Silhouette

Fabulous FATHERS

ARLENE JAMES

Falling for a Father of Four

Arlene James

Falling for a Father of Four

«HarperCollins»

James A.

Falling for a Father of Four / A. James — «HarperCollins»,

Four rambunctious children and not a wife in sight. Struggling single father Orren Ellis needed someone to care for his brood, and the only applicant was Mattie Kincaid. Though the beauty could cook, clean and courageously keep his kids in line, Orren considered her simply too young to take the job of his bride.But years were not important to Mattie. She had quickly fallen for the endearing father of four and sensed he felt the same. And no matter how loudly Orren protested, Mattie was determined to make herself part of this ready-made family.

© James A.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

Falling for a Father of Four 6
ARLENE JAMES 7
Contents 8
Chapter One 9
Chapter Two 18
Chapter Three 27
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 29

Orren Ellis on Fatherhood:

To my children,

I'm so proud of you four. Each of you in your own way has a deep, instinctive understanding of love. You, Chaz, eldest and only son, understand that love is responsibility, which you so willingly and ably accept. For bright Jean Marie, love is to be tightly grasped and defended. My Yancy doll has always known that love is for happily sharing. And my sweet baby Candy Sue carries love to us all in every smile and cuddle.

Because of you four, I've always had reason to count my blessings. You've gotten me through some tough times. You brought Mattie to us. (She says that we make her complete, but we know that she was the missing part of our family.) Never forget that it has always been and will always be you who make me what I am, a happy father of four. Maybe one day before long I'll even be a happy father of five…or six…or…Who knows? And who can blame me for wanting more, when every one of you has brought me such joy?

I will always love you. Chaz. Jean Marie. Yancy. Candy Sue. Wherever you eventually go, whatever you may or may not do, whomever you will become, I will always love you. Always.

Daddy

Falling for a Father of Four
Arlene James

www.millsandboon.co.uk

ARLENE JAMES

says, “Camp meetings, mission work and church attendance permeate my Oklahoma childhood memories. It was a golden time, which sustains me yet. However, only as a young widowed mother did I truly begin growing in my personal relationship with the Lord. Through adversity, He has blessed me in countless ways, one of which is a second marriage so loving and romantic it still feels like courtship!”

The author of more than sixty novels, Arlene James now resides outside Fort Worth, Texas, with her beloved husband. Her need to write is greater than ever, a fact that frankly amazes her, as she’s been at it since the eighth grade! She loves to hear from readers, and can be reached at 1301 E. Debbie Lane, Suite 102, Box 117, Mansfield, Texas 76063, or via her Web site at www.arlenejames.com.

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten

Chapter One

"Get down, you big baby, and get outta my way!"

Jean Marie shoved at her younger sister, not hard enough to really send her over the edge of the counter and crashing to the floor, but hard enough to let her know that she meant business. Sitting at the kitchen table, Orren covered the mouthpiece of the telephone receiver and counted to ten, striving for patience as four-year-old Yancy Kay wailed and called for her "bubby," Chaz. All of eight, Chaz was the family hero, and Orren knew that he depended on his son too much, but wasn't he doing everything in his power to try to take some of the weight off of those slender shoulders? Not, however, at the moment. He nodded at Chaz, who disgustedly reached past Yancy's tormentor, their six-year-old sister Jean Marie, and heaved Yancy off the counter, against which Jean Marie had pushed a chair in order to prepare her specialty of buttered crackers for an afternoon snack.

"You don't have to be such a meanie," Chaz scolded in a low mutter.

Deeply offended, Jean Marie threw the knife with which she was working into the sink, where it clattered noisily among the other dishes. Yancy yowled, and Orren's caller hung up. He couldn't blame her. No woman in her right mind would willingly walk into this lion's den. Orren put his head in his hands and sighed. "Well, that's another one we can forget about."

Repentant, Yancy stuck her thumb in her mouth and laid her tousled golden-blond head on Chaz's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Dad," the boy said. Then he turned his attention to the four-year-old wrapped around him. "You shouldn't have climbed up on the counter, Yancy. The apples are all gone, anyway."

"I'll get some more when I go to the store," Orren promised tiredly, getting up to hang up the phone. Trying to sound reasonable, he turned a look at redheaded Jean Marie. "You shouldn't talk so ugly to your baby sister, Red."

"She ain't the baby," Jean Marie retorted unconcernedly, taking another clean knife from the drawer. "She just acts like it."

She was right. Three-year-old Sweetums, otherwise known as Candy Sue, was still enjoying her afternoon nap, her curly, pale blond head lying on his pillow even as they spoke, but that wasn't the point. "You still shouldn't be so cross with her. She just wanted an apple."

"We ain't got any apples," Jean Marie said, "and she was gonna fall on her durned fool head."

"Watch your mouth!" Orren snapped, despair sitting on him like a big mother hen brooding a chick. He'd had two calls on the ad, and both had hung up after hearing how many kids they'd be expected to sit and the unmistakable sounds of the chaos that reigned over his household. Fourteen bucks wasted and a day of work lost for nothing. What was he going to do tomorrow when he had to show up for work? He was scared to death to leave them alone, but how could he work and care for them, too?

He looked at Chaz, sighing. "You may have to go back to the day care," he said, and winced as both Jean Marie and Yancy screamed protests, Jean Marie with several words she shouldn't even have known, Yancy with her usual howl. He pointed a stern finger at Jean Marie. "Go to your room, young lady. I won't have you talking like that."

"I hate that old day care!" she yelled. "That Porter woman'll call welfare on us!"

"No, she won't," Chaz said resignedly. "She's onto your tricks and lies now."

Orren shook his head, recalling all the ways Jean Marie had sought to get herself and her siblings barred from the day care center: the strawberry jelly rashes, the hole-riddled underwear and socks, the tall tales about deadly diseases and strange curses. He wasn't at all certain Mrs. Porter would take them full time. After-school care had been difficult enough. But what other choice did he have now that school was out? He started planning his plea and tried not to think about what it was going to cost, especially since the hours would mean cutting back on the side jobs he took to make a little extra.

"Get on to your room," he said to Jean Marie as the phone rang again. She threw herself off the chair and pounded away, slamming doors in her wake. Orren sent a look to Chaz as he reached for the receiver of the wall-mounted phone near the door. "Check on the baby. If the phone doesn't wake her, Jean Marie will." He snatched up the receiver in the middle of a second ring. "Hello."

A bright voice at the other end of the line said, "Hi, my name is Matilda Kincaid."

Mattie hung up the phone and smiled in satisfaction. Mr. Orren Ellis sounded frankly desperate. She was welcome to come out and interview even if she wasn't the grandmotherly type specified in his ad, and the sooner the better. Right away, in fact. They could talk about the kids and the other duties once she got there. All she had to do was hit Bois d'arc off the 81 Bypass and follow it past the old cemetery. It was the beige and white house on the right, with the For Sale sign standing up close to the road. Come to the carport door. The For Sale sign was for the acreage and not the house.

Mattie rolled off her bed onto the floor, stabbed her feet into sandals and snatched up the hairbrush on the dressing table beneath the window. Yanking several strokes through her long dark hair, she dropped the brush into the small denim backpack that had replaced her purse during her first year of college at Oklahoma State in Stillwater. Free for the summer, she was ready for a job and the slow pace of the hot summertime in Duncan. She'd be happier still if she never had to set eyes again on the hallowed old halls of higher education, but after only two years at the university, it was doubtful her father would hear of her leaving college.

As if conjured by her thoughts, she jerked open her bedroom door to find Evans Kincaid standing with fist raised to knock, his tan uniform as crisp as his badge was shiny, despite a full day put in as one of Duncan's finest. Tall and fit in his mid-forties, his inky hair trimmed close to his head, he was the quintessential police officer.

"Hello, sweetheart! How was your day?" He bent and kissed her on the cheek.

"Oh, fine. Amy's out back lighting the grill."

"Ah. Well, I'll run out and tell her I'm home. You, however, have company."

He grinned, his leaf green eyes twinkling with delight. Mattie almost groaned aloud. That look could mean anything from a new puppy to a "playmate," all designed to delight the little girl she no longer was. Poor Dad! He just couldn't accept that she was no longer a child. At nineteen-going-on-twenty, Mattie was far more mature than most of her contemporaries. Truth be told, she felt decades older than the young people with whom she shared classes at OSU. She supposed it had something to do with losing her mother at so young an age and stepping into the role of housekeeper during the years before her father found Amy, his sweet second wife, who used to be their next-door neighbor. She counted Amy more good friend than stepmother and loved her—if for no other reason—for making her father happy and for occasionally running interference when Evans Kincaid became too obsessively "parental."

Evans pointed her in the direction of the living room and went on out through the kitchen to kiss his wife. Mattie sighed and took herself off to greet her unknown guest. She stifled a second groan and rolled her eyes upon discovering Brick Carter studying the display of her father's medals and awards won in the line of duty. Brick swung around, freckled face splitting in a wide grin.

"Hey, Mat!" Brick had an annoying habit of shortening everyone's name to a single syllable like his own. His carrot red hair had been shorn so close that the pink of his scalp shone through, and the prominence of his front teeth gave him a rabbity look. "How long you been home?"

"Just since Wednesday," Mattie answered, as if that explained why she hadn't seen him, when in truth she'd avoided him like the plague, even sneaking out of church early to avoid an accidental meeting. "Congratulations on your graduation."

Brick stuck out his thin chest, his hands jingling the change in his chino pockets. "Thanks. It sure feels good to have that sheepskin!"

"What are you going to do now that you've finished university?"

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Take some time off, I guess. I’m kind of young to get tied down to a job already, and Mom wants me to think about grad school. I’ll probably do that. Right now, though, I just want to have some fun! Hey, how about taking in an early movie and—”

“Sorry,” Mattie interrupted. “I was just on my way out. I have a job interview.”

“A job interview?” This came from behind her, her father’s voice.

She turned, masking her irritation with a smile. “That’s right, and I really have to go. Mr. Ellis is expecting me.”

“Ellis?” Evans turned the name over in his mind. “Can’t say I know any Ellis.”

Mattie shot a pleading look over his shoulder at her stepmother. “Must be law-abiding,” Amy quipped with a wink at Mattie.

“What kind of job is it?” Evans wanted to know.

“Baby-sitting,” Mattie said easily, not yet ready to reveal that it was full time.

“Oh, well, then, that’s all right. But, honey, you really don’t have to work. You have your allowance and—”

“Dad!” Mattie closed her eyes in humiliation. “I’m not a child. I don’t need or want an allowance. I’m perfectly capable of earning my own way. If you hadn’t insisted I come home, I could have moved into a secretarial job in Stillwater.”

Evans waved that away with a deprecating chuckle. “You don’t want to be a secretary.”

Mattie had to bite her tongue to keep from asking how he knew what she wanted to be when she didn’t know herself—except that the idea of working with children did hold a good deal more appeal than remaining with the real estate firm for which she’d worked part time last semester. In fact, she hoped the Ellis household contained a number of children, two or three, at least. With another pleading look at Amy, she said, “I really have to go now,” and whirled away, flipping a wave in farewell. “So long, Brick. Say hello to your sister for me. Bye, Dad.”

“Hey, what about dinner?” Evans called after her, moving into the doorway.

“Oh, don’t worry about me!” she called back, hurrying down the walk toward her car. “I’ll get something later. Maybe Brick will want to stay.”

Evans frowned as she all but skipped down the walkway. He almost called her back, but his wife’s hand on his forearm stayed him. A glance in her direction told him that he was in danger of becoming the heavy-handed father again. With a sigh, he closed the door and turned back into the living room. “Well, Brick, how about it? Want to stay for dinner?”

Brick shrugged. “Sure!” Brick’s personal theory, well known to all acquainted with him, was that he ought never to turn down a free meal. Evans smiled lamely and went to change his clothes.

“She’s here!” Chaz announced, moving away from the kitchen sink where he’d kept watch through the window. Orren glanced up in time to see the late-model red two-door turn into the drive. It was a make with a good reputation for safety and dependability, yet had a racy look about it. A good choice for a second car, a single person more intent on value than prestige, or a teenager with particularly careful parents. He prayed it wasn’t a teenager—these kids of his would eat the average teenager alive—but he didn’t have time to watch from a distance as she got out of the car and moved toward the door. Instead, he ran across the hallway into his bedroom, where he dumped another armload of junk, kicking it out of the way as he wrestled the door closed and ran back to the living area. She knocked just as he moved on into the kitchen.

Motioning for Chaz to get out of the way, Orren crossed to the door, where he paused and pulled a deep, calming breath, drying his sweating palms on his jeaned thighs. He opened the door to a petite cutie with enormous green eyes and dark hair falling down her back in a sleek sheet. She wore a gauzy yellow blouse over a white tank top and a faded denim miniskirt, yellow sandals on her small, bare feet. She had that firm, fit look of the well-endowed teenager, but something about her

face hinted that she might be older. Perhaps it was the carefully applied lipstick in a sensible shade of peach or the hint of blush across her high cheekbones. Whatever it was, it gave him a glimmer of hope.

"Mr. Ellis?" she asked. "I'm Matilda Kincaid."

Nodding, he backed out of the doorway. "Miss Kincaid. Won't you come in?"

She stepped up into the house and shrugged off the backpack she carried slung over one shoulder. Looking around in blatant curiosity, she spied Chaz and moved in his direction, hand extended. "Hello. I'm Mattie."

"This is my son, Chaz," Orren said, proudly dropping his hands onto Chaz's stout shoulders as Chaz stiffly placed his hand in Mattie's.

"Pleased to meet you, Chaz." She smiled and lifted her gaze to Orren's, the shock of those emerald eyes rocking him back a little. "Are there others? Children, I mean."

She sounded almost eager, but Orren wasn't taking any chances. She was young, but she handled herself with a certain maturity. He wouldn't count her out until they'd talked—and he wasn't about to scare her off, either. He nodded smoothly and smiled down at Chaz. "Son, why don't you go and get Sweetums?"

Chaz's pale blue eyes signaled his approval of this particular maneuver. Few females could resist the curly-headed little moppet with eyes the color of a summer sky. They'd spring Yancy and Jean Marie on her later, if things got that far. As Chaz went off to fetch his baby sister, Orren pulled out a chair from the kitchen table.

"Won't you sit down, Miss Kincaid?"

"Yes, thank you."

She hung her backpack on the back of the chair and gracefully lowered herself onto the seat, tucking her little skirt around her legs. Nice legs, Orren noticed, for a girl her age, that was. And perhaps finding out her exact age ought to be the first order of business. Counselling himself to patience, Orren doggedly observed the niceties.

"Can I get you anything? A cup of tea, maybe?"

"Oh, no, thank you. And please call me Mattie." Her smile was slightly mocking as she added, "Miss Kincaid is my father's maiden aunt."

He felt himself smiling in response. "Well, you're obviously no old maid, so Mattie it is. My name's Orren, by the way. We can save Mr. Ellis for the fellows down at the shop. The mister is a way of reminding them who's boss."

"You're young to be anyone's boss, aren't you?" she said smoothly.

He was shocked, and not just because he felt a hundred most days, but because she had so neatly turned the tables on him. He knew what it was like to be young and struggling. The world was full of folks who thought you had to be skimming forty to do anything worthwhile, and woe to the man who set out to prove himself capable before then. He just hadn't expected the question from this little slip of a female. He pulled out a chair and dropped into it, saying defensively, "I'm twenty-eight."

Her dark, slender brows rose in tandem. "My goodness, you were awful young when Chaz was born, then, weren't you? What is he, nine or ten?"

"Eight." Orren retorted. "Chaz is eight. He won't be nine until November."

"Ah. Then you were an expectant father at my age," she announced, beaming at him.

Orren blinked, wondering how he'd lost control of this interview. The same way he'd lost control of his life, apparently—without even realizing it. A hushed squabble in the hallway alerted him to more trouble in the making. "Excuse me," he said, rising and edging that way. Before he could get there, though, Jean Marie slithered through the open doorway, evading Chaz's grasp. She glared at him mulishly, pushing her blazing red hair out of her face. He'd told her pointedly to brush it, but she seemed to think that taming her hair was the height of indignity. She targeted Mattie Kincaid with a frown that abruptly upended itself. This was no old meanie. This was a pliable, hoodwinkable youngster! Jean Marie beamed and headed for her. Orren caught her about

the shoulders and redirected her toward the tattered brown tweed couch, saying, “This is Jean Marie. We call her Red, for obvious reasons.”

Mattie smiled at the girl. “Hello, Jean Marie. What beautiful hair you have.”

Jean Marie gaped and shoved at the unruly mess. “I don’t, neither.”

“Yes, you do. I think it’s very pretty.”

Jean Marie pulled a face at her father, all but sticking out her tongue, as if to say, “So there!”

Chaz edged into the room with the baby on his hip, an apologetic look on his face. Candy Sue rubbed her eyes sleepily, and Orren hurried to introduce her. “This here is Sweetums, uh, Candy Sue. She’s three, and Jean Marie here is six.”

“What a doll!” Mattie exclaimed, holding out her arms. Chaz gratefully delivered Candy Sue, who went to Mattie without the slightest hesitation. Why should she balk when she’d been passed from stranger to stranger her whole little life, Orren mused, fighting back the anger such thoughts always brought with them. Just then Yancy bolted into the room, bounced off the edge of the armchair and threw her arms around Chaz’s hips to stop and steady herself. Her thumb went immediately into her mouth. Her golden-blond hair had been pulled ruthlessly back from her face with a green plastic barrette, Jean Marie’s handiwork, no doubt. Chaz scolded her softly.

“You were s’posed to wait!”

“Ah wai’ed,” she said around her thumb.

“You were s’posed to wait till I come and got you!” he hissed desperately.

Orren cast an anxious glance at the prospective baby-sitter. Mattie, however, laughed and rocked forward onto the edge of her chair, Candy Sue cuddled in her lap. “And what’s your name, sweetheart?”

Yancy pulled her thumb from her mouth and answered importantly, “I’s Yancy Kay.”

“And how old are you, Yancy Kay?”

Yancy held up four fingers, carefully folding back her wet thumb.

Mattie spread a smile over them, saying, “Is this everyone?”

Orren nodded morosely. “This is the lot.”

Mattie squirmed in her chair as if just barely able to contain her glee. “Let me see if I’ve got everyone down.” Her gaze lit on Chaz. “Chaz is the oldest at eight, and a very good big brother, too, I’m guessing.”

Yancy threw both arms around him again, exclaiming worshipfully, “Bubby!”

Mattie laughed. Orren joined her belatedly, wondering what she found so delightful. Chaz just looked confused. Mattie turned her smile on the sulky one.

“Jean Marie of the beautiful hair is six,” she recited, “and I’m guessing she has a temper to go along with that blaze of red.”

Jean Marie stuck out her bottom lip and folded her arms emphatically, proclaiming Mattie correct, but her vivid blue eyes gleamed with secret delight. Orren shook his head. Mattie went on to the thumb sucker.

“Miss Yancy Kay is four and loves being babied by her big brother.”

Yancy responded by trying to squeeze Chaz in two.

Mattie wrapped her arms around placid Candy Sue and tickled her lightly, saying, “And Candy Sue is everybody’s three-year-old Sweetums.” Candy Sue giggled that delightful baby laugh that could still lift Orren’s beleaguered spirits. Mattie laughed with her, then hugged her hard.

Jean Marie got up and walked over to Mattie’s chair, leaning against it in disarming familiarity. “If you come work for us, will you try to make me brush my hair?” she asked challengingly.

Mattie smiled. “Nope.” Jean Marie gaped for a second time. Mattie added, “But you won’t get my special snacks if you don’t.”

Jean Marie clamped her mouth shut in a frown. “What special snacks?”

Mattie shrugged. “Brush your hair, and you’ll see.”

Jean Marie scowled. Maybe this one wasn't quite so easily managed, after all.

Orren had to hide a smile. He waded through the children toward the table, saying to Chaz, "Son, take the girls out back to play while I talk to Miss, um, Mattie."

"Is that your name?" Jean Marie demanded, eyes narrowed. "Mattie?"

"Yes, it is," came the smooth answer. "Miss Mattie to you. It's short for Matilda."

Put firmly in her place, Jean Marie brought her hands to her hips and announced baldly, "I don't like her."

Orren glared and opened his mouth to lay down a scathing scold, but Mattie Kincaid, in her cool, unflappable style, beat him to it. "Now, Jean Marie," she said calmly, "you might as well know right now that those bullying tactics won't work with me. My father's a policeman, you see, and he taught me that bullies are usually more scared than anyone else and they act all tough to hide it. So what are you scared of, Jean Marie, a little old hairbrush? Or maybe you'd rather have some warty old witch who'd spank you and put you to bed without your dinner instead of making you delicious snacks and keeping things neat around here, hmm?"

Jean Marie's mouth was hanging open again. Clearly at a loss, she spun and ran out of the room. Chaz's eyes were big as saucers, but no bigger than his father's. Orren had seldom seen his prickly daughter routed so easily, and he frankly didn't know whether to be optimistic or worried about it! He turned away, trying to make up his mind about the confounding Matilda Kincaid, his hand lighting on the back of his neck.

Mattie, meanwhile, smoothly took control. Calling Chaz forward with a crooking finger, she put Candy Sue on her feet and motioned for him to take the two younger girls out as his father had instructed. Casting curious glances in his father's direction, Chaz silently complied, herding the girls ahead of him. When Orren turned back around, Mattie was sitting alone at the table, her hands folded in her lap. He shot a surprised look around the room, frowned, and leaned forward to place both hands flat on the table.

"How old are you?" he asked bluntly, determined to maintain control this time.

Mattie smiled serenely. "Nineteen, the same age you were when you made Chaz."

Orren's frown deepened. "Nineteen's young to watch over four kids—and to be so damned direct!"

Her smile never faltered. "I'll be twenty soon, if it really makes any difference. And it's true, isn't it? You were just nineteen when Chaz's mother was expecting him."

He couldn't deny it, so instead he got defensive about it. "Girl, you've got some brass!" She ignored him, craning her neck to get a good look around, though what there was to look at, he couldn't guess.

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

Her gaze was completely undisturbed. "Your wife."

He felt like he'd been coldcocked. "I don't have one!"

She looked askance at that. "Those children didn't spring out of the ground."

Orren threw up his arms. "She ran away with a rodeo bum! Anything else you want to know?"

She shook her head, but whether in answer to his sarcastic question or in response to his ill-natured revelation, he didn't know. She looked him squarely in the eye and said, "I can start right away."

Defeated, he plopped down in the chair he'd vacated earlier and sighed. "I bet you lead your daddy a merry chase."

Mattie nodded unrepentantly. "He thinks I'm still twelve, which is how old I was when my mother died."

Orren put his head in his hands. "I don't know whether to slit my throat now or hold out a few years in hopes my own girls will run off with circus performers."

"You don't mean that," Mattie told him, as if he didn't already know it.

He dropped his hands and gave her a hard look. "Does your father know you're here?"

"Of course."

"How do you suppose he'll feel about you working for a single man my age?"

She shrugged. "Hard to tell. He might assume you're too old to be attractive to me."

He couldn't believe he'd heard that right. "What?"

She ignored him as if he hadn't spoken and went on. "Or he might assume you're too old to be attracted to me. Either way, I'll be too young in his mind. But, it's a baby-sitting job, and he'll think that's appropriate, so it shouldn't be any problem, really. If he hedges, I'll enlist my stepmother's aid. She's never had children so she doesn't have these parental hang-ups. And if he outright forbids it, we'll have a screaming fight. Then I'll take the job anyway, because it's what I want, and I am, after all, over eighteen. I have two years of college, by the way."

Orren just stared at her for a second. "I think I will cut my throat."

She got up from the table and said, "Can I look around?"

"No!"

She threw out a slender hip and propped her hand on it. Yes, indeed, she was over eighteen. But she was still a baby. Especially compared to Gracie. He frowned. Now why had he done that, compared her to Grace? She folded her arms and asked baldly, "So how long has she been gone?"

He nearly hit his chin on the table. Little shocker. Well, if she wanted the dirty details, he'd give them to her. He got up and put his hands flat on the table, drilling her with his baby blues. "Two years and seven months." He waited a beat and added, "A week and three days."

She batted her lashes at him. "Candy Sue was just a baby."

"An infant," he admitted. "I had to put her on a bottle." Let her digest that.

She was outraged. A nursing mother had abandoned her baby, not to mention three other children and a husband! Then she started looking for acceptable reasons. "She must've been young when you married."

"Older than me," he said flatly, "but that didn't keep me from getting her pregnant. Four times."

Miss Matilda Kincaid lifted her chin a notch. "You're trying to embarrass me."

"And succeeding," he admitted, looking at the splotches of color spreading across her cheeks. "Maybe that'll teach you not to go around asking nosy questions."

"Is there a better way to find out what I want to know?" she retorted saucily.

He grinned. Damned if she didn't have him there. "You ever hear that curiosity killed the cat?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's pretty obvious I'm not a cat, and it wouldn't be very responsible of me to walk into a situation blind, would it?"

He scratched his chin at that. "Guess not. You've just got an awful frank way about you."

"Yes, I do. Now, is the job mine or not?"

He shook his head, chuckling, and said the one thing guaranteed to get her dander up. "Well, I don't know. I'll have to talk to your dad first, clear it with him."

The color in her face blossomed to full red as she struggled to tamp down her temper. It took several seconds, actually, of breathing through her mouth and working her jaw, but she finally got it in hand. That hip flew out again, and she was clearly fuming, but she managed a nearly polite, "Fine."

He went to the phone, figuring it would be dangerous for him to laugh outright. "What's his name?"

"Evans Kincaid."

"I want you to know I'm doing this because you said earlier that he's a police officer, which seems a good recommendation. Are you really nineteen?"

"Yes!"

"What's the telephone number?"

She ground it out through bared teeth, and he punched it into the telephone. The conversation was fairly short. Kincaid was obviously pleased that he'd been consulted. It marked Orren, he said, as a conscientious father himself. Orren politely but honestly explained that he was divorced and fairly desperate as he hadn't generated much interest in the position, the hours being tricky and some housekeeping being required. Actually he was hoping for more than some housekeeping, but he wouldn't mention that. He couldn't exactly demand it, considering the wages he was able to pay, and he knew he had no right to expect it. Since his days off as manager of the car repair shop were Sunday and Monday, he pointed out that he would expect Mattie to work Saturday. He didn't say that he could easily keep her busy seven days a week by taking small jobs on the side, but he was hoping Mattie would welcome the extra money as much as he did. At any rate, Kincaid made it plain that he would not approve of Mattie working Sundays, and Orren made special note of it, figuring that Kincaid was a religious man who wouldn't take kindly to having his little girl's ears scorched more than they already had been.

Mattie, her father promised, was great with kids and a hard worker. She knew her way around a house, too, having pretty much taken over the domestic duties after her mother died. "She's a great little organizer," he said proudly, "and neat as a pin."

Orren looked around at his hastily cleared combination kitchen and living room and wondered if Mattie would last a week here in this madhouse with her penchant for order and neatness. He could only hope.

"Between you and me," Kincaid went on, "I think, she's felt a little displaced since I remarried. She and Amy are fast friends, but I've noticed that Mattie is a little restless and uncertain when she's home from school. This might be good for her."

"I hope so," Orren said warmly, but privately he had his doubts. He loved his kids, but sometimes he thought he'd go stark raving mad. It was always one crisis after another around this place, and there was never enough money, what with the cost of child care and all. Sometimes he wanted to just walk out, not forever, but maybe long enough to get blind drunk on occasion. Still, he couldn't afford that much beer, and he sure couldn't afford the hard liquor for it, not with someone constantly outgrowing shoes or coming up with ear infections and such. He hung up the phone and turned to take the new sitter's measure one more time.

"You heard?"

She nodded. "When do I start?"

He was surprised, really, that she still wanted to. Maybe she didn't understand everything involved. "I work ten to seven, five and sometimes six days a week. I'll try to get breakfast for the kids before I go, but lunch and dinner are part of your job."

"All right."

"I can fend for myself," he went on, "but the kids have got to eat regular meals."

"I understand. I don't see any reason for you to do without, though, considering I'm going to be cooking anyway."

That was good news. "Well, dinner, maybe," he conceded gratefully. "I usually skip lunch, though sometimes someone will take me out."

She shrugged. "What about the grocery shopping?"

He hedged that. "I try to do it on Mondays, but sometimes it's Tuesday evening before I can get to it." Or Wednesday, he thought. Or Thursday. If at all.

"I'd rather do it myself, if you'll give me a budget," she said. "I prefer to make out weekly menus and shop with a list. It cuts down on impulse buying and makes use of things that might otherwise go to waste. I do the shopping on Mondays, floors on Tuesday, bathrooms on Wednesday, dusting on Thursday, and laundry on Friday, though I suppose my Monday will be Tuesday, so we can push everything back a day, if you want."

He couldn't believe it, not coming from this small, delicate girl. He put his hands together and said in a dramatic voice, "Oh, Lord, if this is Your idea of a practical joke, I'm going to become an atheist, I swear."

Mattie frowned. "That's not very funny. I'm trying to tell you what you can expect from me, and if that's not what you have in mind, well, then, the whole thing's off."

Orren shook his head and clapped a hand over his heart. "Miss Mattie, my love, you've already exceeded my expectations by far. I'd be happy as a hog in slop if you just fed my kids and kept Red from stringing up her sisters. But since you have a system you want to use, you just go right ahead. I'm tickled pink. And if it doesn't work out quite like you have planned, well, then, we'll just make do. That's mostly what we do anyway. Now, I hope you'll go before those four hellions troop back in here and scare the daylights out of you. They can, and they probably will, but I'm hoping you'll at least get the grocery shopping done before you quit. See you in the morning at nine-thirty." He grabbed her backpack from the back of the chair and shoved it and her toward the door.

Mattie dragged her feet, but he got her through the door before she could tell him to take his job and shove it. He didn't get it closed, though, because she beat him to the doorknob. She glared up at him from the doorstep and said, "You are insane, you know."

He smiled benignly. "And you're going to join me a lot sooner than you realize."

She rolled her eyes at that and pulled the door shut in his face. He couldn't hold back the relief that flooded him, though he knew it was much too early to celebrate. Chances were the poor thing wouldn't last a week, but then again, she just might. She had fortitude, that girl, and she was young enough to take the punishment. Maybe Miss Matilda Kincaid was the answer to his prayers. He hoped so. He very fiercely hoped so.

Chapter Two

Mattie carefully made no mention to her father of the utterly gorgeous Orren Ellis. She said nothing about his well-muscled six-foot frame and carefully kept her thoughts to herself concerning his finely honed, square-jawed face with its sculpted lips and gold-tipped brows. She made no comparisons with bronze and gold and platinum and his slightly curly, sun-streaked hair, which, in her opinion, could use a good cutting. Most of all, she kept secret how shocking were the electric depths of his light blue eyes, fringed lavishly with gold and bronze lashes.

She spoke instead about his four adorable children, about Chaz, the little man, and the challenging Jean Marie of the wild red hair, and golden Yancy who adored her big brother, and the picture-perfect little doll baby Candy Sue, whom everyone called Sweetums. They were bright children. They were beautiful children. They were sweet and fun and exciting and just a little needy, and she couldn't wait to get started with them. She just didn't expect to get started with them two hours early the next morning.

Orren was extremely apologetic and even more frantic than the day before when he called at seven in the morning to ask, to beg, her to come over early. "The mechanic on the early shift has called in sick," he explained, "and I took yesterday off to stay with the kids and interview sitters. I have to go in to cover him. Please say you'll come. I don't dare leave these children here alone."

"I'll be there," she said sleepily. "Give me half an hour."

"Thank you, Mattie. Oh, thank you."

Her father was waiting for her when she stepped out of the bathroom. "That call for you?"

"Umm-hmm, Mr. Ellis has been called in early."

"So have you, I take it."

"Right-o."

"Off and running, I guess."

"So it seems. If you don't mind, Dad, I really need to get dressed."

Evans nodded and moved toward the door, but he stopped, pulling the belt of his bathrobe tighter. "I'll make some coffee."

"That'd be great, Dad. Thanks. Uh, you wouldn't mind filling the thermos, would you?"

"Sure. No problem."

She smiled at him as he went out the door, wondering what he'd say if she told him that the thermos of coffee was for Orren, not herself. She pulled on jeans and a T-shirt and got out her sneakers and a pair of thick socks. Something told her she was going to be on her feet a lot today. She yawned and reached for the heavy comb with which to detangle her wet hair.

Her wet hair was hanging down her back when Chaz let her in the door. Orren saw that at a glance, which was all he had time for unless he was going to work without socks. "Mattie, thank God! I'm really sorry about this."

"I brought you something," she said, placing the thermos on the corner of the table while he dug through the mountain of laundry he'd dumped on the couch, Sweetums clinging to his side, her grasping little hands twisting wrinkles in his pale blue uniform shirt. "It isn't a pair of clean socks, is it?"

"Just coffee."

He looked up at that. "Oh, you're good. You're very good."

"Thanks. Need some help?"

"Could you take the baby?" he said, going back to his search. "I know I washed socks. Where are the darned socks?"

She reached for Candy Sue, but the baby was always clingy when she first woke up, and it didn't help that the telephone had jangled her awake hours earlier than usual. She clamped on to him like a

leech and shrieked in his ear when Mattie laid hands on her. A crash in the kitchen announced that Mattie's attention was more urgently needed elsewhere.

"Uh-oh." She turned and hurried away in that direction.

"Son," Orren called anxiously, still pawing through the laundry. "Everything okay in there?"

Mattie stuck her head around the short partition wall and said, "A hot waffle iron is melting a hole in the floor vinyl."

"Well, unplug it!"

"I did!"

"Blast!" Orren groaned and staggered as Jean Marie bumped into him, feeling her way along sleepily from behind a curtain of hair.

"I want doughnuts," she said, yawning.

"Not this morning, Red," Orren answered, giving up the search for socks. "See if you can get Sweetums to come to you."

"Let Chaz," Jean Marie grumbled, stumbling toward the kitchen. Yancy screamed from the back bedroom just then, offended at waking up alone, and Candy Sue promptly threw up on his shoulder.

"Aw, baby!" Orren jumped away from the mound of clean laundry and held Candy out at arm's length. She immediately started to wail. Lord help him! "It's okay, Sweetums. Chaz, bring the antacid! Candy Sue's nervous stomach is acting up again."

He placed Candy Sue in the chair and spread a towel over her in case she threw up again, then ripped his shirt off and threw it on the floor, muttering, "Only clean shirt I had!" He felt like sitting right down and bawling, but that'd make three of them, and he didn't think he could stand it.

Mattie appeared, Chaz on one side, Jean Marie on the other. She was holding the bottle of antacid and a spoon. "Set the water glass down on the end table, Chaz," she directed smoothly, "then take Jean Marie and go quiet Yancy."

Chaz obediently complied. Jean Marie stuck her chin out and opened her mouth. Mattie bent down to her face level, parted the hair curtain with a fingertip and said, "Unless you don't want me to cook breakfast." Jean Marie whirled and stomped after her brother. Mattie straightened and thrust the bottle and spoon at Orren. "You dose the baby," she said, "I'll take care of the shirt. Where's the iron and ironing board?"

He took the medicine, watching as she bent and picked up the soiled shirt, and said, "I don't know. My bedroom, I think."

"I'll find it," she said airily, carrying the shirt away from her.

Orren gratefully sat down next to the baby, spread the towel over the two of them and began the chancy process of coaxing the medication down her. Ten minutes and three attempts later, he judged that he'd gotten enough of the stuff in her to calm her stomach and began rocking her into a better mood. Shortly thereafter she dropped off in his arms. He stood, towel and all, to carry her to his own room, where she might be able to sleep undisturbed by the other children. He was surprised —and oddly disturbed—to find Matilda Kincaid bent over his bed, straightening out his sheets. She certainly looked adult from the back. She glanced over her shoulder, something very like censure on her face, but then her expression softened and she stood, turning, to smile down at the frothy-haired angel in his arms. He smiled, too, proud of the little beauty cuddled so trustingly against him.

"She'll never be able to stay asleep in the kids' room," he whispered. "She sleeps most often in here."

Mattie nodded and moved away to retrieve the clean and pressed shirt from the ironing board as he tucked the little one into his bed. She stepped out into the hallway; a second or two later, he joined her, pulling closed the bedroom door. She shook out the uniform shirt and held it up for him, her eyes roaming over his bare chest. Orren resisted the urge to turn his back, and instead dipped

one hand into a sleeve hole. She carried the shirt around him and slipped the other sleeve over his arm, settling the shirt over his shoulders.

"I tried to iron it dry, but it's still damp," she said quietly. "At least it didn't stain."

Nodding, he began pushing the buttons through the buttonholes. "That's all right. Thanks."

"No problem," Mattie said, presenting him a pair of matched socks from her belt. "They had dropped down between the bed and the wall."

He clutched them gratefully. "You are a lifesaver!"

"Just part of the service."

"Listen, I'm sorry to run off so quick. I meant to show you around, explain things, but I really don't have the time this morning."

"Oh, don't worry about that," she said cryptically. "I think I can find plenty to keep us busy today."

He was already moving into the living area, only half listening, when he remembered the grocery shopping. He immediately turned back, whipping his wallet from his hip pocket. Emptying it of the last seventy bucks to his name, he thrust it at her apologetically, saying, "Uh, there really isn't anything much here to eat. If you could do the shopping, I'd appreciate it, but this is all I have until the end of the week. We'll, um, discuss a budget later."

"What about your lunch?" she began, but he waved that off, snatched up the thermos and swung out the door. A glance at his watch told him that he just might make it—barely. These days, he reminded himself grimly, barely was the best he could hope for.

Mattie shook her head at the boards nailed over the door, the bare gypsum walls and the electrical wires hanging loose. While Candy Sue slept and the other girls watched an educational program on public television, she'd looked over the house in the helpful company of Chaz. It hadn't taken long to get a full picture of Orren Ellis's house, his unfinished house. Chaz had told her proudly that his daddy had built the house with his own two hands, and she could understand his pride, but the place was woefully inadequate. For one thing, the kids had been squeezed into a single small room, while this third unfinished bedroom and its badly needed second bath had accumulated debris and gathered dust. Actually, the whole house was a dustbin, not to mention a jumble of chaos. Ah, well, she'd wanted a challenge.

After a scant breakfast of buttered griddle cakes sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon, which the kids wolfed down gleefully, Mattie had found a piece of paper and a pencil and made a list of the family's favorite foods. It wasn't a very extensive list, but it was enough from which to conceive a frugal menu for several days. She then went through the refrigerator and pantry, listing the available supplies and mechanically rearranging the shelves. Everything needed a thorough cleaning, but that would have to wait a bit. First she had a shopping list to make out, carefully estimating the cost of each item and tabulating the whole to be certain that the cost remained safely within the amount allotted.

That proved a simple task compared to getting the children properly dressed for their outing. Their clothing, both clean and dirty, was scattered over the whole house, but eventually she put together outfits for each of them and, by standing over them with an implacable expression, a bar of soap and a tube of toothpaste, saw them dressed and made presentable. It took some time to persuade Jean Marie to brush her hair, but by promising that each of them could choose a favorite food item from the grocery store, she managed even that.

The shopping excursion was a nightmare, with Jean Marie and Yancy playing hide-and-seek in the aisles, Candy Sue begging for everything she laid eyes on, and Chaz desperately badgering, pleading and threatening his sisters while trying all the while to coax Mattie into buying the same items his father always bought. To make matters worse, Candy Sue suddenly developed a pressing need to visit the rest room, while Jean Marie flatly refused to go along. What should have taken an

hour at most took more than twice that time, but finally Mattie had the groceries stowed in the trunk, the kids belted in and the little red car on the road to the Ellis house.

By making a game of putting the groceries away, Mattie managed to complete that chore relatively quickly. Then she ferreted out a ragged notebook, sharpened her pencil and set about making her plans. The first order of business, she told an anxious Chaz, was the kitchen, to which he replied, "What's wrong with it?"

So much was wrong with it, to Mattie's mind, that a detailed explanation would take inordinate time and effort, so she settled for pointing out that it was poorly organized and not exactly "sterile." Jean Marie took violent exception to the slightest perceived criticism. Eyes narrowed suspiciously, she declared that the kitchen was forever kept just exactly as their mother had left it. When a gaping Chaz declared aloud that Jean Marie was "cuckoo," she summarily bit him. Luckily, the skin wasn't broken. Mattie marched the little hoyden straight to a corner and stood over her for an entire half hour to keep her there, while Chaz comforted Yancy, who wept loudly on his behalf.

Afterward, Jean Marie disappeared into the bedroom, barricaded the door and shouted insults at Mattie. She was mean and stupid. Her hair was an ugly black color. She was too short and had "baby hands." Chaz helpfully explained that Jean Marie thought "big girls" had long, red fingernails like their mother's. Once the subject of Orren's unfaithful wife had been broached, Mattie found she couldn't quell her curiosity without first asking just a few questions.

Chaz answered each and every one most helpfully. In short order, she found out that Grace Ellis was a tall, blue-eyed beauty with a penchant for tight blue jeans and embarrassingly revealing lingerie. She wore lots of makeup and piled her long blond hair on top of her head. She worried about wrinkles and bragged about her figure. She had shouted at their daddy a lot, said that Candy Sue was "all his fault" and explained repeatedly to her children that she "needed her fun while she could get it." He remembered especially that when she went off with "that man" she'd explained that they were going to get rich on the rodeo circuit and had promised to send them money, but she never had. Chaz divulged, without any prompting, that Orren had gone after Grace upon discovering she had left him, only to return later, all sad, to explain that Mommy was tired of "making do" but sent her love. She wouldn't be coming back, he'd said, except to see them when she could, but she hadn't ever done that, either.

Jean Marie heard it all, having tired of screaming insults and sneaked out of her room. She appeared out of nowhere and immediately denied everything Chaz had said. Their mommy was beautiful and smart and was off getting money. When she came back, they'd all be rich and happy, especially Daddy, who missed her most of all. Mattie carefully schooled her expression and voice, betraying none of the shock and dismay the tale and its refutation had engendered, and calmly suggested that Jean Marie cool her temper unless she wanted to spend another half hour in the corner. With that, she went to make pimento cheese sandwiches and cut up celery, carrots and apples for lunch.

The children, thankfully, were used to entertaining themselves. She had merely to keep an eye and an ear open while they played, occasionally interrupting her work in the kitchen to mediate a minor quarrel or redirect their energies. Even Jean Marie cooperated reluctantly when she promised them a special afternoon snack of cinnamon crisps, which she made from a simple, inexpensive piecrust recipe, cut into strips, and baked in the oven. Candy Sue practically keeled over after the snack, so badly in need of an afternoon nap was she. Yancy was persuaded to join her without much effort, and the two older children went outside to play in the shade of an old live oak on the edge of the front yard within easy sight of the kitchen window. Orren had hung sturdy swings from its thick branches and fashioned a sandbox in an out-of-the-way spot. Mattie dutifully oversaw their play while listening for the younger two and scrubbing down the kitchen cabinets.

All in all, she was well pleased with her day. She had the small kitchen gleaming and the cabinets strictly organized in plenty of time to tell the children a favorite story before stripping the beds and

remaking them with clean linens. Then she vacuumed the living room rug, ran a dust cloth over the surface of the battered tables and single lamp and contented herself with straightening up the mess by dispatching the children to other parts of the house with various items in tow, all but Jean Marie who declared that she wasn't "nobody's" slave and locked herself in the bathroom. Mattie let her be until enough of the clutter was removed from the living room to identify it as such, then calmly picked the lock and opened the door.

Jean Marie was lying on the floor beside the tub, her arms flung out dramatically, mouth open, eyes rolled back in her head. An empty, uncapped vitamin bottle that Mattie had noticed in the small wastebasket earlier was clutched in one hand. Mattie smiled to herself, folded her arms, and called out in an unconcerned voice, "Chaz, dear, please bring me a clean spoon so I can poke the handle down Jean Marie's throat and make her throw up all these vitamins the silly girl's taken."

Jean Marie bolted up into a sitting position, her free hand going automatically to her throat as she gagged just at the thought of that spoon handle. Mattie feigned weak relief. "Oh, good. You didn't overdose yourself too badly, after all. Never mind, Chaz. She seems fine now."

In the next instant Jean Marie realized she'd been outfoxed. Sputtering angrily, she threw the vitamin bottle. It bounced harmlessly off the doorjamb and rolled at Mattie's feet. Calmly, Mattie bent and picked it up, then straightened and cocked her head. "Now, young lady," she said, "unless you want me to describe this latest incident to your father, I suggest you improve your behavior." It was then that Jean Marie realized how serious a mistake she'd made. Her daddy wasn't beyond blistering her backside for such a prank. Mutinously, she stuck out her chin. Her eyes filled with tears, but she stubbornly refused to shed them. "You know," Mattie said gently, "we could be friends, you and I, if you'd just let us." Then Mattie left her there and went away.

Orren dragged home utterly exhausted. What a day! A total of three mechanics had called in sick, and he'd been so busy under the hoods of several different cars that he'd hardly had time to answer the telephone. Everything was behind schedule, and he'd endured a rude dressing down from one customer because of it. Tomorrow promised to be a repeat performance, and he was so hungry he could eat lumber. He only hoped Mattie had saved him some supper. She hadn't, but he could hardly grasp what she had done when he walked into his own house and found himself in a strange place.

The kitchen looked like a surgery ward. He'd never seen it shine so. Come to think of it, he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the tops of the counters, let alone seen them gleam. He'd almost forgotten they were red! Moreover, the table had been properly set with napkins and everything, and the air was filled with the delicious aromas of cooking food. Most astonishing of all, however, was the sight of his children lined up to greet him, heads freshly washed, clothing neat, bodies clean. The babies were ready for bed. Chaz was beaming. Jean Marie showed no visible bruises, though he couldn't imagine anything but brute force producing the astonishing change in her appearance. Her hair had been plaited into a braid! She was wearing shoes and socks. Her shorts matched her shirt. He hadn't even known she possessed matching shorts and shirt! Mattie herself looked neat as a pin, even with one of his dish towels tied around her waist like an apron. She quickly whipped it off and suggested that he wash up while she put dinner on the table. Mechanically, he put the thermos he'd brought home on the clean counter and trudged off to do as he was told, marveling at the order in his living room as he did so.

It was almost more than he could fathom, sitting down at the table with his family for a real meal. And what a meal! Boiled beef and noodles in a creamy sauce, green beans, corn and hot bread. When Mattie set a small bowl of pickled beets at his elbow, he could do nothing but gape.

"Chaz said you liked them," she divulged shyly and skittered away.

For the first time he had the presence of mind to look around the table and count the places. Obviously she had been unsure of her welcome at the family table. He twisted in his chair and cleared

his throat. When she turned from the sink to look at him, he asked carefully, “Aren’t you going to join us?”

Smiling broadly, she plucked another place setting from the cabinet and hurried to squeeze in between Sweetums and Yancy. Once there, however, she dropped her hands to her lap and bowed her head. Uncertain what to make of that, Orren shrugged and reached for the beets, drawing up short when Chaz widened his eyes and frantically shook his head. Thoroughly puzzled, Orren opened his mouth to ask what the dickens was going on, only to be shocked into continued silence by the sight of Chaz folding his hands in an attitude of prayer, his look pleading. Dumbfounded, Orren realized that they were waiting for him to say grace! All but Jean Marie, who tucked her hands into her armpits and narrowed her eyes stubbornly, and Sweetums, who copied Chaz’s posture without the least idea why.

Orren cleared his throat, bounced a knee nervously, and took a deep breath, finally blurting, “Thank-you-for-this-food-amen.”

Mattie lifted her head, smiling, and began serving dinner.

It beat anything he’d ever seen. Even Jean Marie behaved like a civilized human being and cleaned her plate quickly, despite a pouting silence. Yancy accepted the towel that Mattie tied around her neck bib-fashion, upon realizing that Sweetums was to wear one, also, and ate everything put in front of her, even demanding more. Chaz couldn’t say enough good things about Mattie’s cooking, and Sweetums managed to giggle charmingly while stuffing her little mouth. After wrapping up the feast with canned pears, they all sat back for a few minutes, replete in a way they never had been before, while Mattie explained about the menu taped to the inside of the pantry door and how she had marked the foodstuffs so they would know what was required for meals and what was available for “unscheduled snacking.” She added that she’d tucked the eight dollars left over from the shopping into a jar on the top shelf and suggested that he spend some time with the kids before Candy and Yancy had to be put down to sleep while she cleaned up the kitchen and packed leftovers for his next day’s lunch.

Flabbergasted but wise enough to see the benefits of such a plan, Orren did exactly what she suggested. Only later did he realize that she had slipped away quietly, leaving a note to say she would be in at nine the next morning unless he called to say he wanted her earlier. Bemused, Orren sat down on the couch, pleased that he could, to watch an hour of television with his older children and listen to Chaz glowingly recount their day. Jean Marie was not so thrilled with their new sitter, but her criticism seemed based on nothing more than resentment at being persuaded to behave. In fact, he was a little surprised that her complaints weren’t more vehement, but he was too tired to really do anything more than marvel at what one little gal had been able to accomplish in a single day. Later, when he slid between clean, smooth sheets, he decided sleepily that Matilda Kincaid was a sorceress in a teenybopper’s guise. The next morning, when sitting himself down to enjoy a breakfast of hot muffins, fruit, and—luxury of luxuries—fresh coffee, he silently amended that description to angel, albeit a young one.

Mattie shoved the bed to one side. Jean Marie glared at her from the doorway, arms folded, eyes narrowed, bottom lip jutting out. Mattie sighed. She’d already been told to leave “Mama’s bedroom” alone, but once she’d thoroughly cleaned the place, she’d felt an overwhelming urge to make it more attractive. Its bare, bereft nondecor was depressing, and for some reason she wanted to give Orren Ellis reason to be, if not happy, at least pleased. It hadn’t taken a lot of effort, really, once she’d been able to get a good look at the room and ferret out some items to use for decoration.

A good washing of the walls had revealed a stuccolike finish of eggshell white. The kids had thought she was nuts when she’d taken brown acrylic paint from one of their battered art sets, thinned it, and used it judiciously to highlight every crack, chip, and mar in the plaster. She’d even gouged a little plaster away in places to heighten the effect and was pleased when the overall look suggested old adobe.

The faded, dirty, entirely too frilly Priscilla curtains were cleaned, dried and put away for the girls to use at a later time, as was the heavy old crocheted bedspread. After washing the windows, she covered them with a pair of golden tan sheers that she'd found in the back of the linen closet in the hallway, then for a valance she tacked up an old horse blanket with which the kids had been playing. An old hand-sewn quilt was thoroughly cleaned and quickly repaired to serve as a bedspread. A headboard for the bed was fashioned from a stack of oak posts discarded as too crooked for use as fencing sometime in the past.

With Chaz's help, Mattie dragged a scarred trunk from the unfinished room, first emptying it of carpentry tools, and placed it at the foot of the bed. Next to it, she arranged a pair of old, nearly rotted cowboy boots and a coiled rope that Chaz insisted his daddy had once used to work the cattle they'd kept on the place. Jean Marie declared this an ugly lie, and Mattie suspected that it had something to do with her mother, but she couldn't imagine what. After receiving specific instructions about what to look for, Chaz unearthed some rusty bits and pieces of bridle, as well as the barrel and stock of a shotgun so ancient it threatened to disintegrate in Mattie's hands as she cleaned it sparingly and hung it on the wall. A battered, almost shapeless, felt cowboy hat came out of a closet somewhere and found a place on the end of a post in the rustic headboard, and a second horse blanket became a bedside rug.

The true challenge in this transformation was presented by the lamp that offered the room's only light source. Pearl white, with gold detailing and a ruffled shade, it was completely out of sync with the new Old West flavor of the room. After much thought and many suggestions from the children, most of them nonsensical but funny, Mattie decided to completely sand the finish of the lamp with sandpaper culled from the unfinished room to give it a rustic look. The shade was another matter. It simply could not be made over to work with the rest of the room, but replacement seemed out of the question—until she came across a tin pail with a hole in the bottom.

Jean Marie volunteered the information that Orren had been furious when Chaz had driven a nail into the pail in a misguided effort to create a shelter for a pet squirrel. The idea had been to attach the pail to a tree in the backyard, but Chaz had been unable to manage that. It seemed that the pail he had chosen was a brand-new one with which Orren had intended to feed the premature, motherless calf he'd secured in the small corral out back. Orren had yelled. Chaz had cried. The squirrel had run away, and eventually the calf had died despite Orren's attempts to save it. The story almost put Mattie off the idea of using the pail, but in the end, it was the only option she could see. She hoped to mitigate the unpleasant memories by having the children draw designs on the side of the pail with crayons, then, using the drawings as patterns, carefully pierce the metal with a hammer and nail. Jean Marie refused to participate, and Mattie wound up having to perform the piercing herself, but once the bail was removed and the hole in the bottom was carefully enlarged, she had herself a suitable, thoroughly unique lamp shade. Jean Marie, however, predicted disaster. Her daddy would hate the dumb old thing, she declared. In fact, he'd hate the whole ugly room.

Mattie was pretty well convinced that Jean Marie was right by the time Orren's truck turned into the driveway. She felt a wave of panic as she heard the engine die away in the carport and the cab door open and close as he got out. Jean Marie waited at the corner of the dinner table, the gleam of retribution in her eyes. When the door opened and Orren pulled himself sluggishly into the house, she launched her offensive.

"She tore up everything!" she declared, pointing an accusing finger at a quaking Mattie. "She took down Mama's pretty curtains and put up a dirty old horse blanket, and she moved everything around, and she punched holes in things! And she got out stuff she wasn't s'posed to, stuff you said we couldn't even get out!"

Orren stood with a hand on the back of his neck, staring at the belligerent child. "What on earth are you talking about, Red?"

Mattie stepped forward, arms rigid at her sides, chin up and confessed. "I redecorated your bedroom."

His mouth fell open, his blue eyes widening. “You what?”

“It was presumptuous of me,” Mattie admitted, bowing her head. “I don’t know quite what came over me except…well, it was depressing, even after I cleaned and reorganized it, and I thought…” She blinked, deciding it was better not to say exactly what she’d thought, that it’d be of benefit to everyone to remove every trace of his ex-wife from the room in which he slept night after night—especially of benefit to her. “If you don’t like it,” she said with a sigh, “I’ll put everything back the way it was. I’ll even repaint the walls.”

Orren stared at her for what seemed like an eternity, then he rubbed a hand over the top of his head and said tiredly, “Guess we’d better go take a look at it.”

Jean Marie ran ahead and smugly threw open the door, while Chaz rushed forward to exclaim that he liked the new room, he thought it was swell, he wished it was his room. Orren paused to apologetically pat his son’s head and say, “One of these days it will be your room, Chaz, just as soon as I finish the new master bedroom. Promise.”

The rather forced smile that Chaz gave his father in return for that promise made it clear that the boy didn’t figure it would be kept anytime soon. From the grim expression on Orren’s face, Mattie concluded that Chaz was correct; a conclusion which did nothing to calm the butterflies beating madly in her stomach. She held her breath as Orren moved into his room and abruptly stopped, shock registering on his face. Mattie closed her eyes, biting her lower lip to stifle a moan of distress. Suddenly Orren rounded on her.

“I don’t believe this!”

Feeling sick, Mattie pressed a hand to her abdomen and quickly said, “I’ll put it all back, I swear. I’ll do it before I go home tonight.”

Orren lifted his hands to his hips. “No way!”

“But—”

Throwing his arms out, he whirled. “This is great! It’s wonderful! I can’t believe you did this without spending a cent!” Suddenly he whirled back. “You didn’t, did you? Spend any money, I mean, because if you bought stuff, it’ll have to go back. I can’t afford—”

“No!” she interrupted. “I didn’t buy a thing! I just sort of…rearranged stuff.”

He grinned and pivoted to take another look. “This is amazing. You’re a genius, Mattie, I swear you are! Man, I’m sure glad I didn’t throw any of this stuff away. I nearly stomped that pail there, and I can’t tell you how many times I meant to burn those old crooked fence posts!”

“I he’ped!” Yancy said around the thumb in her mouth.

“Me, too!” Chaz admitted proudly.

“They all did,” Mattie said, tossing a glance in Jean Marie’s direction.

Jean Marie clamped her jaw and glared at her, tears gathering in her eyes. She advanced on her father. “You don’t like all this junk, do you?”

Orren smiled, completely missing the import of the question. “I like it real fine, Red. Y’all did a good job.”

“But what about Mama’s curtains?” she cried.

Orren turned a confused face at Mattie. “I put them away,” she said softly. “I thought if…when the girls get a room of their own, they might like to use them in there.”

“Now that’s a good idea,” Orren said a bit too heartily, finally having divined the problem. “You’ll like that, won’t you, Red? Maybe we can put up one of those borders you see in all the stores these days, too.”

“And we can dye the curtains and bedspread to match,” Mattie offered helpfully. “With some pretty throw pillows and a nice scarf or two we could—”

Crying out in frustration and rage, Jean Marie tore from the room and out of the house. Sighing, Orren bowed his head in defeat.

"I'm so sorry," Mattie said. "I didn't realize how sensitive she is about her mother's things. I shouldn't have made any changes without consulting you first, either. Maybe we should put everything back."

Orren shook his head. "Mattie, I owe you a debt of gratitude. You read me just right, figuring what I'd like and all, and you did a fine job in here. I never imagined what all you could do for us when I hired you! Makes me wish I could keep you on past the end of summer, but since everybody will be going back to school, you included…. Well, never mind that. The thing is, I like this room a whole lot better now than I ever did before, and Red has to accept the fact someday that her mother isn't ever coming back. I wish I knew what to say to her to make her understand. Lord knows I've tried, and I reckon I'll just have to keep on trying. But you don't owe anybody any apologies. Now, if it's all right with you, I'll wash up and go talk to her while you get dinner on the table. My belly's beating against my backbone, I'm so hungry, and whatever you've cooked up in there sure smells good."

Mattie smiled and nodded. "All right. It won't take long. The meat loaf's done, and the macaroni's almost ready."

Orren licked his lips and made hungry noises while she turned away and headed for the kitchen. He slipped out the door a few minutes later, and soon after that returned with a pouty Jean Marie in tow. Her eyes and nose were red from crying, and her attitude had not noticeably improved, but she said nothing as she sullenly ate her dinner, then disappeared into the back of the house.

Mattie made short work of the post-dinner cleanup, while Orren spent time with the youngest two girls before putting them down for the night. When she gathered her things to make her usual low-key departure, however, Orren appeared to thank her once again for all she'd done.

"You are one talented young lady," he said. "I don't know anyone your age anywhere who could do what you've done. One of these days you'll make a fine wife and mother."

He hadn't the least idea how dismaying his words were to Mattie. None of her efforts, she realized, had made him see her as the adult she was inside, if not outside. Perhaps it was time for another sort of transformation, this time of herself.

Chapter Three

It was just a sundress, and that's exactly what Mattie told her father, patiently, unconcernedly, determinedly. He didn't buy a syllable of it.

"That thing's indecent!" he exclaimed, walking a circle around her, the better to become outraged by the strapless bandeau top and the short slit skirt that exposed the matching short-shorts. "You've worn bathing suits less revealing than that!"

"And will again," she assured him nonchalantly. "In fact, if you prefer, I could wear one today and save myself the same hassle."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She sighed and flipped the long tail of her hair over her shoulder. "We're going to lie out in the sun today," she explained, delivering the well-thought-out excuse. "The kids should start swimming lessons soon, and I want us all to get a little sun first. I don't want to have to change my clothes twice to manage it."

Evans scowled but couldn't argue with her logic. Amy stepped into the fray, lifting a loving hand to her husband's shoulder, sending a knowing look to Mattie. "Honestly, Evans, you sound like the father of a twelve-year-old instead of a twenty-year-old."

"She's not twenty!"

"She's closer to twenty than nineteen."

"That dress would be indecent at fifty!"

Amy smirked. "Now I agree with you there, unless, of course, the fifty-year-old should have a body like a twenty-year-old. Give over, Dad. Your little girl is all grown up and has a perfect right to wear anything she wants."

"Oh, and I have no right to voice my opinion, I suppose," Evans sulked.

"You have as much right to voice your opinion, Daddy, as I have to ignore it," Mattie said blithely, and with that she went up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "See you tonight. Have a good day. Bye, Amy." Trilling her fingers at her stepmother, she sauntered down the hall, ignoring the heatedly whispered conversation taking place behind her. Poor Daddy. How upset he would be if he knew upon what campaign she had just embarked!

Orren frowned at the Mattie who stood before him, busily pinning up her hair. If she was not careful that so-called dress was going to show more than it already did, and it showed quite enough already—more than enough. The sight of all that pale golden skin made him decidedly nervous. His hands were shaking, for pity's sake! Not that he found her attractive exactly, not in the same way as he'd found Gracie attractive. Heavens, no. Gracie was sexy, blatantly so, almost embarrassingly so. She had often referred to herself as a "hot property," and no one had ever argued with the assessment. Gracie breathed heavy sexuality and had from a very early age. He imagined she'd appeared more worldly and womanly at twelve than Matilda Kincaid did at twenty. There was something innocent about Mattie, something wholesome. Actually, coupled with her very sleek, almost exotic beauty, it was pretty heady stuff. But it just wasn't the kind of thing that really attracted him. Not really, really attracted him, anyway. Of course not. She was much too young, just a girl. He scraped his fingers through his hair, just to have something to do with his hands, and cleared his throat.

"So you think I should let the kids take swimming lessons," he said, as much to call himself back to the subject at hand as to let her know that he'd been listening.

She snatched a hairpin from her mouth and stabbed it into the twist of hair atop her head. "Absolutely. They're never too young to learn something so important."

"I agree," he said, embarrassed and irritated, "but there's one little problem."

"Oh? And what is that?"

He ground his teeth together. “I can’t afford swimming lessons.”

She blinked at him as if that idea hadn’t occurred to her at all. “It doesn’t cost anything. At least, no more than you’re paying me now.”

It was his turn to blink. “You mean, you are going to teach them?”

“Of course. I have certification from California. I used to live there, you know.”

Actually, he hadn’t known, but he nodded, anyway. It was so typically Mattie. Of course she’d teach them herself! He should have expected that by now. Was there anything she couldn’t do? He felt a step behind suddenly, but he was becoming accustomed to that. Thinking rather desperately, he came up with another question. “Where were you thinking of doing it?”

“Teaching them, you mean?”

“That’s right.”

She shrugged. “I have a friend with a backyard pool. I thought we’d start there.”

He cocked his head. “What friend would that be?” Male or female? he wondered specifically.

“Terri Whiteside.”

His stomach dropped. Male or female? he asked himself again, then shook his head over the stupidity of it. What was it to him? Nothing! Except, of course, as it pertained to his children. He wouldn’t want anything untoward to take place in front of them. If Mattie had a boyfriend—and of course she did!—he had better make sure that she understood what type of behavior he expected from her. He opened his mouth to speak, but she beat him to it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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

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