

# No Small Deceit



A novel by

**Mary Jane  
Bryan**

## **She couldn't believe it! How could he betray her like this...**

There on the front page was a terrible photo of Tali coming out of her office doors, complete with wig and scarf. But the face was definitely hers.

Tali was in shock for a few seconds. How could this be? How did it happen?

“You’re kidding!” She finally found her voice. But now she couldn’t think of even one word.

*Exclusive photos inside* the headline continued. *See why Margaret Barnett isn't who she says she is!*

“Who did this?” she was able to ask. “Who? I want his, or her, head. Immediately. It has to be someone in the building. Someone close enough to be able to take photos.”

A mental picture of a handsome young janitor working the hall with toolboxes and a lunch box on the floor around him came to Lily’s mind. But she dismissed it as Tali was continuing, giving out orders of what to do about this.

“I certainly hope this rag has good malpractice insurance, ’cause they’re going to need it!”

By the end of the day, Tali had the information she wanted.  
Brent!

**Committed to winning a challenge from friends, he falls in love with a woman who is not what she appears to be...**

Brent Walker receives a challenge from friends to interview and photograph Margret Barnett, the elusive heir to a newspaper fortune. His only clue is Granville, a small Southern town. But when he gets there, no one in town will tell him where she lives. Still, all is not lost. While in Granville, he meets and falls in love with Tali, a beautiful young woman who lives on a farm with her grandmother.

**She loves him, but she's afraid to let him know who she really is...**

Tali is used to people trying to find Margret Barnett, but she knows the town will protect her identity. She's afraid if Brent finds out who she really is, he will only want her money and she wants to be loved for herself. Besides, he's as secretive as she is about his life away from her, and she suspects he's not the humble journalist he appears to be.

Can these two strong-willed people find a common ground of trust and acceptance, or will pride, stubbornness, and deception keep them apart?

## KUDOS for *No Small Deceit*

In *No Small Deceit* by Mary Jane Bryan, Tali is a small town farm girl, or so Brent Walker thinks when he meets her. But she isn't what she seems to be. Of course, neither is he. With deceit on both sides, it's hard to have an honest relationship as both parties have something to hide. Add to the deception, the normal male/female misunderstandings and no relationship has much of a chance. But when they both get caught deceiving each other, pride and stubbornness make it hard for either one to forgive. The story is cute and clever, the plot strong, and the characters believable. It's a classic love story with an unusual twist, a very good read. ~ *Taylor Jones, Reviewer*

*No Small Deceit* by Mary Jane Bryan is just what the title says it is: the story of two people who start a relationship with a little white lie and find that it soon balloons out of control. Love is hard enough when the two people involved are honest with each other. But when you add omissions and deceptions, taking the relationship where you want it to go is nearly impossible. Our heroine, Tali, is a small-town girl, or so she tries to pretend, but her innocent façade is hiding a big secret—she's really a newspaper heiress everyone thinks is an old lady. Into her life walks Brent Walker, humble journalist and mouth-watering gorgeous. But he isn't what he appears to be either. Can these two complicated people wade through the deceit and mistrust to find true love, or are they doomed from the start? *No Small Deceit* is a complicated tale of deception, mistrust, and two people

who want to be loved for who they are and not what they have. Add in the machinations of Brent trying to get an interview with the newspaper heiress, and you have a charming, funny, and entertaining story. ~ *Regan Murphy, Reviewer*

# No Small Deceit

Mary Jane Bryan

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GENRE: ROMANCE/WOMEN'S FICTION/CHICK LIT

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## DEDICATION

*Thanks to all my friends and  
family for their continual patience  
with me. I especially want to thank  
my husband, Peter, for his persistence  
in never letting me give up  
on my dreams.*



# Chapter 1

*Summer 2000:*

**T**ali spotted the man when she was about halfway across the meadow, walking her horse at a slow pace. This was familiar territory for both of them.

The man was getting out of the driver's side of a vehicle, the side opposite her. He walked toward the back of the car. He opened the trunk and started rummaging around.

She wondered what he was doing on this rocky, dirt road, and then she grinned to herself. She bet Burt, owner of Burt's Gas and Tire Repair shop on the highway, had probably told this man to turn down this road as a shortcut to get to Granville.

The man had probably asked for the nearest way to Granville.

Since Burt was a great practical joker, he always told people who stopped and asked that to go this way.

*Well, Tali thought, it actually is the closet way to get to Granville in terms of distance, that is true. But, as far as time is concerned, the man just found out the problem.*

As Tali approached the car from the front, she could hear the man talking to himself. She could not make out exactly what he was saying, but she caught the words “flat,” “stupid pot-holes,” and a couple of other words she decided she would forget she heard.

She brought TD, her horse, to a stop at the front of the car. They had approached quietly, but the man probably would not have heard them, anyway, talking to himself as he was.

Just then a hand reached up, grabbed the top of the open trunk lid, and slammed it down with a loud bang.

He rose up.

“Whoa!” he cried when he saw Tali on TD just a car length away. He took a step backward.

The slamming of the trunk lid and a man suddenly appearing and crying out caused TD to rear up suddenly, which was unusual for him. He was generally a calm horse. Nothing ever seemed to affect him.

Tali barely had time to adjust in the saddle. If she wasn't as excellent a rider as she was, she would have been thrown off at the unexpected move.

TD may have reared up because Tali had been so startled when she saw the man, she was sure she jerked the reins backward suddenly. TD was not used to having such a command

from her. He probably just reared, confused as to what he was supposed to do.

The man was, by far, the best-looking man she had ever seen in her life. Dark blond hair was cut in an upsweep to frame his handsome face. His blue eyes looked as startled as hers did, she was sure.

Brent, on the other hand, had taken even another step backward. He knew he was looking at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Tali had somewhat recovered her composure and calmed TD, but her heart was still racing. She was sure the man could see it pounding through her T-shirt.

“Flat?” she asked.

She knew the answer, of course. That was the major problem with this road. It seemed every time someone tried to go this way, for whatever reason, the result was a flat. That is, if the person were lucky. A ruined tire was more common. The locals avoided this road as much as possible.

She would have to talk to Burt about telling people to come this way. It simply wasn't fair to them, practical joke or not.

“Yeah,” Brent answered, “an elderly gentleman at a gas station told me to come this way and I would be in Granville in ‘no time flat.’ I guess he was right!”

Brent grinned, sheepishly. He knew the joke was on him. He should have turned back when he was only a few yards down this road. At that time, he could tell what it looked like

ahead for as far as he could see. He had hoped it would get better. But it hadn't.

He should have at least turned around at the farmhouse he saw on a hill about a half a mile back.

"I'll have to talk to Burt about that," the woman said.

Brent brought his thoughts back to her. But his thoughts had never really left her. How could they?

"What's that?" he asked.

Tali could have kicked herself. Here was her dream man, obviously from the city and wealthy, also, by the make of his car. And all she could do was say something stupid! He would surely think she was just a "hick from the sticks" and never want to be near her again.

She took a deep breath. She knew she wanted to keep him talking. His voice sent chills down her spine. She had never had such a reaction to any other man before.

Brent wanted to keep her talking. Maybe evasive answers or idiotic questions would keep her here.

"The elderly man you probably asked about how to get to Granville. He thinks it's funny to send people this way. A little ways up the highway, you would have seen a sign at an intersection, with directions on how to get to Granville. It's a very decently-paved county road. Nothing like this."

"I guess I'm just lucky," Brent replied. *In more ways than one, he thought, because I may have never met you otherwise. Here you are, out in the middle of nowhere, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.*

Tali smiled. Actually, she would thank Burt and give him a big hug the next time she saw him. She had been leisurely walking TD across the meadow, going home, with really nothing to do the rest of the day. Sitting on the porch swing at the farmhouse could only be done for so long.

“I bet he gets lots of tire repairs from sending unsuspecting people this way, right?” he asked, sarcastically. It seemed logical to Brent—send someone to a place where they would have a flat, then offer your services.

“I really don’t think he looks at it that way,” she responded, bristling at his tone. She had known Burt Madison all her life. It was just his way.

Brent caught the narrowing of her eyes and the almost-resentful tone of her voice. He sure didn’t want to offend her, not at this beginning stage of what he hoped would be a delightful relationship.

No, one should not offend such a beautiful woman as this. He didn’t want a strike against him from the get-go.

She dropped the subject, much to his relief.

“What’s the problem?” she asked. “Can’t you fix a tire?”

This time *his* eyes narrowed. What kind of man did she think he was? A wuss?

“Of course I can change a tire, if, and that’s a big if, I have a tire iron, which seems to be missing from this trunk. And, no, I’m not so irresponsible as not to have one. I let a friend borrow my car last weekend, and I do admit I didn’t think to look in the trunk to make sure everything was still there when he returned it. He didn’t mention having a flat or using the tire iron, but

there it is. You just assume everything will be there as you left it.”

He was sweating, his forehead covered. His shirt was soaked. He was stuck in the middle of nowhere. And he had just met a beautiful woman looking like this. He was in no mood to be friendly or even courteous. What right did she have to look so cool, to be so happy and friendly?

“Hop up behind me. TD and I’ll take you to town. Eddie at the station will bring you back out, fix your flat.”

The horse had been prancing, never still, as she made her offer.

Her voice was melodious, a lovely sound.

But Brent had never been on a horse in his life, much less such a magnificent beast as this.

“No way,” he said, shaking his head. “Thanks for the offer, but not me.”

“Suit yourself,” she responded, shrugging.

In one fluid motion, horse and rider turned, crossed the ditch, and jumped up the other side to the open meadow.

“Wait!” Brent called, but his voice fell onto deaf ears.

A second before he called out the horse had sprung into a gallop.

As she galloped across the meadow, she almost forgot about the horse. She had just met the best-looking man she had ever seen. She was still shaking.

Why had she offered to take him to town on her horse? Obviously, he was a “city slicker,” and was probably afraid of horses, especially one as big and powerful looking as TD.



He watched as they crossed the meadow. The horse seemed to glide across the grass, the rider in perfect harmony. They were one.

Her long, beautiful hair flowed out behind her. He watched until they disappeared among the trees.

Then he noticed the silence again.

“That was dumb. Really dumb,” he said aloud to himself.

He straightened up. He reached for his cell phone and flipped it open. No service.

*Great, he thought. This must be a “dead zone.”*

He tossed the phone onto the front seat of the car.

He was not sure how far it was to town, but he knew that the farmhouse was about a half mile behind, so he decided to go that way. He could telephone for help from there.

He reached into the backseat for his jacket and slung it over one shoulder as he began walking. He wasn't going to reach any town in time to find and try to interview anyone this evening, let alone Mrs. Margaret M. Barnett, heiress to the Quincy fortune and newspaper baroness.

## Chapter 2

**F**or the past fifteen minutes, he had been traveling down this rocky dirt road, wondering if there really was a town at the end of it. *Nothing is worth this*, he thought. Maybe he should just forget about the challenge he had picked, fix the flat, and go home.

No, he couldn't do that. A challenge was a challenge. He had never run from anything before.

The yellow and red flowers grew in prolific abundance along the fence on one side of the road. He stood still for a moment with his hands on his hips, surveying the area that circumstances had forced him to stop in, and sighed.

He was on a hard-packed, rocky road. Looking down at his feet, he saw rocks sticking up out of the surface. A little to his right there was a pothole.



He knew about those! He had been trying to dodge those since he had been on this road. At the same time, he had tried not to get too close to the bushes at the sides, their branches spreading out over part of the road. He wasn't interested in scratching his BMW. Otherwise, he could appreciate the beauty and tranquility of the place.

Graceful, stately oak trees stretched in majesty to the sky, their branches intertwined. Spanish moss hung in abundance from the branches, swaying gently in the breeze. He watched as squirrels and birds scampered and hopped from branch to branch, tree to tree. The warbling of different birds filled the air with song. He listened to another sound. He realized what it was. Cicadas were in full "voice." Their music ebbed and flowed in response to the conductor. This "concert master" was a certain cicada that dictated the rhythm of the chorus.

A gentle breeze moved the leaves, producing a faint rustling among the branches. The zephyr provided a refreshing coolness on this hot, muggy summer day.

He sighed, wishing he could enjoy the beauty of the trees and wild flowers. But he had put himself on a timetable, and it was suddenly in danger of being torn apart.

The stillness and calmness of the area brought a certain serenity to his body and mind. He *had* been working too hard lately. He felt he could just stay here, never moving again.

Just as he thought he would never spot the farmhouse, it finally came into view. It was a good quarter mile up a driveway from the road, nestled on a hill among big, beautiful oaks. Tall, stately pine trees lined the driveway on either side.

As he entered the yard, a huge dog rose up from its position on the bottom step of the porch. An old woman sat in a cane-back chair, snapping beans, putting the ends in a paper bag and the beans in a large pot. He stopped, not quite sure what the dog was going to do.

The dog took a step toward him, wagging its tail. Brent cautiously and slowly reached out a hand and let the dog smell his scent. The animal licked his hand.

The old woman had seemingly paid no mind to this exchange of greeting between man and dog.

But someone else had been watching.

“Well, well, I’ve never seen him do that before,” a familiar voice said.

Brent looked up as a figure opened the screen door and stepped out on to the porch. A figure in cut-off shorts, T-shirt, long hair flowing.

“You!” he said. “What are you doing here?” he asked before he thought.

“Me?” she asked, putting her hand on her chest. “Moi? I live here.”

“Live here?”

“Do you always repeat everything in your conversations?” she asked, smiling.

Her smile took his breath away, but her words rankled. She would never know what she did to him. He’d make sure of that.

“Only if I think someone needs it,” he replied in kind.

She raised her eyebrow.

“Now, children, hush, now,” said the old woman on the porch.

They turned toward her.

“This is Granny Mae. My name’s Tali,” the girl said.

“I’m Brent. Brent Walker. Do you have a phone I can use?” he asked, as he hung his jacket over the porch railing. “And, by the way, you’ve never seen what before?”

“Oh, just Duke, there,” she said, gesturing toward the dog, who had now laid back down, at Brent’s feet. “Duke usually greets strangers with fierce barks and growls. I have no idea why he didn’t bark at you.”

“Told you so,” Granny said.

“Now, Granny!”

Brent looked from one to the other. This conversation was lost on him.

“Matchmaker,” Tali said, simply, with a grin.

“Oh!” Brent exclaimed, not sure what to say to that.

Matchmaker? This beautiful girl didn’t need any help there. The only thing Brent could imagine was that perhaps there were no eligible young men around here.

“Phone?” he asked again, getting back to the business at hand.

“No phone,” she said, spreading her hands.

“You’re kidding,” he said, then cursed himself for not bringing his cell phone from the car. It might not even be there when he got back to his vehicle. Having been so hot, sweaty, and frustrated, he didn’t even think about it until now.

Smiling at the look on his face, almost as if reading his mind, she pointed toward the road.

He turned in the direction she was pointing. An old pickup came into view.

“Eddie,” she said. “I rode into town earlier and told him about you. He said he’d come. If Eddie says he’ll do something, he will. Never doubt that.”

The old pickup came to a stop in front of them, and a young man stuck his head out the window.

“Well, come on. I don’t like to be out after dark,” he said.

“Not out—” Brent began, but one look at Tali’s face had him grabbing his jacket and heading toward the truck.

“Go to Fran’s Bed and Breakfast for the night,” Tali called after him. “Tell her I sent you.”

Brent acknowledged that he had heard her with a wave of his hand as Eddie jockeyed the pickup around in the yard and headed back down the lane that served as a driveway.

Brent waved out the window and watched in the side view mirror as she returned it.

On the porch, Granny nodded. “Yep, he’s the one,” she said, smiling.

Tali said nothing in reply. She simply turned and went back into the house, giving no indication she had even heard Granny’s remark.

## Chapter 3

**T**hey made it to Eddie's service station with the flat tire at dusk, but it was dark as Brent knocked on the front door of Fran's Bed and Breakfast. A sign had instructed him to "Please Knock," which seemed strange to him. Used to the major hotels around the world, knocking for entrance seemed very strange.

A middle-aged woman opened the door.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Good evening, ma'am," he began, with a smile. This smile usually allowed him to get his way.

She nodded, agreeing.

"A young lady named Tali said to tell you she sent me. I had a flat outside town and need a room for the night."

As if the name Tali were a magic word, at the mention of it, Fran had stepped back, inviting him in. She was all smiles.

“If Tali sent you, that’s fine with me, then,” she said. “I have a good room, and you’re just in time to wash up before supper.”

She looked pointedly at his smudged arms and even at his face.

“Oh, no,” he groaned, when he looked at himself in the mirror in his room. He had a large smudge of dirt down the left side of his face.

“I’m sure that really impressed Tali.”

His usually impeccably starched shirt was rumpled and sweat-stained.

He cleaned up and enjoyed a delicious meal, one of the best he’d ever eaten. He couldn’t tell Fran enough how much he enjoyed it.

No one was in a hurry to leave this woman’s table. Better to let that blueberry cobbler settle with a last cup of coffee.

“So, Brent, what brings you to Granville?” a man asked. “Usually a person has to be coming here to get here. It’s not like we’re on the Interstate.”

“You can say that again,” Brent said, smiling, but they seemed to know he meant no offense. “Actually, I’m here to try to interview the most elusive woman of wealth in the world, it seems. No one yet has been able to see and talk with Mrs. Margaret M. Barnett, so I thought I might try my hand at it.”

For some reason he did not feel the need to explain about his challenge.

He felt a change in the atmosphere. It seemed to drop a degree or two. At the mention of this name, several around the

table reached for their coffee cups, busying themselves with drinking.

“More coffee, anyone?” Fran asked, rising from her chair. She headed for the kitchen.

*What did I say?* Brent wondered.

One older man, who Brent had learned lived at this place on a permanent basis, spoke up. “You won’t get to her, young man,” he said. “She doesn’t allow any visitors out at her place. And I might as well warn you, as we all would—” He paused, looking around the table at the others, who were nodding. “—that no one around these parts will give you any information about her. Might as well not ask. We’re all pretty protective where our little Margaret’s concerned.”

“Can’t you just point me in the general direction of her house? Surely there aren’t so many houses in this town that I couldn’t find it.”

They just looked at him and again sipped their coffee. He dropped the subject as Fran returned with the coffee pot.

Brent had enough sense not to pursue it at this time.

The next morning, he stepped out onto the screened-in porch that ran around the front and two sides of this building. A swing hung from the ceiling on one end of the porch, rocking chairs were along the wall. Between two of the rocking chairs, in two different spots, a wooden barrel had been placed with care. Checkerboards complete with checkers, sat on top of the barrels. One of the checkerboards had a game in progress, some checkers on the board and some stacked off the board.

He stretched, pushing his hands up in the air above his head. He had just slept like a baby, having gone to sleep as soon as he lay down. The bed had been wonderfully soft.

He glanced around. This small town had the typical Southern “square.” An old building in the middle was now a restaurant, called The Old Post Office. It could well have been the original post office for this town.

He was amazed. Although this was the year 2000, time seemed to have stood still here. Except for a few vehicles, this square could be on a 1950s postcard.

*Norman Rockwell would appreciate this*, he thought.

As he started down the steps to go see about his car, he spotted TD on the other side of the square, tied loosely to a lamppost.

TD could only mean one thing.

Tali!

He felt the excitement the thought of seeing her brought to him.

At that moment, she came out of a shop, her arms full of plastic bags. She was laughing with the shopkeeper, who had followed her out to the sidewalk.

Brent heard her happy laugh, carried on the wind, as he started across the square in long, graceful strides. More than one head turned to watch him as he crossed the short distance.

Tali was saying something to the man, laughing. She spotted Brent at the same time.

TD also spotted him and gave a soft nicker, as if in greeting.



Tali looked quickly over at the horse, surprise registering on her face.

“You, too?” she asked the horse.

The horse tossed its head, shaking its mane, and looked at her.

“Traitor,” she said. She turned to watch Brent cross the last street to arrive at her side. *What a good-looking man*, she thought. *Too bad he’s so full of himself, he can’t even be nice!*

She started arranging the bags, which had handles, onto TD’s saddle.

“Good morning,” he said from behind her.

Brent had seen her looking at him, so there was no use for her to pretend she didn’t know he was there.

She was so beautiful, looking so fresh this morning. He wanted to reach out and turn her around, pull her to him, and kiss her. He did lean toward her, taking a deep breath. He knew she would smell as clean and beautiful as she looked. Her thick hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

“Is it?” she asked, sounding cooler than she had planned.

What was it about this man that made her so testy? Seeing him walking this way had reminded her of yesterday, when she had watched him from behind the screen door at the farm. As he walked up the steps, she had experienced an almost uncontrollable urge to step out to greet him, run into his arms, and put her face up for his kiss. The urge had happened again when she walked out the door and he had taken a step toward her. But he had drawn back, so she did.

What had come over her, anyway? She had met many men in her young life. She had never wanted to run into their arms as she did with this man. True, she had thought about him all night, unable to sleep. She hadn't been prepared to see him first thing this morning.

"Isn't it?" he countered.

"If you say so," she said, as she swung up and into the saddle. She pulled TD's head around and moved away. "Better see about your precious car."

She left him standing there, staring after her, as she cantered down the street and around a corner.

Why was she so prickly? Just because he hadn't wanted to ride with her on the horse? He hadn't done anything to her that he could remember. In fact, he had felt yesterday on the front porch of the farmhouse that she wanted to come to him, and he had almost held out his arms, encouraging her. But they both had turned away at the same time—he because he refused to let her know how she affected him. He wasn't about to try to guess why she did anything.

A movement at the end of the block caught his attention. Eddie was opening his service station. Brent walked down the street, greeting people as he went. People were sure friendly in this small Southern town. They opened their shops early. It wasn't quite seven a.m., yet they were here, setting items outside their doors.

Eddie took the time to examine the tire but then had bad news. He couldn't fix it and didn't have one to match it in stock. It had a special tread. He offered to put a different type

on the car, which would get Brent to Springfield, but ride rough. Or, he was willing to go to Springfield to replace the tire. He needed other supplies, anyway.

But he explained that if Brent planned on going to Tali's very often while he was here, the temporary balloon tire would not last on those potholes and rocks in that road. It would be better to have a new tire to match the others.

Brent was surprised when he found himself agreeing to let Eddie go to Springfield, probably not until the next day. That meant Brent would spend the night here again.

Why would he want to spend any extra time in this small town? Why not just get the interview and leave?

He already knew the answer. The picture of a petite, feisty red-head atop a beautiful horse came to mind.

He refused to let her image stay there.

"Since we have to wait on this, can you tell me how to get to Margaret Barnett's house?" Brent asked, in what he hoped was a casual tone. He wanted to sound like he was just asking how to get to the town library.

Eddie didn't answer. He picked up the phone book, intent on finding and calling a place that had the required tire.

Brent knew, however, that he had heard him.

Brent waited. When he knew Eddie wasn't going to give an answer, he asked, "Why won't anyone in this town tell me where Mrs. Barnett lives?"

Eddie looked up, but before he could answer, another voice spoke up from the office doorway. "Because everyone is very protective of her, which she appreciates very much."

Brent looked up to see Tali standing there. The light from the garage bay outlined her figure in such a way that it took his breath away.

“No one has ever interviewed her. What makes you think you can?” she asked.

He smiled. “Charm. Wit. Good looks. You name it!”

His tone said that he usually got by with this banter, giving him a natural inroad to start a conversation. Most women smiled and relaxed.

Not Tali. “Oh?” she asked.

She did not smile, but looked at him very seriously.

His smile faded.

What did it take with this woman? How could such a beautiful creature be so cold?

“Found one!” Eddie proclaimed, hanging up the phone.

Brent and Tali continued looking at each other.

“Hey,” Eddie said, walking up to Brent and touching his sleeve.

“And why is everyone so protective of her?” Brent asked. “She’s worth billions, owns a major newspaper chain, and she’s supposed to really be a character. She’s probably very interesting. It would make a good article for several national, even international, publications.”

“So, you *are* a reporter. I thought so.”

She started to turn away, in disgust, it seemed.

“No,” he said, reaching for and taking her arm as she turned, forcing her to turn back to him. “No, I’m not a journalist,” he said, still holding her arm.

She looked down at his hand on her arm then back up to him, raising her eyebrow.

“Sorry,” he said, as he let her go.

“Then, what?” she asked. “Do you want some grant money for a pet cause, or something? It seems—Margaret—is always being hit on for money for something.”

“Margaret, is it? Then you do know her? Personally?”

“Oh, yes, I know her,” she responded. “Everyone in town knows her. That’s why they try to protect her from the likes of you.”

“Likes of me?” he asked. “And what does she, or anyone here, for that matter, know about me? How can she or they get to know me, if I don’t get the opportunity to even see her?”

Tali looked at him steadily. “Tell you what,” she said, “why don’t you write out the list of questions you would like to ask her, and I’ll that see she gets them. If she wants to answer, I’ll bring them back to you. If she doesn’t, then you won’t see her, anyway.”

Eddie had been sitting on a stool a few feet away, listening, obviously enjoying this exchange. He had a big grin on his face.

“Is that the best I can do?” Brent asked. “I’m sure if she would just see me for a minute, we could set up an interview. I mean, how do I know it would be her, and not just anyone, answering the questions?”

“Think she would fall for your...charm, is it?” Tali asked, mockingly.

“Yes, just like you have,” he countered.

“Me?” she asked. “Me? If you think I’m impressed by your super ego, then you can just...just...”

She was so indignant, she couldn’t finish her sentence.

She turned and flounced out of the office, her long, full ponytail swishing back and forth. Her hands were clenched at her sides. Brent stared after her. He wanted to run after her, turn her around, pull her to him, kiss her, and never let her go. But instead he just stood there.

“Way to go,” said Eddie, still grinning.

“Huh?” Brent asked, looking over at him. “Did you say something?”

“She likes you, I can tell,” Eddie replied.

“Likes me?” Brent questioned. “Are you kidding? I think she’d like to scratch my eyes out. There goes my interview, or even answers to questions, from Margaret Barnett.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Eddie responded.

“What do you mean?” Brent asked.

Eddie just shrugged. “Stranger things have happened. You ready? Want to ride with me over to Springfield, pick up that tire you need?”

“Which way do you go?” Brent asked. “Can you drop me off at Tali’s house and pick me up on the way back?”

“Sure. You a glutton for punishment or something?”

“There must be a way of getting through to her,” he said.

Eddie laughed. “Which one? Margaret or Tali?” he asked.

“Either. Both,” was Brent’s reply.

Now, it had become a challenge, a vendetta. Even if he didn't get to see Margaret Barnett, he was determined to have Tali eating out of his hand before he had to leave Granville.

He wasn't used to being rebuffed by any woman.

He wasn't about to start now!

## Chapter 4

**E**ddie stopped at the end of the driveway to let Brent out. Brent had asked to be dropped off there, so Eddie could get to Springfield and back as soon as possible. They had been delayed at the service station when a man had brought his pickup in, the motor threatening to die every time the vehicle came to a stop. Eddie had taken the time to check it out, get it running smoother, and idling correctly.

Brent saw Granny sitting on the porch before he was half-way up the drive. He heard a familiar sounding motor start up but couldn't tell what direction it was coming from. He stopped to listen, looking around at the sky.

In a minute or two, a helicopter came into view over the top of the house. He only caught a glimpse of it before it dropped down again below the roofline. He heard it fade into the distance.



In that brief glimpse, something about the helicopter looked very familiar but he just couldn't place it. It must have flown in from the east and then banked north. The farmhouse faced the south, situated on a knoll. The ground sloped gently away behind the house, but he couldn't see anything over the ridge. A thick stand of trees prevented anyone seeing beyond them.

Although the helicopter and its markings nagged at him, he temporarily dismissed it from his mind.

"Back again, huh?" Granny said by way of greeting. "Tali ain't here. She's gone to town."

"I know," he said.

She looked up at him quickly, sharply. She relaxed when he continued.

"I saw her earlier at Eddie's station. It sure is peaceful out here," he said, seemingly dismissing the subject of Tali.

The old woman wasn't fooled, and they both knew it. Why else would he be back out here, if not to see Tali? It wasn't to see her, Granny knew that for sure. But she kept quiet, willing to let him do the talking. She had learned long ago that you learned more by listening than by talking.

He only sat a minute more before he asked, "Mind if I look around? Maybe look in the barn? I haven't been to many farms before. Actually, I haven't been to any," he admitted with a grin.

Granny smiled back at him, showing toothless gums.

*At least I can still charm someone!* he thought.

“Sure, go ahead. Just don’t bother TD. Tali gets real upset if anyone touches him, almost. ’Course, he may not let you touch him. Right spirited, that one is.”

“You can say that again!” exclaimed Brent.

They both knew he wasn’t talking about the horse.

# Chapter 5

**T**ali looked out and down as the helicopter headed north, toward Springfield and the airport there. From there her private jet would take her to Atlanta.

Tomorrow morning was the annual stockholders' meeting. She had the afternoon and evening to prepare herself for it.

Her speech to the stockholders was more or less a pep talk, a morale booster. They liked to see her. Although she kept her finger on the pulse of her corporation and knew at any moment what was happening, for the last two days she had not been able to think of anything but Brent Walker.

She closed her eyes and remembered the first time she saw him. Of course, she had heard him before she saw him.

She had spotted the black car on the road from across the open field. TD had moved silently through the meadow, across the ditch, to stop in front of the BMW. Obviously, the man had

a flat tire and he was frantically searching for something in the trunk.

She heard him cursing under his breath when he couldn't find what he was looking for.

He had slammed the truck down so hard she had jumped, causing TD to rear up prance sideways. He was so in tune with her every movement that her jump had startled him, also.

She had also felt herself draw in her breath and tense up when the man looked up at her, as startled as she was.

He was gorgeous!

Large blue eyes had stared at her from beneath long, thick lashes.

Lashes to die for. Even hers weren't that long!

How many women would envy those lashes, a natural asset to this man's good looks.

Since he was obviously a visitor to the area, she had been prepared to offer what help she could to him. Her offer of riding with her on TD to town was unusual. To many it would have been an honor, yet he had seemingly scorned it.

For some reason, that had angered her, causing her to feel rejected, a feeling she was not familiar with and didn't like.

But what shook her most was the fact she had not been able to get him off her mind, not even for a minute, since that first moment.

But she had her pride, too. He would never know how she felt!

In spite of her thoughts returning time and time again to Brent, Tali was able to concentrate enough throughout the

evening to know what she would say the next morning in her speech.

From helicopter to jet to helicopter, she was now cozily entrenched in her private penthouse on the top floor of her corporation's main office building.

Unique in its design and conception, she'd had the building constructed so that her personal helicopter was able to be lowered completely down into the building, out of sight, and the door would close above it. At that point, from the air or roof, no evidence of a helo pad was in sight. The other half of this top floor was her penthouse and the apartment of her secretary and lifelong BFF, Lily.

Tali finally laid her notes aside, feeling confident that she knew their contents.

Her thoughts returned to Brent.

How dare he think he could charm his way into her presence? And for an interview, at that. She had never granted reporters personal interviews, and she wasn't about to start with him.

In fact, early on in her career, with the knowledge that she would someday be chairperson of the corporation, she had vowed to stay out of the public eye. She had well-educated, competent managers that she fully trusted to run her business interests. She felt no need to flaunt her wealth.

She never forgot her mother's family, the town she was born in, or the people there. For this reason, the citizens of Granville loved her and helped protect her privacy. She acted

like one of them when she was there, which was often, and she was accepted completely.

Her money had helped put many of the young people through college and get them started in their chosen careers.

She was simply “Tali” to them, and Tali she would remain. Her grandfather, Granny Mae’s husband, had given her the nickname when she was born. It had stuck, of course, like all nicknames tend to do.

He had said that Margaret Matilda was too hard for such a dainty thing to handle, so he had shortened the Matilda to Tali.

She was glad he had. The name Margaret Matilda may have been in her mother’s family for generations, but she didn’t think she would pass it on—when, or if, she ever had children.

Unbidden, beautiful blue eyes, long lashes, and Adonis features came to mind, crowding out all other thoughts. She found herself wondering what their children would look like, and couldn’t believe she was having such thoughts.

*What children?* She laughed to herself. *He obviously couldn’t stand me on sight and I certainly couldn’t put up with such an arrogant, egotistical man!*

She snuggled down in her bed and went to sleep on thoughts of curly-haired, blue-eyed babies.

# Chapter 6

**A**s Brent walked up the driveway, Granny Mae thought what a fine-looking man this stranger was. He was almost as good looking as her Hank had been at that age. What memories the sight of this young man of Tali's brought back to her.

And there was no doubt in her mind that this young man already belonged to Tali.

She had watched as they bristled at each other, one barely talking civilly to the other. Yet, Granny could tell there was a mutual attraction so strong, so immediate, between these two that, if they both had not denied it, they would have been in each other's arms. For a second, at one point the other day, she thought that it was going to happen, anyway. But they both drew back at the same time.

She had felt that, too.

They'd come around, she knew.

She watched him as he walked to the barn. He had broad, powerful shoulders atop a slim, trim torso. He obviously kept himself in top physical shape. He was full of pride, just as her Hank had been at that age, and always, really.

That's what made men like this the way they were. They had such fierce pride in themselves and their accomplishments. They never let anything take that away from them, not even the all-consuming, unconditional love they gave to the woman they finally chose to love. And these women allowed them to keep that pride.

Tali was a match for him, Granny knew, but he would remain an independent man, just as Tali would remain an independent woman.

Brent approached the open door of the barn. Granny had given him permission to explore the farm. A variety of aromas assaulted his senses. Fresh hay was the most prominent, causing him to sneeze.

A soft nicker answered his sneeze, letting him know that TD was in the barn. After his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he saw the horse at the side, his head above the boards of his stall, as if he were waiting to greet Brent.

Brent went to the horse. He did not remember Granny's warning about touching him. The horse seemed to welcome him stroking its nose.

"I thought Tali would be here," he said out loud to the horse. "Do you miss her, too?"



The horse shook his head, seemingly in response to Brent's question. He was used to Tali leaving him alone for several days at a time, but, yes, if he could think in human terms, he would have felt he missed her. TD and Tali had a bond between them that few humans and horses did.

An open door at the side of the barn allowed TD to go outside and get his exercise whenever he wanted. An open pasture stretched out from the barn.

Brent spent some time exploring the barn and tack room. He found a litter of kittens in some hay and the mother cat allowed him to pet them for a while. Then he wandered outside. As he passed down the side of the barn, TD joined him at the fence, again nickering.

"I know, I miss her, too, and I've only known her for one day. Am I crazy, or what?"

A fence along the back of the property enclosed the cleared yard. A gate in the fence allowed a person to go through to a path in the woods, but this gate was padlocked.

Brent thought it strange for this farm to have a high chain-link fence with barbed wire around the top, and a locked gate.

Fences had always intrigued him. He speculated as to why property owners put them up. Of course, some reasons were obvious, such as TD's enclosure.

But why this? What, or who, was it keeping out?

It never occurred to Brent to wonder if people were to stay on the house side of the fence. He thought, as most would, that the locked gate was intended to keep prowlers or hunters on the forest side, preventing them from getting too close to the house.

The padlock hung down in the middle, so that it could be locked or opened from either side. But Brent saw no significance in this.

After returning to the porch, he learned from Granny that Tali might be gone for several days.

So she wasn't just in Granville.

Granny wouldn't say where she was, though. He asked her about Margaret Barnett. Granny just shook her head.

"I really couldn't say," she replied.

*Couldn't, or wouldn't*, Brent wondered.

"Come on in the kitchen and have some lemonade," Granny said.

Brent followed her into the house.

"Have a look around the living room while I get the lemonade," Granny said. "There are some photos of Tali when she was younger."

Brent stopped at the living room door. There was an old-fashioned console TV with a VCR box on top of it. A swivel VCR stand was full of cartridges. He knew many people in the Southern countryside, especially older people, still used their VCRs.

Wal-Mart still sold blank VCR tapes so people could record their favorite TV shows or movies. The retail giant still sold VCR machines. They knew there was still a market for these.

He saw a rotary box on the table beside a well-worn recliner.

He recognized this as a rotary box because his grandmother still had one, to turn her TV antennae that stood on the house. Yes, he'd seen an antennae on this house, but had not thought about it at the time.

Looking around, he spotted several framed photos on a side table. He picked up one of Tali as a cheerleader, in the traditional pose with one pom-pom in the air.

*She hasn't changed much*, he thought.

Granny returned with the lemonade, gesturing for him to sit down.

“Have patience, young man,” she said. “You know what they say. Good things come to those who wait.”

He opened his mouth to answer, but was spared having to respond by a series of honks.

Eddie had returned.

## Chapter 7

**B**rent was sitting on a stool at the cafe counter. Eddie had put the new tire on his car, but Brent was not through in Granville. He would do all he could to see Margaret Barnett. His coffee cup was halfway to his mouth when he heard the familiar “chop-chop” of helicopter blades.

He jumped down, splashing coffee on the counter as he lowered the cup. He pushed through the door. Stepping clear of buildings and trees, he looked up in the direction from which the sound was coming.

It flew low over town, heading east. Just as he had thought at Tali’s.

He *had* seen that helo before! Now, he remembered. It was Margaret Barnett’s personal helicopter. He could see the flaming red and yellow emblem of her publishing corporation painted on the side.

But was it coming or going? Was Mrs. Barnett leaving town or arriving?

He decided to get his car and follow the helo. Maybe he could keep it in sight. However, by the time he had reached his car parked behind the boarding house, there was no sound of the chopper anywhere.

He stopped his car on the edge of town, wondering where to go next.

This town was a curious one. Everyone he had asked for information about Margaret Barnett had been very close-lipped. They really did protect her. And somehow he knew offering to pay for any information would just set him back even further with these people.

He found himself turning up the country road to Tali's before he realized what he had done.

Halfway up the drive, he saw a large horse trailer and dual axle pickup parked in front of the barn. The pickup and trailer matched in color, a beautifully coordinated pair. He parked and walked over to where Tali was helping a man put TD in the trailer.

She glanced at him, noting his presence, but was busy with TD.

To its credit, the horse was calmly going up the ramp into the horse trailer. And what a trailer it was. It was top-of-the-line for conveying horses from place to place.

Tali had climbed in with TD. Brent could hear her talking to the horse.

In a few minutes, she jumped out, removed the ramp, shut and latched the door. She took a few steps backward, putting herself in full view of the driver, and waved at him.

This gave Brent an opportunity to watch her. As before, he caught his breath.

She was wearing a T-shirt and cutoff jeans. The T-shirt showed off her full breasts in vivid detail. He felt his excitement mount as he watched her.

Every time he saw her, no matter what she was wearing, he wanted to reach out and pull her close to him. He knew it would be heaven to have his arms around her.

“All ready to go,” she said to the driver. “See you in few days.”

“Take it easy, Miss Tali,” he responded. “And don’t worry about Tandy Dan, now.”

“I won’t” she promised. “I know he’s in good hands.”

The driver smiled, pleased with the compliment.

She stuck her hands in her pockets as she watched the rig go down the drive.

*Tandy Dan? The horse? Brent was thinking. Tandy Dan? Now, where had he heard that name before?*

That was it!

He turned to Tali, who looked forlorn, still watching the pickup as it drove out of sight.

“TD?” he asked. “Tandy Dan?”

She looked over at him and nodded.

“There was a Tandy Dan who won the Triple Crown several years back—six years, maybe.”

Again, she nodded.

“You don’t mean—” He couldn’t finish.

“Yes, TD is Tandy Dan.” She smiled. “I always feel like this when he goes away, even though I know it will only be for a few days. I still miss him, though. I like to think he misses me, too.”

She flashed him that beautiful smile that made his heart skip a beat.

“Anyone would miss you,” he said, softly.

But she had turned away and did not catch what he said.

She turned back.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing, really,” he replied. “It can’t be the same horse,” he said, continuing the thought.

“It can’t?” Tali asked in reply.

“No way. *That* Tandy Dan would be worth...oh...at least...millions, maybe,” he said, with a wave of his hand.

“Well, he wasn’t cheap,” agreed Tali.

“Do you train him?” Brent asked. He couldn’t allow himself to think she might own him. How could she? Sure, this was a nice farm, as country places go, but it was just that—a country home. No one of such modest-looking means could afford a horse like Tandy Dan.

“If you mean train him for racing, then the answer is no,” replied Tali. “But I do take very good care of him. He has accepted me and treats me as a friend, and that’s all we can hope for from anyone or anything, isn’t it? Besides,” she continued,

“how much training does it take to be a stud? I thought that came natural for all males.”

She was smiling at him, teasing him.

He took a step toward her and she was in his arms before they both realized or could stop themselves. She raised her head to tell him to let her go, but she realized too late that it was a mistake.

He immediately bent his head and kissed her, slowly, passionately. No one had ever kissed her like this before! She found her arms around him, holding herself up, lest she faint, she felt so weak.

Finally, he drew away, looking down at her triumphantly.

That was his mistake. She pushed him away, not willing to admit what his kiss did to her. She was trembling, so she put her hands back in her pockets.

“At least, I thought it came natural for all males,” she said. Unable to accept the emotions and thoughts he aroused in her, she felt a need to lash out at him, hurt him. She knew insulting his male ego would do it.

“Doesn’t it?” he asked, laughing. He was undaunted.

She gave him a hard look, a look that had caused most men she had met to back down, and leave her alone. She turned and walked toward the barn, her back stiff with anger.

He stood and watched her walk away. It was hard for him to take his eyes off her. What a kiss! So there *was* fire beneath all that ice. Maybe she had just never met any man yet to match her passion and desire. By her actions and what she said, though, she couldn’t stand him.



Yet her response to his kiss was overwhelming. He found himself shaking, but would never admit it, just as he knew she wouldn't.

He wouldn't be bested. It was now a personal challenge. He would make her love him, fall for him, and then walk away from her, just as he had all the women he had known before.

He turned toward the house, catching sight of Granny standing on the porch, watching them.

She was smiling.

# Chapter 8

**M**rs. Barnett, Mrs. Barnett!” Lily called to Tali. Tali had been attempting to walk down the hall, past the door to her office, but Lily, her secretary, called out to her.

Tali turned into her outer office. She smiled at Lily, wondering what was happening. Lily wasn’t very excitable, and her best asset was her ability to shield Tali from unwanted calls. Most callers just simply did not get past Lily to get to Tali.

Apart from her talents as a secretary, she was also Tali’s best friend, had been since they were both in the second grade. She had an apartment, as part of her salary package, on the thirtieth floor of this building, the same floor as Tali’s penthouse.

“What’s so urgent?” Tali asked.

“There’s a man on the line, asking for Margaret Barnett,” she began.

Tali waited, looking at her friend. That was nothing unusual.

“He says he knows Tali, a friend of yours. That he *knows* you would like to talk with him.”

“Name?” asked Tali, beginning to suspect who was on the line.

“Brent Walker,” came the reply.

Tali wasn’t surprised.

“You know him?” asked Lily.

“You might say that,” Tali replied. The picture of a beautiful, blue-eyed man had come to mind. Tali wondered if her burning cheeks were showing as she remembered the feel of his lips on hers.

They were showing. Lily noticed the change in Tali at the mention of this man’s name. Lily also wondered why she even had put him on hold, offering to check with Tali or “Mrs. Barnett.” She had done it without thinking as she caught a glimpse of Tali coming.

Who was he? she wondered. No name before had invoked such a response from Tali.

“I’ll take the call. Put the muffler on, okay?”

Lily just stared at her as Tali walked into her inner office. Not only was Tali already late for the meeting she was heading to when Lily stopped her, but she simply did *not*—had not ever—taken unsolicited calls like this.

As she moved to switch on the muffler, she knew she would be quizzing Tali very thoroughly this evening about this man.

The “muffler” was the term they used to refer to the electronic equipment that would muffle and distort Tali’s voice, making her voice seem huskier and older than she really sounded in person. That was the reason most thought “Mrs. Barnett” was an older woman.

“Margaret Barnett here,” Tali said, in her best professional voice. This voice was usually intimidating.

How did Tali know Brent would be unaffected by her cold, impersonal tone?

The ego of the man was unbearable!

“Mrs. Barnett. Hello. My name’s Brent Walker. We have a mutual friend from Granville, so I was hoping you would speak with me.”

“You’ll have to talk fast. I’m already late for a meeting. And who is our mutual friend?”

Tali couldn’t stop herself. She was curious as to what Brent would say about Tali, how he would describe and characterize their association.

“Friend” was not quite the term she would use.

The man was unscrupulous. Using an acquaintance like this, hoping it would give him an inroad to someone else.

“A Miss Tali,” he responded brightly.

He didn’t include the last name and it suddenly dawned on her that she had not used her last name that day on the porch. So, unless he had asked someone in town, he didn’t even know her last name.

“Tali Perkins?” she asked, giving a false last name. *Let’s see how he handles this.*

“Must be the same,” he said. “Gorgeous auburn hair, beautiful figure and smile, petite, no bigger than a minute?”

Tali drew in her breath. Did he really think she was beautiful? Did he really like her hair, think she was slim?

“That’s her,” Tali said, her voice breathless. “What can I do for you, Mr. Walker?”

“I know you’ve never done it before, but would you grant me an interview? Please! I’ll get down on my knees and beg, if it helps. See, I’m down.”

His tone was teasing, coaxing, knowing it often solicited the type of response he wanted.

In spite of herself, she smiled, picturing him on his knees. So, he could act humble, if it suited his purposes.

She decided to string him along for a while. She would enjoy seeing him squirm, waiting for what he wanted.

“You know what?” she began, “As you know, I never have given anyone an interview, but I’ll consider it in your case. That’s consider it, only, understand. I’ll just think about it. Could you call me back tomorrow afternoon?”

“You bet!” he said.

She could picture his pleased smile, thinking he had accomplished this much with his charm.

“Your minute’s up. Good-bye, Mr. Walker.”

She hung up the phone and swung around in her chair, facing the large window, looking out over the city. But she didn’t see a thing.

Just hearing his voice had created a feeling within her, she didn’t want there. She refused to let him affect her this way.

She continued staring out the window, her thoughts on him.

“Tali?” Lily asked from the doorway. “You’re late for your meeting.”

“Oh!” Tali exclaimed.

She grabbed the portfolio she had placed on the corner of her desk and rushed out of the office.

She left Lily standing there, staring after her, unable to move.

Tali just didn’t act this way.

Who was this guy, anyway?

## Chapter 9

**W**hen he called back the next afternoon, he was in for a big disappointment. Mrs. Barnett had left the city unexpectedly that morning. No, she had left no message for him. Her secretary said she was sure Mrs. Barnett would not forget him, but would be in touch soon.

He hung up the phone, feeling at odds with himself.

Playing a hunch, he decided to go back to Granville. He didn't think she left town because of him, yet maybe she went "home."

Besides, Tali was there, and this gave him a good excuse for going there, just "happening to be there."

Did he need an excuse to go there?

Wasn't being drawn to beauty a reason within itself?



Granny wasn't surprised to see him.

Yet, Brent was so busy looking around, especially toward the barn, that her calmness passed him by.

"Tali?" he asked.

"Down yonder," Granny responded, nodding toward the barn.

Brent's long legs took him quickly to the barn door and he heard Tali's voice, talking to TD.

So, the horse was back. Why did he feel he was competing with a horse?

*Because the horse has her attention and affection, a small voice told him, and that's what you want.*

The horse saw him before Tali did. TD gave a soft nicker.

Tali whirled around. "You! What are you doing here?" she asked, before she could stop herself. *Oh, great, what an exciting thing to say. He'll think I'm the dullest person he's ever had to talk to.*

"Just thought I'd see how TD made out," he said.

"Oh?" she asked. "Thought maybe you could swap stories, that sort of thing? Love 'em and leave 'em, huh?"

She was smiling, teasing him.

Brent smiled back at her, drinking in her beauty. It was good to see her smile.

"Well, you have to play the field, you know, until you find the right one," he said. "You never know where Ms. Perfect may be found."

For no reason, she felt her cheeks grow hot. She turned back to the horse, hiding her face from him.



“And have you found the right one?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

“Yes, I have,” he replied.

“Really? And who’s the lucky lady?” she asked.

“Well, she’s a beauty. High-strung, sort of like TD here.” He reached up to stroke the horse. “She’s a real thoroughbred. Temper to match it, too. But she’s not untamable, she just doesn’t know it yet.”

Tali laughed. “Are you describing a person or a horse?”

“You do have to tame them both, it seems.”

“Oh, you think that’s important?” she asked, throwing him a warning glance, which he chose to ignore.

“What?”

“That a woman be ‘tame,’ as you put it.”

“To a degree. But I like an independent woman, too.”

“I suppose your fiancée is wealthy, right?”

“She seems to have enough,” he replied, looking her up and down, his eyes shining.

He gave her a look that made her cheeks burn. She was glad for the dimness of the barn, the shadows that covered her blush.

He didn’t correct her impression that he was engaged. Why not string her along for a while?

At that moment, Granny appeared in the barn door, a picnic hamper in her hands.

Brent hurried to take it from her.

“I thought you two might like to take your lunch down by the creek. I made fried chicken and a chocolate cake this morning.”

“Umm, how did you know those are two of my favorite things?” Brent asked.

“You’re a man, aren’t you?” Granny asked.

Brent laughed. He looked at Tali.

She smiled back at him. “Sure, let’s go. The creek is one of my favorite places. Let’s go on TD. He loves it there, also.”

Brent looked over at the horse. He was apprehensive about getting on the animal.

“You’ll be fine,” Tali said. “TD already likes you, can’t you tell?”

She brought the horse out of his stall, putting only a halter over his head.

She started leading him out of the barn when Brent stopped her.

“Saddle?” he asked.

“Oh, no, not to go to the creek. TD would feel punished. All you have to do is hang on to me. You’ll be fine. Of course, you have to hang onto the picnic hamper, too.”

She laughed at the expression on his face and led TD over to some bales of hay, which she used to climb on and jump onto the horse’s back. She reached out to hold the hamper while Brent tried to get on the horse.

“Hold him still!” he said, after the horse shied away several times.

“He’s wondering when you’re going to get on,” Tali responded, laughing so hard she nearly dropped their food.

Brent finally succeeded in climbing onto the horse’s back, where there was plenty of room for two people. They started out of the yard at a walk, across a field, away from the house.

His first fear of being on the horse gradually gave way to the joy he experienced in having his arms around Tali’s waist, holding her tight. He imagined he could feel her heart beating wildly at his touch.

Her heart *was* beating wildly. She had no control over it. His touch did things to her that she had never felt before. Her skin felt on fire where it came into contact with his.

Other young men had been on TD behind her before. But none had affected her like this man did.

She wished their circumstances were different.

She didn’t have time to worry for long, however, because they had reached the creek at a spot where a large clearing sloped gently down to the water, forming a natural beach.

Tali started laughing again when Brent nearly fell trying to get off the horse. She simply slipped a leg over, intending to slide down the horse’s side.

But Brent was there. His hands held her hips and moved up above her waist as she slid slowly down to the ground.

He held her there, his hands on her breasts, his breath on her neck.

She didn’t move. She couldn’t move. It was heavenly being in his arms. Unconsciously, she leaned back against him as she put her hands on his arms.

His hands gently caressed her breasts as he leaned down to plant tiny, featherlike kisses on her neck.

She caught her breath, closing her eyes.

His touch was so exciting! Never had she felt this way before.

He gently turned her around. She opened her eyes, looking deep into his. She saw nothing there but love. And desire.

Definitely desire.

Her head was already tilted up, so when his lips touched hers, she simply leaned in toward him, his arms wrapping themselves around her, drawing her close.

She felt the hardness of him and her excitement mounted. She could no more have stopped his kisses and caresses than she could have stopped the creek from flowing.

She didn't want him to stop!

They were lost in time, each exploring the other's body in wonder. She was not aware of being undressed by him as she kissed his chest, his neck, his face.

They dropped to the thick, soft grass together.

They became one.

When he entered her, she gave a brief cry of pain.

They belonged together. It felt as if they were made for each other.

And when they reached their climax, both cried out. They lay together, him on top of her. She didn't want the moment to end.

His head was resting on her bare stomach, and she stroked his thick, beautiful hair.

They stayed that way for several minutes, letting their hearts quit pounding, letting their breathing become normal.

Eventually he rose up, looking at her. He reached up a hand and touched a breast. "You are so beautiful," he whispered. "Your breasts have the most beautiful shape I've ever seen."

She reached both hands up and touched his face, letting her fingers draw slowly down his cheeks.

He noticed there were tears in her eyes.

"It's okay," he reassured her. "I love you. I've loved you ever since I looked up and saw you on that horse. You're the most beautiful, most desirable woman I've ever met!"

"And I love you," she repeated. "It's just that..."

"I'm your first, aren't I?" he asked, marveling at the wonder of it. For this beautiful creature to have been untouched was beyond comprehension. And yet it was true.

"Yes, you are," she said.

"I'm glad," he said. "Now you're mine completely. Oh, I love you so much!" he cried, planting kisses on her breasts.

"Have you ever been swimming in a creek?" she asked.

"I can't say that I have," he said. "Am I about to?"

"Only if you want to," she replied. "It's quite an experience."

They jumped up and ran to the water's edge.

Although it was high summer, Brent yelled out when he plunged into the icy, cold water. This was a swift-running creek, at least in this spot, so the water stayed cold.

He came up sputtering, shivering. Once they were used to it, however, they played around in the water for a while. When they came out, they planned to let the air dry them off, but they couldn't resist one another.

They made love again, slowly, leisurely, each mounting to and exploding with passion at the same time.

Never had anything been so exciting, so satisfying, to either of them.

After enjoying the delicious meal Granny had provided, they relaxed, their backs against a tree. He reached out to take her hand, desiring always to touch her. He looked down.

"What a beautiful ring," he said, touching a diamond and ruby ring Tali wore on her right hand, pinkie finger.

She held her hand up.

"Yes, isn't it? It belonged to my grandmother, then my mother, and now it's been handed down to me. My grandmother actually wore it on her third finger, so you can imagine how tiny she was."

"Then you take after her," was his reply, giving her a look that made the blood rush to her face, making her become flushed.

His look was so full of desire that she felt an immediate response. She was actually leaning toward him, ready for his kiss, when she remembered something. She leaned back, pushing him gently away from her.

"By the way," Tali began, "I talked with Mrs. Barnett and she said you had called her about that interview. She said to call her this afternoon at three o'clock."

Brent sat up straight, looking surprised. Tali must be very close to Mrs. Barnett. He looked at his watch. It was one-thirty.

“I should hurry, then, or she’ll leave her office again.”

“She’s not at her office.”

Brent looked at her questioningly.

“She’s here, in Granville, at this number. It’s unlisted, so you won’t find the address. She asks that you not reveal this number to anyone, okay? That’s part of the deal in granting you the interview. Deal?”

As she spoke, she reached into her shirt pocket, retrieving a small, folded piece of paper.

He reached for it, but she held it away, out of his reach.

She was smiling, playing with him.

“Deal?” she asked, again.

“Deal,” he said. “The number is safe with me.”

He reached past her for the paper, bringing his face close to hers.

Their lips met in a slow, passionate kiss.

She was the one to push him away.

“You’ll be late for your interview. We’d better pack up.”

# Chapter 10

**T**hey quickly gathered up everything. They touched each other as much as possible, laughing as they tickled each other. Tali whistled for TD, who was used to the call.

“May I call from your house?” Brent asked, as they trotted along on TD.

Tali stiffened. Her mind was racing. What could she do? Then she relaxed.

“Can’t. Remember? No phone, it’s that ‘dead zone’ thing for a cell phone, and Granny just doesn’t want any kind of phone. We, the family, I mean, caters to her wishes,” she replied.

“Oh, that’s right. Then we’d really better hurry.”

The number she had given him went to a small cabin down the hill, at the back of the house, out of sight of the house and



barn. It contained radio equipment and was used for the helicopter's coming and going.

It was nearly two forty-five by the time they returned to the farm.

Tali stopped at the front steps and let Brent off TD. This time, at least, he did not fall off the horse.

"I'll put TD away," she said, heading for the barn.

He barely heard her, his mind already on the coming interview, already on the questions he had written down, in case he ever did have the opportunity to speak with Mrs. Barnett.

Had he thought of everything? He wanted it to be a spectacular piece—one that all the leading magazines would want to pick up and use as a feature article. He retrieved his attaché case from the porch where he had set it when he arrived.

He looked up at Granny, grinning.

"My big moment," he said.

She smiled back at him. "Tali told me. Make the most of it, now. You may never get another chance."

"I know," he agreed.

He still had to make it into town in time.



Tali heard the phone ringing before she reached the cabin. She hurried, taking long strides, almost jogging. She had time only to put TD in his stall and brush him down before heading down here the back way. She gave Brent time to get back to town.

She cursed herself for having let the time get away from her at the creek. But who wouldn't have forgotten time in Brent's arms? Time stood still when he touched her.

He loved her! She knew that. She wanted to shout it out, tell the whole world.

But she didn't have time to think of that right now. She started running, fumbling in her shorts' pocket for her keys. She still had to unlock the door.

Brent was just ready to hang up the phone when he heard her pick it up. He had allowed it to ring over fifty times, and had decided Mrs. Barnett had changed her mind again.

"Hello? Wait!"

A breathless voice answered and Brent thought he recognized it, that it sounded familiar. Where had he heard it?

"Hello?" a voice answered again, this time different. This was Mrs. Barnett, the same one he had spoken to before. Perhaps her assistant had answered the first time.

In the cabin, Tali cursed herself. In her haste, she had answered the phone without thinking of switching on the muffler. All her lines had these same electronic devices on them.

She spent the next forty-five minutes answering Brent's questions. For the most part, they were the normal, typical ones any reporter would ask. Some she would not answer.

*Doesn't he have any imagination?* she wondered.

She made a split-second decision at the end of the conversation.

“Nothing you’ve asked me is very exciting, Mr. Walker. I’m afraid it wouldn’t be very interesting copy. Would you like an exclusive scoop?”

“Sure, of course,” he replied. Now, maybe he would get somewhere. She had refused to answer any of the personal questions he had thrown at her.

“You may report that I have recently met the man of my life. I have fallen thoroughly, completely, head-over-heels in love.”

“Great!” responded Brent. “Who’s the lucky guy?” *What a scoop!*

“Sorry, no names,” Tali said. “Just knowing there’s a significant other in my life should keep some people guessing, don’t you think?”

“Oh, I think, for sure,” Brent said. “Better keep a look out behind you. Every reporter and his dog will be watching you now, trying to find out who this mystery man is.”

“Well, I will tell you that this man loves me completely, for myself, for who I really am, not just for my money or position.”

*Yeah, I bet.* “Great, again!” he said out loud.

The call ended with a promise by Brent to check with her before the final copy came out. He spent several minutes after they hung up organizing his notes, which were on unnumbered pages. He neatly placed them in his attaché case.

He went as fast as he could back to the farm.

“Tali?” he asked Granny.

“Still at the barn,” she replied. “Have a seat. She’ll be here in a minute.”

He sat down on a rocker beside her. Did she ever leave this porch or quit shelling beans?

He had his notes in his hand.

“Maybe I’d better go down there. I really can’t wait to show her these, tell her about the interview with Mrs. Barnett.”

“Here she comes now,” Granny said, nodding toward the barn. She always sat in a chair facing both the barn and the driveway.

Brent looked that way, marveling again at Tali’s beauty. And now he knew the full extent of that beauty. Every inch of her body was etched permanently into his memory. He was getting excited just watching her draw nearer and remembering their lovemaking.

“Finished?” she said, as she mounted the steps.

“Yes, and with a major scoop, too.” He stood up. “Tali, do you mind if I leave for a few days? Please. Would you understand? I need to get these notes written up, okayed by Mrs. Barnett, and submitted for publication. No, I hate to leave you, especially now. How can I go? I love you so much!”

He laid the papers down and reached her in two long strides, putting his arms around her, stroking her hair.

She pushed him away, gently, and smiled up at him. “Of course I understand. Go do whatever you need to. After all, it’s your job, isn’t it?”

“Well, no, not exactly,” he replied.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“It’s not my job.”

“You’re a reporter, aren’t you? After all, you wanted an interview with Mrs. Barnett. Most reporters do interviews.”

“Yes, they do,” he agreed. “And I have submitted a few articles, through the years, to various magazines and they’ve been accepted for publication. But I’m not a reporter by profession, if that’s what you meant.”

“Then what are you?” she asked.

“Do I have to *be* anything?” he asked, smiling down at her. Why was she being so serious?

“Most people are something,” she returned. “Besides, if you aren’t a reporter, why did you want to do an interview with Mrs. Barnett?”

“Why all these questions?” he countered.

“Because there has to be a reason,” she insisted.

“Personal satisfaction, I guess.” He shrugged. “The knowledge that I would be the first to do something. Hey, lighten up,” he teased, stroking her arm. “It didn’t hurt her, I assure you. Now, I do have to go. Will you remember how much I love you while I’m gone?”

“Of course,” she said, reaching up, touching his face. “And I love you thoroughly, completely. I’m head-over-heels in love with you.”

He frowned down at her. Those words, the way she said them. They seemed so familiar. He shook his head. Silly! They were just an expression. But it immediately began nagging at him.

Tali watched him get in his car, drive away.

Yes, she loved him. But who was he?

Granny had watched them together. Something had happened at the creek, she was sure of it. Poor Tali. Being so much in love as she obviously was with this man could mean heart-aches.

And poor Brent. He would certainly have his hands full with Tali.

Granny smiled. She started humming to herself as she continued shelling beans.

# Chapter 11

**T**ali looked up as Lily rushed in, and she blinked in surprise at her assistant. “Lily! What’s wrong?” Her usually very self-composed assistant looked flushed, nervous.

“I have just seen and talked to the most handsome, most beautiful man I have ever seen in my life. It’s just too bad!” Lily exclaimed.

At least that explained the flushed cheeks.

“What’s too bad?” Tali asked.

“He’s on the janitorial staff, that’s what’s too bad!”

“So?” asked Tali, smiling. She was teasing Lily.

It was a secret with them that Lily planned to marry one of the many executives who came and went from other businesses, or even from here. She wanted someone wealthy, not a janitor.

“Actually, you never know where you might find true love,” Tali responded.

Her tone held such a plaintive note that Lily gave her a closer look.

Tali’s eyes were dreamy and she seemed lost in a world of her own.

Lily remembered a certain phone call a few weeks back and her curiosity got the best of her.

“Who is he?” she asked. “You might as well tell me, you know. Is it that ‘reporter’ that called and you gave the interview to?”

Tali brought her glance back to her friend.

“He’s not a reporter, but, yes, that’s him. I’m not sure what he ‘is,’ though.”

“Why not find out?” Lily asked, shrugging. “You have lots of people that can do that for you, you know.”

“You’re right,” Tali agreed, with a wicked grin. “Let’s find out just who, or what, this Mr. Brent Walker is!”



While Brent slowly and deliberately worked on the baseboards along the hall, he kept an eye on the office door.

Earlier an older woman had gone in, then the assistant. Could the older woman have been Mrs. Barnett? She hadn’t come out yet, but she could just be another assistant.

He had thought of the possibility of there being another door to the office, but he hoped not.



But the assistant! Now, there was an idea. He could tell she was attracted to him, simply by the way she blushed and stammered when she tripped over him and he raised up. He was used to having this effect on women. There was just one now, of course, that he wanted to have this effect on, and did. He thought of Tali, and their lovemaking, and wanted to be with her so much. But he also wanted to find out about Mrs. Barnett. He almost put his equipment away and headed for Granville, but contained himself. He missed Tali so much! His desire for her was so great he was surprised at himself. He had been with lots of women, but no one had aroused such excitement, so many feelings within him.

Brent's patience paid off. In his work kit, he had a camera in a bag, disguised as equipment. When he saw the young assistant go in, he positioned the bag so that the camera faced the door. He held the remote control in his hand. This old VCR recorder was all he could find on such short notice when he decided to try to take these sneak photos. He had thought many times of throwing it away, because people were switching over to other recorders and DVD machines. But now he was glad he had tossed it up on the top shelf of his closet. It worked out perfectly for this purpose.

Also, since he knew there was a VCR machine at Granny's, he planned to go there and share this tape with Tali. They could watch it together and she would verify that he had caught Mrs. Barnett on tape.

Presently, the door opened and the older lady stepped out. At the same time, a man had been coming down the hall, and he was a few feet from the door when the woman stepped out.

Almost colliding, they looked at each other.

Brent noticed the surprised look on the man's face, which quickly changed to pleasure. He reached out and hugged the woman and she returned the embrace. Her face was only partially toward Brent, and her hair hid most of her face. He kept the camcorder going, however, as the two talked and laughed.

He could not make out the words they were saying, but once the woman laughed and Brent stopped cold in his tracks. The woman's laughter sounded so much like Tali's that he immediately pictured her in front of him, laughing up at him, her eyes sparkling.

The moment passed, though, so Brent knew he had just imagined the laugh being so much like hers. How he missed her! And, now, with this video, he could go back to Granville, to see Tali. He was sure there would be something in the video he could use as a still and submit with his article.

The two of them started up the hall the other way, still chatting as old friends.

Could this man be the mystery lover?

In front of the elevators, they reached out, touched hands, then leaned forward for a goodbye kiss, on the lips.

That was good. He hoped it wasn't too far away from the video camera to get a good shot. As soon as the elevator doors closed on the woman, and the man started toward him again, he began to put his work equipment away.

As usual, the man simply walked past him, paying no attention to one of the maintenance staff in overalls.

# Chapter 12

**M**rs. Barnett's office," Lily said into the phone in her most professional voice. "Lily speaking."  
"Lily! What a beautiful name!" a voice breathed, and Lily felt her heart skip a beat. She knew that voice!

No matter how hard she had tried, she had been unable to forget that voice, or the gorgeous man it belonged to. Even if he were just a maintenance worker, she had found herself watching for him and looking down halls, hoping to get another look at him. If she saw him, she would think of some excuse to talk to him. But for a week now, she had not seen him.

She had even made excuses to go on trips to other floors. No luck.

And now here he was, phoning her.

"This is your friendly maintenance man. Do you remember tripping over me last week?"

*Do I?* “Oh, you’re the one painting the baseboards?” she asked, in what she hoped was a casual, indifferent tone.

But he wasn’t fooled. He chuckled. “The same. I’m so glad you remember.”

“How did you know my name?” Lily asked.

“Oh, we men always have ways of getting the names of pretty women we meet, or get run over by, whichever.”

His voice still held an amused tone.

“And what can I help you with, Mr. . . .” she asked, leaving the question open, obviously waiting for his name.

“Call me Michael,” Brent responded, in the appropriate time. He hadn’t expected to be asked, so he used the first name that came to mind. “And you can help me by rescuing me from a lonely, boring evening tonight. Will you have dinner with me tonight?”

“Why tonight?” she asked.

“Why not?” was his response.

He wasn’t used to being questioned like this. The only one doing that lately was Tali. Most women eagerly accepted his invitations.

“I mean, we met, or rather, I fell over you, a week ago. Why wait until now to ask me out? Were you booked up until now or did someone just call and cancel?”

No matter how impressed she had been by his good looks and wonderfully sexy voice, she was simply not going to be that easy!

*Has this women been taking lessons on being difficult from her boss or does this just rub off by association?* Brent won-

dered. “I had some personal, some family business to take care of. I haven’t even been to work there. Had to take some time off.”

She *had* noticed that.

“But I’m back in the city now. I haven’t been able to get you off my mind. So how about dinner?”

“Sure, I’m free tonight. But I live in this building, and it gets locked at a certain time. Can you meet me at the main entrance?”

“Of course. Eightish?” he agreed.

“I’ll be here.”

“Until then,” he said, softly into the phone, again sending goose pimples down her arms.

Why did this man affect her so? “Yes,” she breathed in response. She placed the phone gently in its cradle.

On the other end of the line, Brent sat for a minute by the phone, reflecting on this last move of his. Did he feel bad about using Lily this way? No, he decided. If they both had fun and enjoyed each other’s company, that was reason enough to have dinner and get better acquainted. If he could bring her a few minutes pleasure, help her to enjoy her life more, then it didn’t make any difference what his motives were.

Most of his business associates would agree that his ends always justified the means. There would be a few, however, who thought his methods of dealing with things somewhat unorthodox.

He would take this opportunity to be with Lily and find out as much as he could about Mrs. Barnett. Tomorrow he would go to Granville and view the tape with Granny and Tali.

Lily *was* pretty. He had to give her that. She was standing inside the outer glass door, waiting for him. When he approached, she waved to the man behind the security desk, who got up and locked the door behind her as she stepped out onto the sidewalk.

She drew in her breath.

In his Armani suit, he was so beautiful. He carried himself so well, that it seemed as if the suit had been made just for him. He could have been born into it. But how could he afford such clothes on the salary he was bound to be making?

“Two jobs,” he said, as if he could read her thoughts. “And a brother-in-law in the business.”

He laughed, and she laughed, too.

It felt so easy, so good, being with him.

She was so fascinated by the place they went that she didn't mind his questions about her over dinner. She answered questions about her job, Tali—although he thought of her boss as Mrs. Barnett—and her living arrangements. He answered her questions openly, so she thought they were just getting to know each other better. And that suited her just fine!

He was so easy to talk to and so handsome!

After dinner, they walked a while, arm in arm. When they reached the office building, she found herself inviting him up to her apartment, which was on the penthouse level. He gladly accepted.

This was the opportunity he had been waiting for. He had not expected it on the first evening. He had been prepared to date her for several weeks, or as long as it took, to get upstairs, near Mrs. Barnett's living quarters.

He pretended interest in such an unusual arrangement as living in the same place you worked, right next to the boss.

When the elevator doors opened on the top floor, or actually the next to the top floor, he immediately took in every detail, the arrangement of every door in the short hallway.

Lily pointed to Margaret's door. "And T—Margaret lives there."

"Who?" he asked.

"Margaret. Mrs. Barnett. I started to call her by her nickname, which would not have meant anything to you."

"Which is..." he coaxed.

But Lily's attention was at the door, as she fumbled with her keys. She was extremely nervous. She had never invited a man to her apartment on the first date before. She wasn't sure what she expected, or wanted, from him. Or, on the other hand, what he expected.

As she opened the door, she glanced back at him. He was staring at Tali's door.

"Michael?" she invited, holding the door open.

He looked back at her, a smile on his face. He stepped through the door to her apartment, which he quickly ascertained was really a townhouse. So, that's why the elevator didn't go completely to the top floor.

"What a place!" he commented.



And it was.

As you walked in, two sofas were set at right angles to each other, which provided a cozy-looking, inviting spot for reading, watching television, or just conversing with guests. Built-in shelves on either side of the room gave it the added feeling of a library. Most of the shelves were filled with books, interspersed with knick-knacks and photos in frames.

The area opened to the dining area, and a wood-and-tile table with Windsor-style chairs gave it a formal, yet lived-in look. On one wall, there was a formal chest with a mirror about it, giving the illusion of added space and light to the room. The ceramic tiles on the table were of a grape design, which accentuated the deep green and scarlet of the living area. To accent the table, a floor lamp was placed near it, opposite a fireplace. He wondered how many people she entertained at one time. The lamp was on, providing an added glow to the design of the table. He was sure this was a planned effect and the lamp stayed on most of the time.

The kitchen had a curved counter on the dining room side. See-through cabinets let light in and further gave the feeling of space.

The living room and dining room both shared a cathedral ceiling, revealing beams, which added to the character of the place. Natural light flowing through a sky light revealed the inner beauty of the hardwood beams.

Lily loved light. On one wall, right angles to the shelves, another large mirror, as a decorating accent, reflected the architectural style of the overhead beams.

Brent let out a long, low whistle.

“You like?” Lily asked.

“I sure do. It reminds me of—” Brent didn’t finish. He had involuntarily started to say that it reminded him of Tali, but stopped himself in time. He had learned long ago that you don’t mention one lady while in the company of another.

“It reminds you of what?” she asked.

“Just some of the photos I’ve seen in house furnishing magazines. Have you ever had it photographed for one?”

She was flattered, as was his intention. He had thought fast on that one!

“Not that I know of. Please, take a look upstairs,” she said, gesturing toward the staircase.

“Is that an invitation?” he asked with a wicked grin.

Lily blushed, then quickly regained her composure. “Maybe.”

He smiled at her, apparently enjoying her confusion. This man had such an animal magnetism about him and he obviously knew the effect he had on women.

He started up the stairs. “Coming?” he asked, looking down at her, enjoying the position it put him in.

She had to look up at him. “You go on,” she said. “I’ll get us some coffee.”

She made a point of looking directly up at his face, studiously avoiding any other areas of his body.

He laughed softly, starting to go up again.

The main bedroom was tastefully done, by Lily, he assumed, as he had expected. The walls were a robin’s-egg blue,

but a bright array of colors added contrast. An upholstered headboard was raised above the bed and attached to the wall. Above that, four watercolors of flowers were symmetrically arranged. Plantation shutters on the windows on each side of the bed kept the space open and bright.

Another mirror decorated one wall. It was made from an old window frame. It added an even sunnier look to the room.

The whole apartment reminded him of Tali. He had no idea why.

Lily appeared in the doorway.

“You have excellent taste,” he said. “I love the whole apartment.”

“Thanks. My boss and I both planned and decorated it. Hers is very similar to this. We grew up together, so we always had the same tastes, it seemed.”

Lily continued to rattle on about the apartment, but Brent’s thoughts locked on her one statement about her boss. How could they grow up together yet be so far apart in age? Mrs. Barnett had gray hair and looked old enough, at least from the back and side, to be Lily’s mother. He brought his attention back to Lily, who was pointing out a painting to him. His eye caught the scene of a farmhouse, barn, trees, but his thoughts were still far away.

“...our hometown. He was a local artist,” she concluded. She looked at Brent, expecting an answer.

He looked straight at her, smiling, causing her to catch her breath.

“How about that coffee?” he asked, taking her elbow, gently turning her toward the stairs. He followed her down.

He had seen enough to know how Mrs. Barnett’s apartment was also laid out. All he needed was a key to the elevator to get to this level.

His opportunity came a short time later when Lily went to another room. Her phone rang and she excused herself to go talk on the phone.

Brent quickly took the elevator key off her ring. Quickly taking a piece of clay in a plastic container out of his jacket pocket, he pushed just hard enough with the key to make an impression. He closed the lid. He had the plastic case in his pocket and key back on her ring while she was still on the phone. He shook his head. Why had this thing with Mrs. Barnett become such an obsession with him that he was stooping so low as to steal keys? But he couldn’t seem to stop himself. He had to see in her apartment. He had his jacket on and was by the door when Lily returned.

She looked disappointed, but brightened considerably when he made another date with her. He would see her tomorrow night.



Brent found himself on the turnpike heading south without consciously being aware that he had come this way. But he knew where he was headed!

Granville and Tali.

# Chapter 13

**A**s Brent neared Granville, he heard the familiar “chop-chop” of helicopter blades overhead. It seemed to go directly over him and then veered off toward Granville.

On an impulse, Brent braked quickly and turned down the same dirt, bumpy road he had first traveled on when he came to Granville. This time, instead of creeping along, he kept a steady pace, in spite of the bouncing around. He would need an alignment for sure after this and probably another new tire. Or all of them.

But he could see the chopper in the sky in front of him, and he didn't want to lose it.

Suddenly, the chopper dipped, going out of sight below the trees. Where could it have gone? That was flat land up there. In fact, he had to be getting close to Tali's farmhouse.

Before he could do any more speculating, the chopper rose again in the sky, vertically, and came back toward him. It seemed as if it had delivered its passengers and/or cargo.

But where had it landed? It had to be close, and the distance made it exactly at Tali's.

Well, he was going there, anyway, so he could ask about it, after he showed them the video.

Since there had to be lots of roads around Granville that he had not yet explored, he decided to find another one that led to the farmhouse. And there had to be a road that led to Mrs. Barnett's.

His best bet was probably the old man at the service station where he had stopped when he was first looking for Granville. If anyone would know, surely he would.

When he pulled into the old service station, it seemed as if nothing had changed in the past few weeks.

The old man was sitting in the same place. Had he even moved?

"Back again, huh?" he asked as Brent approached him.

"You remember me?"

"Don't get too many strangers around here. Sure, I remember you. Found Granville yet?"

"Yes, finally," Brent replied. "Now can you tell me if there are any other ways into Granville? I took a couple of roads out of town, but just seemed to circle around and come back to the same spot."

The old man nodded. "Yep, it can happen if you don't know your way around. There are several ways into town. Last

time you wanted the closest, that's what I gave you. Which way you want now?"

"Any other, really," Brent replied.

The man grinned. "Okay, let me think." He pushed back his cap and scratched his head while he held onto the cap. "Go down past the road you took last time," he began, pointing that way. "'Bout a quarter of a mile past there is another road. Winds around a bit but you'll eventually come to Granville. Real scenic, it is."

The "eventually" was what made Brent wonder about it. He started to ask about any others when the old man spoke again.

"Goes past the old LeDieux plantation, then watch out. Washed out in a couple of places several years back. Past the washouts, there's three roads you can take. Take the left-hand one, get you into Granville."

"The LeDieux plantation?" Brent asked. That sounded interesting. He hadn't yet seen a home large enough to be considered a plantation.

"Yep. The LeDieux family's owned it since before the War."

Somehow, Brent knew the old man meant the Civil War. He would not have been able to explain how he knew, he just did. Time seemed to stand still in this place.

"'Course, some newcomers call it the Old Barnett place but us old-timers know it as the LeDieux plantation. Was LeDieux before Claire LeDieux married Barnett. Don't that still make it LeDieux?"

The old man was on a roll. Brent wasn't sure if he really expected an answer or not. He didn't care. When he heard the name Barnett, he knew he was home free. That's the road he wanted.

"Thank you, sir," he began, holding out his hand to shake the old man's.

The man took it but stopped Brent. "Can't go down there in that," he said, pointing to the BMW. "Bottom out."

"Bottom out?" Brent asked. What did he mean?

"Yep, there's some pretty big rocks on that road, I'm told, especially where it washed out. Better take a four-wheel drive."

"Is there a car rental place near?" Brent asked.

That produced a large guffaw from the old man. "Nope, but you can take Ole Blue there, if you want to. He'll hold up. Just go slow."

Brent looked over to where the old man was pointing. There sat an old—*very old*, Brent thought—faded blue Ford pickup. Vintage '50s, he figured. Maybe early '60s, but no later. Could he even drive such a thing?

The old man was digging into his pockets of his overalls for his keys. He held them out to Brent.

"You'd trust me with your pickup?"

"Sure," the old man agreed. "You'll be leaving that here, won't you?" he asked, pointing to the BMW. "Who'd lose if you don't come back?"

His big grin revealed missing teeth. But the grin was genuine. He thought it was funny.

"You're right, of course."



“He’s full. Just enjoy.”

The old man still thought it was funny. He probably thought it was funny that a city slicker would want to use the pickup.

The only reason Brent would, of course, was that it would get him to Mrs. Barnett’s house. *Excuse me—plantation.*

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## About the Author



Mary Jane Bryan is a graduate of Missouri State University (SEMO), Cape Girardeau, Missouri, with a BS in Business Administration/General Management and a graduate of Three Rivers Community College, Poplar Bluff, Missouri, with an AA in General Studies.

Bryan is strong believer in women as entrepreneurs and managers, and she is a past creator and owner of Jane's Muppets. She is a past member of Toastmasters International, which is an excellent resource for creative writing and presentation, receiving critiques and advice as needed. A past resident of Ecuador, Bryan now currently resides in Farmington, Missouri, with her husband, Peter, and their cat, Cookie.