

He hesitated, then he turned and looked directly at her. "The bad part is that, during our conversation, we also discussed the elopement letter she left for me last night. It appears that in her haste to explain how you'd influenced her decision to elope, Joy was a little remiss about the verbs she used. Specifically, she failed to clearly differentiate between past and present tense."

"What do you mean she explained how I influenced her?" Corey asked warily.

"Read the letter," he said, taking two folded pieces of paper out of his pants pocket and handing Corey the one on top.

Corey saw at a glance what he was talking about.

Corey told me she loved you and wanted to have your baby, she said you're the only man she's ever felt that way about, and that's why she's never married anyone else. Uncle Spence, I love Will. I want to have his babies someday. That's why I can't marry anyone else...

Despite the mortification she felt, Corey managed to affect a calm, dismissive smile as she handed the letter back to him. "In the first place, I was describing how I felt about you when I was a teenager, not an adult. Secondly, the conclusion she drew about why I haven't married was hers, not mine."

"As you can see, that's not quite the way it read."

"Is – is that all that's bothering you?" Corey said, relieved that he wasn't going to challenge her explanation.

Instead of answering, he shoved his hands into his pockets and studied her in impassive silence for so long that Corey took a nervous sip of her drink. "What's bothering me," he said bluntly, "is that I don't know how you feel about me now."

Since she didn't have the slightest idea how he felt about her and he wasn't volunteering any information about it, Corey didn't think he had any right to ask the question or expect an answer. "I think you're one of the handsomest men I've ever married!" she joked.

He was not amused. "This is no time to be evasive, believe me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I know damned well you feel something for me now, even if it's just common garden-variety lust."

She gaped at him. "Does your ego need a boost?"

"Answer the question," he ordered.

Struggling desperately to put a light tone on the matter and end it, she said, "Let me put it in this way: If we ever do an article on 'Great Kissing', you'll be featured in the Top Ten, and I'll give you my vote. Well?" she teased. "What do you think?"

"I think you'd be accused of bias for voting for your own husband."

"Don't call yourself my husband," Corey said. "It isn't funny."

"It isn't a joke."

"That's what I just said," Corey pointed out impatiently.

"We're married, Corey."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"It may sound ridiculous, but it is also true."

Corey searched his impassive features, shaking her head in denial of what she saw in his eyes. “The wedding ceremony was a sham. The judge was a plumber.”

“No, his father and his uncle are plumbers. He’s a judge.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Instead of replying, he handed the second folded piece of paper of her.

Corey opened it and stared. It was a copy of a marriage license with Corey’s name on it and Spence’s name on it. It was dated that day and signed by Judge Lawrence E. Lattimore.”

“We’re married, Corey.”

Her hand closed into an involuntary fist, crumpling the paper; her chest constricted into a knot of confused anguish. “Were you playing some sort of sick joke on me?” she whispered. “Why would you want to humiliate this way?”

“Try to understand. I told you what Joy said, and I thought this was what you wanted –“

“You arrogant bastard!” she whispered brokenly. “Are you trying to tell me that you actually married me out of pity and guilt, and you thought I’d like it? Am I so pathetic to you that you thought I’d be happy to settle for getting married at someone else’s wedding, in someone else’s gown, with a piece of wire ribbon for a wedding ring?”

Spence saw the tears in her eyes, and he caught her by the shoulders. “Listen to me! Corey, I married you because I love you.”

“You love me,” she scoffed, her shoulders shaking with laughter, her face wet with tears. “You love me...”

“Yes, dammit, I do.”

She laughed harder and the tears came faster. "You don't even know what love is," she sobbed. "You 'loved me' so much that you didn't even bother to propose. You didn't see anything wrong with turning my wedding into one great big joke."

From her perspective it was all true, Spence knew that, and the knowledge was as painful to him as the tears racing down her pale cheeks and the anguish in her eyes. "I understand how you feel about me right now."

"Oh, no you don't!" She twisted out of his grasp and angrily brushed tears off her pale cheeks. "But I'll try to make it clear once and for all; I don't want you! I didn't want you before, I don't want you now, and I will never want you!" Her palm crashed against his cheek with enough force to snap his head sideways. "Is that clear enough for you?" Whirling on her heel, Corey started for the closet where her suitcases were. "I'm not spending the night in the same house with you! When I get to Houston, I'm going to start annulment proceedings, and if you dare try to oppose me, I'll have you and that drunken judge arrested in less time than it took you to arrange this marriage! Is that clear?"

"I have no intention of opposing an annulment," he said in a glacial voice. "In fact," he added as he tossed something onto the bed and walked to the door, "I suggest you use that to cover the cost of your attorney." The door slammed shut behind him.

Corey collapsed against the wall and buried her face in her hands, her body shaking with silent sobs.

At last, a numbness finally swept over her, and she shoved away from the wall and went over to the telephone. She asked the servant who answered to locate her mother and grandmother and tell them to come up to her room immediately, then she instructed him to find Mike MacNeil and have him call her.

When Mike called, Corey told him something had come up, and she had to fly home tonight. The phone rang as soon as she hung it up.

“Miss Foster,” the butler coolly informed her, “Mr. Addison’s car is on its way to the front and will be waiting for you there as soon as you are ready to leave.”

Despite the fact that she was desperate to get out of that house, Corey was irrationally infuriated at being summarily ejected from the premises that way. She finished packing in record time and closed her suitcases. As she put the last one on the floor, she remembered the object her “husband” had tossed onto the bed. Expecting to see a money clip with bills in it, she glanced toward the head of the bed, where she thought it had landed.

Lying atop a pile of ice blue satin pillows, glittering in the pale light from the setting sun, was a spectacular diamond ring that looked as if it should have belonged to a duchess.

Her mother and grandmother knocked on her door, and Corey called to them to come in while she picked up her purse and reached for her suitcases. Mrs. Foster took one look at Corey’s pale face, saw the suitcases, and came to a full stop. “Dear God, what’s wrong?”

Corey told them in a few brief sentences and nodded toward the ring on the bed as she left. “Please see that he gets that back. Then tell him if he ever comes near me again, I’ll swear out a warrant!”

After Corey left, Mrs. Foster looked at her mother in stunned silence, then she finally said, “What a stupid thing for Spence to have done!”

“He deserves to be horsewhipped,” Gram decreed without animosity.

“Corey will never forgive him for this. Never. And Spence is impossibly proud. He won’t ask her again,” said Mrs. Foster with a sigh.

Her mother walked over to the bed and picked up the ring, turning it in her fingers with a smile. “Spence will have to send a bodyguard with Corey when she wears this.”

Seventeen

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE WON’T SIGN THE RELEASES SO THAT we can use the pictures we took in Newport?” Corey exploded.

“I didn’t say he had flatly refused to sign them,” Diana said carefully. In the week since Corey had been back from Newport, she’d thrown herself into a dozen projects to keep from thinking about either her marriage or the annulment proceedings she’d started, and she looked exhausted. “He said he would sign them, but only if you brought them to him personally tomorrow tonight.”

“I am not going back to Newport,” she warned.

“You won’t have to. Spence will be in Houston taking care of some business.”

“I don’t want to see him in Houston or anywhere else.”

“I think he knows that,” Diana said wryly. “You not only started annulment proceedings, you asked for a legal injunction to prevent him from coming near you.”

“What do you think he’d do if we put the magazine out without the releases?”

“He said to tell you that if we do, his attorneys will dine on our corporate carcass.”

“I hate that man,” she said wearily.

Diana wisely refrained from arguing that point and stuck to the matter at hand. “There’s a relatively painless way around this. He said he’s staying at the River Oaks house, so tomorrow night-“

Furious at the control he was exerting over the magazine and over her, Corey said, "Tomorrow night is the Orchid Ball. He'll have to sign the releases during the day, instead."

"I explained to Spence we're one of the sponsors and have to be there. Spence said he would expect you at the house before the ball, at seven o'clock."

"I am not going there alone."

"Okay," Diana said, sounding as relieved as she felt. "Mother and I will wait in the car for you while you're with Spence, then we'll leave from there."

Eighteen

COREY HADN'T BEEN BACK TO SPENCE'S HOUSE SINCE HIS grandmother lived there, and it seemed strange to be returning after so many years.

She knew he'd leased the house to tenants who'd kept most of the servants on, and the place was as beautifully maintained as it had always been. Since Spence was staying there now, Corey assumed either he had decided to sell it and it was vacant, or else the people who'd lived there for years had moved out.

All the carriage lights were lit on the front porch, just as they'd always been whenever guests were expected, but tonight, a strange colorful glow was visible through the closed draperies in what Corey knew was the living room.

"I won't be long," Corey told Diana and her mother as she got out of the car and walked up the front steps.

Clutching the release form in her hand, she rang the bell, her heart drumming harder as footsteps sounded in the foyer, and harder still when the door swung open and Mrs. Bradley's former housekeeper said with a warm smile, "Good evening, Miss Foster. Mr. Addison is waiting for you in the living room."

Corey nodded, then she walked through the dimly lit foyer. Bracing herself for the impact of seeing Spence for the first time since that hideous scene in Newport, Corey rounded the corner and walked into the living room.

Then she braced herself again, trying to assimilate what she was seeing.

Spence was near the middle of the candlelit room, leaning casually against the grand piano with his arms crossed over his chest.

He was wearing a tuxedo.

The room was decked out for Christmas.

“Merry Christmas, Corey,” he said quietly.

Corey’s disoriented gaze drifted over the thick garlands draping the mantel, to the beribboned mistletoe on the chandelier overhead, to the huge Christmas tree in the corner with its red ornaments and twinkling lights, then it came to a stop at a small mountain of presents beneath the tree. All of them were wrapped in gold foil, and all of them had huge hite tags on them.

And all the tags said “Corey”.

“I cheated you out of a Christmas dance and a Christmas wedding,” he said solemnly. “I’d like to give them to you anyway. I still can, if you’ll let me.”

Spence had envisioned a dozen possible reactions from her, from laughter to fury, but he had never considered the possibility that Corey would turn her back on him and bend her head and start to cry. When she did, his heart sank with defeat. He reached for her and dropped his hands, and then he heard her choking whisper: “All I’ve never wanted was you.” Relief made him rough as he spun her around and yanked her into his arms, wrapping them tightly around her.

His wife laid her hand against his jaw and tenderly spread her fingers over his cheek. “All I’ve ever wanted was you.”

In the car outside, Mrs. Foster looked at the embracing couple silhouetted against the draperies. Her son-in-law was kissing her

daughter as if he never intended to stop or let her go. "I don't think there's any need for us to wait," she told Diana with a happy sigh. "Corey won't be going anywhere tonight."

"Yes she will," Diana said with absolute certainty as she put her car into gear. "Spence cheated her out of one Christmas dance, and he intends to make up for it tonight."

"You don't mean he intends to take her to the ball," Mrs. Foster said worriedly. "The tickets have been sold out for months."

"Spence managed to reserve somehow, and we're sitting together at it." With a fond smile, she added, "We shouldn't have any trouble finding the table. It has an unusual centerpiece. Instead of white orchids, it has a big red sleigh filled with holly."

Epilogue

WRAPPED IN A RED VELVET ROBE, COREY STOOD AT THE windows of the chalet, looking out across the snowy, moonswept hills of Vermont, where they had decided to spend their first real Christmas. Her husband insisted this was also their second honeymoon – the one they would have had if Corey had gotten her Christmas wedding – and he was playing the role of ardent bridegroom with passion and élan.

She turned and walked over to the bed where Spence was asleep, the she leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead. It was almost dawn, and he'd made love to her until they were both exhausted, but it was Christmas morning, and she was absurdly anxious to see him open his presents. He gave her presents all the time, and she'd shopped for months for just the right gifts for him.

A smile touched his lips. "Why are you awake?" he asked without opening his eyes.

"It's Christmas morning. I want to give you a present. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," he said with a husky laugh and pulled her down on top of him.

"This is not your present," she informed him, propping her elbows on his chest as he opened her robe. "You've already had this one."

"I like having two of the same presents," he persisted, tracing his finger down the valley between her breasts.

"Two Christmases and two honeymoons, all in one year," she answered on a breathless laugh as his mouth traced a seductive

path where his hand had been. “Are we always going to do everything in twos?”

The answer to that question appeared nine months later in the birth announcement section of *People* magazine:

It's a “double exposure” for Spencer Addison and his wife, photographer Corey Foster – identical twins named Molly and Mary, born September 25th.