

**The Taming of Jessie Jane**  
**by**  
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**Chapter One**

He would know those legs anywhere.

Mitchell Hayes paused on the stairs beneath the wide landing where the woman stood. She slouched in the side doorway that led to the ballroom, facing away from him.

Mitch wore a fedora. It was a prop and an affectation and he knew it, but it was also useful when he wanted to play it incognito. Pushing the hat back off his forehead a little, Mitch let his gaze travel upward.

No doubt about it. Jessie. With bad hair.

A wig? He hoped. He'd always loved her long red hair, hair that flowed down her back in a silken stream, hair that slipped through his fingers like liquid satin. In Mitch's not-so-humble opinion, it would be a crime to cut hair like Jessie's — let alone to dye it that dishwater brown. If she had cut it, he'd give her hell later. That should be fun.

And yes. Though he knew the price in the end would be more than he wanted to pay again, one way or another, there would be a later.

She wore a plain black skirt, a snug white shirt, and ugly black shoes. Waitress clothes. She'd probably signed on at some temporary agency that supplied extra staff for special events like the one tonight — the Lone Star County Debutante Ball.

Incredible. The two of them showing up at the Lone Star Country Club on the night of the deb ball. Could it get any richer? He planned to see that it did.

In the ballroom, the band was playing the national anthem good and loud. The patriotic strains poured through the open doorway, filling the stairwell with sound.

Harvey Small, who was ahead of Mitch on the stairs, had reached the landing where Jessie stood. Short, balding, and officious, Harvey was the Lone Star Country Club's new manager. As a rule, the Harvey Smalls of the world did not lead guests to their rooms. For Mitch, though, he'd made an exception. Mitch, after all, was the Mitchell Hayes, and the Mitchell Hayes had made it clear he wanted his stay here kept as quiet as possible. So Harvey was showing him the way — up the back stairs, where they'd be less likely to run into someone who might recognize him.

Harvey must have realized that Mitch had stopped climbing. He paused and looked back. "Ahem. A problem?"

Mitch spoke a little louder than necessary. "No, not at all."

In the doorway, Jessie straightened. She turned just as Mitch started moving again. He reached the landing. Those wonderful too-knowing blue eyes of hers found him. She blinked. But other than that, her unforgettable face remained calm and composed.

By then, Harvey had noticed her. And he didn't see Jessie Jane Dooley, a.k.a. J.J. Dooley, local bad-girl-made-good. Harvey saw a waitress just standing around. His small eyes seemed to get smaller and his wide brow furrowed. "Miss?" It was a reprimand. It was Don't you have work you ought to be doing? in one tight, disapproving syllable.

Right in character, Jessie bobbed her brown head, an obedient Yes, sir of a nod.

Oh, but those eyes. They gave her away as she looked past the manager again and straight at Mitch. What a moment. Heat sizzled through him. He knew she felt it, too. Those incredible eyes told him so.

Really, life was damned amazing when you thought about it. All these years, and he still wanted her. He'd been seventeen when they first loved, eighteen when she dumped him. Then there had been that incredible interlude in New Orleans eight years later. He'd been the one who walked away then. And now, here they were again, back in South Texas where it all started, eighteen years from being eighteen, a decade from those steamy nights in New Orleans. And somehow the fire hadn't stopped burning.

She'd broken his heart more than once. And here he was, ready and willing to have it broken all over again.

Mitch lifted a hand and tugged on the brim of his hat — a salute. And a challenge.

Right then, Harvey cleared his throat a second time. Strongly. "Ahem."

Jessie got the message. Another few seconds of hesitation on her part and Harvey would be saying more than "Miss" and "Ahem." Evidently, she wasn't willing at that moment to have her cover blown. She turned and stepped through the open doorway, vanishing into the ballroom as "The Star Spangled Banner" played on.

## Chapter Two

Jessie disappeared into the ballroom and Mitch ached to follow. The urge to chase her down right then was as strong as the need to draw his next breath. He quelled it. She'd spotted him. He'd seen in her eyes that she would find him.

If this ball was anything like the deb balls of Mitch's youth, there would be a long, elaborate program, including slide shows and testimonials and an endless parade of patriotic songs. There would also be a steak dinner. Jessie would play her part, serving the white-gowned debs and their tuxedoed escorts. When the dancing finally started, hours from now, she'd have a chance to slip away.

Mitch knew his way around the club. He'd grown up among the powers that be in Lone Star County: those famous feuding Carsons and Wainwrights, the magnificently wealthy Callaghans who owned the giant estate out by Lake Maria. In his early years, he'd spent a lot of time here at the club. Jessie hadn't. She was a Dooley and the Dooleys weren't the country club kind. But Jessie was nothing if not resourceful. She'd find him, all right. And he knew in his bones that it would be tonight.

Harvey led Mitch up the final two flights of stairs and along a couple of hallways to the Governor's Suite. Once inside, the manager urged Mitch to ring downstairs should he have a single unfulfilled desire. Mitch hid a smile at that one.

*Hello, Concierge? There's a waitress with naughty blue eyes and a bad brown wig, passing out the T-bones at the deb ball tonight. Could you get her for me — she can be damned ornery. Tie her up, if you have to — and deliver her to my room?*

A few minutes after Harvey departed, the porter appeared with Mitch's bags. A generous tip and he was gone. Originally, Mitch had planned to check things out a little next, to head downstairs again and get a look at the burned-out shell of what had once been the original clubhouse, bombed a few months back by a group of rogue cops from the local Mission Creek police force.

He'd thought maybe he'd find a cozy corner of the temporary structure they'd set up to house the Men's Grill until the old clubhouse could be rebuilt. He would treat himself to a chicken-fried steak smothered in country gravy — and soak up the atmosphere.

But since he'd seen Jessie, his plans had changed. He wasn't leaving this room until she tracked him down. It was barely seven. He had several hours to wait. He called for room service, ordered some food and a nice little bottle of Pinot Grigio — and two glasses. Once he'd filled his stomach, he showered and shaved and changed into fresh khakis and a clean polo.

The Governor's Suite had a balcony accessed through a set of French doors. It looked out over the back gardens and beyond — to the wide, rolling expanse of the Lone Star Country Club's Ben Hogan–designed golf course. Mitch took his wine out there and sat at the cute little iron patio table. It was a balmy May night, not a cloud in the sky. The lights from the three swimming pools, nestled at intervals among the spectacular greenery, twinkled at him invitingly. The music from the deb ball drifted on the air.

Too soon, the bottle was half empty. It wouldn't do to get drunk. Not tonight. He put the cork in it and went back inside.

He made a few calls to L.A. That ate up about an hour. At nine-thirty, he took off his clothes, doused the lights and climbed between the cool white sheets of the king-size bed. He grabbed the remote and channel-surfed for a while.

But nothing could hold his attention. He was too edgy, too focused on the moment when he'd see Jessie again.

After a while, he gave up. He turned off the TV and he lay there in the dark, remembering Jessie. Waiting for her.

He must have drifted off in spite of his certainty that he wouldn't. The next thing he knew, he felt the cold steel of a gun barrel at his temple and the warm weight of her body pressing him down.

"Okay, Mitch." Her voice was as he remembered it: velvety. Low. "What the hell do you think you're up to? No way I'm letting you steal my story."

### **Chapter Three**

Mitch lay on his stomach. Jessie straddled him, pressing the gun, quite tenderly, to the vulnerable hollow directly behind his left eye.

"Jessie," he said reproachfully. It felt good, to have her name in his mouth again — almost as good as it felt to have her sitting on him. "Come on. Put it away."

The gun — most likely that cute little nickel-plated Colt .25 she'd carried in New Orleans, just in case she ran into trouble she couldn't handle with her quick wits alone — stayed where it was. Those fine, strong legs held him prisoner. Her anchoring hips pressed him into the bed — not too hard, really. But hard enough. And speaking of hard...

She shifted a little, leaning forward on top of him. He stifled a groan of arousal. "I asked you a question," she whispered in his ear. "What are you up to?"

Damn. He could smell her. The special, one-and-only drugging scent of her skin. And that perfume. The same as in New Orleans. "Still wearing Poison, aren't you? Smells good."

"You'd better talk to me, Mitch."

"As always, your approach lacks...subtlety."

She made a disgruntled sound in her throat. "Just trying to get your attention."

"Don't worry, you've got it. What now?"

"I told you. I want an answer."

"Are you going to shoot me?"

"Probably not." She breathed the words into his ear, sweetly. With at least a measure of regret. Her breasts, covered in some crisp, smooth fabric — that snug waitress shirt, no doubt — brushed his back.

At that moment, he would have given up his percentage in last summer's blockbuster to roll over and take those breasts in his hands. "I'm sure your daddy must have told you that you never point a weapon you don't intend to use." Her daddy, dead for more than a decade now, was Killer Kyle Dooley. Killer Kyle had known virtually all there was to know about guns and how to use them.

Jessie chuckled. "I learned many things from my daddy. Most of them hurt. And I've gotta tell you, he pointed a lot of guns in his day. A good number of them with deadly intent. But now and then — as I believe you remember — he would draw a bead on a man for the simple pleasure of watching an enemy squirm."

"I'm not your enemy, Jess."

"Right."

"And I don't think I'm in the mood to squirm for you."

She heaved a big, fake sigh. "Oh, gee. You're not?"

"Put the gun away. We'll have a glass of wine."

She moved the gun slightly, so that the small, cold barrel whispered in a gentle circle at his temple. "My question stands. I'm waiting for your answer."

"Just...checking things out in the old hometown."

She sat back — and at the same time tightened her legs on him. He had to control another heated moan. "Tell me now," she commanded, pressing the gun home a little harder than before. "You're looking into working something up, putting a treatment together, making a movie about Mission Creek, about the things that go down at the Lone Star Country Club."

"Jessie..."

"Damn you, stop hedging. Give it to me straight."

"There's no ownership when it comes to ideas. You know that."

"That's a yes, right? You're stealing my story, moving in on my ground."

"Are we going in circles here? You know ideas are a dollar a dozen. It's what you do with them that matters."

"Say it. Tell me the truth."

"You're getting way out of hand with this."

"I'm frustrated, Mitch."

As if he wasn't, with her crotch spread against the small of his back and her legs wrapped tight around him.

"I just want you to say it." She hissed the words through clenched teeth. "I want you to tell me —"

Mitch had had enough. He bucked against her, hard. She swore under her breath. And then he was rolling, knocking her off of him, sliding out from under those kicking legs, shoving the sheet out of the way, expecting, any second, that her shiny little gun would go off.

#### **Chapter Four**

They tussled in the moonlight on the white sheets in the wide bed. Jessie was a good fighter, strong, quick, and ruthless. But Mitch had seventy pounds on her and he kept himself in shape. He got hold of her right hand, gave it a hurtful squeeze, shaking hard until the little gun went flying. He heard it hit the carpet with a soft *thunk* perhaps four feet from the bed.

"Damn you, Mitch Hayes...." She kicked with those fine legs, punched at him with her free hand.

He managed to capture that hand, too. And then he hooked a leg across her stomach and sat on her. She squirmed and wiggled. He spread-eagled her arms. Two buttons had popped open on her tidy white shirt. He could see a swatch of something black and seductively satiny. Her skirt was hitched in a tangle around her waist, caught beneath his hips.

After a few more seconds of furious wiggling, she gave up and lay still beneath him, panting and glaring.

"Ah," he said softly into her shadowed face. "My turn on top. Now I get to ask the questions." He watched her gaze move downward, pause, and then lift — just a fraction too quickly — to meet his again.

He chuckled. "All right. It's no secret. I'm glad to see you."

"Get over it."

"Never." He spent a few seconds looking at her. It was no hardship, looking at Jessie. "Your wig is askew."

She struggled again, briefly, then lay limp and commanded, "Let me up."

"I don't know. What if you shoot me?"

She made a snarly sound. "The gun isn't loaded. I was afraid I'd be too tempted to actually use it." She squirmed again, fitfully. "Come on. Let me up."

Her lips, as always, looked eminently kissable. But she didn't really seem to be in a kissing mood at that moment. Still. No harm in asking. "Do I get a kiss first?"

"You've got a lot of nerve, Mitch."

"Hey. You're the one who broke in here, sat on me and put a gun to my head."

"Let me up." There was a silence. They stared at each other. A battle of wills. Then she spoke again, answering the question she must have seen in his eyes. "No. I mean it, Mitch. I'm not here to sweat up the sheets with you."

"Liar."

"It just... It fried me, to see you here, on the trail of my story. I came on a little strong, I guess."

"Yeah, and Hitler was not a very nice man."

"I swear I'll behave. I just want to talk."

He let go of her wrists — as a test. She made no move to regain the upper hand, simply lay there, watching him, arms back against the pillows, palms, pale and vulnerable, open to him.

Finally, she grunted. "Please? You weigh a ton."

So he slid off of her. He switched on the bedside lamp, reached for his boxers and then his pants. When he turned back to her, she was standing beside the bed, the ugly wig in her hand.

Her hair was the glorious red he remembered. But she'd cut it — short and spiky. She raked her hand through it, using her fingers as a comb.

"You cut your hair," he said softly, shaking his head. Funny, he felt no desire to razz her about it now. All the fun of this had vanished suddenly into a feeling of loss. Of low, dragging sadness.

"Yeah." She tossed the wig on the bed and buttoned her shirt back up. "You mentioned wine?"

He poured them each a glass, which emptied the bottle. He handed her one, held his up in a toast. "To...whatever you're after, Jess."

She clicked her glass with his and they both drank. Then she dropped to a crouch and picked up the Colt. She stood. "You are scouting the idea of making a movie, right? A movie about Mission Creek, about that ring of crooked cops who blew up the old clubhouse, about the Carsons and the Wainwrights, maybe about the Texas Mob and the drowning of a certain mobster's daughter by a group of local rich-boy war heroes we both know. About all of it, everything that goes on in our hometown."

"And if I am?"

She sipped more wine. "I don't want you covering the same ground as I am."

"It wouldn't be the same story, you know that. I make movies. You write true crime." As J. J. Dooley, Jessie was the author of *The Mardi-Gras Murders*, *Love Her to Death*, and *Murder in the Orange Grove*. Reviewers were fond of calling her the next Ann Rule. "Different forms," he said. "Different approaches. We could both —"

"No. It would all be too freighted for me. We'd be bound to run into each other again. And even if we didn't, I'd always be thinking we might, thinking of you, wondering if you'd noticed this, or thought of including that. There'd be too damn much old baggage to distract me from getting the work done."

"You're such a coward, Jess. Always have been, when it comes to you and me."

She had no reply for that — or if she did, she decided to keep it to herself.

He tipped his glass at her. And then drained it, set it down, picked up his Rolex and slid it on his wrist. "Tell you what."

She looked at him sideways. "I'm listening."

"Say I did give up this story, just turned and walked away...."

"Yeah?"

"What will you give me to do that?"

## Chapter Five

Jessie set the gun on the nightstand and sat on the edge of the bed. She drank the last of her wine and then put the glass down next to the gun. "Well, Mitch. Let's see. I seem to remember reading somewhere that your last picture grossed over fifty million on its opening weekend."

He smiled. "You noticed — and it was fifty-seven million, to be exact."

"All right then. Fifty-nine million. You've had a string of hits."

"Well. Four in a row."

"Oh. Only four. How sad for you."

"I try not to let it get me down."

"I'll bet. You live in Malibu now, if I'm not mistaken — when you're not at your ranch in Colorado or your villa in the south of France."

"Jessie. You've been keeping track. I'm touched."

"As for me, I'm doing pretty well, all things considered. I live in California, too. Sacramento. A nice old brick bungalow not far from City College. I drive a compact car. And I still fly coach. What I'm saying is I don't think you're after my money."

He shook his head. "Uh-uh. Not your money..." The more he looked at her hair, the more he liked it. It was no-frills, lean and mean. And that suited her.

"So let me see..." She crossed her legs, braced an elbow on her knee and cradled her chin on her fist. "What *could* you be after?"

Mitch approached her. Carefully. When he stood right before her, he extended his hand. She looked at that hand long enough to make him wonder if she would ever take it.

Finally, she reached out. A hard thrill shot up his arm at the contact. He closed his fingers around hers and pulled her to her feet. And then he raised her hand to his mouth.

Those blue eyes were locked with his as he pressed his lips to the sweet ridge of her knuckles. A slight shiver went through her, one she tried her damndest to mask. But he felt it, and knew a flash of heated triumph at the proof of her response to him.

Tempting wasn't enough of a word for it. He wanted to yank her against him, spear his fingers in that spiky hair and savage her mouth until she dragged him down on top of her across the rumped bed.

But no. It would be too easy. And in the end, it wouldn't be enough. He wanted more than sweaty jungle sex — well, okay. Jungle sex would be great. But later. First he wanted her agreement about his new plan for tonight.

He tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. It felt damn good there, always had. "Come on. Out on the balcony."

Her eyes were wide. She'd been expecting the jungle-sex move herself. He hadn't made that move and that had surprised her — which pleased him. Jessie Jane was not all that easy to surprise.

He led her through the French doors. They stood at the railing, looking out over the lawns and gardens. Music could still be heard from the ballroom below them. But now it was dance music. A sweet, slow tune.

"This place is amazing," she said. "Up here on the top floor, it's like some ultra-exclusive hotel."

"That's why they call it a country club and resort." He turned to look at her. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

She pinched up that mouth he ached to kiss. "How much do you think it costs, in brush country like this, to pipe the water in to keep it so lush and green?"

"Shh. Just answer me. Do you think that it's beautiful?"

She gave it to him, grudgingly. "Yeah. All right. It's beautiful."

"To write your book, you'll need a tour of the club. An extensive tour. You'll need to really get the feel of it."

"I can manage that by myself. I always do."

"Can't argue with that." He turned to her, took her slender shoulders. She resisted, but only minimally. In the end, she did face him. "You never forgave me, did you, for the deb ball the year we were eighteen?"

## **Chapter Six**

Jessie's slim shoulders stiffened in his grip. "We don't have to go into all that old stuff."

"I disagree. I think we do. You got mad at me because two different debs asked me to be their escort — though if you'll remember, I did turn them both down."

"You just don't get it."

"Then you should explain it to me."

"It was never you I was mad at. Not really. I was mad because you and I were so completely hopeless. You were a Hayes and I was a Dooley and there was no way anyone was sponsoring someone like me to do the deb thing at the Lone Star Country Club, no way I would ever be one of the debs asking you to be my escort."

"You broke up with me because of that damn ball."

"No. I broke up with you because the ball was the final proof of where you and I were headed



together — which was exactly nowhere."

"I didn't think that. You know that I didn't."

"It doesn't matter what you thought. We were going nowhere together and that was a simple fact."

"You hurt me, Jess. Really bad."

"And then you went to the ball, after all. With Annabeth Frasier — which, I do realize now, given the wisdom of eighteen extra years of living — you had every right to do."

It wasn't the point, not as he saw it. "But we both know why I did that. To get back at you. I wanted to hurt you so bad you'd come after me. But you didn't come after me. And that hurt even worse than your dumping me in the first place."

"Get real. I was eighteen. My daddy was a drunk and an ex-con. My brothers were all headed for their own various troubles with the law. I loved a boy who hung with the country club crowd. Every time I looked in the mirror, I could have sworn I saw Born to Lose tattooed across my forehead."

"So you dumped me — and then you never came after me, even when I went to the ball with little Miss Frasier."

She jerked away and stepped back. "This is stupid, you know it is. There's no point in rehashing the past."

"I'm trying to...get it out there, I guess. Trying to understand why it all went wrong."

She leaned on the railing and looked out over the expanse of night-shadowed greenery below. "We were eighteen. We both had a lot to prove — to ourselves. And to the world. I think you ought to face the fact that I did you a favor then. As a Dooley, I was used to being the bad guy. So I did the breaking up. But look down into your heart. Look deep. I think you'll see that if I hadn't done it, you would have."

He found he couldn't quite face her. He leaned on the railing, too, and stared out over the grounds, not really seeing them. Right then, all he saw was Jessie — though he wasn't even looking at her. "It hurt so damn bad. I can't tell you how much."

"But it was the right thing. For both of us."

Mitch turned his head her way. "Was it?"

Her eyes gleamed at him through the darkness. Was that the sheen of tears he saw in them? She said tightly, "You were on your way to Yale. The whole world was out there waiting for you. With open arms. What good was I going to do you, except to drag you down?"

"Jessie..."

She was backing up again, a hand out to ward him off — and his unwanted sympathy, too. "Don't you even try it."

"You never could stand to have anyone see you cry."

She blinked, tossed that mean red head, and held her ground. "Is this what you want then? Is this your price for leaving the story alone? A long, maudlin trip down memory lane?"

He looked at his watch.

She growled low in her throat. "What? Got an appointment?"

"It's one a.m."

"Did I ask for the time?"

He ignored her jibes. With a woman like Jessie, you had to let some things go. "What do you figure? Maybe five hours till dawn?"

"I don't know. I suppose so." She went on glaring at him. "Why?"

"That's what I want. The next five hours. Alone with you. Here at the country club on the night of the deb ball."

### Chapter Seven

"And what," Jessie asked low, "is the next five hours alone with me going to do for you?"

"I'm not sure. But that's what I want."

"And then you'll get out, go back to L.A. where you belong, leave the story to me?"

"That's right."

"Like you left the New Orleans story to me?"

After their hot and heavy affair there, he'd made a movie, *Magnolia Dreams*. It was his first and it took a prize at Sundance. She'd written *The Mardi-Gras Murders*.

"That worked out, didn't it?" he asked, then added with a rueful shrug, "Professionally anyway."

She had on her meanest tough-girl expression. "Professionally is all I'm talking about, Mitch. All I'm interested in."

"Liar," he whispered.

One corner of her mouth lifted — and not in a smile. "That's the second time you've called me a liar tonight."

"You don't like it, stop telling lies."

She said nothing for a moment. The music from below seemed to swell louder on the night air. At last, she sighed. "All right. I'll admit you get to me. You always have. Years go by and yet...when I think of what might have been, in an ideal world, I always think of you, Mitch."

He felt a curling warmth, low in his belly. Pleasure. "Thank you. And Jessie?"

"What?"

"I like your hair."

She frowned. "Really? You could have fooled me there, when you first saw it."

"Took a little getting used to. But it's very...you."

The side of her mouth lifted again, this time in something pretty close to a real smile. "And back to this crazy bargain of yours...."

"You have more questions?"

"Just one. What about sex?"

He grinned. "Only if you ask me nicely. And other than that — other than whether or not we make love, which is totally up to you — this night is all mine. You do what I tell you to do, go where I lead you."

She dropped into one of the two chairs by the little iron table. "And in exchange for that — for the rest of this night with me — you will not, under any circumstances, from any angle, make a movie about Mission Creek."

"That's right."

"No tricks. No changing the location, tweaking the details and then basically telling the same story anyway."

"No tricks. I swear to you. Think back. I never did lie to you, Jessie. You know that I didn't."

She crossed her legs and wiggled her foot. It was bare. Sometime before she climbed on him and pressed her Colt against his head she must have slipped off the duty shoes. "I'm the better choice for this story anyway. You know you'd only turn it into some schmaltzy blockbuster."

"We can't all be gritty and uncompromising."

She looked up at him from under her lashes. "You are taking this well, all things considered. It's making me nervous, if you want to know the truth."

"We're agreed?"

She hesitated. But only for a moment. "We're agreed."

"Good. I've got a dress shirt, some dress shoes and some good summer-weight slacks. It's not a tux, but it'll do — given that we're improvising here."

"Improvising what?"

"Tonight. We're making it up as we go along."

"I'm not following."

He leaned one elbow on the railing and looked her up and down. "The waitress get-up. It's got to go."

"Because?"

"This is our night, Jessie. Our night at the deb ball. And I want to see you dressed properly for it."

## **Chapter Eight**

Jessie made a scoffing noise. "You're not serious. You want to see me in one of those big, puffy

white Margaret McKenzie gowns?" Margaret McKenzie owned the local shop where all the debs had bought their gowns when Mitch and Jessie were young — still did, for all Mitch knew. "You want me to pretend I'm one of Mrs. McKenzie's *girls*?"

"She was always a very sweet woman, that Mrs. McKenzie." Margaret McKenzie made most of the white ball gowns herself and she'd always called the debs she made them for her *girls*.

"You're dodging my question," Jessie groused.

He studied her as she sat on his balcony in her plain white shirt and cheap short black skirt. The soft glow from the lamp in the room behind them made her red hair gleam, her blue eyes shine. All those years since he'd last seen her, last heard her low, sexy voice, last felt her fine, lean body pressed to his — all those years that didn't matter in the least. She stole his breath. She made his heart stand still.

"Mitch."

"Yeah?"

"You're lookin' schmaltzy, you know? Seriously schmaltzy."

"What can I tell you? I'm a schmaltzy kind of guy."

She made a sound that got hung up somewhere between a chuckle and grunt. "Now, about that big, white dress..."

"All right," he conceded with a good deal of regret. "I guess a big, white deb dress isn't really your style."

"Not now, not then. Not ever."

"I suppose I'll have to give Harvey a try."

"Harvey?"

"Small. The club's new manager."

"Ah. Mr. Self-Importance — on the back stairs. Danny DeVito minus the sense of humor."

"That's the one. In the old days, the club manager could come up with just about anything a man might ask him for. Let's see how he does coming up with something slinky. For evening. Are you still a size —"

"Wait a minute." She rose from the chair.

"We have to get moving on this. I want to take you out into the garden, kiss you underneath the stars. We've only got so much..." He forgot what he was saying. She was unbuttoning that white shirt. He found his throat was slightly dry. He swallowed. "You always were so damn eager. One of your best features, no doubt about it."

"Don't get your hopes up."

"I can't seem to help it. My hopes — among other things — *are* up."

She was on the last button. It slid from the hole. She took the sides of the shirt and peeled it off her gleaming white shoulders. Underneath, she wore a black satin slip — or so he thought at first

glance. When she unzipped the skirt, dropped it to the balcony floor and stepped out of it, he wasn't so sure. All of a sudden, it looked like a clingy man-killer of a little black cocktail dress.

"How's this?" She turned in a slow, saucy circle.

## Chapter Nine

"Mitch?" Jessie smiled at him. Slowly. She looked good enough to eat — and also extremely pleased with herself.

Stick to the plan, Hayes, he told himself. If he took her to bed right now — assuming she'd allow it — they'd never make it out of this room.

*And what the hell would be so wrong with that?* a cynical voice in the back of his mind wanted to know. Why not just get down to it? What more was there going to be between them, in five hours, than what could be there right now on the wide, tangled bed just beyond those French doors? What the hell did he hope to prove — to her or to himself — by dragging her downstairs, dancing with her beneath the magnolia trees in the night-shadowed back garden, kissing her in the grass by the light of that sliver of almost-summer moon?

Why not just give in here and now to what they both wanted — what they both knew they would have by the time his five hours were through? Just reach out and take her. In the end, she wouldn't refuse him. She never had. Not when it came to sex.

The problem always lay in all the other things he wanted from her. And some fools never learn. Some dreams just refused to die, no matter that you were absolutely certain you had killed them — twice.

He didn't reach out. He kept his arms at his sides. "What about shoes?"

"I left a large black purse just inside the door to the hall. In that purse, along with my waitress shoes, I have an evening bag, sparkly earrings and evening sandals."

She never ceased to amaze him. He decided he might as well just ask outright. "Why?"

"If a brown-haired waitress gets herself in a jam — if, say, she should get caught snooping around..."

He understood. "Then you could easily become a redhead in a cocktail dress."

"That's right."

"I've got to ask. Is it really a dress? Or is it a slip?"

She shrugged. "Either. Both. Whatever you want it to be." She bent and scooped up the skirt and the shirt. "Let's go in. You can change. I'll put on my shoes and earrings and fluff up my hair." She started toward him.

He should have moved out of her way. But he didn't.

She stopped when there were maybe six inches between them. Her eyes said yes. The set of her jaw said probably not. "My choice, Mitch. Not unless I ask for it, that was the deal."

"Are you going to ask for it?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you know what I think." He took a long breath through his nose, sucking the maddening scent of her into himself. "But right now..."

Those blue eyes scanned his face. The hunger he saw in them sent a bolt of pure heat rocketing through him.

"A kiss," he said. It was a command. And a plea.

Her pupils widened. A very good sign. She looked at his mouth. Even better.

He dared to lift a hand — slowly, with great care. He was showing her no tricks, no fast moves, nothing to spook her. Everything up-front, cards on the table. What you see is what you get....

She was allowing it. Watchful. And wary. But not flinching. Not shifting away.

He brushed the back of a finger down the silky skin on the side of her neck, carrying the light caress out along the singing line of her collarbone. He felt the tremor go through her, and he sucked in another long breath — unbearably tempting, the scent of her. His finger touched the black satin strap of her slip or her dress or whatever it was. He edged his finger under that strap and hooked it, then guided it over the marvelous curve of her shoulder, so it fell down her arm.

That pleased him. Just to look at the loop of that black strap, loose against the tight, soft skin of her arm. He smiled to himself, said her name on a breath.

"Jessie..."

She whispered through clenched teeth, "All right, damn you, Mitch. Kiss me. Please."

He dropped his hand. "I won't even touch you. Except with my mouth."

That made her laugh, a low, throaty sound. "Always such a gentleman..."

"Come on. Your mouth. Give it to me."

She lifted that fallen-angel's face. And he covered her mouth with his own.

## **Chapter Ten**

Magic. Kissing Jessie. There was nothing in the world to compare.

The kiss started out restrained. But it didn't stay that way for long.

He had forgotten — or no. Forgotten wasn't the right word.

Okay, then. Denied. Put away. Pushed somewhere down deep where it wouldn't make him too crazy with remembering, with wanting what he couldn't have.

Which was — at least partly — the taste of her, the ripe silk of her full lips, the way she opened, her breath so warm, scented slightly with wine. Those small, eager sighs of hers, that naughty tongue and the way she could use it to drive a man wild...

She caught his lower lip between her teeth, worried it gently, with tender cruelty. He couldn't hold back a low, needful groan.

"Mitch." She whispered his name into his mouth.

He kissed her harder, deeper, pushing his tongue inside, tasting the slippery sweetness there, somehow managing, at the same time, to hold his arms at his sides, fists clenched, keeping his promise to her.

To touch her only with his mouth. For now.

Her lips were everything he'd ever wanted, the wetness beyond them more than he could ask for.

And yet, not enough. Never enough...

She moaned, tipped her head farther back. He lost her mouth and kissed his way downward, scraping his teeth, lightly, tauntingly, over the stubborn jut of her soft chin.

Down farther still. Trailing his tongue along the center of her throat, knowing he had to stop, wondering if he could...

Somehow, he did it — stepped back a fraction, moved out of the kiss that had become dangerously more than he'd meant it to be. With fierce regret, he lifted his head and opened his eyes.

She looked back at him, lashes low and lazy, a smile trembling, not quite born, on that kiss-swollen mouth. "I always did love to kiss you."

"That's all you loved? Kissing me?"

"I loved...everything, Mitch. Every moment with you." It was a confession, soft and low. Shy. It broke his heart anew to hear it. From below, the music played on.

"How many times," he whispered, "are you going to break my heart?"

She lifted her head, her chin tilting to an angle of defiance. "You were the one who walked away last time," she reminded him. "I woke up that Monday morning in that wonderful old hotel in the garden district. Alone."

Those were the facts. But the truth went deeper. They both knew it. "It was what you wanted, for me to go."

She didn't deny it.

He reached out again. Guided the fallen strap back up, over her shoulder, smoothed it into place. "There. You only need the right shoes."

She captured his hand. And that was what he'd always wanted — in his heart, his soul, in whatever name you gave that place where his truest, most elemental self resided: her hand in his.

A simple thing. And inevitably impossible. For someone like Jessie.

"Come on." She tugged him back toward the room beyond the open French doors.

"Hey." He faked a scowl. "I'm running this show, remember?"

"Well, of course you are. I'm only taking you where you said you wanted to go."

## **Chapter Eleven**

Mitch put on his improvised evening attire. Jessie got her sparkly earrings, her evening bag, and pretty high-heeled sandals. She sat at the vanity table in the dressing area and fiddled with her hair, dabbed glittery stuff onto her eyelids, glossed those gorgeous lips, and spritzed more Poison in the hollow of her white throat.

"Ready?" he asked when she slid the small perfume atomizer back into her bag and stood.

She held his eyes in the mirror. "Where are we going?"

He put his hands on her silken shoulders, leaned close enough to whisper in her ear. "Wherever I take you. That was the deal, remember?"

In the mirror, her glance skittered away, then jerked back to meet his. "Can we stay...out of the center of things?"

He understood the reason for her request. She was still on the trail of a story, and the longer she could keep the citizens of Mission Creek from knowing that J. J. Dooley was in town, the easier it would be for her to get the first stages of the job done.

In the early stages, if she worked at all the way he did, she'd prefer to stay as far in the background of the world she was studying as possible — to soak up the feel of the place unobserved. If she stuck with it, folks were bound to learn that she was gathering material for another of her books.

But why make things harder any sooner than she had to? People got strange when they knew you were going to write a book — or maybe make a movie — about them. They often clammed up or demanded control of the story you planned to tell.

So yeah, he understood why she didn't want to be seen with him — didn't want to be seen at all at this point, if possible. But he didn't like it. It reminded him too sharply of when they were kids. His parents had been appalled at his dating "one of those white trash, two-bit criminal Dooleys." Her daddy and brothers had hated him for being "a damn country club snob." He and Jessie had given in to the pressure. They would sneak around to be together.

Now, here they were, years down the road. Independent adults who ran their own lives. And yet still sneaking around.

How did that old saying go? *The more things change, the more they stay the same....*

He let go of her shoulders and stepped back, wondering, why the hell am I doing this?

It was bound to end the same as before. He'd set it up to end the same as before. Five hours — less than that now — and it would be over. Mitch would go his way, Jessie would go hers....

"Hey, Mitch," she turned and faced him. "You know what?"

God, she was beautiful. All dressed up in a little bit of nothing, glitter on her eyelids, her mouth glossed the color of a ripe plum. Ready for anything...

"You think too much," she told him. "You need to learn to take life as it comes."

## **Chapter Twelve**

They went down the back stairs and out a service entrance at the rear of the main building. He led her along a trellised walkway and then out onto the thick green patch of lawn between the



building and the place where the twisting paths led into the gardens.

Upstairs in the ballroom, the band was playing an old-fashioned waltz. There was no one nearby that Mitch could see — no one on the walkway or standing in the shadows over by the structure jutting off the clubhouse that was serving, for the time being, as the Men's Grill. The huge balcony to the ballroom was in front, on the roof of the club's grand entrance portico. Any debs and their escorts who wanted a breath of fresh air would most likely be out there.

"Dance with me."

Jessie slipped off her high-heeled sandals and stepped into his arms, her body picking up the cues, following him effortlessly.

But it wasn't right. She was vigilant, her attention on the shadows, on the places someone might be lurking, watching them. He pulled her close, nuzzled her temple and the feathery spikes of her hair. "Don't worry. We're alone."

But she did worry. He could feel the slight stiffness in her, the fragmentation of her attention that made her oh-so-slightly resistant to the dance. He didn't want that. This was his time with her. He didn't want her attention on anything but him.

He stepped back. "Put on your shoes."

She gave him a long look. "You're angry."

She was right. "Just put your damn shoes on."

She slid on one sandal, then the other. Then he took hold of her hand and led her into the garden.

They walked the paths in silence for a while, the music from the ballroom growing fainter in among the trees. The night birds sang from the shadows, falling silent, briefly, as they passed. White roses glowed in starlight and clusters of bougainvillea spilled over rocks and trellises. The big, waxy leaves of the magnolia trees looked wet in the darkness. Small lanterns on the ground lighted their way, tucked among patches of tiny clustered flowers with moss-green leaves that he couldn't have called by name.

"What's that?" she whispered, pointing roughly in the direction they'd been headed. "Those lights like moons?"

"The main pool. The lights are mounted on the fence."

"The main pool?"

"There's also a diving pool back the other way, and farther on in the same direction, one for the little kids."

She laughed. "Ah, to grow up in all this luxury..." Her voice was teasing.

He stopped on the path and turned her to face him. "You used to be angry that I 'grew up in all this luxury..."

She reached up, touched his face, tracing a finger along the line of his jaw, leaving a burning trail of sensation in her wake. "And look who's angry now."

He took her hand, resisted the urge to press his lips to it — and gently pushed it away.

"Go ahead," she whispered. "Say it."

"I don't think I like this. I don't think we ought to be doing this, after all."

### **Chapter Thirteen**

"Come on," Jessie said.

"I don't think so. I think that maybe we ought to just —"

She didn't let him finish. "There has to be a bench or something around here — someplace for lovers to sit and hold hands and share secrets and forbidden kisses and promises to love each other forever."

He stared at her. The problem was, it was just as it had always been. He could have stared at her forever. But a few hours was all he had.

"Mitch. Please..."

"All right, damn it. This way." He led her down one path and then another, until they reached a little bridge over a narrow stream. A willow tree hung over the bridge and at the base of the tree, deep in the shadows, there was a stone bench.

He pulled her in there and they sat on the bench. The little man-made brook burred and the hidden birds twittered in the branches above them. The music from the ballroom, sounding faint now, and far away, haunted the air.

They sat for several minutes, not speaking. He knew eventually she was going to ask him something he didn't feel like answering.

In order to avoid that, he broke the silence first. "The book you're going to write..."

He felt her stiffen beside him. "What about it?"

"Jessie. We have a deal. I'm out of this. It's all yours. You can talk to me about it. I swear on this heart of mine that you won't quit breaking, I will never tell a soul."

She was quiet again. He looked at her. But the shadows were all around them. He could see her eyes and the shape of her face. But the whole wouldn't come together. He couldn't make out her expression.

He said, "In New Orleans, you were the same, so guarded about the story you were tracking down."

She chuckled. He took that as a good sign. She said, "It was my first book. I didn't know what I was doing — not really. I could hardly believe my own nerve, to think I could write a whole book, me, Jessie Jane Dooley. I felt that if I talked about it, I would end up proving to myself that it wasn't going to work, it wasn't going to happen, it was all just some silly pipe dream and I could never really do it."

"But you did do it. And you've done it several times now. I think you're to the point where you can at least tell me what it's going to be about without destroying the fragile structure of your own belief."

She wasn't looking at him. She had her hands folded in her lap and her head tipped down, a

pose that spoke of praying, though Jessie had never been a girl who prayed. "I think I'm going to center it on Haley Mercado." She lifted her head then. He felt the force of her gaze on him. "Remember her?"

He did. The Mercados ran a paving business — but everyone knew that wasn't what they *really* did. They were in the mob. And their money bought them entrée to the places that mattered in Lone Star County. They were all members of the club, had been for years and years.

"Haley was so beautiful," Jessie said. "I read in the papers that she drowned out on Lake Maria. And it was those boys you grew up with — the rich boys, the boys who had everything — who were to blame. They were tried for her murder. And they all got off. Flynt Carson, Luke Callaghan, Spencer Harrison, Tyler Murdoch..."

"Maybe they got off because they were innocent."

She made a *humphing* sound, a sound that meant she didn't buy that for a nanosecond. She turned her head toward him. "And what about you? What story were you planning to tell?"

"You'll laugh."

"Never."

He admitted gruffly, "A love story. A rich boy. A poor girl. Lots of trials and tribulations, all the odds stacked against them."

"But happily ever after at the end, right?"

"Just call me Mr. Hollywood." He took her hand — roughly, squeezing the fingers harder than he should have. "Okay, Jess. I'm done with this."

"Done?" She sounded hurt. And a little bit lost.

He steeled himself against the pain in her voice, reminded himself that she could always get to him — and that it always went nowhere in the end. "It's not turning out the way I wanted — though God only knows what I thought I expected. It was a silly idea, the two of us, here, tonight. Silly and also destructive. I'm a hopeless romantic at heart and we both know it. I think maybe we'd better just —"

She stood. "No. Don't say that. Come on. Come with me...."

## Chapter Fourteen

Jessie hooked the satin cord of her black beaded evening bag more securely on her shoulder and pulled on his hand, dragging him upward off the stone bench.

Fool that he was, he stood. "What?"

"Come on." She pulled him from under the drooping branches of the willow, out onto the garden path again.

He held back at the base of the little bridge that arched over the creek. "Give it up, Jessie. There's nowhere to go."

Her eyes flashed — with defiance. And possibly, with fury. And then she moved closer — too close. She was right up against him, her scent all around him, satin and woman — his woman, always, if only in his most secret, impossible dreams. She was pressing so damn close....

He took her by the arms. But he didn't quite have the will to push her away, to let go of the glorious, purely sexual feel of her plastered all along the front of him. "What the hell do you want?" he whispered into her upturned face.

"You know what. What you want..."

"It's not the same."

Those slender, strong hands slid up, over his shoulders, and clasped at the back of his neck. "Oh, Mitch. I think it is. Both on the surface. And deep down."

"I want more than you want."

"Maybe. Maybe you're just...braver than I am. Or maybe it's that you're more willing to kid yourself."

He laid it right out for her. "I've never given you up, Jessie. Not really. I've always hoped, always dreamed that the day would come when you'd take a chance on forever, and you'd take it with me. But it's a fool's hope. And I'm thirty-six years old. I want a life, you know? I want a woman — *the* woman — beside me, every night. I want kids."

"Well, go for it. I'm not stopping you from —"

He shook her. "Listen. There's someone, in L.A. A nice woman..." Her name was Marlina. She was bright and beautiful and funny and sweet. He liked her. A lot. She just...wasn't Jessie.

Blue eyes had narrowed to slits. "What are you saying? You're betraying some poor innocent woman, tonight, with me?"

"No. I'm betraying no one. It hasn't gone that far with her yet."

"Yet?"

"That's right. Yet. I haven't *let* it go that far. Because of you. You're the shadow in my heart, Jess. The dark hope I've never let die. But after tonight, things will change. After seeing you again, at last, I know what I need to do. I know it's time to finally let go."

She slid one hand down again and cupped him. The feel of that — her warm palm, her caressing fingers claiming him out of nowhere, sent a hard thrill bolting through him. He had to swallow a moan. She said, "Before you go off and become some lucky woman's husband, let me give you something to remember me by."

It was too much, her soft taunts, her hand on him. He lost it. He grabbed her by the round, firm globes of her bottom and yanked her against him, capturing that naughty mouth of hers, plundering it as he crushed her close.

She melted into him, grabbing on, sighing, plundering right back for all she was worth.

When he finally lifted his head, he knew what she would say.

And she did. "Please, Mitch. Before you go...before you say goodbye again, forever. Please make love to me. Just once more."

## Chapter Fifteen

Should he have refused her?

Hell, yes.

Was he going to?

No way.

She'd let go of his manhood and grabbed for his hand. He grabbed back. She took off at a fast walk, tugging him along behind. After a minute or two, he figured out where she was going — toward the white globes of light on the stone fence by the main pool.

"Jess, we could just go back to my room."

"I know." She sent him a look over her shoulder. Her eyes were shining. "But let's not."

"You are so bad."

"Oh, yes. Yes, I am. Now, come on...."

He had no desire to argue. He strode right along behind her, slowing only as much as he had to, to match his longer stride with hers.

They emerged from the garden path onto another open section of thick, green lawn. Across the expanse of it, he could see the stone fence that surrounded the pool, those globes of light like moons, one on each pillar set into the fence corners. It was then that he realized the night sounded different. He paused.

She turned back to him. "What?"

"Listen. The music..."

She tipped her head, frowning. "Ah," she whispered after a moment. "It's stopped." She sighed and her lips curled in a sweet, sad little smile. "The ball must be over."

He raised the hand she wasn't holding and looked at his watch.

She yanked him close, stood on tiptoe to plant a quick, possessive kiss on his mouth. "Don't you look at that watch, Mitch Hayes. Not now. There is no such thing as time now. There's only you and me."

He kissed her back, as quick and hard as she had kissed him. "Whatever you say. Lead the way."

She pulled him across the dew-damp grass, to the gate in the stone fence. They went through, to the pool, which was deserted, the lounge chairs in rows, awaiting tomorrow's sunbathers, the little snack area, with its round tables and shading umbrellas and bar, all empty of customers now.

There were two green-and-white tents, at the end of the pool, one to either side. "What are those?" she asked in the voice of a coconspirator.

"Cabanas," he whispered. "One for men, one for women."

"Perfect." She led him on, past the rows of empty lounge chairs and the tables and bar. He

assumed she would go to the nearest tent, but at the last minute, she turned for the far one.

He thought he heard a noise from the men's tent behind them. He paused, looked back.

Jessie said, in that husky, teasing voice of hers, "Come on, there's no one here." She was pulling him on, to the women's cabana.

He chuckled. "In there? You're kidding."

She kept going. Seconds later, she pushed back the tent flaps and they were inside.

He took her in his arms. "Kiss me." She did — a long, deep kiss, sweeter than the ones before. And then, for a moment, he just held her, there in the darkness, letting his eyes adjust a little to the gloom. "I've never been in the women's tent before."

She snuggled closer. "Is there a light in here?"

He kissed her hair. "Better not. Unless you want company. Some groundskeeper is bound to see it and come to check what's going on."

"How? This place is closed up tight, no windows, no —"

"Hold on. If this is like the men's tent..." He felt his way around the wicker lounges, to the side of the tent and the long pole that could be let down to reveal...

She clapped her hands like a delighted child as light from outside shone in on them from above. "A skylight."

He remembered what he should have thought of earlier. And he swore low.

She asked, softly, "What?"

"I don't have a condom."

She gestured at her little purse. "You don't imagine I'd come looking for you without them, do you?"

They laughed together. And then the laughter faded and they just stood there. Staring. For a long time.

She was so beautiful, silvered in starlight. He said, "Come here."

She came to him, slowly, her eyes wide — suddenly innocent in a way she rarely let anyone see. When she reached him, he took her evening bag away and dropped it at their feet. He let down one strap of her gown and then the other. She brought up her hands, crossed them over those proud, firm breasts, keeping the top of her dress from falling away.

"Let it go, Jessie."

Her full mouth trembling, her eyes wide and wounded, showing him her real self at last, she lowered her arms.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

He would have undressed her slowly. But there was so little to take off.

A wisp of satin. A tiny black thong. Those shiny black high-heeled sandals.

She stood before him, naked. Proud. "Now, your turn," she said.

He obliged.

She reminded him, grinning, "That watch, too. Get rid of it."

He took it off and tossed it on top of his clothes.

And there they were, Mitch and Jessie, naked in the moonlight. Again. At last. She came into his arms, lifting her mouth, fusing it to his. He tasted her, deeply, running his tongue along the slick inner surfaces, smiling as her tongue came out to play — twining, darting back, slipping forward to slide around his once more.

There was a thick green rug spread on the terra-cotta tiles of the floor. They sank down to it, stretching out. She wrapped her soft hand around him. He groaned.

And suddenly, it was all urgency, all hunger and yearning and too many damn years apart. He pulled her tightly into him, shoving a leg between her firm, smooth thighs, pressing up, feeling the wetness, the readiness.

She cried low and latched onto his throat, sucking, leaving her mark, as below she taunted him with that naughty hand.

He couldn't take it, couldn't wait. He pushed at her, rolling, until he was on top, getting both his legs between hers, managing somehow, to capture that hand that was driving him crazy. And then to get hold of the other hand, too. He dragged both hands up and pinned them above her head.

And there they were again — just as it had been in his bed, earlier. Him on top, pinning her down. He looked into those unforgettable eyes, whispered, "What are we doing, Jess? Can't there be more?"

Her mouth trembled. "Oh, Mitch..."

He released her hands. He had some idea that he would pull away, give it up now, get his clothes on and get out.

But then she reached for him, crying his name.

And he couldn't go, couldn't leave her. Had to see it through, right to the end. He came down to her, wrapping his arms around her, then rolling once more to take the bottom position. He stroked her, running both hands up the long, strong curve of her back, then down again, all the way, over the smooth rise of her hips. And inward, to part the wet, silky curls and get to the womanly center of her.

She moaned, a long, needful sound. And then she sat up. He let his hands, wet with her essence, go wandering, along the curves of her thighs, around to the front of her and then upward. He cupped her breasts, felt the hard nipples pressing into his palms, and then caressed his way downward again, over that flat belly. From the groove of her navel, a diamond glittered, hard and bright. He ran his thumb over it, trailed his hand down, lower. Into the red curls.

He stroked her some more, watching her as she rode his hand.

The moment came when she sucked in one long, hard breath — and grabbed his wrist. "Wait."

She found the shiny black-beaded purse, took out what she needed, rolled it down onto him.

She lowered her body to his. He surged up into her and then reached out, pulling her down. It was a battle in which they were enemies, comrades, the vanquished and the victor, each. And both.

In the end, he rose above her. He braced himself on his hands, so he could look down at her, see her face as fulfillment took her. She closed her eyes in the final surrender. And she said his name.

And then he let his own finish happen. He felt the wave of completion washing over him, carrying him away to a place where he never had to leave her, where she opened her arms to him. Where he took her outstretched hand and never had to let go.

## Chapter Seventeen

Like spoons in a drawer.

Jessie was tucked in against him. His thighs cradled hers. He kissed her shoulder. She sighed.

Should he leave it at this? Probably. Take this one last, bittersweet memory of her, put it somewhere secret, and then get on with his life. He would marry — Marlina, or someone very much like her. Have children. Have a good life, and a full one. He'd learn not to look back on what might have been. Jessie certainly seemed to want it that way.

And yet he couldn't stop himself. From wondering. And wishing. She sighed and cuddled in closer.

Twice, he had asked her to be his wife. Once, when they were eighteen. She had put him off and then, a few weeks after that first proposal, just before the deb ball, she'd told him it was over between them.

Eight years later, in New Orleans, he'd asked her again. She'd given him an outright no that time, said she'd be his lover. Anytime. But marriage was not, and never would be, for her. The next morning, he had left her — before she could wake and tempt him to stay.

Under no circumstances, he told himself firmly, was he going to make a total fool of himself by asking her again.

Jessie must have sensed the turn of his thoughts. She stirred and rolled over, peered closely at his face. Then she pulled back. "Oh, all right. What?"

So he asked her. "What the hell more do you have to prove — to yourself, to the world — before you'll figure it's time to give you and me a chance?"

Her mouth pinched up and for a moment, he was sure she would evade him with some flippant remark. But then she sighed again, a weary sound this time. "It's not about what I have to prove. Maybe, once, I thought that it was. But I'm doing all right now. I'm —" She cut herself off, put a finger to her lips and pointed at the tent flap through which they had entered.

He strained to listen. Heard nothing. Shook his head.

But she was already scrambling to her feet.

"Jessie," he whispered warningly. It was going to be embarrassing, if someone walked in on them right now. They ought to at least put their clothes on, preserve some measure of dignity.



But Jessie's mind was not on dignity. She made another shushing motion with her hand and, still gloriously naked, tiptoed to the tent flap to peek out.

Well, all right. If she didn't mind being caught here naked, so be it. He'd get caught naked, right along with her. He got up and followed her.

There was a narrow space between the tent flaps. Jessie crouched down. He stood above her. They peered through the flaps.

She was right. There was someone out there: A man. Mitch thought he looked vaguely familiar — probably someone he'd met once or twice years ago. The man was tall. Powerfully built, about Mitch's size, but younger than Mitch. Perhaps twenty-five, maybe thirty, with light brown hair. The man wore a snowy white dress shirt and tuxedo pants, the jacket off, slung over his shoulder. If he'd once worn a tie, he didn't now. The shirt was open at the neck. He was carrying a pair of silver evening sandals. They dangled from his left hand. He stood opposite their tent, at poolside, staring straight ahead. The underwater lights flooded upward, casting his face into eerie relief. He looked...lost. Wounded to his soul. And angry, too. Damned angry — though Mitch thought he was probably too stunned to realize it yet.

Mitch knew just how the poor guy felt.

After a moment, the man seemed to shake himself. He turned and walked toward the gate, disappearing from their view. They heard the gate open and close.

Good luck, buddy, Mitch thought.

They watched for several seconds longer, listening for more sounds, waiting for signs that someone else might be out there. But nothing more happened.

Jessie stepped back from the tent flaps. "What do you think?"

He didn't think. He knew. "A woman — an important woman — just ran out on him."

Jessie laughed. "Oh, of course. A modern-day Cinderella, leaving her silver sandals behind."

"You would have to laugh about it."

"Well, Mitch. It's only that you're such a total romantic."

"Wait a minute. I get it. You saw a murderer, right? You figure whoever once owned those pretty shoes is a dead woman now."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

"I just don't think, whatever was going on with him, it was necessarily anything all that romantic or heartbreaking."

"Damn you, Jess." She didn't get it. Jessie saw so much. But in some ways, she was completely blind. This time, he wasn't just walking away without first getting to the bottom of what had made her that way.

He reached for his shirt.

## Chapter Eighteen

"Mitch. Please." Jessie stood naked on the green rug beneath the tent's skylight, begging him. "Don't leave like this...."

He yanked on his shirt and buttoned it up. "Right. Don't go away mad. Just go away."

"That's not what I meant."

He slid on his watch, grabbed his pants, shook them out. "Put on your clothes."

For once, she obeyed him, stepping into that little black thong, pulling her dress over her head, dropping to one of the wicker sofas long enough to slide on her sandals. She finger-combed her hair as he was tying his shoes.

"Get your purse," he commanded and grabbed her hand.

He led her out of the tent and back the way they had come, past the pool, out the gate, through the garden — by a direct route this time, or at least, as direct as the winding paths allowed.

They emerged onto the lawn. He pulled her onward, across the grass, toward the clubhouse. When they reached the trellised walkway, he didn't head for the service door, but instead went on around, past the Empire Room restaurant and the small garden just west of the building. That garden led to the meeting rooms and, beyond the meeting rooms lay the main parking lot.

About then, Jessie started dragging her heels. "What's going on, Mitch?"

He stopped and turned to face her. "I figure I've got at least a couple of hours left."

"But —"

"Uh-uh. We had a bargain. You're supposed to do what I tell you to until dawn."

"But I —"

"Was that our bargain, Jessie?"

She pouted at him like a truculent child. "Yes."

"Are you sticking to our agreement — or not?"

"Fine. Whatever. Lead the way."

A few minutes later they reached his rented Mercedes. He opened the passenger door. "Get in."

She shot him a rebellious look, but then she gave in and slid onto the seat. He shut her door and went around and climbed in behind the wheel.

Neither spoke as they left the club. Mitch drove too fast along Country Club Road. The light was with him at Mission Creek Road. He spun a left, headed north.

She figured it out when they got to the Lone Star Highway and he went west.

"There's no point at all in going to my father's house," she said. "Nobody lives there anymore."

He didn't answer. They'd be there soon enough.

\* \* \*

The house where Jessie Dooley grew up lay along a rutted dirt road well off the highway. Mitch roared down that road, kicking up cyclones of dust in his wake, probably wreaking hell on the undercarriage of the car.

At last, he spun into the front yard — which was nothing but bare, rutted ground, a lot of dead bunch grass and sage, and a couple of ancient, rusted car frames up on blocks, waiting for repairs that were never going to happen. There was a barn — a small one, with a hole in the roof, and a corral with half the fence broken down. The house, its roof and long porch sagging, windows broken, some boarded up, loomed against the night sky.

Mitch had only been there once, over eighteen years ago, when he and Jessie were a couple of kids in love. It had been ugly and rundown, even then — and her father had aimed his shotgun at Mitch's head and ordered him off his property, promising he'd be a "dead little rich boy" if he ever showed his face on Dooley land again. The house had been ugly and unwelcoming then. Now, in the darkness, with no light in any of the busted windows, it looked downright hostile.

"Mitch," Jessie said wearily. "What is the point?"

"Come on. We're going in."

"It's too dark. We won't be able to see a thing in there."

He didn't know if they needed to see. But he knew Jessie. "Give me that little purse."

"What?"

"Give it to me."

She slapped it into his open hand. He flipped the catch and dug inside. Two condoms, a lip gloss, a small comb, a set of car keys...

And just what he was looking for. Did he know Jessie or what?

He held up the small, high-powered flashlight. She scowled at him. He returned her purse. She opened the glove box and stuck it inside.

"Let's go." He got out and so did she. They approached the rickety porch.

"Why do we have to do this, Mitch? What do you think it will prove?"

"You sound strange, Jessie. Like you're scared to go in there."

"The hell I am."

"Well, good. Come on."

### **Chapter Nineteen**

The porch boards creaked under their feet. The door hung open on a single hinge. Beyond was darkness. Mitch turned on the flashlight and they went inside.

They stood in the kitchen and Mitch shone the light around, at the rusty sink and the stained, pitted counters. There were rat droppings. Garbage strewn across the buckled linoleum seemed to hint that more than once, vagrants had found shelter there. Half the cupboard doors were

missing, victim to vandals, no doubt. It smelled of dust and waste and mildew.

"Why are we here, Mitch?"

He shrugged. "We've been in *my* world. It seemed only right that we should spend a little time in yours."

"This isn't my world. I left it behind years ago."

"Did you? Could have fooled me." He shone the light in her face. "Where's your bedroom?"

She stood tall, defiant and unblinking in the light's hard beam. "No. You're wrong. You're so wrong."

He dared to ask it. "Your father? He didn't —"

She pushed the light away. "No. No one ever abused me. Not sexually, anyway — though I'll admit..." She didn't seem to be able to go on.

He had a sense that it would be easier for her to say certain things in the dark. He switched off the flashlight. And then he reached out, brushed the side of her hand, to let her know his hand was there. "What? I'm listening. I'm here...."

She took his hand. "One of my brothers — Dave, remember him? He tried. I was eleven at the time. I made certain he never tried again."

"You never told me."

"That's right. My time with you was precious time. No way I would waste it talking about Dave and how I had to cut him with a carving knife to make it clear to him that incest was not my thing. And anyway, I know how you are. You might have gotten some crazy idea that you should avenge my honor. You'd have ruined your life — not to mention most likely gotten yourself hurt — trying something insane like that. Uh-uh. I can look out for my honor by myself, thank you very much."

The words were there. He could hold them back no longer. "God, I love you, Jess."

"It's just..." Her voice was small. Young. Lost. It had tears in it.

"Yes." He held her hand tighter. "Yes, I'm listening. I want to hear...."

And there, in the darkness of her father's abandoned house, she told him. "All my life, there's been one thing of which I was absolutely certain. I would not, under any circumstances, end up like my mother, old at thirty-five, bruised from casual beatings, cringing and scraping and begging for a kind word, dead at forty — and probably glad for the peace death brings. No. I fought. To stay alive in my brutal, abusive family, to keep my father and my brothers off my back. To make a place for myself, a name for myself, to do something that matters, something the big world out there would give a damn about. I've learned, in my writing, how to...open myself. How to let the pain out, let it show, let it be. But in my life... Oh, Mitch. I don't know, somehow I don't know how not to fight. I'm afraid not to fight."

He pulled her to him, wrapped his arms around her, tucked her in close, against his heart. And right then he knew.

If she couldn't do it, if she couldn't reach out and let him love her, if she couldn't allow herself to be his wife — so be it. He would settle for nothing less than Jessie. He'd go to his grave a single man.

She whispered to him. "If I trust you, if I stop fighting you, if I stay with you for more than a little while, I'll...lose something, become weak, end up minus some essential part of myself."

He cradled her close, rocked her from side to side, whispered back, "I love you, Jess. Never forget."

They stood there for a long time, in the darkness, holding on.

At last, he took her hand and led her out into the clean night air. "I'll take you back now, to the club."

They rode in silence. When they got there, she asked to be let out in the staff lot, over by the stables.

"What about your other clothes, your big purse — and your little nickel-plated Colt?"

"I'll send you my address. You can mail them to me. Oh, and about the story? Take it if you want to. I think I've seen enough of Lone Star County for a while."

He felt the same. It was a story he didn't have the heart anymore to tell. "One last kiss..."

She leaned across the console and pressed her lips to his. He wanted — so badly, more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life — to reach out. To hold her there. But he knew that he couldn't.

Jessie pulled away. "Goodbye, Mitch." She got out of the car.

He couldn't bear to watch her leave. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, she was gone.

## Chapter Twenty

Mitch's house, with its wall of windows looking out over the Pacific, felt lonely for a while. The hollow sighing of the waves at night haunted his dreams, sounding to him like someone he loved whispering promises he knew she couldn't keep. He would wake to an even deeper sadness than when he went to bed alone.

He told Marlana goodbye. He took her to dinner and afterward, he took her to her house and went in for a drink. He told her that he'd enjoyed the time they'd spent together. But that he'd been lying to himself. There was a woman he had always loved. That wasn't going to change.

There was work. Locations — this time in the Bahamas. Shooting went well. And the beaches were grand. Then back home, to finish up a few interiors. Then he had to get going on post-production. The film was working, he thought. It was coming together. Buzz was excellent. This one, like the last four, was going to be a hit.

Jessie had a book out, late in the fall, *Kill Her with Kindness*. Reviews were over the moon. Mitch had his copy on order, to be delivered to his door on the day it came out. He read it that night and wished like hell he dared to option the damn thing. He'd make a blockbuster of a movie out of it. But he knew Jessie wouldn't want that. Too freighted, she would say. Plus, she thought he had too soft a heart to do justice to the cold, hard worlds she wrote about. And hell, maybe she was right.

Still, he could dream, couldn't he? Maybe someday — wouldn't that be a kick — he'd get the chance to prove her wrong?

By the following spring, a year since their night at the debutante ball, he was feeling better, getting over her again — or maybe coming to a deeper acceptance of what his life would be. Sometimes, on the beach, he'd see young families, playing together, building their castles in the sand. He'd think what he was missing and regret would tighten his throat.

But only for a moment. He would move on, down the beach, look out at the Pacific, at the gulls wheeling over the endless blue waves, and know that he was okay. He'd be all right. On his own.

Sometimes now, whole nights would go by without a single dream of her. It must be progress, he decided.

But then came that night in June.

He was having a pleasant, perfect little dream, a dream where he held one Oscar in each hand and thanked the Academy from the bottom of his heart.

And a voice — her voice — purred in his ear. "Where's my Colt, Mitch? You never did send it to me."

His double-Oscar moment faded. He was back in South Texas, in the Governor's Suite. And Jessie was sitting on him, with her little gun to his head.

Except there was no gun. And outside, he could hear the soft roar of ocean waves.

But the rest of it — Jessie straddling him, her scent on the air, her voice in his ear. That seemed so real...

Because, he realized with a sudden jolt of fierce joy, it was real.

"Mitch, oh Mi-itch..." Her teeth lightly teased his ear. And there was more, beneath the teasing. A note of apprehensiveness, of uncertainty. She was unsure of her welcome here.

And damn it, she should be.

He made his move fast — a man had to with Jessie — surging up and over, flipping her to her back.

And landing on top, spread-eagling her hands. "You never sent me your address."

If she really was uncertain, she was covering it well. "Hmm." She smiled. Lazily. Now it was a bolt of pure lust shooting through him. "I guess you've got me there."

"How the hell did you get in here?"

"Your security system is good — but not good enough to keep me out."

He went for the real issue. "Tell me. Now. *Why?* Why are you here?"

Her mouth started trembling.

He knew then, he understood. And he couldn't believe it. He was the happiest man alive.

"Say it," he commanded.

"I...I love you, Mitch."

He wanted the rest. He wanted it *now*. "And?"

"Marry me."

He stared down into her beloved, beautiful face. He couldn't move, couldn't speak.

She whispered, "I've been thinking. Since the last time we loved. I've been thinking that it's about time I learned how to do it, how to really be with a man. And there is no one in the whole wide world I'd rather learn to be with than you. Am I...too late?"

He shook his head.

"Then will you, Mitch? Oh, God. Will you, please?"

He swallowed. Here it was, the most important moment of his life. And he couldn't speak.

"Oh, Mitch. Are you all right?"

He nodded. Because he was. He was very, very all right.

"Then will you? Will you marry me?"

And in answer to *that* question, he lowered his mouth to hers.

***The End***