



Jan Scarbrough
Kentucky
Woman

BLUEGRASS REUNION SERIES

Kentucky Woman

By Jan Scarbrough

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*For three Kentucky women—Brenna, Dana and Holly, the mothers of my
grandchildren*

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Chapter One

*Trackside Training Facility
Louisville, Kentucky*

Times were good and that scared her.

Alexis Marsden shifted in her saddle and stared into the February predawn darkness between the pricked ears of an anxious two-year-old Thoroughbred. The cold seeped into her bones with brittle clarity. Frosty mist hugged the quiet infield lake, lending a ghostly appearance to the half-mile oval track and deserted grandstands. The fog added an aura of peace to the setting.

A peace Alex didn't feel.

Instead, a razor-sharp blade of anticipation etched her heart as if something was about to happen. Or her life was about to change.

She didn't want her life to change, thank you. Not now. Not after all the hard work she had done to make it *almost* perfect. She had everything she wanted—career, family, independence, and an avocation she loved in exercising Uncle Johnny's horses in the morning before going to her nine to five desk job. Okay, she didn't have a "relationship" and her young son didn't have a father. But even that was working out. Being both mom and dad wasn't so hard.

Alex seized the bottom of her lip hard—as hard as the guilt racing through her heart. Was it wrong to be glad Tyler hadn't known his dad? Brandon, the man she had once loved, and the man who had abandoned her, had been killed two weeks ago. Now Tyler would never have the chance.

The colt beneath her tossed his head. *Come on*, he was telling her. *Let's go!*

Alex shook off the premonition and willed herself to relax. "Easy, Greco," she soothed, placing a quiet hand on the restless youngster's neck. His muscles quivered beneath the touch of

her leather glove. “Easy, boy.”

Snorting his impatience, the colt danced sideways. Alex sucked in a breath of frigid air. Time to get to work.

She pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her riding helmet, buying a little protection against the bitter wind, and flexed her already tingling fingers inside her riding gloves. Greco’s neck arched, disputing her firm control, and she let the thick reins slide a notch through her grip. The sleek chestnut moved forward and stepped onto the sandy footing of the exercise track.

She clucked once. Greco picked up a jog. Alex posted up and down to the rhythm of his slow trot, and turning the wrong way on the oval track along the outside rail, she let the colt warm up slowly. She felt his pent up energy in each springy step.

When she finally turned again, moving closer to the inner rail for the gallop, the sky in the east had washed pink. The rising sun, still hidden by clouds, gilded rose-colored streaks across the ragged gray fleece overhead. Alex savored the splendor of the morning sky exposed in all its glory over the expanse of infield.

It was always like this in the mornings. She watched the horses peppering different points of the training track—slower ones to the outside, some jogging, others galloping, while others breezed next to the inner rail or worked at near-race speed. Her heart surged with joy. Oh, she loved it.

Alex flicked her tongue across her chilled lips. “Time to go, boy.”

Now loosening her hold on the reins, she clucked once more. Immediately the colt moved into a smooth gallop. The animal’s naturally long gait stretched out. Powerful muscles coursed between Alex’s legs. She stood in the stirrups, bowing over the colt’s neck, and shortened the reins to keep from going faster than Johnny had ordered.

The dirt track flowed beneath her. Wind stung her face, chasing tears from her eyes and breaching the protection of her sweats, but she didn’t care. Blood ran warm in her veins, and her heart pumped with exhilaration.

She stared between the colt’s ears—beacons into the animal’s soul, relaxing and twitching forward and back, listening to her soft crooning or pricking toward the track ahead.

In another stride, Greco’s ears flattened. *Danger!*

In a heartbeat Alex registered Greco’s signal. Ahead someone shouted. Hooves pounded. Out of the gloom, a runaway horse hurtled straight toward them like a ghostly specter in a bad

dream.

Instinct kicked in. Ducking her head to look over her right shoulder, Alex saw the track immediately behind them was clear. She pulled the right rein and sharply jammed her boot into the colt's left side.

At a full gallop, Greco swerved hard. The runaway came on. Too fast. Too near. A flapping stirrup nicked Alex's left thigh.

Adrenaline spurred her pulse. The harsh beat of fear thudded against her ribs and left her head spinning. Alex shook off the panic. Acting again on instinct, she steadied her horse and regained her balance, glancing back. Other horses and riders scattered right and left while an outrider closed in on the frightened runaway.

Entering the turn, Alex eased Greco to a walk. On the other side of the rail, she spotted the unseated rider. Shaken, but apparently unhurt, he was slowly climbing to his feet. An ambulance sped down the track.

It was surreal—as if she watched a slow motion movie. She could have been lying there instead. Or what if it was Johnny's special colt sprawled on the track seriously injured? A horse had been killed not long ago at Churchill Downs in a head-on crash with a runaway in the morning gloom.

She turned Greco toward the barns and nudged him into a jog.

Alex swallowed hard, forcing down queasiness. Her intuition had proved right. Something had happened. Thank heavens, she'd averted disaster and her life wasn't going to change after all.

* * * *

His stomach dropped. Fear wrapped around him, smothering him. He opened his mouth to call a warning but no sound came out.

In the frigid morning gloom, his Thoroughbred colt swerved to avoid an oncoming horse. In a flash, a blink of an eye, the colt was clear of danger.

Damn, that was close. Much too close. Jackson Breckinridge stepped back from the aluminum railing that divided the track from the deserted grandstands. He thrust his fists into the pockets of his camelhair coat, glad for its weight.

He couldn't lose Greco. Not now. Not after losing his grandmother and brother in the space of a month. Not with his family's honor at stake.

He let out a frosty breath. Potential was written all over the colt's lean, well-muscled body, and Jack was counting on this potential to bring back the glory days of Breckinridge Station, the family's Thoroughbred horse farm.

The leggy red colt now jogged toward him. Jack glanced askance at the wizened trainer by his side. Johnny Marsden had trained horses for Jack's grandparents. Now the old man worked for him.

Jack slapped the trainer on the back. "Give that exercise boy credit, Marsden. That kid has talent and courage as well as some plain damn good luck."

The corners of Marsden's mouth quivered. "Yep, I got the best damn exercise rider on the track."

Horse and rider stopped in front of them. Steam lifted from Greco's shining coat.

"Johnny, do you want me to finish the gallop?"

Jack tensed. It was a decidedly female voice. No wonder Marsden laughed at him. The rider was not "Mr." but "Ms," a backside "gallop girl." And if he didn't miss the mark, the rider was just the woman he had come to Trackside to find.

Marsden walked through the gap in the railing and placed a hand on the horse's neck, catching the bridle with the other. "Nope. Colt's had enough excitement for one day." The trainer looked over his shoulder. "You told me you wanted to talk to Alex. Here she is."

Jack surveyed the exercise girl. For a second Alex sat immobile on the colt. Then she lowered the sweatshirt hood from her riding helmet. Cold had reddened her tiny nose and delicate cheekbones. She gave a small nod to acknowledge his stare, glancing at him for a brief, electric moment.

"Hop off, kid." Marsden handed Greco over to his groom. "Why don't you two go warm up in the office? Give me a few minutes and I'll join you there." He turned and headed toward the shed row, leaving the groom to tend to the horse.

"Sure, Johnny." Alex flicked her whip into the dirt.

Jack's gaze shifted from her face to where the short, leather stick landed near his feet. Had that action been a deliberate challenge? He stepped back a pace and glanced up.

In a quick, fluid motion, she hauled her right leg over the horse's neck, and in the next instant slid from the saddle, dropping with a thud to the ground in front of him.

A breath hitched in his chest. The tiny slip of a woman held him captive with a defiant

gaze. He hardly noticed when the groom led Greco away. Seeing Alex again staggered him. He hadn't expected the adrenaline rush.

Staring at him, she drew off her helmet, tucked it under her arm, and shook loose a cascade of brown curls, dark and rich like expensive Swiss chocolate. The unruly mass tumbled around her face, framing her jade eyes and delicately arched brows.

Desire slammed him hard. That was unexpected too, but possibly a good thing, given what he was about to do.

Jack reached down and retrieved her stick. Straightening, he handed it to her, handle first. "Your whip?"

"Thanks." She snatched it out of his hand, casting him a guarded look from under thick lashes the same color as her hair.

Petite and slender as he remembered, she wore a gray hooded sweatshirt and leather chaps over tight, faded jeans. The worn brown suede encasing her legs and thighs created an intriguing V of blue denim beneath her belt buckle.

Jack's blood simmered. What was she now? Twenty-six? He hadn't seen her in years. In fact, he had deliberately avoided her. No mistake about it, things hadn't changed. Alex always threw him off-kilter.

"No point in freezing our butts off," she said in a no-nonsense voice. "Let's get some of Johnny's coffee. It's not good, but it's hot."

"Lead on."

She spun around and stalked away from him like a cat. He was unable to keep his eyes off the way the chaps framed her swaying, denim-clad hips. She had been eighteen when he last saw her. Now he appreciated the way she filled out those jeans.

Yes, Alex had grown up.

Jack struggled to regain his accustomed control, that steely reserve he used in a corporate board room and as a defense against the prying of a domineering mother. In two strides he caught up to Alex and they walked side-by-side. Already he had learned two things. One, Alex had the courage of a wildcat. Saving Greco had shown him that. And two, he was even more confident he was doing the right thing.

The former was safer to discuss. "That was a nice piece of riding."

"Thanks."

“Your quick action saved my colt’s life.”

She shrugged off his praise. “It was touch and go for a second.”

“I owe you a lot.”

She stopped right in front of the busy entrance to Johnny’s barn and turned to face him, a proud lift to her chin. “Look. I was just doing my job. I don’t want your gratitude.”

She wouldn’t budge an inch—or five feet and three inches. The muscles in her jaw moved, and she glared up at him, dark lashes now shrouding her eyes. Knowing what he knew about her, he couldn’t fault that attitude. In her place he’d want nothing to do with him or his family either. Her mind-set didn’t bode well for his plans.

To dispel his nervousness, Jack brushed a glance from the top of her head down to the toes of her boots, just the sort of haughty appraisal he had used to intimidate the out-of-state businessman who threatened to buy his family’s regional bank.

Unfortunately, his gaze didn’t seem to have any effect on Alex, who continued her mistrustful assessment of his face.

“Why are you here, Jack?”

Her direct question jarred him. “I own Greco,” he said as if to explain his right to watch his horse train.

“Everybody at Trackside knows that. Why are you really here?”

Was this the time to explain himself? It didn’t seem proper somehow. Out here in the cold, gray morning. What he was about to do required wine, music, flowers, and quite possibly an act of God, given her obvious distaste for him.

She shifted from one foot to the next, her gaze somber.

Jack bought time, hoping the warm office would thaw her icy demeanor. “I’m glad you’re still working for Marsden.”

“I enjoy it.” Her hand strayed to a charming curl that dipped over her right eye.

He had seen her brush the hair from her eyes many times when they were kids at Breckinridge Station where her father had worked. Back then her laughter was infectious and her smile contagious. It lit her face and warmed his heart. But more often than not her beautiful smile had been for his brother Brandon, not for him—the older brother who was duty bound to referee all their youthful, summer exploits.

He hadn’t seen her since she’d been an up-and-coming jockey. Then she’d gotten

pregnant and quit riding, giving up her dream. That was about the same time her dad died of a heart attack and she and her mother moved from the farm.

“What do you think of Greco?” he asked.

She tucked the curl behind an ear, her eyes narrowing as if trying to read his motives. “He’s good enough to win the Kentucky Derby,” she said cautiously.

Jack thought so too, but fearing bad luck, he didn’t care to express the sentiment. “What do you think of Marsden’s training?” he asked, honestly interested in her opinion. “I know he’s your uncle, but there are lots of good trainers around. Should I move Greco to another barn?”

“Don’t you dare!” She fisted a hand on her hip. “There are other good trainers, sure, but very few with Johnny’s natural ability. He’s a real horse whisperer. He won’t push Greco too fast.”

Her green eyes flashed with the same enthusiasm Jack felt. This love of Thoroughbred racing was something they had always shared. He took a deep breath and glanced over her head toward the race track where tractors dragged the surface during the morning break in training.

Immediately his chest filled with fire. Trackside was a far cry from the glaring lights of a stuffy board room. He longed for this kind of life, but had never dared to disappoint his family. He had been the good, first-born son. Dutiful. Loyal. Honor-bound to carry on the family banking business. Not like his brother Brandon. Not like the young, reckless kid whose actions had threatened the family’s reputation and who enlisted in the army eight years ago.

Jack looked down at Alex, her eyes now clouded by questions. Her sweet, serious face intrigued him. Beguiled by her wide, intelligent eyes, he fought the sense of destiny that surrounded her like some psychic’s aura.

She bit her lip, staring up at him. Waiting.

“Why have you really come, Jack?”

Sensing the possibility of a thaw in her voice, Jack used that board room training to come straight to the point.

“I’ve come to ask you to marry me.”

Chapter Two

Wind whistled down the shed row, stinging Alex's face. She stood her ground, not feeling the cold air, but rather the heat of the flush burning her cheeks. From deep within an incredulous laugh erupted.

"What? You've got to be kidding!" Of all the things she had expected from Jack Breckinridge, a marriage proposal hadn't been one of them. He had been her friend once. She had admired him. But he was Brandon's big brother and being two years older, he was untouchable.

"You know I never joke about things," he said.

How could she forget? The Jack she remembered had never kidded around. That guy who visited Breckinridge Station on vacations had been serious, hardly cracking a smile, and always disapproving of the childhood pranks she and Brandon pulled during those idyllic summer days together.

Why this proposal? She hadn't laid eyes on Jack in a lifetime. Was it because of Brandon's recent death? Did Jack know about Tyler? No, only Brandon and her mother had known Tyler was his son. Not the rest of his family.

Her stomach tightened. Brandon hadn't wanted her or his baby. Being the daughter of the hired help, she'd been the wrong kind of girl to marry a Breckinridge. After she had gotten over the shock of rejection, Alex had been glad for Brandon's indifferent silence. She had neither wanted nor needed the Breckinridge family's interference in Tyler's life.

Yet she *had* gladly accepted their money. Twice a year, at Christmas and Tyler's birthday, an anonymous cashier's check arrived at her address. She'd always assumed this was Brandon's way of easing his conscience without getting involved.

A dozen more questions leaped into her mind, but she couldn't force even one past her lips. All Alex could do was stare at Jack with what she hoped was a very blank look on her face.

"I know this is a surprise," he conceded.

She found her voice. “You bet it is.” Whatever Jack was up to, she didn’t need it. One Breckinridge man in a lifetime had been plenty, thank you very much.

“Maybe I can explain myself better if we go into Johnny’s office.”

Alex shrugged, not sure Jack could ever justify his crazy proposal. “This is one explanation I can’t wait to hear.”

She strode down the shed row, paying no attention to the smells of manure, hay and horseflesh, and the early morning banter of Spanish-speaking voices.

Inside Johnny’s office, she dropped her whip on the table beside the coffee pot, grabbed a Styrofoam cup and filled it with the strong coffee. Then she dumped three spoonfuls of powdered creamer into the cup. Ignoring Jack, who had come in behind her and shut the door, she perched on the edge of Johnny’s old desk and cradled the cup, letting the steam and aroma fill her nostrils.

God, she needed the caffeine. She took a sip, lifting her gaze to rake it over the tall, black-haired man who filled the room with such authority.

Her first sight of Jack Breckinridge in years had unnerved her, to say the least. Now in the close confines of the tiny office—crowded with a space heater, two hard chairs as shabby as the desk, and a small table against the far wall piled high with notebooks, racing magazines, bits of broken tack, an ancient radio and miscellaneous junk—Alex found it hard to breathe.

The very air pulsed with tension. Or maybe it was her heart pounding. Or the fact that his spicy aftershave spiked her senses, making her alert and on edge.

He slipped off his expensive camelhair coat, revealing a pair of dark gray cords and a lighter gray turtleneck sweater that looked like Armani. Jack draped the coat over a chair, his muscles bunching against the form-fitting sweater. Damn! He was hot, and she wasn’t thinking temperature.

Even the way he poured himself a steaming cup of coffee from Johnny’s ancient coffee maker was a surprising treat to the eye. He didn’t add sugar or powdered creamer, just brought the cup up to his lips and cautiously tasted the strong brew.

She tried not to stare. Tried not to act as if she cared about his presence in the office.

What was this marriage proposal? It blew her mind.

Alex took another sip of coffee. When she looked up, Jack was watching her over the rim of his cup. His steady gaze fired her body. This was damn awkward. She didn’t want to be

melted by his chiseled features or by his eyes the color of a gray Kentucky morning. She didn't need to complicate her already almost perfect life by stirrings of something she didn't want.

Or need.

She had made the mistake of getting involved with the younger Breckinridge brother. And even though Jack had always been the responsible brother, he was still a Breckinridge.

His expression softened. "You've loved horses all your life, haven't you?"

Where did that come from? She shrugged. "I've heard a theory that a person is either born with a horse gene or not. I guess I have it."

"I was born with it too."

"Horses are in your blood."

"My Kentucky blueblood," he said with a touch of self-mockery in his voice.

Alex offered a half-smile, tired of his stalling. "Are you ever going to explain yourself, Jack?"

Jack felt his smile fade as he watched confusion sweep across Alex's face and her eyes blur with questions. The spunky kid he had played with those long summers ago was all grown up. Those slim and delicate fingers holding the foam cup hardly seemed strong enough to control a galloping horse. Yet he had seen her do it with surprising skill and ease.

She was tough and feisty. Brandon had found that out, hadn't he? Alexis Marsden could be damn stubborn and independent, and she had no reason to feel warm and fuzzy about his family.

Finishing his coffee, Jack tossed the cup into the trash can while Alex gazed at him. Could she read his heartache? Know of his dilemma? Certainly not. He was never one for revealing his emotions.

"I don't have all day, you know," she pressed him. "I've got two more horses to ride and then a job to go to."

"Right." He shuffled his feet. *Shuffled his feet?* Jackson Breckinridge Junior? The up-and-coming bank vice-president, workaholic and Jaycees Man of the Year? How could he stumble over the appropriate words?

More importantly, how did he acknowledge his loss of respect for his kid brother? His need to salvage the family honor?

Two weeks ago his parents had gotten the dreadful knock on the door. Some spit-polished Army chaplain had broken the awful news. Brandon lay dead along some god-forsaken Iraqi highway.

Coming so soon after his grandmother's recent death, Brandon's passing had doubled his family obligations. The familiar pain of a beginning migraine throbbed behind Jack's right eye.

He schooled his features, pulling that comfortable mask of reserve over his face. "Did you hear about Brandon?"

"Johnny told me."

Jack heard the raw emotion in her voice. He wanted to take Alex in his arms, but knew better than to try. After all, she had loved his brother enough to have his child.

"I still can't believe it. It's shocking," she said, averting her face.

"It *is* hard to accept." His voice sounded hollow even to his own ears. Moments of awkward silence followed.

When she looked back at him, tears glistened on her lashes. She wiped them away. "How are your parents?"

"They're devastated, of course."

"I can understand."

Each held the other's gaze. The back of his neck ached from the strain of the last month—and of the moment.

"How are you doing, Jack?"

He frowned and rubbed his neck, wondering how much to tell. "I must admit it's a shock. First Nana and now Brandon."

"I heard about your grandmother's death too. I'm sorry." Alex sat her cup beside her on the desk. "You know I loved her."

He nodded. Alex had grown up on the farm where her mother had been his grandparents' housekeeper and her father, the farm manager. "She loved you too, Alex, you and all your family."

"I know."

"Nana left Breckinridge Station to Brandon and me," he said. "With Brandon gone, the farm is now mine."

Alex leaned forward. "Oh, Jack, that's exciting for you, even under the circumstances."

His throat tightened. "Times like these cause people to take stock of their lives."

That was true to a point. He *was* at some sort of personal crossroads, what with the deaths of the two people dearest to him. Running Breckinridge Station would be a welcome change. He was tired of banking and all the social expectations that went along with it.

"Is that why you asked me to marry you?"

"Yes." He fought the dull ache behind his eye.

He'd never thought about marrying Alex until his brother died. He always hoped Brandon would step up and do the right thing by Alex.

Jack let out a long breath full of frustration. His brother had been damn irresponsible to father Alex's baby. Brandon had told him from the first. When he refused to marry Alex, Jack could have killed him.

He didn't go to their parents, but Jack made sure his brother didn't continue his wild behavior by persuading him to enter the army. Whether it was fear of his father discovering the truth or fear of his *own* fatherhood, Brandon left Louisville after high school graduation.

Ironically, their mother had never forgiven Jack for encouraging Brandon to enter the service.

"Jack, we haven't seen each other in a long time." Alex's stiff posture displayed her mistrust and hostility.

"I realize that." Alex didn't deserve his brother's betrayal. His parents didn't deserve their youngest son's dishonor.

"You must have plenty of female friends to choose from," she said reasoning aloud, "women better suited to your sort of lifestyle."

"I *do* know many women," he acknowledged.

"Then why me?"

"Because." What could he say? He wasn't at liberty to tell her the truth. He had to shield his parents. Jack's head started to pound. His brother's disgrace was his disgrace. He couldn't tell Alex the primary motive for his proposal. Family honor. She had no reason to care about his obligation to protect the Breckinridge reputation and standing in the community. "Because."

No, he couldn't tell her that any more than he could admit to secretly loving her a long time ago.

"I hoped you'd do me a favor." The words tumbled out of his mouth like a gift from a

Greek muse. "My mother is pressuring me into marriage to a woman I don't like."

Alex cocked a skeptical eyebrow. "What for?"

"Mother wanted one of us to make a prestigious marriage, and with Brandon gone, she's expecting me to do it. You know me, Alex. I don't go in for that society stuff."

Alex seized upon his words. "This sounds like a movie. Not real life."

"It's the truth." Making up his mother's matchmaking wasn't far from the reality. Lately she had been pushing Miss Gloria Fenton, social-climbing debutante, at him.

"Well, I guess I can see your mother pulling a stunt like that, but you're a big boy, Jack. Why do you feel you have to do what she says?"

"I'm the first born son, remember? It's my duty to the family."

"I'm sorry." She shook her head. "Find another candidate for your scheme."

"Alex, if you marry me, I'll also provide a trust fund for you and your son. If things don't work out between us, you'll never have to worry about money again."

Alex folded her arms across her chest and glared at him. "I don't want or need your money. I'm perfectly capable of caring for my family."

"No one is questioning your ability. I'm asking you to do me a favor and I'm making it worthwhile."

"I can't marry someone I don't love."

He gritted his teeth. He had anticipated her reaction, but not her bluntness. "No, I suppose you can't."

Tension crackled between them. Now what? He had tried to do the noble thing and fix Brandon's horrible mistake. Alex was as obstinate as he remembered. He wasn't sure how to sway her.

Johnny Marsden burst into the office at that moment, bringing with him a blast of cold air. It did little to cool Jack's flushed face.

The trainer seemed completely unaware of the friction in the room. He poured a cup of coffee and sat down. "Greco's fine. Good piece of riding out there, kid."

"Thanks, Uncle Johnny."

"When it's foggy," Marsden explained, "you never know what might happen on the track."

"Yeah, the day's been full of surprises," Alex muttered, glancing at Jack.

Marsden's eyes narrowed. He slowly looked back and forth between them, taking stock of the situation. "Anything goin' on I should know about?"

Alex uncrossed her arms and put her hands flat on the desk beside her, leaning forward again. "Oh, no. Not a thing."

So Alex could avoid the truth when it suited her purpose. Jack touched his fingertip to his forehead in mock salute. She glared at him, evidently not amused.

"Break's over and the track's open," the trainer announced. "Best get going, then."

"Sure, Johnny." Alex shoved off the desk. Grabbing her helmet, she stuffed her hair under it, buckled the chin strap, and started for the door.

Jack grabbed her leather whip. "You're forgetting something."

His words stopped her. She turned to face him.

"Your crop, Ms. Marsden." He placed the handle in her outstretched hand, but for some perverse reason, didn't let go of the other end.

She glared at him. "Thank you, Mr. Breckinridge."

"My offer still stands, Alex." He released his hold.

"Don't hold your breath." Snatching her stick, she fled out the door.

Chapter Three

What had she been thinking? Alex wanted to slap her palm against her forehead in frustration. Instead she took the wet, iron skillet from her mother's grasp and began to dry it with a terrycloth dishtowel.

"I can't believe you, Alexis Anne." Evelyn Marsden stood at the kitchen sink, her frown deepening. "How could you turn Jack down?"

A familiar pang shot through Alex's stomach. Why did her mother always make her feel like she was five years old? Defensive. As if her judgment was flawed.

Alex took a deep breath, hoping to steady her nerves. Her relationship with her mother was complicated. One minute Alex was the child. Next, the parent. In rare moments, they were friends. That's when she did dumb things, like complain about Jack Breckinridge's idiotic proposal.

"I'm sorry about Brandon." Evelyn shook her head. "He was such a pretty boy."

Alex rolled her eyes at the thought of hard ass, hard muscled Brandon Breckinridge being called *pretty*.

Her mother turned off the hot water and emptied the dish pan of suds down the drain. "With Brandon gone, you should marry Jackson." She took the dry skillet from her daughter's hands.

Now Alex was in for a lecture. She could see it coming, big time. "I don't love the man, and his proposal is purely self-serving."

"I don't care what his motives are, if it can get us out of here and back to Breckinridge Station where we belong," Evelyn said. "With Brandon dead and gone, there won't be any more nice presents twice a year."

Alex set her jaw. Angry resentment shot through her. Hadn't she busted her butt to make sure her mother and son had everything they needed? They weren't destitute, by any means. Everyone had credit card debt, didn't they? And a car payment.

“We don’t need help from a Breckinridge.”

Evelyn dried her hands. Her face softened, and she pressed her lips together while she surveyed her only child. “I’m sorry, honey. I know I must sound ungrateful and selfish. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t even have a roof over my head.”

Reaching out, Evelyn pulled Alex into a one-arm hug. Alex ducked her head against her mother’s thin shoulder and accepted the peace offering.

How frail her mother felt. At sixty-six, Evelyn was still good-looking and vain enough to know it. But sometimes Alex forgot her mother wasn’t the robust woman of her childhood. The heart attack two years ago had zapped her mother of strength. Nevertheless, Evelyn always spoke her mind, which was something Alex had gotten used to over the years. Her mother didn’t mean half the things she said, and so Alex had learned to take her words with a grain of salt.

No matter her faults, Evelyn had created a loving, safe atmosphere for Tyler in their cramped two bedroom apartment. Alex could always count on her to be there for both of them. Just like Alex had been there for her mother when Daddy died. That’s what families were for, wasn’t it?

Alex shrugged out of the embrace, shaking free of the sentimentality that welled within her chest and threatened her burning eyes.

“It’s time for Tyler to go to bed,” Evelyn said gently. “Do you want me to get him ready?”

Alex smiled in appreciation. “No, I’ll do it.”

She pushed open the kitchen door and walked into the darkened living room. A white glare pooled from the TV onto the floor. Dressed in red and blue striped pajamas, her son sat hunched on the sofa hugging his knees, his bare feet peeping from the flannel pajama bottoms. Big feet. Just like Brandon’s.

Regret seeped through her. Brandon would never know his son. Long ago she’d given up thoughts of them being a family, but a man should know his son.

Like a zombie with a glazed look in his eyes, Tyler was transfixed on the television screen. His only movement was an occasional flick of an index finger when he pressed a button on the remote control. Beside him, the family cat lay curled atop of a throw pillow.

“Have you finished your homework?”

No answer.

Alex reached out and confiscated the remote.

That got his attention. “Hey! What are you doing?”

“I asked you a question.”

“Huh?”

“Homework.”

“Oh, I did that when I came home from school. Granny helped me.”

Chalk up another debt to her mother. Alex smiled down at her tousle-headed son. “Well, then I guess you’re ready for bed once you brush your teeth.”

“Ah, do I hafta?”

She folded her arms across her chest and put on her stern, no-nonsense look.

Tyler glanced up and frowned. “Okay, I’m goin’.”

“Thank you.”

Tyler untangled his legs and padded into the bathroom while Alex clicked off the TV and shooed away the cat. She started to remove the red chenille slipcover that covered their worn sofa.

“Let me help,” Evelyn offered.

The two of them made short work of converting the sleeper sofa into Tyler’s bed. It was lumpy in the middle and dreadfully uncomfortable, but for a slight boy, who slept like a log, it worked fine.

Tyler tramped into the living room and crawled into bed. “Can I watch TV?”

“Not on your life. Tomorrow’s a school day.”

When had she started sounding like her mother? Of course, Tyler knew he had school the next day. Odd how one’s best intentions faded once becoming a parent. Responsibility for a child’s life was a heavy, although joyous, burden.

Alex picked up a book from the stack beside the computer table. “How about a chapter from *The Black Stallion’s Filly*?”

“Okay.” Tyler sounded resigned, but that was just for show. He was smart and possessed a vivid imagination. Alex had been reading to him since he was six months old. Unlike most kids, Tyler didn’t like *Harry Potter*. He preferred tales of horses or animals. They were slowly reading Walter Farley’s classic series of Black Stallion books, the ones she’d enjoyed as a child.

Alex sat down beside him on the sofa-bed, circled him with her left arm and drew him

close. Tyler's hair smelled of baby shampoo.

Make a note to schedule a haircut.

She started reading at chapter five. The two main characters, Alec and Henry, were training the Black Stallion's filly for the Kentucky Derby.

A warm energy imbued her with tenderness as she read. How she loved this little boy! So what if Tyler Marsden had the look of Brandon about him? He wasn't self-centered like a typical Breckinridge. She hadn't raised him that way. He wasn't a spoiled rich kid. For all his tough-boy posture, Tyler cared about others, and he'd always been respectful of her mother, even when his granny nagged.

Thinking of Evelyn, Alex looked up to find her mother watching them. The older woman stood silhouetted against the light from her bedroom door. Alex could almost hear her mother's thoughts. *He's a Breckinridge.*

Instinctively, Alex gave Tyler a small squeeze. It was a possessive gesture. This was *her* son. Something in her heart rebelled against any Breckinridge getting involved with him. In her mind, they'd given up that right when Brandon walked out on her in her time of need. Two lousy checks a year didn't make up for her son not having a father.

"Did you ever ride in the Derby?" Tyler asked after she'd read several pages.

"No, Tiger, I was an apprentice when I quit riding. I didn't have enough experience for a Derby mount."

His eyes grew big with curiosity. "Do you think Greco can win it?"

Alex often talked about the horses she exercised. Tyler knew all about Johnny's prize colt. "Greco is certainly capable enough," she answered. "But he's only two. He must stay sound until the first Saturday in May which is a whole year away. Also, Greco needs to win a few big stakes to prove he's Derby material."

"I'm going to ride in the Derby when I grow up," Tyler predicted.

Alex grinned. "No you're not. Look at those long legs. You're going to be too tall." With that, she tickled the bottoms of his feet.

"Quit it," he yipped, kicking out like he was peddling a bike.

"Say please."

Tyler burrowed his head into her stomach, trying to tickle her back. Giggling and yelping, they tussled for several minutes until Alex abruptly ended the wrestling match. She was

the parent, after all, and it was time for bed.

“We’ve got to settle down. Granny will get us.”

“Granny won’t get us,” Tyler fired back. “She’s easy, like you are.”

“Humph!” Alex grunted, standing up. “And you’re a rascal. Now crawl under those covers.”

Tyler scrambled under his blanket and snuggled down. “Was my daddy tall?”

His question jarred her. “Yes.”

He looked up with an eager light in his eyes. “Maybe I can be a trainer like Uncle Johnny.”

“Yes, maybe you can. Or maybe you can be an equine veterinarian.” She kissed his forehead. “You can be whatever you want to be. Now get some sleep.”

“Night, Mommy.”

Alex switched off the light and glanced at her mother. Evelyn’s brow puckered. Alex frowned too. She was in for it again. Bracing for one more lecture, she followed her mother into the kitchen and shut the door behind them.

“I know I got him too excited before going to bed,” she said hoping to dodge the reprimand.

Evelyn turned toward her. “You’re an excellent mother, Alexis.”

“But?” Alex waited.

“But you can’t do it all by yourself.”

Alex crossed her arms across her chest. “I haven’t done it all. I have your help, Mom.”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“I wasn’t given a choice, and you know it.”

Evelyn looked smug. “You have a choice now.”

Heat swept Alex’s face. She’d left herself open for that. Why wouldn’t her mother leave it alone? “I’ve made my position clear.”

But Evelyn wasn’t listening. “Look at your son. He does nothing after school but work on his homework and watch TV. There’s nowhere for him to play outside that’s really safe, especially in this neighborhood, and I can’t drive him to after school activities.”

“Tyler is doing okay.”

“But he’s not thriving.” Evelyn gestured toward the door to the living room. “By his age

you were an expert rider. You had fields and woods and barns to play in. You already knew your way around horses and you were so responsible that your father trusted you anywhere on the farm.”

“Stop it!” Alex wanted to smother her ears with her hands. “He’s doing just fine as he is.”

“Tyler is a boy and boys need activity. They need a place to run and explore. It’s unfair to keep him cooped up in this small apartment all the time with an old lady like me.”

“Life isn’t fair, Mom. Surely you know that.”

“What I know is that when an opportunity comes along, it’s up to you to grab it and hang on.”

“Marriage to Jack Breckinridge is not an opportunity.”

Evelyn stood her ground. “Jack has inherited Breckinridge Station. It’s Tyler’s heritage too. His birth right. You’re denying him that.”

“I am not!”

“Lower your voice, Alexis.”

Alex clutched her hands, trying to control another wave of anger.

“Do you really want Tyler to struggle to pay for college like you had to do?” Evelyn asked.

She couldn’t win. Not when her mother got like this. But she was just as stubborn. “I’ve already given Jack my answer.”

“You can change your mind. It’s a woman’s prerogative.”

“No, I can’t because I don’t want to.”

Evelyn shrugged. “Your father and I never had any money, but because of our jobs, we were able to give you a wonderful childhood at Breckinridge Station. If you marry Jack, the farm can be yours. Truly yours. Yours and Tyler’s.” There was a note of longing in her mother’s voice. A bit of regret as if life and time had passed her by.

Alex heard the disappointment. She looked away. “It’s not that simple.”

“Isn’t it?” Her mother paused. “The boy needs a father, and I won’t always be here to help you.”

With those words, Evelyn withdrew from the discussion, leaving the kitchen and her daughter, who stood silently in the center of the floor catching her breath. Minutes ticked by. Alex heard her mother shuffling around in her bedroom and going into the bathroom to brush her

teeth.

No, life wasn't fair. Evelyn Marsden could lay down a pretty good guilt trip when she wanted, and Alex was just enough of a sucker to pick it up. Or maybe it was the only child, responsible part of her personality. She always wanted to do the right thing.

Her heart began to pound. What if she *was* denying her son the chance of a lifetime? She'd sacrificed so much for him already. What did it matter if she sacrificed more?

She didn't want to think about it.

But she did. Long after she heard the door to her mother's bedroom softly close, she stood rooted in the same spot. Damn! Tyler was more important to her than anything. More than her jockey career. More than any man she'd ever met. Did her son mean more than her stubborn pride and need for independence? Was he more important than her overwhelming resistance to change?

Without an answer, she padded quietly into the bathroom, slipped off her clothes, pulled on a nightgown, and brushed her teeth. Suddenly, she felt exhausted, as if all emotion had drained right out of her body, leaving her limp and wrung out.

In her room, she fell into bed and pulled the navy flannel comforter up to her chin. Simon, the orange tabby, hopped in the middle of her stomach and began to knead the blanket rhythmically—nails in and out—poking her through the material with sharp claws. His loud purr filled the quiet room. Finally he circled, making a nest in the covers, and curled up on her belly.

Don't feel sorry for yourself. She forced her eyes shut.

If she married Jack for money to better provide for Tyler, what basis was that for a relationship? A marriage? When she let herself think about it, she wanted a real marriage, complete with real intimacy and friendship as well as great sex. But she never considered the possibility, because it was unlikely to ever happen and she didn't need the heartache of wishing for something she'd never have.

Alex turned on her side, disrupting the cat. Simon promptly found another spot and curled into a warm, furry ball against her back. The neutered cat was the only male she'd had in her bed for a long, long time. Simon's presence and purr eventually soothed her to sleep.

Chapter Four

Alex clicked to save her Word document and then reached for the ringing phone.

“Chandler Company, this is Alexis Marsden. May I help you?”

“Tyler hasn’t come home from school,” her mother said, her voice tight with anxiety.

Alex glanced at her watch. Ten minutes to five—plenty of time for Tyler to have walked from the bus stop to their apartment. “Maybe he missed the bus.” She fought to speak over rising panic.

“I’ve already checked with the principal,” Evelyn replied. “The bus driver told the school secretary he let him off at the stop as usual.”

“I’m coming right home.” Alex didn’t wait for a reply. She slammed down the receiver, locked her computer, and jerked her handbag from her desk drawer.

Heart thudding, she took the back stairs and rushed from the building. Over two thousand children were reported missing daily. *Where had she heard that statistic?* Visions of recent cable newscasts featuring murdered children flashed through her mind. *Not Tyler. No, not my little boy.*

She fumbled with her car keys just as her cell phone blared the call to the post, a ringtone reminiscent of her days as a jockey. Alex dug through it to find the trumpeting phone.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Marsden?”

“Yes?” She was used to being called “missus” by the parents of Tyler’s friends.

“I’m afraid I have a bit of bad news, but you’re not to worry. Tyler’s okay.” The strange woman’s voice was clipped.

“Where is he? Who is this?” Alex’s stomach dropped as she fought not to sound as frantic as she felt.

“This is Angela Jenkins, Brad’s mother,” the other woman said. “Tyler and Brad were playing in the family room. The next thing I know, they headed downstairs with the new dog. Tyler lost his balance, fell down the steps and hit his head.”

Why was Tyler at the Jenkins house in the first place? Trying to pull herself together, Alex worked to make sense of the words.

The other mother continued, "I thought he was fine, but then he started throwing up. I rushed him to the emergency room."

"Emergency room?"

"They say he's going to be okay, but they need your permission to take some tests."

"Where are you?"

"Baptist East. I'm sorry, Mrs. Marsden."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

* * * *

Three hours later, Alex drove Tyler home. None the worse for wear, her little boy had been suitably chastised by his scary rush to the hospital, CT scan, and minor concussion. Now he sat in the rear seat, silently watching the back of her head with wariness in his blue eyes.

Alex glanced from the rearview mirror back to the road. The relief that flooded through her was a palpable thing. Mrs. Jenkins had been right. Tyler had not been seriously injured. Just to be sure, she would keep an eye on him tonight as the young doctor had instructed.

She glanced again at the rearview mirror. Now came an equally hard part of parenting. "You've yet to explain why you didn't come straight home after school."

His gaze transferred to his seat buckle.

"Tyler?"

"I wanted to see Brad's new dog and I knew Granny wouldn't let me."

"You didn't know that."

"Yes I did, 'cause I can never do nothing after school."

A familiar twinge of guilt pinched Alex. That was Evelyn's point last night. Tyler wasn't thriving. He was growing up, and wanted to go places and be with friends. For all her effort and the twice yearly checks from Brandon, she didn't have money for extra-curricular activities like soccer teams or summer camps. Her mother's reluctance to drive because of her health and Alex's work schedule posed serious problems she didn't want to consider.

"That doesn't mean you don't ask first," Alex said firmly. "You scared Granny and me to death. I'm going to ground you for two weeks."

Alex looked up again at the mirror and saw his lower lip jut forward. "It doesn't matter,"

Tyler said. “I never go anywhere anyway.”

Her heart bled. Alex’s eyes blurred and she swiped tears away, hoping her son didn’t notice. Sure, Tyler piled it on thick now. She could take his guilt trip, but what would he think in a few years when he was older? Would he grow to hate her because she couldn’t give him an iPod or a Nintendo Wii?

Words failing her, she managed a rueful smile. More than anything, Alex didn’t want to be like her mother and pile on guilt. Tyler didn’t need that. He knew he’d done the wrong thing.

The silence in the car grew uncomfortable. Alex flicked the signal to turn into their apartment complex.

Jack’s marriage proposal meant money for all the things she couldn’t give Tyler. The best schools. Summer camp. After school sports. A future. A man in his life.

His heritage...

Yet it would mean giving up her hard-won independence. It would mean also mean going over to the dark side and becoming a Breckinridge.

* * * *

The next day during morning break, Alex walked down the shed row toward Johnny’s office. White rags, like tiny sails, flapped on a laundry line strung between the support posts. Typical of Kentucky weather, the unrelenting cold of two days earlier had blown away on a gust of southerly March wind. The month had not come in like a lion this year.

A black cat crossed her path and scampered into an open stall. Alex stopped, put her hands on her hips and leaned backward to stretch her lower back.

Damn, she was tired. Waking Tyler up every two hours to check on him hadn’t done much for her beauty rest. Neither had Evelyn’s arguments from the previous night that thrummed in her head, giving her a sleep-deprived headache. She needed caffeine.

Once when slipping into a fitful sleep last night, visions of Jack had flitted through her dreams—Jack, the disapproving teen who scolded her when she’d stolen the ladder from the hay loft, leaving Brandon stranded and yelling for help, and who once pulled her feet first from the spreading branches of the old blue ash near the barn paddock, catching her in his arms and holding her tight for a long moment. She could remember the look in his eyes. Surprise maybe, and something more.

Those idyllic memories didn’t help her mood. She didn’t want to dwell on the early days

with Brandon and Jack, the fun and freedom before grown-up reality set in. Back then the lowly farm manager's daughter was good enough to be a playmate for the visiting grandchildren of the farm owner, but not good enough to marry.

Bending her head side-to-side, Alex stretched again, hoping to ease the tension in her neck and shoulders. There were times when she was honest with herself and admitted pangs of guilt deep in her gut that had nothing to do with her mother's nagging.

Deep, deep down, she regretted having pre-marital sex at eighteen, being swept away in a tumult of lust and love that night in the hay loft. Brandon had claimed he loved her and she had loved him back. The swift moment of sex had ironically been the best mistake she had ever made. Tyler had come of it.

Being a single mother was tough, but being both mother *and* father to Tyler was tougher. There was no point in kidding herself any longer.

Alex stepped aside to let a groom leading a blanketed Thoroughbred pass. What would she say to Jack when she saw him? Oh, she'd see him again. If she recalled rightly, Jack Breckinridge was a single-minded, persistent sort of a guy when he wanted something.

And for some crazy reason, he wanted to marry her.

Maybe she needed help, but she didn't want a man to rescue her. Not even a sexy, self-possessed man who wore his cords and Armani sweaters as if he was poured into them.

Calling hello to Greco's groom, she walked down the shed row. At Johnny's office door, she pulled it open and came face-to-face with the subject of her thoughts, who was sitting in a hardback chair and reading a worn copy of *The Blood Horse* magazine.

Jack glanced up. Her stomach contracted. She shut the door. "Johnny's out with the horses," she said.

"I didn't come to see Marsden."

Alex's breath caught. *Of course not.*

"I'll be riding Greco in a few minutes." She spoke hastily, trying to ignore the knot in her stomach.

"I know."

He appeared so relaxed. So in control. She took a few steps across the room, aware of his aristocratic face and piercing eyes. Alex poured coffee into a cup and held the cup up to her lips, buying protection. Against what? His stare? Her incredibly mixed emotions?

She sipped the hot liquid, letting it burn all the way down her throat, and gazed at him over the rim of her cup. Being around Jack left her flustered. On edge. Like a colt ready to break.

Jack placed the magazine on Johnny's desk and leaned back nonchalantly. "Given any thought to my proposal?" Amusement sparkled in his gray eyes. "I've been holding my breath."

She pressed her lips together, heat rising in her cheeks. "I told you I won't marry without love."

"I remember you saying that." He shrugged his broad shoulders indicating he didn't much believe her. "I thought you might have reconsidered. You had two days to sleep on my offer."

She jutted out an unyielding jaw. Did this man have some sixth sense?

But to be honest, Tyler's unhappiness caused her current restiveness. His accident was a wake-up call and seeing him this morning curled in a ball in the middle of that lumpy sleeper sofa had given her pause.

Her mother was right. Tyler deserved more. No matter her hard work and best intentions, she couldn't do it by herself. Her son wasn't thriving. It would be years before she could afford a house and a monthly mortgage payment. Years before he would have his own room, a real bed and after-school activities. She couldn't even manage fifty dollars a month to save for college. Those checks always went to pay bills.

She glanced away, unable to continue eye contact. "I'm responsible for my mother and my son Tyler."

"I know."

She shifted her gaze back to his. "They're all the family I have."

He came to his feet and took two steps. He was close. Much too close. Her heartbeat ramped up so fast she feared he would hear it knocking against her chest.

"Tell me about Tyler," he said, removing the coffee cup from her hands.

She shifted her stance and felt her palms go clammy. "He has dark blond hair and blue eyes and a dimple when he smiles."

"What does he like to do?"

"He likes to read by himself and for me to read to him." What else did Tyler do? Watch TV? God help her, Evelyn was right. Clearly, she was failing Tyler.

"That's about it," she admitted finally, and added a weak justification. "He's only eight."

Alex held Jack's gaze for a minute, waiting for him to say something. Staring into his eyes was a dangerous thing.

Jack read more in Alex's reply than her feeble excuse. She couldn't know that the tremor in her voice betrayed her heartache and concern. He was always a sucker for a damsel in distress.

Once more he watched as she hauled up her chin in that proud, take-nothing-from-nobody look. He wanted to touch her. Kiss her. Instead he steadied his breath, counting silently to ten.

What was the matter with him? Why couldn't he tell Alex the whole truth instead of lying to her and pushing her into a marriage she didn't want? Why had his brother had made such a mess of things?

Jack forced a smile. Alex looked even more delicately beautiful this morning. Her abundant mane of brown hair was pulled back from her heart-shaped face. He wished she'd let it down. Just for fun. Just for him. Alone. In some dark, candlelit bedroom.

He wanted to shake his head and the old fantasy from his mind. Instead he remained immobile and let his gaze search her face. He told himself he wasn't susceptible to this woman, with her expressive eyes and her silken curls, who barely reached up to his shoulders.

The hell he wasn't.

His lips yearned to possess her mouth. His fingers itched to touch Alex's face. Instead, he let his hands hang by his side. He was trying to do a noble thing. Finding her so desirable didn't jibe with his respectable intentions.

She stared back at him with a sad expression that made him want to do battle for her.

"Alex, I owe you the truth," he said, making up his mind. "My mother *is* pressuring me to marry, but that's not the only reason I proposed to you." He paused to search her face. "I know Tyler is Brandon's child."

She paled and her hand lifted to her mouth. "Brandon promised never to tell anyone."

"He left a letter for me to read in case he didn't come home." That wasn't true, but it was easier than admitting he knew about Brandon's behavior from the beginning and had been sending checks twice yearly to salve his conscience. He'd kept Brandon's secret, not exposing him for the jerk he really was, because his parents loved their youngest son and would be hurt by his callousness toward Alex and Tyler.

She looked down. "I see."

"My family has an obligation to you and your son, but not just a monetary one." His jaw firmed. It was time to do more than send money. "I want to do what my brother didn't do—provide a home for Tyler and perhaps, if he'll have me, a father."

Tears filled her eyes, but she brushed them aside. "Why are you doing this?"

Jack rubbed his forehead. "For the family. Brandon messed up. If I can fix it, I will."

"Do your parents know?"

Awkwardly, he cleared his throat. "No. I want to protect them. They think Brandon is a hero. I don't want to tarnish my brother's image so soon after his death."

"You always protected Brandon." Her voice was hard.

"In the end, I *couldn't* protect him," Jack said with a tight-lipped smile.

They measured each other, standing a heartbeat away, but miles apart emotionally. Had he blown his chances by not leveling with her from the beginning? Would she understand his need to defend his family's honor?

"It has to be a business deal." Alex broke the heavy silence, speaking so softly he hardly heard her.

"What?"

"Our marriage." She took a stoic breath. "Since there's no love involved, it has to be purely a business deal. If we marry, sex stays out of it."

Jack took a step back. He assumed marriage came with all the bells and whistles.

Overlooking the details wasn't like him. He should have anticipated a counter plan. "Is that the way you want it?"

"It has to be that way if I marry you." Her voice grew strained. "I don't want to have any kind of feelings invested. It would be too hard."

"Do you think you'd invest feelings?"

"If we had sex," she blurted out and then looked away as if she'd admitted too much. "I won't marry you without an agreement, Jack."

Her sensual, trembling lips offset the look of purpose in her eyes. This petite woman beckoned to him in a way she didn't even know.

Jack felt his face flush. The stakes were high. "I'll agree."

She looked back, her eyes filled with resignation. "I'm not doing this for you or your

parents.”

“I didn’t think you were.”

She drew herself up to her full, though diminutive, height. “I’m doing this for Tyler.”

“So am I.” Damn his brother and his cavalier attitude toward life. But Jack was beginning to realize some part of him wanted this marriage for himself.

“Plenty of people marry for reasons other than love,” Alex stated, almost if she tried to convince herself this was the right thing to do.

His right eye began to throb. Jack lifted his hand and rubbed his temple with two fingers. “We can keep this simple,” he said, drawing on the familiar reserve with which he handled life. He let his voice grow distant. “However, we must act as if we’re married. We’ll live in the same house and be seen together. It won’t be good for Tyler to think we’re not a couple. My parents have to believe it too.”

She looked away and nodded. “I want a pre-nuptial agreement.”

“Okay.” He had no reason to deny her, and anyway, she was right. They needed an official document to protect them both.

Alex sighed. “I’ll pretend to be your wife, Jack.” She jutted out that chin again and her gaze challenged his. “No one has to know about what is *not* going on behind closed doors.”

Disappointment shook him. He searched those pale green eyes, looking for something he didn’t find. He made up his mind and nodded his head. “We’ll keep up pretenses,” he said, “and we won’t let anyone know the truth, not even your mother. Is it a deal?”

“It’s a deal.”

He grasped her hand in his and shook it firmly as if she was one of his business partners.

Yet this wasn’t the same. The platonic agreement with Alex may be purely business on her part, but the tingling sensation that penetrated his fingers where they touched hers and the subsequent heat that surged through his body boded ill for his ability to keep his share of the bargain.

Chapter Five

Four days after their handshake, Jack's corporate jet landed at McGee-Tyson Airport near Knoxville, Tennessee. It was a gray, windy day, and an early March snowstorm threatened from the southwest. The plan was simple. Purchase a marriage license at the Pigeon Forge City Hall, and have a simple and quick wedding at Cupid's Arrow Chapel near Gatlinburg. No guests. Not even Tyler or Evelyn, and certainly not Jack's parents. The elder Jackson Breckinridge and his socialite wife Irene didn't know about their son's wedding plans.

A white stretch limousine delivered them up a mountainside to an old church situated in the shadow of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. Charming and delightful, the stone chapel—with its steeply pitched roof, leaded stained-glass windows and bell tower—was postcard-perfect. The ideal place for a quickie wedding.

Right. Alex peered at the quaint church with a mixture of dread and anxiety. Would this work? Their pre-nuptial agreement was properly signed and notarized. Jack would settle a sizable trust fund on Tyler. They would move to Breckinridge Station where her son would have a normal life in the place where she had grown up.

Alex's heart thudded against her chest. She wanted a measure of control in this marriage, needing to guarantee emotional distance from the man who wanted nothing from her but a signature on a marriage certificate so he could protect his brother's good name. How could she do her best for Tyler and protect her own feelings?

Without sex, that's how.

Even though she had suggested the plan, there was something cold and off-putting about this whole arrangement.

Jack reached across the seat and covered her hand with his warm one. "I want this to be special for you."

Alex jerked her gaze from the beautiful view and repressed the urge to pull her hand away from the intimacy. In the gray daylight, she tried to gauge his frame of mind.

“Let’s just get it over with.” Her voice sounded as frigid as the weather.

Jack removed his hand and looked away. “Fine with me.”

Her throat tightened. Jack’s clipped words told her all she needed to know. He was no more in a mood to do this than she was. This was a family obligation to him.

Jack left the limo and came around to open her door. A plump, fifty-something woman bustled toward them from the church as Alex stepped out.

“Welcome to Cupid’s Arrow, Mr. Breckinridge,” the woman said. “I’m Cynthia Grant, the hostess here. We spoke on the phone.”

“Ah, yes.” Jack extended his hand. “I’m pleased to meet you.”

She smiled, pumping his hand. “I’m sorry I couldn’t order sunshine for you today.”

“I’m thankful you were able accommodate us on such short notice.” Jack turned to Alex. “This is my fiancé, Alexis Marsden.”

“Come straight along with me, honey. Let’s get you out of this cold.” Mrs. Grant swept Alex toward the side door. “We’re quite busy today with six weddings. Saturday, don’t you know?”

Inside a room marked Brides’ Dressing Suite, Alex forced down a sudden surge of panic. Another young woman in a confection of white occupied the far side of the room. Her attendant, dressed in red, stood by her side.

“I’m sorry to have to put you in a room with another girl, but it won’t be for long. It’s almost time for Emily’s ceremony,” Mrs. Grant cooed, gesturing with her hands as she spoke.

Alex nodded and smiled, and then turned her back on the blushing bride who looked young and scared.

Just like she felt.

Get over it. You agreed to this.

Alex clamped her lips together and dropped her tote bag on a chair.

Mrs. Grant slipped out and returned with Alex’s garment bag. “Here’s your gown, honey. Best be getting ready, don’t you know?” She hung the bag on a hook. “Do you need my help?”

“No, thank you.”

“Then I’ll just leave you for now.”

The woman’s energy exhausted Alex. Maybe her lack of sleep was catching up to her. She sighed and opened her tote.

During the next few minutes, Alex freshened her makeup and ran a brush through her thick hair. Then she removed her sweater, jeans, and boots and pulled on a pair of pantyhose, something she hardly ever wore. The dress she'd chosen was a stylish, silk ensemble with a three-quarter length sleeve jacket and a separate long skirt. A size four, the plum outfit was simple and elegant and not a bit bride-like.

She didn't care. This was a business deal. Not a real wedding.

The hostess rushed in to collect Emily. Now dressed and completely alone, Alex took a deep breath and turned to face the floor-to-ceiling length mirror on the other wall.

She gasped. No longer did she look like that scruffy gallop girl, careworn single mother, or even Chandler Company's efficient marketing assistant. The woman who stared back at her had a poised, confident expression on her face as if she knew what she wanted out of life and how to get it.

The irony made Alex smile.

"You look beautiful, honey." Mrs. Grant popped in again. "I'm glad to see that smile."

Alex's face warmed. "Thank you."

"Emily's wedding has started. As soon as they finish taking pictures, I'll come for you," she said. "But first, that handsome man of yours sent me to give you these."

Mrs. Grant whipped an ivory wedding bouquet from behind her back. "You see, there's just a blush of red in the roses to go with your purple dress."

"Oh, thank you!" Alex brought the delicate fragrant flowers up to her nose. She saw the faint tinge of red. And something more—Jack's attention to detail.

"He also sent you this gift." The hostess was as excited as a kid in a candy store, her smile contagious.

Alex accepted the black velvet box. "For me?"

"Yes, honey. You're to wear them."

With trembling fingers, Alex flicked open the top. Pearls. The color of the roses Jack had just given her. A pearl choker and matching pearl earrings. Nothing flashy, but serene and lovely.

"Oh, my!"

"Here, let me help you." Mrs. Grant clasped the necklace around Alex's neck. "They look nice, don't you know?"

When the woman was gone again, Alex turned to face the mirror. The pearls were exquisite, something she could never afford for herself.

Panic rose slowly in her throat. Heaven help her! Jackson Breckinridge didn't want a for-real marriage, any more than she did.

These pearls represented something even more terrifying than the impersonal wedding ceremony that lay ahead. Her life was spiraling out of control. No matter what Jack promised, the prospect of living life as a Breckinridge among wealth and privilege frightened the heck out of her.

* * * *

Somewhere in the chapel, a bad recording of Trumpet Voluntary revved up. It wasn't the stately pipe organ rendition of the song, but Jack didn't care. In his wildest dreams, this was what he always wanted to happen—Alex walking down the aisle wearing a white wedding gown and looking at him with love shining in her eyes.

He drew himself up, squaring his shoulders, and turned to watch Alex move slowly down the aisle toward him. She was carrying the bouquet of roses he had given her and around her neck, she wore his grandmother's pearls. Staring directly at him, she held her head high with a look in her eyes that could either be fear or defiance, but not love.

Resignation rippled through his body. Unfortunately, love was one-sided in this relationship. Alex viewed it as a marriage of convenience, a means to an end. He had been mistaken years ago, thinking he was too old for her. But he'd been young himself and Brandon was in the picture, complicating things, making a mess of everything he touched.

Damn! He had been so wrong. He had believed Brandon loved Alex, and at that time he wasn't going to compete with his kid brother. Then Alex got pregnant and Brandon had deserved a chance to step up and be a man.

Alex reached his side and stopped. She gave him a tremulous smile.

"You look beautiful," he whispered.

"Thank you for the pearls." She actually blushed.

"You're welcome. I told you I wanted to make today special."

The music ended with an abrupt squeak as they turned to face the minister. Alex lowered her gaze, her lashes shadowing her eyes.

The clergyman cleared his throat. "Dearly beloved," he said in his East Tennessee accent.

“We are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this company, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony...”

Jack released a pent-up breath and lifted his gaze. Heart-shaped candelabras framed the wall behind the minister. As the man’s voice droned on, Jack tried to ignore the paradox of the empty chapel. On what should be the most important day in his life, when he should be surrounded by family and friends, he was alone. Only Alex shared this moment. For better or worse, they were in this together. Just the two of them.

“Alexis Anne.” The minister turned to her.

Alex barely came up to his shoulder. Her upturned gaze was focused on the minister, and the light from the flickering candles cast an ethereal glow across her face.

The minister asked, “Will you have this man to be your husband, to live together in holy marriage? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?”

Jack expected Alex’s voice to be soft, a measure of her reluctance to be his wife. Instead she answered in a very firm, “I will.”

And then it was his turn.

“Jackson, will you have this woman to be your wife...”

To be your wife. The words hung like the aroma of scented candle smoke in the air. Alex wouldn’t know he really meant his promise.

Sweat spiked his brow. “I will.”

The minister took Alex’s bouquet and placed it on the altar. “Please face each other and join hands.”

Alex’s gaze turned up to him as he caught her hands. They were small but strong, so soft to the touch.

“Repeat after me. I, Jackson, take thee Alexis...”

Jack’s voice cracked as he recited the vows, his heart beating hard against his chest. “Till death us do part,” he ended and gave her fingers a gentle squeeze.

Once more, Alex delivered her vows firmly, awing him by the steady resolve in her voice.

“Do you have rings?” the minister asked.

Alex lowered her gaze in confusion. “Rings?”

Jack gave a reassuring grin. “I brought them.”

A blush crept into her cheeks. “Thank you. I didn’t think about buying one for you.”

Jack handed her a simple gold band. She took it and slipped it on the third finger of his left hand.

“With this ring I thee wed...”

And then Jack slid a smaller ring on her finger, repeating the words that symbolically bound them together.

“Now that Jackson and Alexis have given themselves to each other by solemn vows,” the minister said, “with the joining of hands, and the giving and receiving of rings, I announce that you are husband and wife...”

It was done. Jack’s heart took a nose dive.

“You may kiss the bride.”

Should he kiss her? That wasn’t part of their deal. But the minister grinned expectantly and Alex stood there looking so lovely, testing his willpower.

He didn’t have any.

In the split second before he kissed her, Alex’s eyes widened. Cautiously, tasting her parted lips, Jack was careful not to press her. He didn’t touch her as he longed to do. Only his mouth communicated his sudden need—his lunacy.

Jack straightened and stepped back. What made him agree to a celibate marriage? It was more than a red-blooded male should be expected to promise.

* * * *

She had done it. She was now Mrs. Jackson Breckinridge.

But heaven help her. What *had* she done? Jack’s chaste kiss had affected her like exploding land mines. Galloping horses. A whitewater rafting trip. Alex reeled from the memory of his warm and tender lips upon hers.

She shut her eyes a moment, swaying, trying not to stare at her reflection in the dressing room’s tall mirror. It told her many things she didn’t want to know. And the worst of them was that Jackson Breckinridge had breached whatever defenses she thought she’d erected.

He’d kissed her, and she had liked it. Not only that, she wanted far more.

Her eyes flew open. She must regain her focus. Making a better life for Tyler was more important than anything she might feel about the man she’d married.

Loving Tyler was real. A mother's love. A primal thing. Something as much a part of her life as it was to breathe.

Her chest expanded. Loving Jack was fool's gold. He was a Breckinridge. Once she had let Brandon consume her nights and days. Tyler was a product of that teenage love.

Don't torture yourself with thoughts of the past.

Alex removed her skirt and top and returned them to the garment bag. She put on her sweater and jeans, trying not to think farther into the future than the trip back to Kentucky.

Her coat was in the limo. Glancing once more around, she gathered up her tote and garment bag.

Jack waited for her outside. He had removed his black tuxedo and was dressed in cords and a cashmere sweater. His mouth was set in a grim line. "It's snowing."

"What?"

He took the garment bag from her hand. "It's snowing. Not hard yet, but it's picking up. I called the airport and my pilot said the ceilings are low. He won't fly under these conditions even with instruments."

"Okay." Alex allowed the information to sink in. "What do we do?"

"We stay the night."

She clutched her tote bag tighter. "In Gatlinburg?"

Jack brushed a glance across her face. "Actually, part of the wedding package is a one-night stay in a nearby cabin." A smile curved his lips. "A honeymoon cabin."

Chapter Six

Jack was in big trouble now. That single kiss at the end of the ceremony was not part of the bargain. Neither was spending the night—together—in a honeymoon cabin.

During dinner, Jack forced himself to chat about nonsensical things to kill time. Sitting across from him with her elbows on the table, Alex seemed as ill-at-ease as he felt. She sipped a cup of coffee, savoring it as if she was loath to leave the safety of the restaurant.

“I suppose this is hard for a confirmed bachelor.” She balanced a china cup between her fingers.

“What do you mean?”

“When we were young, I remember you saying you weren’t marriage material. Now you’re saddled with a wife.” Alex shrugged. “You must regret giving up your freedom.”

His mouth pinched into a straight line before he spoke. “Look, Alex, we both know why we married. It’s a little too late for regrets.”

“I have no regrets.” She lifted her gaze to meet his straight on.

Jack’s chest heaved, and the tightness eased. “I have no regrets either. We’re in this together,” he said. “Just the two of us.”

“I know.”

Alex’s genuine beauty shone on her face, stealing the air from his lungs. “We must stick together.”

“And remember the bottom line.” Determination fired her eyes. “Tyler.”

There wasn’t much to say after that. Jack called for the bill. He’d been afraid she would bring up the kiss in the chapel, but she hadn’t. He had been spared.

For the moment.

The limo driver dropped them off at the front steps of a secluded log cabin snuggled in a wooded valley and promised to return at nine in the morning.

And then they were alone. Only one security lamp lit the cold night, illuminating the

gently falling snowflakes that glittered and danced around them. All was hushed, the air crisp and clean. Their footfalls crunched softly on the snow.

Jack climbed the wooden, snow-covered steps to the porch and unlocked the front door. Inside, he flicked on the overhead lights, dropped his small bag, and took stock of the surroundings.

A bar separated the living room from a small kitchen. The living area was rustic and functional with a sturdy plaid sofa, oak tables, and a cheerful braided rug on the rough-hewn hardwood floor.

Logs and kindling were conveniently laid in the stone fireplace, and a Butane firetorch was placed on the mantle. Jack ignited the twisted newspaper and kindling. The firewood burst quickly into flames with a welcoming crackle.

Alex remained outside on the uncovered porch gazing at the snowfall. "Are you coming in? It's warm inside." Jack shut the front door and walked out to stand beside her.

"It's just like a fairy tale," she said almost sighing, her breath frosty in the frigid air.

If this was a fairy tale, then Alex was the fairy princess, her green eyes dreamy and faraway and her dark brown hair sprinkled white with snow. His jaw hardening, Jack suppressed the urge to touch her.

He searched for something to say. "It *is* peaceful."

"And pristine." She turned her wide eyes on him, a half smile on her lips. "As if we're in our own little world."

He held her gaze a moment, her romantic words chafing him. *Damn*. How was he going to survive a night, let alone the rest of his life? Jack reached out and brushed a lock of hair from her eyes. The feel of her skin sent shafts of raw need through him.

She shivered at his touch. "Maybe we should go inside. Maybe there are bears."

His laugh helped him ease his tension. The only bears he knew were on the inside of the cabin, but he didn't dare voice that belief.

"Yes, we'd better go in."

Once inside the cabin, Jack locked the door and busied himself at the hearth. He prodded the fire into a blaze trying to avoid thinking about Alex. He was aware of her prowling the cabin. She touched a wooden table one moment, picking up a magazine the next. He knew every move she made without even looking at her.

Alex checked the refrigerator. "There's basic breakfast food in here."

"Good. We should be able to get an early start."

Next Alex explored the closed door beside the fireplace.

"Oh, my gosh!"

Jack jumped up. Crossing the short space to stand behind Alex, he stared into a bedroom. Decorated with mirrors on the ceiling, ornate red draperies and a king size, heart-shaped bed covered with a red velvet bedspread, the room was a veritable pleasure den.

"Hot damn," he said, unable to suppress a giant grin.

Alex's knees almost buckled. "Well, it certainly *is* a honeymoon cabin." She tried to inject a bit of humor.

Jack lightly touched her shoulder. "Alex, I'm sorry about this."

She turned to face him, her insides sweltering with an unwelcome desire she fought to control. "That's okay." Her voice cracked. "You didn't know it would snow."

"Maybe we should have stayed in Louisville." He furrowed his eyebrows. "Gotten married there. I just wanted to make it special, more than a sterile civil ceremony."

Alex longed to stroke the contrition from his brow. "It *is* kind of charming." She lifted her hand to gently touch his sweater and tried to smother a smile. "I wonder how many happy couples have rocked the night away in there."

He abruptly turned away. "I'll sleep on the sofa."

After he had enlarged the space between them, Jack turned once more to gaze at Alex, his face stony.

This is hard on him. She ached for him and for herself. Why hadn't she considered Jack's feelings? He was a man with a man's need. Did he feel the awakening chemistry between them just as she did?

He was a hero for denying himself.

But the night wasn't over yet.

Stung by conflicting notions, Alex gathered her nerve. "I guess I'll hit the sack, er, go to bed."

"Maybe I should shower first so I won't have to do it in the morning."

"Sure. Go ahead. There must be a bathroom off the bedroom." She stepped out of his

way, leaving the door to the chamber of love wide open.

“Thanks.” Jack picked up his bag and practically darted into the bedroom.

Soon Alex heard the shower running. An image popped into her mind of steamy hot water cascading over dark hair and hard muscles. Knots tightened between her shoulder blades.

She circled the living room, noting the framed prints of mountain scenes on the wall. Her pacing didn’t work, however. Her palms grew damp.

Wandering into the kitchen to wash her hands, Alex spotted another door she’d not yet investigated. It opened onto a chilly back porch enclosed by glass windows made foggy from the bubbling water of a hot tub.

Someone at the wedding chapel had thought of everything.

Alex dipped her fingers into the bubbles and let the hot water slip through them. Steam rose to her face, beckoning her. Many times after a long day at the track, she had longed for a whirlpool to soothe the pain from her aching muscles. Now, with one right in front of her, she couldn’t resist.

There was one problem. A major one. She had traveled without a change of clothing.

Murky light from an outside security lamp seeped through the cloudy windows that enclosed the chilly porch. Fluffy white towels were piled on a wooden bench beside the hot tub. Several white terry cloth robes hung nearby. That solved part of her problem.

Alex glanced around. The bedroom door was still shut. She closed the door to the porch.

Quickly stripping out of her clothes, she placed them on the bench. Her bare flesh prickled with goose bumps. Shivering, she climbed the steps, tested the water with a toe, and then sank slowly into the delicious warmth.

Sliding under the water up to her chin, Alex let out a sigh. The tips of her hair dampened and she realized it would frizz. No matter. She planned to enjoy every minute of this.

Jets shot hot streams of water upon her back and around her thighs. Buoyed by the depth, Alex stretched her legs out so the pulsating water hit her feet. Soaking in silence, with only the sounds of bubbles and the strong aroma of chlorine around her, Alex relaxed. Her tight muscles loosened and her pulse rate lowered.

She leaned her head against the side of the tub and shut her eyes.

In the netherworld of the water and steam, Alex questioned her high-minded reasoning for accepting this marriage with Jack. She was giving her son what was his—what Brandon had

refused to provide. His heritage. Security. Safety.

Granted, Jack would keep them safe. He would provide the monetary things they lacked. But what about their emotional needs? Would he step up and be the father Tyler didn't have?

She crossed her arms over her breasts, feeling vulnerable, dirty even. What had she done? There was no honor in it for her. She had compromised so much, giving up her hard won independence and taking the easy way out.

In the end it had been guilt that had caused her to marry Jack.

Long moments passed, bubbles washing over her. Heat rose to her cheeks. The warmth of the tub became an inferno. Tired of beating herself up, Alex stood, the water swishing around her waist. Slowly she climbed out of the tub, reaching for the towel.

"Alex?"

Her breath caught in her throat as Jack opened the door. He stood in the doorway, wearing only a pair of plaid boxer shorts.

Alex couldn't drag her gaze away from the dark curls on his rock-hard chest, the width of his broad shoulders, the gleam of desire flashing in his now darkened gray eyes. But there was something more in his gaze, a longing so profound and intense that it caused her to hesitate. She let the towel dangle from her fingers.

Standing naked before him, her heart pounded and her voice failed.

Jack felt the blood drain from his face. His eyes froze on Alex's slender, athlete's body as she slowly stood and stared at him. Water droplets clung to her long eyelashes. Damp ringlets framed her face. Her full lips, slightly open, seemed receptive—inviting more than she knew.

Every muscle in his body grew taut. Jack wanted Alex as badly as he'd wanted anything in his life. He wanted her love and friendship even more than he wanted to win the Kentucky Derby. The realization sucker punched him.

He stared at her while despair suddenly ravaged his heart. Alex didn't want him. He knew he was only a means to an end—a damn checkbook.

And he had given his word. No sex for him. How could he face her knowing deep down in his heart he had lied to himself to get her to agree to this marriage? For him this wasn't a loveless marriage.

Jack ducked his head and silently backed out of the doorway, softly shutting the door.

Outside in the living room, he dressed quickly. His mind was a blur of regret and embarrassment. Frustration clawed at his gut. If only she had whispered his name, he would have gone to her. He would have taken her into his arms and kissed her all night long, telling her about his love. And maybe then they could find the beginnings of a real marriage.

It wasn't meant to be.

The cozy cabin seemed to press in on him. The living room was too warm and intimate. Jack slipped on his shoes and his coat. Opening the door, he stepped outside.

The snow had stopped. He stood on the porch and shivered. His head pounded. Cupping his hands, he blew his hot breath on them. Minutes passed. Finally, Jack shut his eyes and lifted his face to the stars, trying to let the serenity of the cold, snowy night seep through him.

It didn't work. Questions and recriminations continued to rip him apart.

Did he enjoy torturing himself? If he couldn't control his emotions and hide his true feelings from her, how did he expect to keep their relationship strictly platonic?

He had no answers.

When Jack finally returned to the living room thirty minutes later, the fire had burned down, casting a faint glow in the darkened room. There was enough light for him to see Alex had left a blanket on the sofa.

And a red pillow from their honeymoon bed.

Chapter Seven

Change was in the crisp, March air. Alex pressed her shoulders against the leather seat of Jack's Porsche as it purred up the winding driveway. Ahead the lights of Breckinridge Estate twinkled on the hilltop, a gentle beacon in the moonless night. Relaxing the knots in her neck and shoulders, Alex took slow, deep breaths, techniques she used on the track, and willed herself to remain calm.

Beside her Jack was quiet. Too quiet. As if he too was having second thoughts or serious misgivings.

No one knew about their marriage except for Tyler, who at first had been standoffish, but was now happy to be moving to a horse farm, and Evelyn, who welcomed Jack as if he was the son she never had. The two most important people in Alex's life were excited about their impending move. For her mother, she was going home. For Tyler, he was going on a great adventure.

For Alex, she was living a nightmare.

They had been married less than a week and they'd yet to spend a full day together. It had been hectic, returning from Tennessee, quitting her day-job at Chandler's, galloping Johnny's horses in the morning, and packing their belongings for the move to the farm in the afternoon. There had been little time to see Jack, who stayed at his condo, let alone discuss the incident at the hot tub.

Why had she failed to cover her body, letting him see her? Why had she stood transfixed, like a doe caught in the headlights, unable to move? It made no sense, especially when inside she had reacted with an intense flare of desire.

Thinking of him that way felt awkward.

Alex shut her eyes, unable to face the man by her side. Having sex without love was impossible for her. She had an old-fashioned idea that love came before *making love*. Brandon had shown her the fallacy of that naïve expectation. His definition of love had been sex.

Oh, well, she didn't have to worry. Jack was a gentleman. He had proven that already on their wedding night. He didn't want to be married any more than she did. He had sacrificed his freedom for a family obligation.

The Porsche slid to a stop in the middle of a circular driveway, and a young man dressed in white shirt, black tie and trousers sprang forward to open Jack's door. Stepping out of the car, Jack handed over his keys and then came around to help Alex out. His hand was warm. His smile appeared genuine. She promptly disengaged her hand.

"You look lovely, Alex," he said.

Thank heavens for her wedding dress and Nana's pearls. At least she had something appropriate to wear to Mrs. Breckinridge's charity dinner. She felt herself blush. "Thank you."

His black hair gleamed in the lights that flooded the entrance of the white brick colonial. His handsome face was reserved but his eyes twinkled. He wore a black tuxedo like he'd worn on their wedding day and carried himself with a commanding self-confidence.

In a possessive gesture, Jack offered his arm and inclined his head, challenging her to accept. Alex lifted her chin and after a moment's hesitation, placed her hand on his sleeve.

Together they walked up the short flight of stairs. They were greeted by a stiff, tuxedo-clad butler, who ushered them across polished hardwood floors covered with expensive Persian rugs through a foyer that opened into what appeared to be a formal living room.

It was unlike any living room Alex had ever seen, running the width of the house to a dramatic focal point at the far end, a large floor to ceiling window adorned with gray silk drapes hung on custom rods. The walls were also gray, but with a light green over-tone that complemented gold-leaf painted tables.

Seating was accomplished by creating several conversation groups with an eclectic mix of upholstered chairs, settees, and area rugs. Yet no one was seated. All the guests stood with drinks in hand, while white-coated waiters moved among them.

There was energy in the room, a vibrant hum of voices and a mixture of heavy perfumes, enough to quash all of Alex's earlier attempts to settle her stomach. Without thinking, she clutched the fabric of Jack's coat, her fingers biting into his arm. He covered her hand as if to reassure her, and they stood in silence watching the crowd of twenty or so well-dressed Louisville elites.

"You'll do fine," Jack whispered, squeezing her hand.

Alex didn't acknowledge his words of support. She couldn't. Her throat was dry. Raw panic ran in her veins. She'd rather ride a runaway horse than be in this place at this time. She told herself she looked just as good as these other intimidating people and lifted her head high.

Two women separated themselves from the crush. Although it had been more than ten years since Alex had last seen her, she immediately recognized Mrs. Breckinridge. Jack's mother looked every bit the grand matriarch, from the perfectly coifed silver hair and elegant silver floor-length gown to her polished nails and fingers flashing diamonds.

The other woman was much younger, tall and stately with an air of sophistication that made Alex want to creep behind Jack and hide.

The younger woman rushed forward, smiling. Her gunmetal gray, taffeta cocktail dress barely reached the middle of her thighs, revealing long, shapely legs. But the top of the dress was what must have caught the eyes of every man in the room. It crisscrossed across her bust, exposing the woman's creamy shoulders and elegant neck while a rhinestone buckle drew attention to her cleavage.

"Jack!"

Alex sensed Jack's tension. She glanced up at him just as the woman stopped in front of them.

"Miss Gloria Fenton," Jack said, "may I introduce Alexis...my wife...Mrs. Jackson Breckinridge."

His words took Alex's breath away. What message was he trying to deliver by such a formal introduction? Clearly by the look on Miss Fenton's suddenly flushed face, Jack's words were sinking in.

His mother strode forward and gave her son a quick peck on the cheek. "What did you say, Jack, darling?"

"I was introducing Alex to Gloria," Jack explained and then paused dramatically, "as my wife."

* * * *

That went well. Not! The hubbub that her introduction caused lasted until the butler called the guests to dinner. Seated beside Jack with Mrs. Breckenridge on her left, Alex stared at the gleaming collection of six wine glasses flanking her gold china plate. Alongside and above the plate, silverware lined up in precise military formation catching the light from crystal

chandeliers.

She had never seen such finery. Where did she begin? Alex fought fear, unreasonable, gut-wrenching fear that threatened to overwhelm her. How could she do this? She was so out of her league. Reaching across her china plate, she seized the water glass and drank several gulps of soothing liquid.

When Alex glanced up, she caught a smirk from Miss Gloria Fenton, who sat across the table. Carefully, Alex replaced the glass, never taking her gaze from the woman's dark eyes, arched black eyebrows and bright red lips. She may be from the other side of the tracks, but no one had to tell her why Miss Fenton's glare carried daggers. Women knew these things.

This Louisville debutante had fancied herself first in line for the title Alex, however reluctantly, now carried.

"Jack, darling," Mrs. Breckinridge purred in a theatrical whisper that all could hear, "I'm disappointed. I expected you to have a wedding ceremony, not some clandestine runaway affair."

"We had a fine wedding ceremony, Mother," Jack replied.

How could he sit there so totally in control, not even breaking a sweat? Alex envied him and hated him at the same time. This was his natural playing field. He belonged here while she was an interloper longing for the smell of horseflesh and hay.

Jack turned to her. "In fact we had a very nice ceremony, didn't we, dear?"

Alex mustered a quick nod, wondering if her eyes were wide with fear. Was she expected to respond? Or behave like a shy, loving bride? One glance across the table made her feel as if her self-confidence was ebbing away.

But she wouldn't let it.

She leaned against Jack's shoulder and murmured sweetly, "It was almost as nice as the honeymoon, wasn't it?"

He laughed, the sound bubbling up from deep within his throat. "I *do* love you," he said and kissed her forehead in a spontaneous display of approval.

Alex sat back, pleased with herself. She had achieved a tiny victory. The artery pulsed in Miss Fenton's flushed neck. As for Jack's mother, well, their race was yet to be run. Alex figured her mother-in-law would break fast from the gate and be hard to catch in the stretch.

* * * *

Two hours later, Alex came out of the powder room and found Miss Gloria Fenton

outside waiting.

“They say your father managed their horse farm,” Gloria said without any preliminary niceties.

“He did.” Alex started walking down the hall.

“Don’t walk away from me, you gold digger!”

Alex turned, fighting a whirlwind of anger. “What do you want?”

“I want to know what you did to trick Jack into marriage.”

Alex smiled at the irony. If Gloria knew Jack had sought her out, what would she think? She turned on her heel again. “That doesn’t deserve an answer.”

The taller woman grabbed her arm, twirling her around. “Jack has never mentioned your name. You must have done something to him to cause this marriage.”

Gloria’s venom-filled words didn’t surprise. Jerking her arm free, Alex stood her ground.

“I know what it’s like to lose a race,” she said. “I’m sorry you’re disappointed in Jack’s marriage to me.” She shrugged. “I guess you’ll have to learn to live with it.”

“Bitch!”

“Sticks and stones.” Alex longed to stick out her tongue, but offered a tiny smile instead. Turning once more, she strode down the hall, chalking up another win in this no-win situation.

The dining room had cleared out, and the guests were once again in the living room, this time seated in groups drinking their after-dinner coffee. Alex stood alone at the threshold to the room. A few heads turned toward her, but no one offered a welcoming smile.

“You don’t belong here, do you, dear?”

Alex straightened her shoulders, refusing to be hurt. Slowly she turned to face her new mother-in-law.

“You’re that little girl from the farm,” Irene Breckinridge said. “The one Brandon took up with before Jack encouraged him to join the army.”

“I was friends with Brandon.” Caution made Alex’s voice waver. “We played together at the farm when we were children, all three of us.”

Irene looked at her with a scornful expression. “Marriage is not a game. I don’t begin to understand Jack’s thinking, especially with Brandon lying cold in his grave.”

A chill rippled down Alex’s spine. She lifted her chin. “Trust me. I don’t take my marriage to Jack lightly. We weren’t trying to hurt you.”

“But you did. I can’t believe he loves you. You’re not his type. You’re not the wife I want for my son.”

“I believe that’s Jack’s decision, not yours,” Alex said. She didn’t have to face this hostile woman. Not with her insides burning with anger and humiliation.

“He’s a Breckinridge.” Irene glared at her with furious eyes. “He has never once shirked his responsibility to his family. I intend to find out what you’ve done to him.”

Alex watched Jack’s mother sweep into the living room smiling and greeting her guests. The double standards were obvious. She felt nothing but contempt for the Breckinridge family and their lifestyle. Brandon had let her down when she needed him the most. His mother considered her the daughter of hired help. She’d been a fool to subject herself to them again and to think Tyler deserved a place in this rich man’s world.

Alex slipped away to the entrance foyer where she stood in silence gathering her thoughts. She hated what she’d done. But because she was already tired of the fight didn’t mean she would go back on her word. Tyler needed the security it brought. From within herself, she just had to find the strength to continue. To make it all the way to the finish line.

No! That shrew wasn’t going to run her off.

Alex heard steps coming into the foyer, but she didn’t look back. Suddenly Jack was there, standing behind her, grasping her upper arms, whispering into her hair, “Let’s go home.”

Why couldn’t she let herself lean back against his chest? Accept the warmth of his presence? The safety of his embrace?

She stood stiff with resignation. “Jack,” she said in a raspy voice, “can we really go home? All the way home? To Breckinridge Station?”

Alex heard the slow, sharp intake of his breath. Silently he took her hand and escorted her to the front door and out of his mother’s house.

Chapter Eight

“Breeze him a half mile,” Johnny Marsden instructed, giving Alex a boost onto Greco’s back. She settled herself into the saddle. “Hook up with that two-year-old from Pete’s barn.”

“Sure thing, Johnny.” Alex looked from where her uncle stood with his hand on Greco’s bridle to see Jack striding down the shed row. Her lips parted in surprise.

Admit it. You’re intrigued by the man you married. You like the way he grins, the feel of his warm hands, and the male smell of him. You wouldn’t have agreed to this marriage without that attraction you feel for him.

“Johnny.” Jack nodded at the trainer and then switched his gaze to Alex. “Hi,” he said. “I finally have everything arranged. The movers are all set for tomorrow morning. We’ll be moved in by tomorrow night.”

“That’s wonderful.” What did he expect her to say? The tension between them rang loud and clear, springing from the surprising chemistry that swirled around them whenever they were together. And they would be together a lot now, wouldn’t they?

Their gazes locked. Was he measuring her against other women he knew, like the high-class, black-haired witch Gloria? Did he regret that his high-minded principles had forced him into marriage with her? Alex longed to ask him, but words failed her. Maybe things would be different away from the city, back on the farm where they’d been happy as kids.

Her life had changed so much. She felt like a simple bystander, a spectator just waiting in limbo for whatever Jackson Breckinridge had planned for her.

He stared at her, seeming to strip her bare with an undisguised passion in his gray eyes. Shivers scurried up and down Alex’s spine. She bit her bottom lip, lowering her gaze.

“I’ll talk to you after the workout, Jack,” she said and turned Greco away.

Jack’s insides lurched with desire. Alex had a very vulnerable mouth. One he longed to taste again. On the back of the horse, gazing at him, her eyes seemed wider, more compelling—

exposing a shyness he had not seen from her earlier. Did he imagine the gleam of interest in her eyes? Did she sense this unspoken pull between them?

Alex clucked once and moved toward the track, Greco prancing sideways in anticipation. Jack followed Marsden to the railing where its aluminum surface reflected the weak March sunshine. Standing there, he lifted a hand to shade his eyes. Alex and Greco stepped onto the dirt and jogged the wrong way of the oval.

“She’ll warm him up slow.” The trainer’s dry, impersonal commentary kept up while they watched. “Then she’ll turn him the right way and start the workout next to the inside rail. When a horse breezes, we let him work at a good pace without urging him. Today Greco will work in company.”

Jack nodded. In the distance, Alex was joined by another exercise rider on a powerful-looking colt. They turned their horses around and broke into a gallop, asking for more speed. At the quarter poll, both horses kicked into high gear. On the outside Greco breezed head-to-head with his companion, neither one giving ground.

“Fifty seconds,” Johnny muttered. “That’s good for the half mile. She kept him well in hand.”

Jack knew it was a successful workout. The two horses galloped out the next five furlongs. Jack’s lips thinned with surprise at the nerves bunching in his stomach. He admired the way Alex sat so effortlessly in the saddle, so confident and in control.

Another part of him was scared shitless for her.

* * * *

Darkness descended upon Breckinridge Station. Standing at the door of the screened porch, Alex gazed at the shadowed patio at the back of the house and the swimming pool, still covered against winter weather. A cool night breeze soothed her forehead. Here, away from the city, she smelled spring, the raw earthy aroma of changing seasons.

She was bone tired, exhausted from moving their belongings to the horse farm, settling her mother and most of the family furniture into the coach house over the garage, and making sure Tyler was at home in his upstairs bedroom overlooking the rolling bluegrass pasture. Her mother and son seemed content. Even Simon the cat was happy with fields and barns to explore. Evelyn had retired to her quarters for the night, and Alex had finally shut the door on an exhausted boy. It had been a good day, one they all would remember for a long time.

Alex twisted the wide gold band on the third finger of her left hand. Its weight was unfamiliar, as unfamiliar as the main house of the fabled stud farm. Instead of a brick mansion in the Federal style like My Old Kentucky Home, complete with a spiral staircase and large, drafty rooms, Jack's ancestral home looked more like a Tidewater cottage—homey and open with a wraparound porch.

She remembered visits to its kitchen as a child when her mother was housekeeper, but she hardly ever visited the family's living area. When they came for summer vacations, Brandon and Jack stayed upstairs in the room now belonging to Tyler. Sometimes she would join the Breckinridge boys in the swimming pool, but more often their playground had been the extensive barns and fields around them—the places she couldn't wait to show her son.

Jack came up behind her. "Penny for your thoughts," he said, his breath touching her hair and making her tremble. "Are you cold? Come inside."

Alex turned to face him. "No, I like it out here. It's so peaceful...quiet."

"It is." His eyes grew tender. In the light shining through the open family room door, Alex saw him smile.

Her fingers itched to caress those upturned lips. But she dared not touch him. Touching might lead to other things. Like kissing. More touching. Her need was there, a moment of weakness that turned her legs to jelly. She was very, very vulnerable.

"Want to sit out here?" she asked.

"I'd like that." Jack sat down on the cushion of a brown wicker sofa. He stretched his long legs out in front of him and laced his fingers behind his head. "Whew! I didn't know how tired I was until I sat down."

Alex found a spot across from him on a matching wicker chair. "Me either."

Letting out a long breath, she savored the sudden silence between them. Cool air eased the hot flush on her cheeks. The night sounds brought a down-to-earth peace that descended around them.

"So what do you think?"

Alex lifted an eyebrow. "About what?"

"About this house." He waved his hand. "Breckinridge Station."

"I can't believe I'm here and living in your grandparents' house." She smiled through the twilight. "It's like a dream come true."

“Having you here is like a dream come true.”

Her heart turned. She didn’t know what to say.

Jack’s gaze lifted over her toward the brightly lit family room window. “This house brings back a lot of good memories.”

“It certainly does.”

His gaze reconnected with hers and they exchanged smiles. “Nana’s cookies, cold milk and sitting on her lap. Nana was always available for a big hug when I scraped a knee.”

“They’re good memories.” Thinking about the past shattered Alex’s courage. Brandon was part of her recollections of this place, for wherever Jack was, his little brother was never far behind. Brandon, Tyler’s father and the man who let her down so completely, haunted this house. Would it ever be different?

Jack must have noticed her mood change. “You’re thinking about Brandon.”

She hesitated, measuring her words. “Don’t you think about him? He belongs here too. It’s strange there are only two of us now where once we were like the Three Musketeers.”

Jack shifted on the sofa, sitting forward. “That’s why I can’t lose you.”

He had moved nearer to her. Their knees were centimeters apart, their shoes almost touching. She caught that crisp, male aroma of his aftershave. It mixed with the night breeze. The memory of the sexual attraction she had felt for him at their first meeting in Johnny’s office came back to her with a wallop.

The same tension erupted between them.

“I’m not going anywhere, Jack.”

He reached for her hand. “When I was at the track yesterday, I realized how frightened I am when you exercise horses.”

Alex looked down at her hand in his. “It’s what I do.”

Jack inclined his head, offering a smile. “It’s so dangerous. Look at the accident earlier this year when the rider was thrown. I don’t want you to get hurt, Alex.”

She shrugged to hide her confusion. “I gave up my dream of being a jockey when I was pregnant. I knew that was too dangerous for a mother.”

“Exercising horses is too,” he said, squeezing her fingers. “Being here at the farm, you won’t be able to drive to the track easily. We’re over an hour away.”

Alex pulled her hand out of his grasp, trying to hide her sudden anger. “Uncle Johnny

depends on me.”

“I depend on you too,” Jack replied. “You’re my wife now and you have obligations as my wife. I want you to promise me you won’t take chances. I want you to give up working at the track.”

That was it. Breckinridge women didn’t exercise race horses. They didn’t fraternize on the backside. They sat in the front with the elite in their pretty sundresses and flower-covered straw hats.

“Okay, Jack, if that’s what you want. I promise.” Alex stood up abruptly. “I guess I should go to bed. It’s late.”

Bed. Now another dilemma raised its ugly head.

Jack climbed to his feet. “Your things are in the master bedroom.”

“I know.” Her heart skipped a beat. The master bedroom was for the home’s husband and wife. Where was Jack planning to sleep?

He read her mind again. “I’ll be staying in the adjoining study. I can sleep on the daybed. I’m afraid we’ll have to share the master bath, but it can’t be helped if we’re to play the part.”

The part. Marriage in name only, but the world must think differently, even her mother. A surprising regret swept through Alex, negating the anger she’d felt moments earlier. Why the contradictory emotions? She had been the one to insist on keeping this a relationship without sex.

He was facing her with his eyes unreadable. Slowly Jack reached out and moved a curl away from her cheek. The touch set off an electric shockwave.

“You don’t know how much I want to kiss you.”

At his husky admission, warmth suffused her body. Alex fought the need to kiss him too.

“But I promised,” he said.

“Yes.” Her voice cracked. “You did.”

Alex swayed ever so slightly. Her thoughts drifted. What would it be like to go to bed with Jack? Like a normal husband and wife? What would it be like to make love? All night long. Slowly. With a passion as hot as liquid fire?

She felt heat flush her face. Even the wind couldn’t cool her cheeks now. Making love to Jack would be a mistake. She would lose herself. Just as she had done with Brandon.

Funny, Jack didn’t want something to happen to her because she was now a Breckinridge and must play the part. For her, she had a deeper concern. She had her heart to worry about and

didn't want to fall in love again.

Jack brushed her jaw line with his fingertips. She fought to remain motionless, her insides aching.

"Good night," she murmured.

"Good night, Mrs. Breckinridge."

Surprise flashed in her eyes. Alex lowered her lashes and gave Jack a tiny, wary smile before she turned away from him and went inside. *Don't go*, he wanted to call out. But he held his tongue. Damn his male ego. Bitter jealousy had stirred inside him when she mentioned Brandon.

Jack's shoulders rose and fell with frustration. Following Alex into the house, he shut the French doors and locked them.

His grandmother had made such a wonderful home for his grandfather. Even today, her personality sparkled in the family room, with its soft yellow walls and white woodwork and traditional country French furnishings. Colorful dark red, yellow and cornflower blue Turkish rugs spread across the polished wood floor.

His grandparents had been married for over fifty years. Would his marriage to Alex last half that long? No use kidding himself. The business arrangement he had made with her was a joke.

He flicked off the lamp, pitching the room into darkness. At the door to the second bedroom, he paused in the shadows. He glanced to his right. The door to the master bedroom was shut against him.

He loved her. That's why he was afraid for her to risk her life on the race track. But he couldn't tell her that. Did she still love his brother? She had Brandon's child. His brother had been a jerk to let this special woman go. He couldn't change the past, but at least he'd brought his brother's boy back to Breckinridge Station where he belonged.

Jack's fingers gripped the door knob. He had promised himself to fix Brandon's mistake. Keeping half of his obligation had been easy, but the other vow of a platonic marriage was the hardest he'd ever have to keep.

Chapter Nine

Jack had already left for work in Louisville by the time Alex awoke, showered and left the master bedroom. It was just seven o'clock, but that was late for her. Her mother was already busy in the kitchen fixing breakfast. It was as if she had never left this place and her responsibility as its housekeeper.

Tyler was bouncing up and down in his chair at the table, his eyes saucer-wide with excitement. "When can I go to the barn and see the horses?"

Alex smiled at her tousled-hair son and turned to pour a cup of coffee. "After school I'll show you around."

"Ah, do I hafta go to school?"

"Yes, you hafta." Alex glanced sideways and winked at her mother.

Evelyn grinned and responded with her own knowing wink. "Eat your breakfast, Tyler," she said. "Boys who live on farms need all their energy."

Tyler started shoveling spoonfuls of oatmeal into his mouth.

Alex watched over the rim of her coffee cup as her little boy made quick work of his morning meal. God, Tyler was good for her. His enthusiasm was contagious. It almost made her forget being forced to stop riding for Johnny.

"Do you want anything to eat?" Evelyn asked.

"No thanks," Alex replied and received a disapproving frown from her mother. "I'll pick up something in town after I enroll Tyler in school."

Evelyn shook her head, clucking as mothers often do. "You don't eat enough to keep a bird alive."

Alex laughed. Her mother hadn't changed. Yet Evelyn appeared happy. Her complaint about Alex's eating habits was not delivered in a nagging way. It was almost as if she complained because it was expected of her.

When Tyler had finished, Alex set her coffee cup by the sink and hurried the boy up to

his room to brush his teeth. Then she shooed him through the kitchen and out the back door, pausing to turn and stare at her mother before she left. Was Evelyn Marsden humming? When had mother ever hummed over a sink of dirty dishes?

A warm glow flowed through Alex. This move *had* been good for her family. Oh, if she could only become happy here, but that would depend upon so many things...like Jack Breckenridge and feeling she didn't belong in his life.

* * * *

Alex drove Tyler to the nearby county school, registered him for the third grade and made arrangements for him to ride home on the bus, an adventure he greatly anticipated. Returning to Breckinridge Station, she checked on her mother, who was in seventh heaven cleaning the buttery yellow family room. Not needed there, she escaped the confines of the house into a world she preferred—a world of horses.

Ross McGuire had replaced her father as farm manager. He was a man in his late forties, balding, always wearing a ball cap, and never saying much. It was clear he was a real horseman like Johnny. All morning Alex shadowed him, picking up as much from his actions as from his words.

Breckinridge Station had seven fulltime employees including Ross. Their foaling crew was experienced, and so were the guys who handled the breeding operation. The farm stood only two low-priced stallions, sending most of their twenty mares to be bred to outside stallions. Breckinridge Station stallions weren't as high quality as others in the immediate Lexington area. That's why Greco's dam had been bred to a former Derby winner, thus producing Greco.

Ironically, that mare was presently in foal to Breck's Good Luck, the Station's best stallion, unfortunately deceased.

"Breck's Good Luck had no luck at all," Ross told Alex. They leaned against a classic white rail fence so typical of central Kentucky and gazed at an empty paddock. "Got hurt before his three-year-old campaign. He'd been a champion at two. Even come close to winning an Eclipse award."

The manager took off his ball cap and swiped the back of his hand over his forehead. "Mrs. B. retired him to stud after he got hurt, and as a stallion, Good Luck was doing a fine job. Covered his mares like a pro. His first foal crop sold well last year."

"I heard he was put down," Alex commented.

“Damn bad luck, like I told you. Broke his front left pastern in the paddock here in November. Had to euthanize the poor creature,” the manager explained. “I tell you, Mrs. Breckinridge was devastated.”

Alex sympathized with Jack’s grandmother. She had no illusions about the ups and downs of the horse business. “Did Jack and Brandon’s father ever take an interest in the farm?” She lifted her gaze to the farm manager, curious about what he had to say.

Ross paused before choosing his words. “Jackson Senior loves this place. Loves the land. The heritage. His wife never took a huge interest in it though.”

Alex had gotten that impression. “Is that why Nana left the Station to her grandsons, not her only son?”

Ross shoved away from the fence. “I expect so, but I tell you this, if Jackson hadn’t funneled money into this operation over the years, the Station wouldn’t have survived. Mrs. B. couldn’t keep it up after old Mr. B. died. As it is, we’re going to be hurting soon.”

“Why’s that?” They walked back toward the barn.

“Economy. Losing Good Luck. The Mare Reproductive Loss Syndrome of a few seasons ago. A lot of things.”

Letting what she had heard sink in, Alex nodded. From what she could tell, Ross ran a tight operation. If Breckinridge Station was in financial trouble, it wasn’t from mismanagement. Jack would find out soon enough what he was up against, if he was going to make this farm viable in today’s economy.

She wanted to help Jack, pull her weight, so they could make a go of this place. It meant as much to her as it did to him. She knew that now, seeing the barns and fields where she grew up.

Clearly, the two-year-old Thoroughbred Greco was the farm’s great hope. If he proved a big runner and won several of the best stake races, he would have a future at stud that could save this operation.

She paused before entering the breeding shed, struggling with the massive frustration she felt. Her life was spiraling out of her control in so many ways because of Jack.

Still she wanted him. Alex rocked on her heels, the truth sweeping through her. Not for the first time, she admitted to herself she was lost because of her foolish, growing desire for a man who needed her for one thing—to make sure his family honor wasn’t tarnished.

Since Brandon, she had not dated. She didn't need a man—any man—or what desiring a man made her feel. She especially didn't need Jack Breckinridge.

She would fight her feelings for him. She had to if she wanted to survive.

With resolve, Alex strode into the breeding shed to watch a Breckinridge Station stallion cover a mare in heat.

* * * *

Alex drove her mother into town later that morning. It took longer than they expected and she missed meeting the afternoon school bus.

"You go find Tyler," Evelyn said after they had carried in all the bags of groceries. "I can put away the food."

"You're sure?"

"Go on, Alexis, and see what that boy is up to."

Alex bolted out of the back door, feeling as if she was a schoolchild escaping from class at the final bell. There was too much trouble for Tyler to get into, especially since he didn't know the barns or horses.

Part of her was worried about him, and the other part was excited. Finally her son would learn what her life had been like growing up. She'd teach him to ride and care for the horses. She'd pass on her heritage, which was bound to this farm just as much as his father's was.

Alex rounded the corner of the mare barn and skidded to a halt shocked by what she saw. Tyler sat on the back of a horse. As improbable as that was, Jack was leading the horse around and looking cowboy-perfect in tight blue jeans, boots, and a long-sleeved shirt. His dark hair appeared even blacker in the sunshine and his male-model good looks more compelling.

He led the horse around and around the paddock. Tyler was safe with Jack. Yet Alex stood there dismayed. She had wanted to share this new experience with her son. That Jack would be the one was as unbelievable as having him here in the first place. From the bright look in Tyler's eyes and the laughter coming from her son's lips, Jack had made a friend. Having them bond this quickly was an unexpected surprise.

Tyler's sandy blond hair reflected the late afternoon sunlight. He looked so much like Brandon up there in the saddle that it took Alex's breath away. For the first time, she wondered why Jack didn't see the resemblance.

Tyler spotted her and waved with his right hand. "Mommy, look! Jack let me ride his

horse!”

Alex’s heart twisted. “I can see that, Tiger.”

Jack halted the horse and stood at its head while she walked toward them. “I was showing Tyler around,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind letting him ride Chief. Tyler can be quite insistent.”

“No, I don’t mind.” She shrugged to cover up the hurt. What was wrong with her? This was Jack’s farm. Without his generosity her family wouldn’t be here living out their dreams. No matter about her own dreams. She had sacrificed those years ago. Still it hurt that she hadn’t been the first one to put her son into the saddle.

Jack must have read her disappointment. “We need your help here, Alex. I’m not much of an instructor.”

“Yeah, Mom, you promised to teach me to ride.”

Alex opened the gate and approached them quietly. “It will be a big help, Jack, if you continue to lead Chief.” She placed a soothing hand on the horse’s withers and glanced up at her husband. Funny, it was hard to think of him like that, but she’d better get used to it. She had made her bed, so to speak, and must make the best of this awkward situation.

“This is Scottish Chieftain.” Jack made the introduction. “He was my grandmother’s American Saddlebred pleasure horse. This guy’s pretty old, in his early twenties, but he still gives a good ride.”

“I wanna ride fast,” Tyler said bouncing up and down.

“Stop!” Alex grabbed his thigh. “You must sit quietly in the saddle—for your sake and that of the horse. If you want me to teach you to ride, you’ll do what I say when I say it and you’ll respect Chief and any horse you ride.”

“I’m sorry.” Tyler looked contrite.

Alex gave him a reassuring smile. “Jack will lead you until I think you have your balance and are ready to ride—at a walk—around the paddock. It may not be today. You must earn the next step by doing a good job.”

“Okay, Mom.”

Alex glanced again at Jack who had an approving look on his face. What was it about this man that sparked fires within her? He wasn’t doing anything provocative, just holding the horse’s head and staring at her with admiration as if he was content about their circumstances

and the bargain they had made.

Alex placed Tyler's leg and heel in the proper position. "Now see if you can do that on the other side." He nodded, looking down and concentrated on positioning his leg and boot. Then she made sure he held the reins correctly. "Jack, can you walk on?"

They circled the paddock at a walk several times, changed direction and went the other way. "You'll be sore in the morning," Alex told Tyler.

"Why?" he wanted to know.

"Because you've used muscles you don't always use," she said. "But don't worry. It's a good kind of soreness. You'll learn to like it."

* * * *

They ate dinner that night in the big, country kitchen at a round oak table. Jack insisted they all sit down together, even Evelyn. They were a family, he told them, and when they could do it, they would eat dinner as a family. After that Jack helped with homework, but stepped aside when it was time for Alex to put Tyler to bed.

Afterwards, Alex slipped outside to the screened porch and sat down in the wicker chair to take stock of the day. She had been busy and productive, both as a mother and as a horsewoman. She'd seen the farm operation up close and knew she liked delving into the details. It was more fun than sitting behind an office desk, that was for sure.

Yes, the first day had been good. She might even come to enjoy "being married" if it was always like this, full of family and horses, which was what her life was all about. She might even forget the disappointment about not working with Johnny any more.

Darkness crept around her and the night sounds soothed her. In the distance a horse nickered. A dog barked down the road somewhere. She hardly heard the door open before Jack was there beside her, taking a seat on the sofa. Like last night they sat quietly for a while, letting the busyness of the day work out of their souls.

"I enjoyed today, Alex," he broke the silence, his voice rich and deep.

She turned her gaze to him. "Thank you for taking an interest in Tyler."

"He's a Breckinridge," Jack said, but added quickly, "Whatever our arrangement, Alex, the boy's welfare isn't part of the deal. It comes first in my book. I want us to be like a family."

Alex heard his sincerity and her heart moved. "Thank you for being so understanding."

"Thank you for marrying me."

Yes, Breckinridge Station was his now and he'd salvaged his precious pride. Her family was a part of this place thanks to agreeing to a strange marriage of convenience.

"I did what I needed to do for my family, Jack."

"I know and I appreciate it."

They were silent again. A gentle breeze ruffled Alex's hair and she brushed a strand away from her eyes.

"I have a favor to ask you." Jack touched her arm. "I know you will hate it."

"What is it?"

"My mother has invited us to dinner tomorrow night. Just the two of us," he was quick to add. "You didn't meet my father at the charity dinner, because he was out of town. He wants to meet you."

Alex swallowed her dismay. This was also part of the deal, playing Jack's wife in public. She had to get over her annoyance. She'd made the bed, after all.

"I'll be happy to go with you."

Jack laughed. It was good to hear his laughter. Alex looked at him and smiled too.

"You little charlatan," he said. "I don't believe you, but I'll take you at your word."

"That's all we can do, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it is."

Chapter Ten

When Alex looked at Jackson Breckinridge, Sr., she saw Jack thirty years from now. They both had the same tall stature, gray eyes, and love for fine clothing. The elder man's hair was gray, but he had a head of it, none of the receding hairlines of many men his age. Alex's new father-in-law looked like what he was—the prominent owner of a reputable regional bank.

“My God, it *is* Alexis Marsden!” He held Alex at arm's length studying her face. “I couldn't believe it when Irene told me Jack was married. I was shocked even more to find out he married the little girl from the farm.”

“Yes, it's me,” Alex said with a shy smile. She had always liked Jack's father, even more knowing how he had helped Nana and the Station.

“I see you're as pretty as ever.” His voice boomed.

Alex found her face growing warm. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

Jackson laughed out loud, the same boisterous laugh that so pleased her about Jack. Yet his interest didn't endear her to Irene, who stood behind her husband with a scowl upon her aristocratic face.

“Come in. Come in. Let's have a drink before dinner.” Jackson ushered Alex into the fashionable living room, this time quiet and empty of other guests.

Jack escorted his mother, offering his arm, which she took possessively, clinging to him in an obvious show of ownership. After he seated Irene, Jack sat down beside Alex on the sofa and took her hand, a gesture that seemed natural for a newly-wedded couple. Alex knew the truth about their relationship, and her heart sank. Could she pull off the charade? She was in the lion's den and, even with Jack by her side, she felt like the next meal.

“I must admit Jack's news was unexpected,” Jackson said after they were served drinks by a white-coated waiter.

Alex stared into her glass of dark red wine, unsure of what to say.

“I so wanted a big church wedding,” Irene spoke up. “We didn't have girls, but I thought

surely one of my boys would give me the pleasure of planning a big event.”

Her indictment hung among them in the air. Unspoken was the fact that, with Brandon now dead, Jack carried the obligation of pleasing his mother. Alex glanced at Jack who was rubbing his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Alex and I didn’t want a huge affair,” Jack said and then slowly sipped his wine.

“But to marry so close after Brandon and Nana...” Irene shook her head, letting her sentence trail off but not her meaning.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mother,” Jack replied. “To me, the promise of new beginnings made the timing appropriate, given the circumstances.”

The promise of new beginnings... Alex liked the idea. It was totally different from her viewpoint. She looked at this marriage as a necessary evil, an event that changed the life she’d so carefully crafted for herself, but something that couldn’t be helped if she wanted to give Tyler a decent future.

“Irene, our son knows what he’s doing,” Jackson said before sipping his Scotch and soda.

The vote of confidence for Jack once more raised Alex’s opinion of her new father-in-law. Not all rich in-laws were narrow-minded snobs. Alex glanced at Jackson, offering a grateful smile. She knew immediately from Irene’s glare she had overstepped her bounds. There were undercurrents in this room that she knew nothing about, and had nothing to do with her; perhaps not even her marriage to Jack.

“After your father died, I lost track of you and your mother. Where is she and how’s she doing?” Jackson asked.

Alex brightened, picturing her mother in the large country kitchen humming a tune. “My mother lived with me and my son in Louisville while I went to school. I couldn’t have done it without her help. Mom is now living with us at Breckinridge Station.”

“I didn’t know you had a son.” Jackson’s interest appeared genuine.

Alex shifted in her seat. “Yes, his name is Tyler and he’s eight years old.”

“You have a son that old? Amazing.”

“I think you’d like him, Mr. Breckinridge,” Alex couldn’t help saying. “He’s bright for his age and excited about living at the farm. Jack is helping me teach him to ride.”

“Good for him. I’m glad he loves the farm. My boys always did.” His voice dropped and he spoke softly. “Irene always wanted the fancy wedding ceremony, but I was always looking

forward to the byproduct of our sons' marriages—grandchildren.”

Alex glanced uneasily at Jack. He returned her gaze. There was sadness in it. Did he want children too? Had her demands about their marriage of convenience ruined his dreams of having his own family?

Tyler and Jack had gotten along so well and even though she had misgivings, her son *was* a Breckinridge. Maybe she was being selfish to deny the family the chance to finally do the right thing.

Yet one look at Irene's foreboding face reminded Alex of her mother-in-law's contempt.

“Do you work, Alexis?” Jackson seemed determined to carry on a pleasant conversation.

“I recently quit my job in the marketing department of Chandler's and just as recently quit exercising horses for my uncle, Johnny Marsden,” Alex answered, throwing another look Jack's way. “I'm afraid I'm a stay-at-home housewife.”

“Johnny Marsden, eh? Now there's a name from the past. Is he still training horses?”

“I have Greco with him, Dad.”

“That's right. I remember.”

Thankfully the talk turned away from weddings to Thoroughbred racing. The three of them chatted until called to dinner. Jackson knew his horses and seemed delighted by the conversation. As Alex noticed, their discussion left out Irene, who sat stiffly in her chair directing her sharp-eyed gaze toward them all.

Nothing good could come of this. She hadn't won over one Breckinridge tonight.

* * * *

Alex and Jack drove home in companionable silence, listening to a Josh Groban CD. An hour after leaving Louisville, they drove down the hickory-lined lane of Breckinridge Station. The coach house was dark so Alex knew her mother was already asleep. Jack parked in the driveway, letting Alex out, and then drove around the back of the house to put the car away in their four-car garage.

Once in the house, Alex climbed the stairs to check on Tyler. His door was shut and she quietly pushed it open. Light from a nightlight illuminated the room just enough for her to see her little boy sound asleep, sprawled out in the middle of his new bed. At his feet lay a great big fuzzy dog, his sorrowful amber eyes looking up at her as if he knew he didn't belong.

“Jack,” she called downstairs in a hushed voice. She put her finger to her lips when he

joined her and then pointed into the bedroom.

Jack smothered a laugh. "It's just Copper," he said.

"Copper?"

"The barn dog. She was a stray who adopted the farm."

The copper-red dog's flag-like tail thumped up and down on the bed as if asking for forgiveness and acceptance.

"Tyler always wanted a dog," Alex said unable to hide a grin.

Jack pulled her into the hall and shut the door. He stood holding her shoulders, looking down at her with a fond smile. "Your cat Simon won't be happy with a dog in the house."

"Neither will Evelyn," Alex predicted.

"But I think Copper should stay if you agree."

How could she say no? In the span of a few weeks, her life had changed—the lives of her family had changed—all because of this man and his generosity. He was so handsome and warm-hearted. He was just...so special.

She reached up and kissed his cheek, and then turned and fled down the stairs.

* * * *

"I see you found something to keep you busy today."

Alex looked up from the floor of the spacious but empty foaling stall where she had been bedding it with straw. Hot and sweaty, pitch fork in hand, she wasn't in any shape to greet the man who'd haunted her dreams last night.

Over a week had passed since their visit to Breckinridge Estate and Copper's introduction into Tyler's life. Now the boy and dog were inseparable except for school or when, like today, Tyler went to spend the night with his new friend David.

"Ross said I could help." Alex offered a smile. "I need to do something to keep in shape since I can't exercise horses."

He leaned against the stall door and grinned at her, his intense gaze sending her head into a dizzy spin. She gripped the handle of the pitch fork.

Jack shrugged. "Working at a race track and working here on the farm are two different things."

"I'm glad you think so." She pushed a piece of hair out of her eyes, fighting a wave of indignation. She'd given up a lot for him. "I've always wanted to learn this side of the business."

“Maybe we should learn together.” The corners of his mouth drew up into another smile. His eyes twinkled with an appreciation that warmed Alex’s heart. She fought the seductive tug toward him.

How was she supposed to take Jack? He looked so refined and gorgeous, wearing a fancy pair of black riding jodhpurs, polished boots, and a long-sleeve white cotton shirt with an almost too deliciously open collar. She felt shabby by comparison.

His smile was drawing her in. *Get a grip! You’ve decided not to let him get to you.*

Right.

Jack pushed away from the door. “How about that ride I promised you?”

“Now?”

“Now.” He nodded. “I’ll saddle two horses.”

Alex put the pitch fork in the feed room, and using the pump near the barn door, ran cold water over her hands to remove the grime. She used a clean towel, normally kept for rubbing down horses, to wipe sweat from her face and the back of her neck. Then raking her fingers through her hair, she tucked the loose curls behind her ears.

When she joined him, Jack had a fond look in his eyes. “You know, that’s one thing I like about you.”

Her eyebrows knit together. “What’s that?”

“You don’t put on airs. You are who you are.”

Was that a compliment? “Gee, thanks, I guess.”

They walked to the other end of the barn. “If she could, my grandmother retired our old race horses to the farm when their careers were over,” Jack explained opening the door of one of the occupied stalls. “I had Ross bring Dusty in from the field this morning. It looks as if he’s already groomed him.”

Dusty was a retired Thoroughbred. He stood about sixteen hands and still looked in good shape. Jack had tacked him using a well-worn English saddle and a bridle with a martingale.

“You can ride him.” Jack led the aging bay gelding from the stall. “Dusty may have some run left in him and if that happens, better you up on him than me.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Her voice was light. She was looking forward to this outing. Alex tightened the girth and adjusted the cheek strap. “Hold his head for me, okay?”

“You don’t need me to give you a leg up?”

Heat flooded her veins. It was one thing for Johnny to give her a boost into the saddle, but the idea of Jack's hands on her threw her whole body into panic mode. "No thanks." Alex stuck her left boot into the stirrup and hauled herself into the saddle.

Jack disappeared into another stall and brought out Chief. He mounted, and they rode around the barns and other farm outbuildings. Then they broke into a slow canter, going along a dirt road flanked by white wooden fences and pastureland dotted with grazing mares and newborn foals.

The ride was picture-perfect and so typical of the central Kentucky Bluegrass.

This was fun. Not the mind-blowing, all out exhilaration of riding a race horse at breakneck speed, but an easy enjoyment—the wind whipping through her hair, nipping her cheeks, the sun beating down upon her shoulders, warming her skin.

Maybe it was fun because Jack was along. Her husband was enjoying himself too, she could tell. He pointed out landmarks and they talked about places they had played as children. Today the old swimming hole looked like a muddy, algae-covered puddle of water. The climbing ash tree had grown too tall for safety.

They took a short cut through a copse of trees, ducking the lower, overhanging branches, jumping the fallen logs in their path, and finally coming out at the foot of a gentle hill. At the top of the hill, against the backdrop of a brilliant blue sky, stood an old, red brick manor house, the ancestral home of the Breckinridge family.

"Race you to the top!" Jack said, taking off at a gallop up the slopping hillside.

Even with his head start, she caught him. Laughing, breathing hard, her face flushed with the thrill of competition, Alex reined in first at the house.

"No fair," Jack said with a laugh. "You're riding a former race horse!"

"So what? *You* cheated."

They laughed at each other, exchanging warm glances while catching their breaths. Alex's heart struggled to find its regular rhythm.

"The original house was built about eighteen thirty."

A heavy growth of ivy crawled up the front of the two-story brick home. The yard was overgrown with brush and scrub trees, more evidence of its abandoned state. They rode closer to the deserted structure.

"It's been a long time since I've been here," Alex said.

Jack looked around. "I need to get this mess cleaned up. Even if we can't afford to renovate the building, we can keep it neat out here."

For a few moments, they sat quietly on their horses studying the smooth façade of the Federal-style house with its four chimneys. Windows were shuttered, the door barred. The smell of disuse and decay permeated the air, and Dusty sidestepped, bobbing his head. Alex placed a calming hand on the horse's neck.

"The walls are eighteen inches thick," Jack recited like a tour guide, "and made with good Kentucky clay bricks."

This is Tyler's heritage too. The awareness hit her as hard as one of those clay bricks.

"Do you mind making one more stop?" Jack's lips were suddenly drawn together in a grim line, his eyes shuttered like the windows. "The family cemetery. Okay with you?" His words were soft, catching on the wind and drifting away.

"Yes, that's okay. Lead the way."

Jack's change of mood was reflected vividly on his face. Subdued. Sad. He seemed to forget her, turning Chief and starting at a walk down a path that took them away from the house.

Alex followed, letting Dusty pick his pace. The small, private cemetery lay in a clearing, surrounded by a stone fence about waist high, and flanked by two giant oak trees with a few brown autumn leaves still clinging to their branches. In the spring and summer, the trees would provide a leafy canopy for those souls resting beneath them.

Jack dismounted and looped his reins over an old iron hitching post. The ground around the stone walls and inside the enclosure had been mowed, well-kept by comparison to the old house. Quietly, he lifted the latch to a wrought iron gate and went inside.

Alex's heart contracted. From horseback, she watched Jack stroll through the rows of headstones. Some were new and shiny marble, others chipped and broken, ravaged by weather and time. He looked as if he was suddenly hurting, and she hurt for him.

Alex slid off her horse and went into the family cemetery.

Aching to touch Jack, not daring to, wanting to ease the look of pure agony she saw on his face, but not knowing how, she stood silently beside him.

Brandon Tyler Breckinridge, the stone read.

"Brandon's grave," he whispered.

Alex gasped. "I didn't know he was buried here."

Jack rubbed his jaw. His face was ashen. “What’s left of him.”

His words were heavy and ponderous as if he reflected on the shortness of life. The horrible reality of violent death.

“I suggested he enter the army.”

Alex reached up and clasped her hands around his upper right arm, hanging onto him for comfort, hoping to comfort him. In a gesture that squeezed her heart, Jack covered her hands with his left one.

“I need to bring flowers,” he said, and she nodded in agreement.

They stood there a moment more, and then sidestepped down the manicured row, looking at other nearby graves. Beside his brother lay another new Breckinridge grave.

“Nana.” Jack’s eyes glistened with unshed tears.

And next, Randall Breckinridge, Nana’s husband and Jack’s grandfather.

A lump sealed Alex’s throat. She felt his agony, burning in her deeply.

Life changed things familiar like the swimming hole and the climbing tree. Love ones were taken away. Regret bottled in her chest. Hot, gritty tears burned behind her eyes as she thought of all that had been and could be. Of love lost and never found—of lives, so full of hope and promise lying unfulfilled in the family plot on the hillside.

His jaw tense, his eyes brittle, Jack stiffened. “I didn’t think it would be so hard coming here.”

Alex looked at the gravestones, sadness washing over her. “Yes. Nana and Randall lived a good, long life. Brandon didn’t need to die so young.”

“I expect you miss him the most.” Jack’s words were muted. “I sure do.”

Glancing up at him, Alex noted a flash of anger in his eyes. Where had that come from?

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” he said. Pivoting on his heel, Jack left the cemetery. He waited while she mounted, and then wordlessly turned his horse toward home.

Chapter Eleven

They rode back to the barn in strained silence. With every quiet mile, Alex grew more distressed. Jack's sorrow was profound, his guilt magnified because, for some crazy reason, she knew he blamed himself for Brandon's death.

Unable to face the closed confines of that house, as beautiful and homey as it was, Alex volunteered to put the horses away when they arrived back at the farm. Jack grunted his agreement and left her in the barn, a place where she always felt at home.

Alex cross-tied both horses to let them cool down by standing in their stalls. Then she sat the grooming bucket outside Chief's stall and began the task of tidying up the old gelding.

Grooming a horse expended a lot of energy—used more calories, the experts said, than riding. To Alex the work had always been a joy, a time for her to connect with another living creature. A time to think. A time to regain perspective.

Mulling over her problems, a simple solution to her current problems eluded her. She moved the currycomb around and around the horse's winter coat, and pulled chunks of winter hair from the rubber currycomb before dropping the tool into the bucket.

Then she picked up a hard brush, working with short, firm strokes, over Chief's back. As her hand moved down the gelding's shoulder, dirt flying up from the brown coat, she wondered about the dynamics within the Breckinridge family.

She felt sorry for Jack. Was he supposed to carry the Breckinridge banner? Be the responsible son, do everything right, and please his mother in the bargain?

Alex knew full well how troublesome dealing with a mother could be. At least she had come to an understanding with hers. Evelyn only wanted what was best for her and Tyler. Her mother's way of communicating that objective was often shrill and direct, sounding demanding and negative.

Was that Irene's problem too? Communication? Or did she harbor other motives, manipulative and self-serving?

Alex stopped her frantic brushing and took a deep breath. The sweet, earthy aroma of horse and cedar shavings filled her nostrils. She placed a hand on Chief's shoulder and rested her forehead against his long, warm neck. Shutting her eyes, she let the heat from his muscled body soothe her, rocking her gently like a babe in arms.

She wanted to help Jack solve his problems with his mother, but she didn't know how. It was beyond the scope of a business partner. Even if she was a real wife, she doubted she could offer him much solace from the sadness of loss, the blame and the constant expectations of his mother.

But as a woman, she could offer him comfort.

The thought sent spiraling shock waves through her body. She pushed away from Chief.

Her mind in a whirl, she dropped the brush into the groom box and picked up a soft one. With gentle motions she whooshed the soft bristles over the horse, going from the top of his face to the tip of his back legs.

Jack wanted to kiss her. Not because he loved her, but because there was a throbbing chemistry between them burning with every accidental contact and look.

Sex between them might alleviate, even for a moment, the pain and suffering that scarred his soul.

Alex swallowed. She had already acknowledged that making love to Jack would be a mistake for her. That's why she extracted the no sex promise from him—to protect herself.

And he had kept that promise like a gentleman.

When she thought about the night in the cabin, and later his willingness to accept Tyler, her lungs squeezed, almost suffocating her.

She had seen on the ride today how things changed—the pond, the climbing tree. Nothing stayed the same. Her fear of change was irrational at best.

Her fingers quivered with anticipation. Maybe she should alter the terms of her agreement with Jack. Could she give him her body? Willingly? Would that ease his grief?

Shivers of anticipation skittered down her spine. They felt like butterflies before the start of a big race. Alex tossed down the brush and picked up a comb, pulling it through Chief's coarse, heavy mane.

If she gave herself, she would lose herself—just as she'd done with Brandon. That was a foregone conclusion. To have sex she needed to be in love.

Did she dare consider the possibility of loving Jack?

Turning her attention to Chief's tail, Alex gently dislodged knots with the comb. She pulled out the long strands of coarse hair, working for a time without thinking at all, lost in a daze.

Until an idea popped fully formed into her mind.

Her hands paused in mid air. Then she dropped the horse's tail, automatically feathering it out. Her heart thudded against her ribs.

She had already hopelessly lost part of herself. It was a done deal. No turning back. She was emotionally invested in Jack. Her concern was not only for the future of his horse farm, it was for him—as a person.

She cared about him on a much deeper level than as a business partner.

Blanking out further thought, she hurried to unbuckle Chief and turn him free in the stall. She did the same for Dusty, figuring that a horse brought in from the field wouldn't mind if she skipped his grooming.

Then tingling with excitement, dread, and a certain amount of foolhardiness, Alex left the barn intent on bringing Jack comfort—even for a short while.

* * * *

Alex entered the house through the back door, pausing to remove her boots in the mud room and wash her hands in the utility tub. Passing through the kitchen, she strode into the family room and looked around. Tyler was spending the night at David's and her mother was in the coach house settling in. Where was Jack?

She stood silently a moment, listening to the tick, tick of the clock on the mantle and letting her eyes adjust to the dim, late afternoon light. Simon wrapped his warm feline body around her ankles, and she reached down to pick him up, cuddling him close for a moment before he squirmed in her arms and she let him go.

Alex took a deep breath fraught with uncertainty. The cozy family room and the calming scent of spiced pumpkin candles called to mind the happiness of hearth and home.

Shutting her eyes, she longed for that happy home where a strong man held her in his arms at night and whispered he loved her. She opened her eyes and sighed.

Then acting on instinct she walked into the study. Jack sat in a well-worn easy chair with his back to the door. Staring at the cold fireplace, he gripped a short glass in his right hand. It

was half-full of ice and a dark liquid.

In her sock feet, she padded noiselessly across the floor. Squatting down beside him, Alex lifted her gaze to his face, reading the sadness written in his gray eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“Why do you ask?” He lowered his eyelashes, guarding his eyes.

Her heart cried out. She touched his knee with her hand and he flinched as if struck. Alex let her hand remain, a tenuous link between them, at best.

“I thought you were grieving because of Brandon and Nana.”

His voice was dispassionate. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s hard to lose someone you love.”

“I’m going to lose you too, aren’t I, Alex?” he asked.

She looked down. “Why would you think that?” she asked. “I agreed to move to Breckinridge Station.”

Tension popped between them. He touched her chin and forced her to look at him. His fingers burned her skin. “What if this never becomes your home? Will you want to take Tyler away from here when you decide you’ve sacrificed too much of yourself? He has a trust fund. You don’t need me anymore, Alex.”

“That’s not fair!” Alex sprang to her feet and turned away. She placed a trembling hand on the mantle, fighting her wish to run back to the barn where she felt safe, and battling her more complicated need to help a man she hadn’t planned on loving.

She sensed him behind her, standing near, his hands hovering close to her shoulders, almost as if he were afraid to touch her.

“God, Alex, you don’t deserve my bad moods.”

He stroked her shoulders, tentatively at first, and then clutched them, as if she were his lifeline. Fire seemed to shoot from his fingers to light her body.

Slowly she turned to face him. With a lazy smile, his gaze explored her face—tracing her brow, lingering on the line of her jaw, resting on her lips. “You’re so beautiful,” he said.

The staccato beat of her heart demanded action. “I’ve changed my mind, Jack. I don’t feel we can live together with this sexual tension between us. I think we need to make this a real marriage.”

Sharp, sudden hunger lit his eyes. Then they became shuttered, cautious. “I promised

you,” he said.

“I’m releasing you from your promise.”

“Do you know what you’re doing? Why would you change your mind?”

Alex cut off his words by daring to touch him. Her hands crept up his chest. She lifted up on her toes to look him in the eyes.

“I’ve thought about it.” She unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, looking at that button, not risking a glance at him. “I was childish and stupid. I thought living with you would be different. But you’re a man with a man’s needs and desires.” Her voice broke and she cleared her throat. “And I have needs too. Since we’re in this charade together, I don’t think we can continue it without sleeping with each other.”

“Always a pragmatist, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she said with a shaky laugh, gathering the courage to raise her gaze. “I want to give you something because you have been so generous to Tyler and me.”

Would he take her to bed? If he didn’t, how would she stand his rejection?

Alex shut her eyes against the heat in Jack’s gaze, her mouth tremulous, and her heart hardly beating.

“Damn it, Alex.” He seized her upper arms, pulling her toward him. “I don’t know why you’re doing this.”

She opened her eyes and stared at him. “I told you why.”

“I don’t want your gratitude.”

“I thought if we went to bed together, you wouldn’t feel so sad.”

“I can deal with my grief in *my* way. I don’t need your help.”

She shook herself free of his grasp and hauled up her chin. “I’m sorry,” she said with all the dignity she could muster. “I made a mistake.”

What had she done? What skewed sense of logic made her even consider asking Jack to have sex? Hard-earned wisdom, designed to protect, had been ignored. Her emotions had plainly gotten in the way. Without a word Alex walked out of the study.

Chapter Twelve

Jack followed her.

“We’re both sweaty from the ride,” he said. Alex turned and glanced into his gray eyes. She squinted at him, confusion ripping through her. “We need to cool off. We need a shower. How about it?”

A surge of shame stilled her tongue. She had asked for this. Begged for it. Did he really want her? After all he’d said moments ago? She had her pride, damn it. His brother had rejected her and this felt too much like *déjà vu* for her sanity.

“What do you really want from me, Jack?” Was he just trying to please her? Tying to be nice?

“This.” He choked off his response and smothered her mouth with a kiss.

Jack tasted of the liquor he had been drinking. It was long and deep, desperate and sad. Jack’s tongue flicked hesitantly and then parried with hers. Alex gradually kissed him back and succumbed, her passion growing until it was as hot and needy as his.

“Oh...my...God. Why are you doing this to me?” he gasped. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. For a stormy instant, she thought he would take her there in the hall. She wanted it. *Him*. Jack scooped her into his arms and kicked open the door to the master bedroom. He stripped her quickly, leaving her standing naked beside the king-sized bed to watch him undress.

When he was naked, they examined each other with intense stares. Pulsing with desire. Deliberately not touching. Growing hotter with each heartbeat. Each glance.

He had seen her before, standing by the hot tub in a honeymoon cabin in Tennessee. She had seen him half-clothed at the door to the porch, but nothing prepared her for the sheer magnificence of him—all male and so very ready.

“Alex.” Her name on his lips made her quiver with a longing so deep and primitive she thought she’d die.

Walking toward him, step-by-step, she felt sexy. Wanton. “I’m on the pill,” she said taking care of practical considerations.

“And we *are* married,” he murmured. “Technically.”

“And legally.”

He laughed. Alex relaxed and smiled up at him. He grabbed her hand, pulling her into the spacious master bathroom.

“Shower or tub?”

Alex shifted, watching the muscles flex along his shoulders and letting her gaze wander down to his bare butt. “Shower. It’s quicker.”

He laughed again. “A girl after my own heart.”

Turning on the faucet, Jack stepped into the spacious glass and tile shower stall and tugged her in after him. They were suddenly wet and slippery. The steam rose around them, encircling them into their private, hot cocoon. They stood face to face, letting the water pelt them.

Jack stroked her arms. “I can’t believe this.”

“Believe it.” Eagerness quivered all the way down her body.

She scooped a glob of her vanilla-scented salt scrub from a jar in the shower stall and rubbed it on his arms. Following her lead, he dug out a scoop of the oil and salty concoction, rubbing it with gentle fingertips across her breasts.

“Ah,” she murmured. Alex shut her eyes and gave into the sensation of his rousing massage. She tilted her head back. The water sluiced through her long hair. “You can do this forever.”

Forever? Had she said that word? Did they have “forever”?

Jack ignored her comment. Instead he ran his fingertips over her nipples and gently cupped her breasts in his hands.

Alex heard a moan coming from deep within. Feral. Primitive. The steady throb increased with every movement of Jack’s hand and the stimulation of the vanilla scrub and hot water flowing over her body. She needed this. Wanted his kisses, his hands on her. *This was meant to be.*

His fingers didn’t stop. Jack applied more scented scrub, sending jolts throughout her body. Alex surrendered to her mounting need, every nerve ending awakened. How long could

she stand his sensual attack?

How long could *Jack* stand it? She felt the rigid length of him against her belly and knew he was more than ready. He kissed her in a glorious explosion of passion.

“Enough,” Jack groaned. He turned off the water, leaving her soapy and salty.

Then Jack wrapped her in a huge melon-colored terrycloth towel, imprisoning her in the promise of another amorous cocoon. He gathered her into his arms again and like the hero from a romance novel, carried her into the master bedroom and lay her gently down on the king-sized bed.

Lying on the flowered bedspread—exposed to his intense gaze—Alex cried out silently with her whole being. Jack watched her, touching her only with his tender, but hungry gaze. She burned with an all-consuming urgency.

“Alex!” Jack spread open the towel revealing her wet body. Then fell lightly on top of her, bracing himself with one hand by her head.

Systematically, he began again a tantalizing assault upon her skin, drying her with his mouth downward along an erotic path. She writhed beneath him. He worked his way to the tender skin of her stomach, and then nuzzling her inner thighs, he sought out the place where a tidal wave of ecstasy swamped her.

“Oh, Jack,” she sighed his name.

Continuing his methodical seduction, he flicked his wet tongue back and forth, stimulating her pleasure even more. He sucked her gently. Alex moved beneath him, the sensation too intense to be bearable. Engorged, pliant, needy, she plucked at his wet, tousled hair with her desperate fingers.

“Jack, oh please.”

At her husky plea, he kissed her all the way up her body until he reached her mouth. “I want you.” His voice was husky with unspent passion.

Was he asking permission again?

All Alex could manage was a nod.

Then he parted her thighs, slipping fully within her, filling her, consuming her.

In an action as old as time, Alex wrapped her arms around his neck and brought her hips and legs up to meet his thrusts. She was holding him tightly moments later when he came within her, crying her name. And she joined him, his name on her lips and in her heart.

* * * *

How long had it been since he'd been so completely sated? Relaxed? How long had it been since he'd made love to a woman?

But this wasn't just any woman. This was Alex. *His wife*.

Jack opened a lazy eye and regarded her sleeping face with an overwhelming tenderness. God, she was beautiful. So giving and loving. Not that she loved him, but her actions today had been beyond generous.

And it sure as heck had relieved his rotten mood.

Not that she hadn't enjoyed it too. He smiled to himself, gently brushing her cheek with his fingertips. Her breathing was deep and slow. She didn't know he was watching her while he held her snugly in his arms.

Where did they go from here? So many questions. So few answers.

One thing for sure, she had been right. They couldn't continue living together without this.

Jack lay back on his pillow, his arm cradling Alex. He stared up at the ceiling fan, wishing he had turned it on, longing to feel its cool breeze.

But there hadn't been time. He smiled again. *Things* had happened too quickly. Not that he minded. They'd both gotten a little carried away.

Alex had surprised him. He knew she dove into everything with passion and enthusiasm—riding, school, motherhood. That she would make love in the same manner shouldn't have amazed him. But it did. Up until this point, she had been so carefully controlled where he was concerned. As if she didn't dare invest her emotions in their marriage.

Maybe she hadn't. Maybe this had just been a pure case of sex for sex's sake. Something a guy would do. Something he had done himself upon occasion.

But he doubted that. Alex wasn't the type. She had made love to please him. No matter how wild and wooly their experience had been, she was just trying to make him feel better because he had lost Nana and Brandon.

She stirred ever so slightly in her sleep. He brushed the top of her head with his lips and settled more comfortably into the depths of the mattress.

As his eyes drifted shut, something gnawed at his heart. Jack didn't want Alex to sleep with him just to please him. It was unlikely that she could ever love him, given her past

experience with his family, but for once in his life, he wished she had loved him first, not his kid brother.

* * * *

She'd made a big mistake. Alex knew it when she popped open an eye and realized she was lying alone, naked, in the midst of the king-size bed. A crumpled sheet was tucked under her chin. The spot next to her was cool.

Jack had been there in bed with her. The slight indentation on the pillow told her so. And she smelled the telltale aroma of sex.

It covered her body as thoroughly as the flowered cotton sheet. It permeated her skin, forcing her to shut her eyes against the memory of last night. Jack's tenderness, those overwhelming climaxes—all were so fresh in her mind that her stomach clenched.

But now he was gone. Last night had been much too good to be true.

Swallowing hard, Alex opened both eyes. The bedside clock read seven. Daylight danced through the window. They had not even bothered to pull the shades. For hours, they had slept and made love and slept again. Forgetting to eat, forgetting everything but each other.

Made love?

Right!

It had been about sex, pure and simple. Hot, mind-blowing, heartbreaking. But sex just the same.

She had known it going in.

Regret sent her heart tail-spinning out of control. What had making love with Jack gotten her? Going against all reason, she had done this to herself. Opened her heart to a man who wanted none of it. Yesterday had been wonderful. A fairy tale. But like a fairy tale, it had been gossamer and make-believe.

Simon leaped upon the bed and stalked across the sheets toward her, ducking his orange head under her hand, begging for an ear rub. Alex scratched his soft ears and stroked his furry cheek. All the while, she reluctantly confronted the awful truth.

Her independent lifestyle was gone. She had killed it as surely as she'd tried to avoid losing it. In giving her body to Jack, she had also given him her soul.

Simon received enough attention and scampered away, dropping down to the floor with a thud. Alex tossed off the sheet and threw her legs over the side of the bed, sitting up. Fighting

back the pain in her heart, she remained still for a minute, breathing deeply.

There was no point in loving Jack, because he didn't love her. No matter how wonderful their lovemaking, all he wanted was to make up for his brother's lack of responsibility. He wanted to protect the precious family honor by taking care of the illegitimate child fathered by the younger Breckinridge.

She took a deep breath. No sense beating herself up about it. The day was wasting. She wasn't the kind to stew about things. Long ago she'd learned that action was preferable to suffering.

Alex stood up and stripped the bed, dropping the comforter onto the floor and wadding the sheets into a heap beside it. Before Evelyn saw these, she would launder the sheets herself, removing the evidence of "lovemaking."

In the bathroom, Alex showered, determined to scrub off the physical reminder of Jack. She replaced his scent with a generic floral body wash. Letting the hot water cascade over her head and down her body, she shut her mind to what had taken place in that shower the night before. She also washed him from her heart, knowing full well that it would cost her too much to continue exposing her feelings so blatantly for Jack to see.

After she toweled off, Alex dressed herself in her customary faded jeans and long-sleeve shirt, buttoning all the buttons up to the collar in a vain attempt to protect herself from the flare of desire she experienced with Jack's gaze upon her naked body.

It didn't work. She entered the large country kitchen, boots on and work gloves in her hip pocket, ready for the day, and immediately felt his stare.

Her mother stood at the sink, scrubbing a pan. Jack sat at the kitchen table, morning newspaper in hand, a spoon of Cheerios rising to his lips. He was dressed in a gray business suit, ready for work. Alex quickly averted her eyes. Hell would freeze over first before she would willingly look at him again. Apparently, Jack didn't share her feelings.

"Good morning." He smiled, his lips curving wide across his face.

"Good morning," she parroted.

He lowered the newspaper, lifting his head to take in all of her. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you."

"I see you're ready to help Ross." He sounded polite.

"After I eat." If he was determined to make small talk, then he would have to drag the

responses out of her. The less she said to him the better.

Alex crossed to the counter, aware of Jack's burning gaze upon her back. She opened a few cabinet doors in search of a coffee mug.

"Upper right," Evelyn said.

"Thanks." She found a heavy stoneware mug, and poured it halfway to the brim with coffee. Because the cream pitcher was on the table, she carried the mug across the room, her legs felt as wobbly as a newborn foal's, and sank down in a chair next to Jack. She poured a generous dollop of cream into her cup.

"Real coffee connoisseurs drink it black."

Alex lifted her gaze at his comment and noted the gleam of mischief in his eyes. "Well then, I guess I'm just not a connoisseur," she said.

She sipped her coffee slowly. She'd prefer to gulp it down in one swig just to finish in a hurry, but that would give Jack the satisfaction of seeing her run. And she'd be damned if she'd do that.

Alex watched Jack over the rim of her mug as he finished his cereal. A lock of his dark hair had fallen over his forehead. Her fingers twitched involuntarily towards him, itching to brush it back. Thank goodness he had his head buried in the newspaper or he'd have seen her reaching towards him.

The room was too quiet with only the whirl from the refrigerator and her mother's soft humming breaking the silence.

It was all Jack could do to hold back his emotions. Every fiber of his body ached for Alex. He longed to reach across the table and caress her velvety cheeks, sweep the curl from her eyes, and kiss those petal soft lips that could be so hot and demanding.

Memories of last night's lovemaking surged through him. She had been so responsive—eager to please and ready to be pleased. But that was last night.

Disappointment pounded hard against his chest. He had kept his promise until she'd asked him to break it. Alex's reasoning had been purely practical. They were young, healthy sexual creatures with an abnormal amount of attraction for each other. Why not make love?

Because the aftermath of unanswered love was just too damn hard.

Now Jack girded himself against more hurt. If she offered, he would take Alex up on the

lovemaking again. He wasn't good at self-sacrifice. But he wouldn't expose his true feelings to her, because he didn't want to hear her tell him she was grateful for his help.

Jack stood. "I must be going."

"Leave your dishes, Jack, dear," Evelyn said. "I'll clean up the kitchen."

"Thank you, Evelyn. I don't know what we'd do without you."

Alex's mother flushed with pleasure. He glanced at Alex, who gave him a grateful smile.

It was all Jack could do from grabbing her hard and dragging her toward him. His limbs, his joints, his heart ached for her, but his head told him no.

Let her make the next move.

"I won't be home for dinner tonight," he said, his tone sharpening and becoming business-like. "There's a dinner meeting after work." It was easier to stay away from her, wasn't it? "I hope you don't mind?"

She had risen from the table. "No, I don't mind."

Jack lifted his key ring from the hook beside the door leading to the mud room. How often had he seen his grandfather do the same thing?

Sorrow for what had been and for what could never be swept over him. He stiffened his shoulders. Although things had changed between them, nothing had. Their marriage had everything to do with Tyler and nothing more. He couldn't change that fact.

Before leaving, Jack turned back for a final glimpse of Alex. The sight of her and her mother in the kitchen filled him with an odd feeling of happiness. For the first time in recent memory, he looked forward to returning home at the end of the day. "Have a good day," he said.

"Thank you." She got up and came over to the door. "Same to you."

His heart buckled. He gripped the car keys extra hard. He glanced at Evelyn to make sure she wasn't listening. "You know, we almost sound as if this is a real marriage."

Her eyes grew guarded. "After last night, it almost is."

Jack nodded, offered a thin smile, and walked through the mud room and out the door. Firmly closing the outside door, he fought a gritty tumult of emotions. The operative word was *almost*.

Chapter Thirteen

Days passed. They were much too polite, much too formal and detached, avoiding each other as much as possible. Alex didn't want to do anything about it. It was easier that way.

Not interacting with him allowed her to nurse her self-reproach. Why had she asked him? She'd known better. Known it wouldn't work. Alex deliberately held herself apart from Jack as if nothing had ever happened between them.

Perversely, of course, she hated the sham of her life. Part of her longed for a real marriage—the kind she'd always dreamed of, while the rest of her was satisfied with things just the way they were.

They could be good together. Alex knew it, deep down inside. But Jack was motivated by his love of the land and heritage of Breckinridge Station, and by his need to protect his family from Brandon's mistake. She was just a means to an end.

After seeing Jack off to work in Louisville and Tyler off to school one morning, Alex headed to the barn. Her ringing cell phone drew her up short. She stopped near the paddock and put it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hey, kid, what's up?"

Johnny. "I'm just on my way to the barn to check on the mares," she told him.

"Kinda like the fancy new life, huh?"

"Sure, what's not to like?" Johnny was trawling for something. He hated phones as much as he hated computers, spending little time with either. She might as well take the bait. "What's up with you?"

"I need your help."

Alex's blood ran cold. "What kind of help?"

"I need you to come back to work," he put it bluntly.

"You know I can't do that. Jack doesn't want me exercising horses."

She heard him take a deliberate breath as if exasperated. "I don't need you full time. Just

one horse. Jack's two-year-old."

"Greco?"

"He's a handful, you know."

"What does that have to do with me?" Alex felt a growing sense of uneasiness.

"Seems like the colt has taken a shine to you. He's thrown off all the exercise riders I've put up on him. You know just how to get the best out of the horse without making him mad."

"I'm sorry, Johnny. I've promised Jack," she said with a sigh. There was nothing she would like better than to ride Greco again.

"He damn well may not have a Derby horse if you don't come back." Johnny's voice raised an octave. "I'm not kidding, Alex. I haven't had a good workout from this colt since you've been gone."

Was Johnny being a little over dramatic? She had only been gone a few weeks.

Alex suppressed another sigh. It was nice to feel needed, but she hesitated to do what Johnny asked. She had Tyler to think about.

If she did decide to ride Greco, she'd have to keep it from Jack. Sneak out after he left for work and come back before he got home. Alex didn't like the thought of that. Their so-called marriage was on shaky enough ground.

"I'll have to think about it," she told Johnny, stalling. "I'll let you know."

"Don't wait too long. I'm desperate here, kid."

Just like that, Johnny hung up. He never said goodbye.

Alex put the cell back in its carrying case on her belt and stood silently chewing on her lower lip. The two-year-old colt was the key to the farm's future. She didn't want to lie to Jack, but she couldn't think of any other way if she wanted to ride Greco and prepare him for racing.

Now Jack needed her help even if he didn't know it.

* * * *

Horses were running again at Keeneland in Lexington, Kentucky. The Bluegrass Stakes was a week away. The Kentucky Derby only three weeks. Jack had read the personnel file in front of him on his desk for the umpteenth time with the same results. He still didn't know what the black type on the white paper said.

Why had he even come to work? His mind wasn't in it.

All he could think about was Alex.

Sitting behind his imposing cherry desk, coffee cup near his hand, he might as well have been miles away. Back at Breckinridge Station.

Jack lifted his mug and sipped the tepid coffee. He didn't care that it wasn't hot. The bitter taste of the lukewarm liquid reminded him of the way his life had been going lately. Badly.

Silence between two people was a hard obstacle to overcome.

Jack rubbed his hand across his chin. He should have kept his promise. Why had Alex asked him to break it? He wasn't strong enough not to take her up on her offer.

Jack girded himself against more hurt.

Rising, he pushed back his chair and walked to the window. Staring out at the crowded parking lot, Jack remembered the day they'd shaken hands on their business deal in Johnny's cramped Trackside office.

He wanted his relationship with Alex to be more than sex. Was that all she wanted? There was more to Alex than he originally thought. He'd learned about her fierce love for Tyler, her loyalty to Marsden, and her unflagging energy when it came to the breeding operation Ross ran for him. Although she didn't use the word "love," she'd made love to him because he was grieving.

Jack mentally smacked himself on the forehead. What a blind fool! Alex did care about him and she'd been trying to show him.

He turned, suddenly making up his mind. He flipped the manila folder closed on his desk and snatched up his cell phone and keys. Damn the bank's personnel issue. He'd deal with it tomorrow.

Jack strode to his office door and flung it open. "Gloria!"

"Jack, darling," she gushed, blocking his exit with her tall curvy body.

He stepped back. "What are you doing here?"

"Is that any way to say hello? I'll have you know my feelings are hurt. I thought you'd be glad to see me."

Her smile was more of a pout and didn't quite touch her eyes. Jack stepped aside and Gloria swept into his office, a trail of Par Amour fragrance following her. His mother had bought her two ounces of it for him to give her at Christmas, if he remembered correctly.

She turned toward him, his cherry desk a backdrop to her elegant white linen tank dress that flared from under her bust to right above her knees. He had to admit she was a fine-looking

woman with her long legs and coal black hair. But she wasn't pretty on the inside. Dating her had been a concession to his mother, as much of what he did in his life was done to placate her.

"I can't understand why you married that exercise girl, Jack. I thought we had a good thing going between us." Tears blurred her eyes. "You've hurt me badly."

Jack swallowed, impatient, his left hand fisting at his side. Tension throbbed behind his right eye. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Gloria."

"You didn't think about my feelings at all," she charged. A lone tear slipped down her perfectly made up face. "In fact, your announcement has made me the laughing stock of the whole city."

"Come off it," Jack said. "The whole city doesn't know you exist."

Her bosom heaved. "You know what I mean. The gossip among our circle is vicious."

"I can't help that." He frowned, longing to end this pointless debate.

Gloria inched nearer, smiling, her tears forgotten. "We were so good together, Jack darling. I thought you loved me."

"I never told you I loved you, Gloria, and if you got that impression, I'm sorry."

She tapped the toe of her pointed high heel shoe. "At least tell me why you married that little nobody. You owe me that much."

"I don't owe you anything. But if it is any of your damn business, I married Alex because I love her."

"Oh, come on. I'll admit she'd got a pretty good figure for someone who's had a kid, but love her? *Please.*"

"I've loved her since we were kids." He said it again, aloud and in front of a witness, and it felt so good.

Gloria's gaze searched his, measuring him and, he guessed, her diminishing chances. "Your mother is beside herself. She wanted you to make a better marriage."

Jack shrugged. "I know. There's not much I can do about it. This is my life."

"Your little bride may have a hard time, you know."

Anger flared as fast as a horse breaking from the gate. Jack closed the space between them. "If I find out you are interfering in my life or Alex's, you will regret it," he said, looking with contempt at her haughty face. "More to the point, if you attempt to sabotage Alex's place in 'our circle,' I'll make sure your party invitations dry up as quick as your compassion for anyone

but yourself.”

“How dare you threaten me? All I ever wanted was to be with you.”

He had heard enough. Jack stepped aside and gestured with his hand towards the office door. “Gloria, it’s been a pleasure talking to you. I think we’ve come to an understanding. Will you kindly leave? Or do I have to throw you out?”

“I can find my own way out, thank you. Enjoy your life, Jack. Just don’t come crawling back to me when she cheats on you and takes you for every cent you have!” The creamy bare shoulders raised and dropped in a huff. Without another word, she sailed out of Jack’s office.

Damn that felt good. He had been longing to put Gloria Fenton in her place for months. And to think she had been the catalyst to make him admit the truth. Jack wanted to shout for joy. Slap high-fives. Spring back flips. Instead he banged the door behind him and raced for his car.

* * * *

Jack rushed home, his mind whirring with plans. He’d quit the bank and concentrate on the farm. Alex would help him. Maybe she’d let him adopt Tyler. Then the boy would officially be a Breckinridge. And he would tell her the truth about sending checks all through the years and of loving her from afar. Yes, he’d clear the air and never lie to Alex again.

Arriving at Breckinridge Station about four-thirty, he parked his car inside the garage and went through the mud room and into the kitchen.

A soap opera blared from the television set in the family room. Jack dropped his suit coat across the back of a kitchen chair and loosened his tie. He hurried into the family room, anxious to see Alex. Tyler lay on his stomach in front of the television with his school books opened. Copper stretched out beside him. The dog lifted his head when Jack entered the room. Alex relaxed in the recliner, her left leg outstretched in front of her.

Her bare foot was bandaged with an ice bag on it.

“My God, Alex. What happened to you?” He crossed the room to her chair.

Alex looked up at him with a wary look in her eyes and clicked the mute button on the remote control.

“Are you okay? Why didn’t you call me?” Words tumbled from his lips so quickly that she didn’t answer any of his questions.

“Mommy sprained her ankle,” Tyler piped up, eager to tell the story.

“My God, Alex,” he said again, gazing down at her. Her pitiful foot, all wrapped up,

reminded him of how fragile she was. More than ever he wanted to pamper and protect her.

“The doctor said I’ll be fine in a few days *if* I take care of myself.” She tilted her head to indicate crutches on the floor. “I have to stay off of my foot.”

“You have no business working like you do around this farm. You’re not hired help.”

She glanced away, refusing to meet his eyes. “What do you expect me to do? I can’t sit around this house and twiddle my thumbs.”

He caught his breath. “Tyler, go up to your room until supper and do your homework. I need to talk to your mother.”

“Do I hafta?”

“Tyler, go on,” Alex said. “Jack bought you that nice TV and that Wii console and games. Why don’t you go up and play your new dragon game when you get finished with those vocabulary words?”

“Okay, Mommy.” Tyler turned to go, then ran back to Jack, giving him a quick hug around the waist. “Thanks again for the Wii.”

“I’m glad you like it, Buddy.”

“I’m glad we came here,” Tyler said sheepishly and then fled upstairs followed by the fuzzy red dog.

Unexpected warmth rushed through Jack. “That’s a good kid.”

“Yes,” Alex murmured. “So far so good.”

Jack sat down on the edge of the sofa and reached for Alex’s hand, holding it firmly in his. “Tell me what happened.”

“I took a wrong step. Turned my ankle on an uneven surface.”

“Did Ross take you to the doctor?”

She refused to meet his gaze and stared down at the arm of the chair rubbing the soft fabric with her fingertips. “Uh, yeah.”

“I’m glad he was around.” Jack hesitated for a moment. “I still wish you had called me.”

“I figured you were busy.”

“We need to talk about keeping you productive and out of harm’s way,” he said, trying to soften his words with a grin.

She looked at him then, her gaze intent, searching his face with a heartrending look. He longed to put his arm around her and pull her close.

For a split second, he was about to come clean about his brother, get down on his knees and tell her he loved her.

But the phone rang.

He climbed to his feet to answer the landline located on a side table. "Hello?"

"Jack! How's Alex?"

"Marsden?" Surprise echoed through Jack's voice.

"Yeah. How's the kid?"

Jack glanced up. Alex sat immobile, her eyes glued to the flashing, but silent TV screen.

"She's resting and comfortable," he told Marsden.

"Good. Suspect she's outta commission for a few days, huh?"

"Yes, she is."

"You tell her that it's no problem. I'll give Greco a few days off too."

And then the phone went dead. Marsden had hung up.

Shock traveled through his body. Jack walked back to the sofa, trying to control his sudden anger. Alex had lied to him.

"Turn that thing off," he snapped.

Her gaze connected with his. Without comment, she flicked off the TV.

"Explain to me why Johnny Marsden is interested in your sprained ankle."

Her eyes grew wide.

"Answer me, Alex."

"He was there when I hurt it."

He barely heard her words. "You were at the track? Working Marsden's horses?" The pulse point in his throat was ready to explode. "You could have been seriously hurt exercising those green Thoroughbreds."

"I only exercised Greco. Johnny really needs my help. The colt is still fractious from those earlier mishaps."

He read the guilt on her face. "I thought you agreed to quit exercising horses." He couldn't believe what she had done. What else had she lied about?

She squirmed in the chair. "It was just one horse." She reached down and pulled the side lever. The footrest dropped with a thunk and the ice bag fell to the floor. "I went in late, did my job, and turned around and came home. Not many people saw me if that's what you're worried

about. No one will know Mrs. Jackson Breckinridge works on the backside.”

He glared at her. “That’s not the point. Don’t you care about Tyler?” Anger rolled through him. Didn’t she understand his fear?

Her eyes sparked and she struggled to her feet. Lifting the crutches, she hopped on her good foot until she’d fitted the pads under her arms. “That’s not fair!”

“What am I supposed to think?” His jaw clenched. “You’ll jeopardize your life going breakneck speed on a race horse.”

“Johnny needs my help,” she fired back.

“Johnny,” he scoffed. How dare she risk her life? “That old trainer has plenty of resources. He doesn’t need you.”

Alex stood in front of him, hobbled by her bandaged foot and the crutches. Her tangled hair framed the fury written all across her heart-shaped face. Her jaw was as set and as tense as his felt. He should clobber her for what she had done.

But all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and kiss her. Protect her. Make everything right between them.

Alex lifted her proud chin. “Johnny can’t do what I can do for Greco. He tried other exercise riders before he called me back.”

“You still don’t get it, do you?”

“What I get,” she spat, “is that Breckinridge Station might be in very real danger of failing if Greco doesn’t do well on the track.”

Jack rocked back on his heels and then drew himself up. “I don’t care about that.”

She pulled herself up too—as far as a petite woman could with a gimpy, bandaged foot and crutches. “I thought you wanted to quit banking and make the farm your career. We need Greco to win big races. I was trying to help you,” she said flatly.

“I don’t need help from you,” he said with a short, harsh laugh.

Her full mouth firmed. “I had to beg you to take me to bed and you’ve left me alone ever since. You don’t need my help with Greco. Sounds like you don’t need me period. Don’t worry, Jack. I’ll stay out of your business from now on.”

“You just do that,” he snapped. Fighting to control the dangerous emotions Alex unleashed within him, Jack did what he’d seen his father do countless times. He left the room and the house, slamming the door behind him.

Alex sank down onto the sofa. She felt as if she'd fallen from a horse and air had been knocked from her lungs. What had happened? She had argued with Jack over her stupid sprained ankle. It wasn't a life-threatening injury, but it symbolized so much more.

Bottom line, she was still the daughter of hired help. She didn't fit into Jack's lifestyle. That same anger and disappointment from years ago clogged her throat and her face flushed with shame.

In her mind she remained the unwed mother of Brandon's child, the child first Brandon, and then Jack, hid from his upper class family.

"Are you okay, Mommy?" Tyler crept down the stairs with Copper behind him and ran across the room to her. He dived onto the sofa, threw his arms around her waist and buried his head in her lap. The red dog licked her elbow.

Alex stroked his blond hair. "Sure, I'm okay, Tiger."

"I heard you and Jack yelling."

"Did you hear what we said?"

"No." His words were muffled in her lap. "I just heard you yelling like you were mad."

"We were mad."

He looked up. "I got scared."

"No need to be scared, Tiger. It's okay." She gave him a quick squeeze. "Let me explain something to you about grownups."

Tyler sat up and Alex brushed the hair from his eyes. God, she loved this child—this innocent boy who hadn't asked for any heartache.

"Sometimes grownups get mad at each other and sometimes they shout." Alex read fear in his eyes. "You know, like sometimes Mommy and Granny yell at each other."

"But you and Granny don't mean it. Not really."

Perception from an eight year old. It blew Alex away. "Jack and I don't mean it either."

"But you sounded like you did."

Alex expelled a long breath of self-doubt. "I know we did, but you're not used to having a daddy around the house. You don't know how men and women act together."

Shock raced through Alex's veins. She had just equated Jack with *father*.

How stupid she had been to think this was a simple monetary arrangement and that she

wouldn't invest her feelings. And not keeping sex out of the marriage had been just as naïve. Where had her head been?

"If Jack's really mad, will he want us to leave?" Tyler's voice was small and sad.

"No, Tiger, Jack wants us." God, what had she said? She didn't know what Jack wanted any more than she knew what she had expected this marriage to solve. She shut her eyes against the pain of her folly.

The front doorbell rang and Copper sprang to her feet, barking.

"Tyler, bring that dog here and go answer the door."

Tyler dragged Copper over to where Alex sat, and she grabbed the feisty dog's collar. Then he ran to the front door and opened it.

Alex's stomach took a nosedive. Irene Breckinridge stood in the doorway, looking as elegant as always, wearing a brown tweed suit and classic brown pumps, and carrying a brown purse across her arm. Her silver hair was styled in a bouffant hairdo. In her ears and around her neck, she wore expensive, but old-fashioned pearls.

During a different age, Alex expected the woman would have come calling wearing a pillbox hat and proper white gloves.

"May I come in?"

Chapter Fourteen

“Come in, Irene.” Alex swallowed her surprise and waved in the general direction of her foot. “I’d get up, but I’ve injured my ankle.”

“Don’t bother.” Her mother-in-law’s tone was coolly disapproving. She came across the threshold and into the family room, eyeing the barking dog in Alex’s grasp.

“Tyler, take Copper upstairs.” She knew her son had no idea who this woman was and she wasn’t ready for a formal introduction.

Tyler closed the door behind Irene and ran to the sofa, grabbing Copper by the collar. “Let’s go, girl.” He dragged the dog up the stairs. Alex heard his bedroom door shut.

She turned to her mother-in-law. “Jack isn’t here right now.”

Irene’s eyes narrowed. “I know. He’s at work, but I didn’t come to see him.”

Alex was too startled to correct her mistake. Irene had evidently not seen Jack’s car and thought he was in Louisville. “Can I help you with something? Would you like to sit down?”

“I didn’t come for a social visit.” She examined Alex with an expression that was cold and unforgiving. “I came to ask you if you’re pregnant.”

“What?” This was too much. Alex would laugh in the woman’s face if it wasn’t so ironic.

“There has to be a reason why Jack would marry you so fast.”

“Really, Irene, it’s none of your business why Jack and I married.” Alex struggled to her feet. She wasn’t as tall as her mother-in-law, but at least standing, she didn’t feel at such a disadvantage.

“I’m prepared to offer you fifty thousand dollars to divorce Jack.”

Alex’s head reeled. Was Irene crazy? Anger and humiliation, as cold as a frigid February morning, gushed through her. “I can’t be bribed,” she stated with anger.

Irene looked down her aristocratic nose at Alex. “Come now, Miss Marsden, I know you and your mother lived in a two bedroom apartment until moving here, and you made less than

forty thousand dollars a year. You've bettered yourself considerably by marrying my son."

Alex shuddered inwardly at the thought of Irene Breckinridge spying on her. She felt unclean. "How dare you! You have a lot of nerve!"

"Don't take that tone with me, young lady." Irene advanced, towering over her. "You're an opportunist, and you know it."

"I am not! I'm protecting my son."

Irene stepped back, speculation sparking in her eyes. "That's exactly what I thought. You married *my son* for money so he could take care of *yours*."

A suffocating sensation choked Alex's throat. She'd said too much already.

"It's apparent that this quick marriage is a sham. Take the money, Alex. You can provide for your boy and your mother. You don't really belong here, do you?"

Alex stared at the imperious woman. She had done her share of covering up for Brandon and so had Jack. Was it time to tell her the truth?

"Take the money, Alex. I won't tell Jack you did," Irene pulled a sealed envelope from her purse.

"No!"

She was *not* like the Breckinridges. She would *not* take their money any more. She'd move her family home, back to that two bedroom apartment where at least she was in control of her own destiny. She'd find a way to support her family.

But if she did that, Tyler would suffer. Alex looked around the butter-soft family room where she felt at home. Her son loved it here. Her mother did too. How could she take all this away from them? How could she hurt them intentionally even to regain her self-respect?

"Well? Are you going to take the money or aren't you?"

Bracing on the crutches, Alex thought about covering her ears with her palms. She didn't want to hear any more. She blinked back the tears starting in her eyes. She'd be damned if she cried in front of Irene Breckinridge.

"What's it going to be, Alex?" Irene persisted and waggled the envelope in her face. "Fifty thousand dollars. It's a lot of money. All you have to do is divorce my son and it's yours."

"I don't know!" Her voice was raw, and her whole body shook with confusion and hopelessness.

"What in the Sam hill are you doing here, Irene?"

Alex turned in time to see her mother advance into the family room like an avenging angel, ready to do battle for her only child.

* * * *

What was his mother's car doing in the driveway? Jack broke into a run. If there was one thing he didn't want was his mother and Alex alone together. God knew what his mother would say to Alex and he needed to tell Alex he loved her before any additional crap hit the fan.

He took the front stairs two at a time and flung open the front door. He was too late. A drama that rivaled the longest running soap opera was being played out in the family room.

Evelyn Marsden stood toe-to-toe with his mother using words that would make a sailor blush.

"What's going on?"

"Jack!" His mother fled to his side. "I want you to get rid of these horrible people."

"Mother, calm down." He took her hand. "You know Evelyn. She worked here a long time for Nana and Mr. B."

"I know who she is, but she and her daughter have no right to be in this house."

"You bitch!" Evelyn shouted, fury making her face purple. "If you hadn't stolen Jackson Breckinridge right from under my nose, then this might have been *my* home, not the place I cleaned for thirty years."

"Shut up, Evelyn." Irene's tone was threatening. She glared at the smaller woman and lifted her proud chin.

"I won't shut up," Evelyn said, stepping nearer. "I've been quiet all my life. Jimmy Marsden was a good man and I knew my place. Thing is, honey, you forgot yours a long time ago."

"Mom, what are you talking about?" Alex asked.

Evelyn turned to her daughter. "Irene Dickerson and I were best friends in high school. Her family lived in Versailles, just like mine. Her daddy worked at the lumber store. She's no better than I am, when you come down to it." She faced Irene. "And she's got the morals of a snake. Jack's father was *my* blind date the night we double-dated."

"That was a long time ago," Irene declared. "Thirty years is a long time to harbor a grudge."

Evelyn took another step forward, wagging her finger. Jack hesitated, torn by conflicting

emotions. They were like two alley cats, spitting and hissing, their backs raised.

“Not when you march into this house and bully my daughter. Alex and Tyler have every right to be here. Any ninny with half a brain can see Tyler is Brandon’s son.”

His mother stumbled back a step. “What did you say?”

“You heard me,” Evelyn said, lowering her voice. She took a deep breath and reached for Alex’s hand. “I’m sorry, baby. I know it wasn’t my place to tell her, but she needs to know. In fact, she needed to know years ago.” She turned back to Irene and looked her full in the face. “You’ve actually been lucky, you know. Alex could have caused quite a scandal if she had wanted to. And why my daughter didn’t ask your family for more child support, I’ll never understand. Those puny checks Brandon sent twice a year were hardly enough.”

“Mom, be quiet,” Alex warned.

“It’s the truth,” Evelyn snapped. “It’s time she knew it.” She turned to Jack. “It’s time you knew your mother is not some high and mighty Kentucky blueblood. She’s a small town girl, just like me.”

His mother’s hand turned cold and damp. Jack looked down to see her whole demeanor had crumbled. “Mother, are you okay? Would you like to sit down?”

“I don’t have to take this abuse,” Irene stammered, letting him take her to the sofa. “Jack, do something.”

“What do you want me to do?” He sat down by her side.

“Get them out of here. You know I can’t stand liars.”

“I don’t know if Mrs. Marsden is a liar.” He glanced at Evelyn. “I’ve never heard you talk about your childhood. I never knew my maternal grandparents.”

Irene had gone pale. “But the other thing. What she said about Brandon.”

It was time for the truth. All the way around. He glanced up at Alex and tried not to be dismayed by the unreadable stare she returned. Jack squeezed his mother’s hand. How did he tell her? For so long he wanted to protect her from knowing about Tyler. He wanted to believe Brandon would step up to his responsibility, and later keep alive the myth of his brother’s heroism.

His insides felt like gum, sticky with mixed emotions and regret. He took a resolute breath. “It’s true. I’ve known since Brandon admitted it to me eight years ago. You know he could never keep anything from me.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” Some of her spunk returned and Irene straightened her shoulders, her posture stiff.

“It was Brandon’s place to tell you. Not mine.”

“Neither one of you told me.”

He heard the hurt in her voice, the hurt he’d tried to protect her from. “Mother, I thought Brandon would tell you, but when he didn’t, I covered for him.” Jack slumped forward and looked as his clasped hand. “I told Brandon if he wouldn’t marry Alex and give his child the Breckinridge name, then he didn’t deserve the perks of that name.”

“I don’t believe it.”

He should put his arm around her, but his mother never invited warmth and affection. “I told him to enter the army. Maybe that would make a man of him. But Brandon took it as a way to duck out of his responsibilities.”

His mother’s eyes showed the torture of confusion and disbelief. “I blamed you for Brandon leaving.”

Jack gave her a sad smile. “I know. I tried to make it up to you in other ways.” He thought about Gloria Fenton and the parade of other women he couldn’t force himself to marry.

He glanced at Alex. Evelyn stood next to her, supporting her, much as he tried to support his mother. Alex looked so forlorn holding herself up by the crutches and searching his face with a gaze fraught with despair.

“At least Brandon didn’t forget us completely,” Alex spoke up. “He sent us a little money each year.”

“I suppose that is something,” Irene said dully. She reached a manicured hand into her Coach bag and put the envelope inside.

What did it matter that his mother had little faith left in Brandon? It couldn’t hurt to let his mother think him honorable in the end. Jack stood up and looked at Alex. Would she mind if he took a step toward making them a real family?

He turned to his mother. “How about meeting your grandson? He’s a great kid.”

“Now?” Casting a wary glance at Evelyn, she muttered, “I’m not sure I’m ready to be a grandmother.” She rose to her feet, her haughtiness returning. “At least a part of my Brandon still lives,” she said in a hushed voice.

Evelyn wiped away a tear and Alex nodded at him. Jack went to the foot of the stairs and

called up, “Tyler, come downstairs. Your mother and I want to introduce you to someone.”

* * * *

When Irene and Evelyn had gone home and Tyler and Copper had finally fallen into bed, Alex hobbled onto the screened-in porch, seeking the peace and quiet of the approaching night.

The introductions had gone well. Tyler had been respectful and polite, Evelyn had been restrained, and Irene had surprised everyone by her quiet dignity if not her genuine warmth. It had been tricky explaining about Brandon, but even that had been softened for the benefit of an eight year old.

Alex had never told her son much about his father other than he was a soldier. Together she and Jack accounted for Brandon’s absence—he was busy serving his country—and told him about his father’s recent death. Standing in the family room, eyes wide with curiosity, Tyler had taken it all in like a champ.

“You’re named for my son,” Irene had told him. “His middle name was Tyler.”

“It was?” He had seemed impressed, glancing all around.

Jack had surprised them all by asking Tyler if he wanted to be adopted and become a Breckinridge for real. Alex had given her son permission by a silent nod and they had all celebrated with delivered pizza, even Irene who had behaved like a trouper and seemed somewhat chagrined over her past behavior.

Things were working out for Tyler, Evelyn, and even Irene and Jack, who had at least started to reconcile their differences. But what about their marriage?

She didn’t want to love Jack, was afraid to love him. She had loved Brandon and that love had not been returned. But he had taught her a bitter lesson.

Loving in isolation was pointless. *True* love was mutual. *Quid pro quo*, something for something. She wanted that something.

Jack came out into the porch and shut the door. He approached and stood behind her so close that she could feel the heat emanating from his body. His warm breath on the back of her neck. His thigh against the back of her knee.

When Jack touched her shoulders, chills clashed with the warmth corkscrewing down her spine. He brushed her hair away from her neck with a gentle kiss.

She stiffened, trying to stay the desire that ran hot and cold through her. She fought her fear of his rejection. “Don’t, Jack.”

He hesitated for only a moment. "This thing between us, Alex, we've got to solve it," he whispered in her ear.

Her knees were about to buckle. "How?"

"By clearing the air." He turned her around. "By telling the truth."

She gazed up into his handsome face, longing for peace between them, longing for so much more that her tied-tongue couldn't express.

"As much as I wanted to protect Brandon, in the end it was a mistake. I don't want to fix his mess." He brushed the hair from her eyes, his fingers tender and warm. "I don't want your gratitude, Alex, but you need to know the truth. I sent those checks."

"You gave me money all those years?" Brandon *was* a jerk. She'd been a fool to think otherwise.

He nodded, and cupped her face in his hands, looking down at her. "I was mad when I found out about Greco," he said softly, "because I don't want you to get hurt."

"I'm a good rider, Jack."

"I know, but I don't want to lose you too."

"What?"

He looked away, but not before she read his heartache. "I've lost Brandon and Nana. I can't lose you."

"Oh, Jack," she said with a sigh. What was she supposed to say? In her mind, his fears were unreasonable, but did they mean something more?

His smile was sad and sweet. He gently traced her lips with a fingertip. "I love you, Alex. I've loved you a long time and I've made so many mistakes. Can you ever forgive me?"

She caught his hand and leaned her cheek into it, savoring his warmth, his nearness, his love. "I need to fess up too," she murmured. "I know you thought I loved Brandon. Maybe you even think I still do. But it was over years ago, Jack. I did love him once, but when he abandoned his son, I couldn't continue to love him."

Alex searched Jack's face, probing deep into his heart. "I told you I couldn't marry someone I didn't love."

"But you married me."

"I know. I didn't make a mistake," she said with fierce conviction. "I love you, Jack."

Jack stopped her next words with his mouth. "We've talked enough."

He kissed her slowly, her head tilting back and her hair falling over her shoulders, loose and long. He slid his hand behind her neck and tangled his fingers in her thick mass of waves.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered. “Let’s go make a real marriage.”

About the Author

Jan Scarbrough lives in Louisville, Kentucky, along with two dogs and four cats. Dreams do come true! On January 2, 2000, she married Bill, her soul mate. When she's not writing, Jan takes riding lessons every week on her favorite horse, the American Saddlebred. She also volunteers at The Luci Center, a therapeutic riding center.

Jan says, "The process of becoming a published author has been fun. My best friends are fellow writers. Who else will check a point plot for me or understand GMC and POV?"

Jan Scarbrough is a member of Novelists, Inc., Romance Writers of America and the Kentucky Romance Writers, where she served as president, secretary, and newsletter editor. Jan is currently the web mistress of the KYRW chapter's award-winning web site.

To learn more about Jan Scarbrough, please visit her at:

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Kylie Dobson is a romance author with a problem. As a seat-of-the-pants writer, she depends on the strength of the characters to drive her plot. But when her hero, Milo, Lord Gafton refuses to chase after the prescribed heroine, everything goes wonky. Kylie is inexplicably sucked into her work of fiction, transported from a contemporary venue to a fictional Regency setting. What's worse is, nothing she does is affecting the plot and she can't get out.

Set into motion by her own creative process is a winter storm which seals the Regency party goers in on a country estate. If that wasn't bad enough, a murderer is on the loose and he's picking off one guest at a time. The more time she spends with Milo the more she comes to depend on him. She's convinced that his character sketch will kick in at any moment and he'll fall for her heroine. But will it happen before she loses her heart to him? And what happens when the plot draws to the end? Will the killer have his way and will Kylie solve the case only to be returned to her reality without the man she's fallen for?

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Project Manager: Georgina Coleman, VP at Pacific Bank, 28 years old. Brilliant and determined, but lacking in social skills.

Project background: Transfer from London to San Diego allows Georgina to shed her dowdy image and get a life.

Project objective: Seduce a man and lose her virginity.

Timeline: Seven weeks, starting from the completion of Project Flowchart.

Target: Georgina's downstairs neighbor, a surly cop named Rick Matisse.

Complication: Rick's 12-year-old daughter Angelina, who thinks Georgina would be the perfect girlfriend to keep Dad on his toes.

Distraction: Money laundering investigation which requires Georgina to mingle with a bunch of Colombian thugs who believe that every woman should be owned by a man.

Project evaluation: A project can go wrong despite successful completion, if Project Manager fails to plan for how to deal with the Target after project closure.

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Secrets of the Heart by Jannifer Hoffman

Nicole Anderson owns a successful costume design business, has a wealth of small town friends and sleeps in a lonely bed haunted by demons from the past. She's convinced herself her life is exactly the way she wants it and has shot down every marriageable man within a fifty-mile radius.

When Hunter Douglas is assigned the task of delivering a deceased friend's children to their aunt, he must first convince the belligerent Nicole Anderson that she actually had a sister. Though forced to take his two charges to Minnesota, Hunter fully intends to persuade Ms. Anderson to allow the children to return to New York with him —without sharing his own little secret. The last thing he wants to do is fall in love with a woman who lives in a small Midwest town with neighbors who seem to know every move he makes.

As the heat index between Nicole and Hunter rises, a bizarre puzzle begins to unfold involving false birth certificates, a stolen suitcase, odd pictures, an elusive stalker, and a grandfather's legacy that could turn deadly.

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***A Man of Her Own* by Jan Scarbrough**

Sarah Colby's romantic heart believes there's a man for her somewhere. She's determined to find her "soul mate." During a girls' night out at a Louisville bar, Sarah's two former college roommates urge her to "kiss a lot of toads" if she wants to find Prince Charming. Hoping to make up for lost time, twenty-four-year-old Sarah practices on several good-looking guys. One of the unsuspecting "toads" is wealthy restaurateur Lane Williams, a guy with a great aversion to settling down.

Lane can't be bothered with romance. His past twenty years has been one of long hours and sacrifice, and he's had enough responsibility to last a lifetime. Clearly, the sexy, young woman, who wants only marriage, is trouble to his equilibrium. As they work together to pull off an important charity party, Lane finds himself susceptible to her charms...and much, much more.

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Bed, Breakfast, and You by Maddie James... Suzie Schul finds home only when the "fling" she had many months earlier shows up with a plan on her B&B doorstep.

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