

Heart of **STEELE**

Successful Chicago corporate lawyer Steeleman Krueger returns to his small-town roots in central Illinois with one objective – to crash his half-brother Conn’s wedding and spoil his snooty mother’s grand plans. But when Steele meets his brother’s intended bride, he finds the opposite of what he expects. Instead of a shallow gold-digger, Rebecca Sedder is a shy and quiet young lady, totally unsuited for his slob of a brother. Now Steele’s got a new goal, to find out why sweet and hard-working Becca would agree on such short notice to marry his brother. The more she refuses to tell him, the more curious he gets, and the more attracted to her he becomes. He knows his conniving mother is behind everything, and he’s as eager to find out why as he is to find out the truth of his past his mother has deliberately withheld from him his whole life.

Rebecca Sedder is between a rock and a hard place. Forced to wed a man she despises to save the reputation of one she cares deeply for, she can’t breathe a word of the truth to anyone, or the deal is off. Conner Morse’s older half-brother Steeleman Krueger shows up in town in the nick of time and promises to help Becca out of her predicament. She wants to jump at his offer and tell him the truth about everything, but she can’t, or someone dear to her will suffer the consequences. She doesn’t want to get involved in the family feud involving Steele and his mother, but she’s already smack-dab in the middle and can’t escape. No matter what Steele says, she knows she has to go through with marrying his brother. But Steele has another idea. The wedding can go on as planned, with one little change – he’ll replace his brother as the groom!

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by

Kessa Stranberg

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~AUTHOR FOREWORD~

In my estimation, one of the hardest things a person must do is forgive someone else for a perceived wrong. Reconciliation, especially after terrible events or an unhappy past, is difficult and sometimes impossible to accomplish. But a heart hardened by hatred or soured with regret cannot fully love, and forgiveness must clear the way before love can take residence.

On the surface, this story, the first I ever completed, may seem like a typical romance, but it is also about forgiveness and how it affects one's ability to love. I hope you enjoy it and always find a way to forgive others, even when they seem not to deserve it.

Our greatest gift as human beings is the ability to love ... and to forgive.

Kessa Stranberg

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CHAPTER 1

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

Propping his elbows on the arms of his burgundy leather chair, Steeleman Krueger rested his fingertips in a spire and studied the phone. He had fielded quite a few awkward calls from women who were more than acquaintances and not exactly friends, but none of those exchanges could compare in shock value to the unsettling conversation he’d just had with his mother.

“I’ll be damned!” he said again, chuckling as he spun his chair and glanced out the window of his thirty-fifth floor Chicago office. “She actually asked for my help.” He chuckled wickedly. “Today must be that proverbial ‘cold day in hell.’”

He turned back to his desk and eyed the phone again. He hadn’t spoken to Queen Lila since Aunt Sybil’s funeral nearly four years ago, and their brief meeting then had been anything but amicable. Now, out of the blue, she’d invited him ‘home,’ as if he traveled from Chicago to Fenton to see her and the rest of ‘the family’ on a regular basis.

For a change, she’d been almost chatty, despite her ingrained arctic tone. She glossed over details of the dairy accident, then made a lot of noise about profit projections for the family’s newly combined enterprise corporation. He saw the pitch coming but was still surprised when she encouraged him to invest in it. This was the first time he could remember her wanting him to participate in anything involving the rest of her family. The key was his trust fund. Of course he’d have to voluntarily revoke his controlling interest in the trust to access the money.

He leaned back in his chair and smirked, thinking what favorite clichés Uncle Charlie would likely offer up if the sweet old man were around to witness this odd development. He could

almost hear the crusty sage saying, “Your slitherin’ momma must think you just fell off the turnip truck, son. I tell ya, something fishy’s goin’ on. She’s up to no good. Any fool knows a she-leopard don’t change her spots. She’ll always be a bad apple. I wouldn’t trust her any further than I could throw her.”

Uncle Charlie was no longer around to guide him, but Steele still relied on the elderly man’s country-simple axioms. Nevertheless, he couldn’t help being intrigued when his mother mentioned the special affair planned for next weekend. When he prodded for more details, she ended the conversation, repeating that she’d like him to attend.

Steele ran a hand over his mouth. If his mother had any hope of luring him back to Fenton after all this time, she’d succeeded. His little brother was getting married, and Steele couldn’t help wondering what poor woman he’d managed to knock up. He wouldn’t miss this show for anything.

He glanced past the open blinds on his glass door, to the central office beyond. Irene leaned over one of the lateral cherry file cabinets, busily rifling through the middle drawer. He hit the intercom button on his phone. “Has Nate come back to the office yet?”

Irene looked around, then marched into his office and closed the door. “What’s going on, Steele?”

He shrugged. “Why would you assume something’s going on, just because I want to talk to one of the senior partners?”

She rested her manicured hands on her narrow, nearly nonexistent hips clad in a teal silk suit. “You’re making a big fuss about not telling me why. So what’s this about – the phone call from that woman who wouldn’t give her name?”

He sighed. He couldn’t pull anything over on Irene Levinstraud, Hastings, Fehnman & Reinhold’s fifty-something office Nazi and mother superior. She seemed to think it was part of her job description to screen all his calls and find out his secrets before he did. Whenever an unidentified women demanded to speak with him, Irene was right there, insisting on knowing which client’s wife wanted his attention. She’d quickly

figured out how he spent much of his after-hours time, and she never skimped on advice about it. Right now was no different. "I'm telling you, Steele," she warned, shaking a finger at him. "if you don't put a stop to 'entertaining' those women, it's going to catch up to you in a bad way."

He grimaced. "I told you, I simply escort them when their husbands are unavailable. So far, no one has objected. Anyway, I haven't 'entertained' anyone since Thanksgiving, so it's no longer a problem."

"Fine," she grumbled, adjusting the half-lens glasses perched on her thin nose. "I just don't want you jeopardizing the firm's reputation, not to mention your career, all for—"

"Relax. It's not a big deal and never was."

She elevated her head of perfectly coiffed short brown dyed hair. "Then why aren't you looking for a suitable, marriageable, young lady to occupy your free time? You've been here six years, and it's high time you settled down."

Steele leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Would it do me any good to tell you to mind your own business?"

"Of course not."

He laughed and leaned forward. He couldn't fault Irene. In her own way, she meant well. She kept him on track and made his work run smoothly. It had taken him quite a while to warm up to her, but when he finally realized what a marshmallow she was on the inside, their relationship blossomed into a surrogate mother-son thing. Irene might have everyone else at the firm toeing the line, but Steele knew deep down she was a softy, a good woman who loved her family and doted on her grandchildren.

She was one of the few people he trusted enough to confide the full story about his unsavory past. She understood what a conniver his mother was, and had warned him to stay away from her and her little fiefdom back in Fenton. But he needed no warnings. He already knew better than to tangle with his mother. Except ... this time he couldn't resist. This time he might have a chance of finally getting what he wanted.

He glanced down at some papers on his desk and jogged

them in an officious manner. “I need to clear my schedule for the next couple weeks, and I want to get Nate’s approval before I leave.”

“And where do you think you’re rushing off to on such short notice?”

He didn’t face Irene. “My mother’s invited me home for a family event scheduled for next weekend. I want to arrive earlier than she expects, to check out a few things.”

When Irene failed to respond, Steele looked up and found her frowning at him. “So,” she snarled. “It was your mother on the phone. Tell me why, after the low-down, dirty way that so-called family of yours has treated you, would you even consider going back to Fenton to attend some fancy occasion she’s planned? And if it’s so important, why would she wait until now to invite you? Obviously that was an afterthought.”

Steele rose to his full six-foot-three-inch height and towered over Irene, but she didn’t back down as she insisted, “Well? What possible reason would you have for wanting to see any of them again?”

“To find out if—” He pressed his lips together and turned to look out the window behind him. Chicago’s glass, steel, and concrete skyline looked just as bleak in early summer as it did in mid-winter. The view reflected how he felt when anticipating another meeting with his family. “My mother’s cooking up some kind of deal. She wants something from me, or she wouldn’t have bothered to contact me. For the first time in my life, I might actually have some bargaining leverage with her. I don’t want to pass up the opportunity to ... to get information from her.”

“Steele,” Irene said softly behind him, “if your mother were ever going to reveal the identity of your real father, she would have done it a long time ago.”

He turned and gripped the back of his chair. “Tell Nate I had a family emergency. I’ll call him when I get to Fenton. I need to pack, arrange for lodging, and try to get out of here before rush hour.”

“Don’t even think of leaving before you finish the changes

to the Carson-Dunlevey contract.” Irene skewered him with a sympathetic scowl.

Steele pushed his chair against his desk. “Right. I’ll have it to you within the hour.” At the moment, the Carson-Dunlevey contract was the least of his worries.

He circled around his desk. Grabbing his charcoal jacket from the cherry coat rack, he slipped it on and straightened it with military precision. When he reached for the door, Irene touched his sleeve. “Be careful, Steele. You’ve been away from them for a long time, and you’ve done well without them. I’d hate to see them hurt you again.”

He managed a smile. “Don’t worry. I’m a big boy now, and I can take care of myself. The Ogre wouldn’t dare try to knock me around anymore, and I don’t give a damn about anyone in that grungy little one-horse town, so there’s nothing they can do to me. I’m going back to take one last look, and then I’m out of there, for good.”



CHAPTER 2

Becca took a deep breath and leaned over the bathroom sink to peer at her reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror. Her hand shook so much she had trouble holding her tube of concealer to smooth a layer over the greenish tinge on her left cheek.

She didn't want to get ready and go with him. She didn't want to have dinner with Conner Morse and his parents. She didn't want to look at his beady eyes or hear his nasty, cackling laughter ever again. But she had no choice.

Her parents knew something was wrong. In the few weeks since she'd begun seeing Conn, they had each expressed their disapproval. Her mother had taken it as a personal insult and called her stupid and irresponsible. Her father had tried to reason with her and show her the error in her judgment. But she'd dismissed their arguments. She couldn't allow them to interfere. They didn't understand the situation, and she wasn't at liberty to explain. She *had* to do this.

She touched a fingertip to her cheekbone and winced. The spot where Conn had backhanded her three nights ago still ached. She was lucky all he'd done was hit her and spout some curses. She could have suffered a lot more than a few bruises. It galled her to play the silent victim, but speaking out would only make things worse – for everyone, not just her.

When Lila Morse had seen what her son had done to her face, she made no apology, but extracted a vague assurance from him that it wouldn't happen again. Becca knew better than to think Mrs. Morse would keep Conn under control. And she knew better than to trust Conn to treat her right.

Biting her lower lip to fight off tears, she sucked in a deep

breath and applied a coat of mauve color to her mouth. As she eyed her handiwork in the mirror, she didn't recognize the startled, angry stranger staring at her. Golden-brown eyes dulled with despair showed dark circles underneath and seemed to have sunk into her head. Her slender, heart-shaped face appeared pale and haggard. It was easy to visualize a ghost's skull framed by shoulder-length sable hair once thick and luxurious but now limp and lackluster. This was a preview of the horror in store for her, now that Conn Morse had entered her life.

In less than two weeks she would cease to be Rebecca Jean Sedder, an individual with free will. Once she became Mrs. Conner Lee Morse, she would be just another of the many acquisitions of the Morse family. She would be Conn's personal property to abuse as he pleased. And she could do nothing to prevent it – not if she wanted to keep her father out of jail. With that fate facing her, she knew she was better off dead.

“Hurry up, Reba Jean!” Conn's voice boomed as he banged on the bathroom door. Startled, Becca dropped her tube of lipstick in the sink. She hated being called Reba Jean, and Conn knew it. No one ever called her that. No one but him.

“We're having dinner with Mom and Dad, not going to some beauty contest. So stop worrying how you look, like anybody really gives a damn.” She heard him pop a beer tab and snicker.

“Becca's not going anywhere with you.” Becca froze at the sound of her father's voice near the door. “I want you out of my house right now, and take that alcohol with you.”

“Back off, old man. You're just a washed up boozehound. Where to you get off preaching to me about drinking?”

Becca heard Conn's nasty chuckle and knew her father, a recovering alcoholic, wouldn't handle the insult well. She couldn't have her father trying to go up against a bully like Conn, especially while wearing a back brace after the accident at the dairy.

She grabbed her makeup from the sink counter and stuffed it in her patchwork denim handbag. “I'm ready,” she blurted as

she swung the door open and wedged herself between Conn and her father in the narrow hallway. “I just need to get something from my bedroom. Conn, why don’t you wait for me in the car?” *And leave my dad alone! Your family’s done enough harm to mine!*

“I’m ain’t waiting outside, Reba Jean!” Conn roared loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. “And whatever you were gonna get in your room, forget it. My Mom’s expecting you, and you damn well better get your butt in gear, if you know what’s good for you.” The bathroom door shuddered under the impact of his fist. “Now come on!”

“You lay another hand on my daughter, you stupid son-of-a-b—”

“Dad,” Becca cautioned.

“Becca, I know you didn’t run into a door. He hit you. If he doesn’t leave right now, I’ll call the police and—”

“Dad, don’t. Conn is—”

“Go ahead,” Conn snarled. “Call the cops on me, old man, and see what happens.” He flicked Becca a warning glare, and she shut her mouth. For the sake of her family, she couldn’t afford to anger his mother by involving the authorities.

She eyed Conn and felt sick at the sight of his puffy gray eyes, thin, scraggly dark brown hair, and splotched, clammy complexion. His uni-brow and coarse features gave him a permanent ill-tempered frown. His beer belly stuck out over too-tight tan trousers, and his pale yellow shirt stretched across his middle like a blister. At twenty-seven, he was as mean as a grizzly and grossly out of shape, presenting a depressing picture of what too much booze and too little responsibility could do to a man. Considering the money his mother threw around to establish her social standing, Becca wondered why she didn’t insist Conn take more pride in his appearance.

“Becca,” her father said, “this is killing your mother and me. We can’t understand what you—”

“It’s all right, Dad. I know what I’m doing. Just ... you have to trust me.” Unable to look her father in the eyes, she stared

down at the faded powder blue carpet. “Please, stay out of it. Okay? Please.”

“Yeah, old man. Butt out.” Conn grabbed Becca by the arm. “What I do with your daughter ain’t none of your business. And if you don’t keep your nose out of it, you’ll never see your little Reba Jean again. ‘Cause I won’t let her step foot in this dump once we’re married.” He squeezed her arm harder when he snarled the word ‘married.’ She winced and jerked away from him.

“Married! Becca! What—”

“Please, Dad. We’ll talk about it later. *Please.*”

“Becca!”

Her father looked so frail, bent over with a cane in his hand as he tried to support his weight without straining his back. In the last month, his dark hair seemed to have turned almost totally gray. Tears clouded her eyes, and she hurried over to him. She knew what she had to do, but she blocked the situation from her mind as she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Everything will be okay. Tell Mom not to wait up.”

Her father narrowed his dark eyes. “Your mother gets off work at eleven. It won’t take you that long to eat dinner.” He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “I know I can’t keep you from doing what you’re bound to do, but I’m begging you not to even consider marriage to that ... that—”

Conn belched and pushed Becca aside. “Mommy Dearest said we’re getting married, so that’s what we’re gonna do, old man. Nobody argues with her once she’s got her mind made up.”

Tossing his beer can at the bathroom wastebasket, he missed by a wide margin and turned away as the can bounced off the stool and rolled to the tub. “What are you looking at?” he growled, scowling at Becca.

“Nothing.” She cast her gaze down and skirted around her father. “Can we go now? I wouldn’t want to keep your mother’s catered dinner waiting.”

When she glanced back at her father, he shook his head and averted his eyes, as if ashamed to look at her. She swallowed

back her tears. She wanted to tell him what was going on, but she knew she couldn't. He'd do something to interfere, and for his own good she couldn't let him jeopardize the situation. "I know I owe you and Mom an explanation, but I can't right now. Just trust me, Dad. Please."

"Come on!" Conn yelled, grabbing her arm with painful force and dragging her behind him.

She lurched and stumbled backward. Righting herself, she yanked her arm from his grasp. "Keep your hands off me!"

"Only till after next Saturday." He leered, flashing his large yellowish teeth. "Then you're all mine."

"Becca!" her father called after her.

She glanced over her shoulder as his thin, drawn face turned livid. "I've got everything under control," she lied. "There's nothing to worry about. I promise."

Conn grunted and shoved her toward the front door. "Yeah, and I promise to take real good care of your little girl, Mr. Sedder. And next weekend, when I'm your son-in-law, you and me will have a good ol' time guzzling brewskies and trading BS on the front porch." He waved a hand in the air. "Later, old man."

* * * * *

Seated in Conn's red Mustang convertible, Becca kept silent until he pulled away from her house. Touching her bruised cheek, she rasped, "I asked you not to say anything about ... about the wedding until I had a chance to tell—"

"Well, when were you going to let everybody know? After we were already married a year or two? We're tying the knot next Saturday. Mom's already applied for the license and got the church reserved, but hardly anybody in town knows what's going on. You ain't told your family or anybody you work with." Conn smacked his steering wheel and glared at the road. "I ain't some hairball you're gonna sweep under a rug, Reba Jean. You're gonna be my wife, and you darn well better get used to the idea. Cuz that's what Mom wants."

Fuming, Becca crossed her arms and looked away. As Conn haphazardly guided the car down the street, a damp breeze whipped her hair about her face. Strands slapped and raked at her eyes, making them sting and tear up. She wiped her eyes, knowing her tears were due to more than just the turbulence from the top being down. She hated the idea of marrying Conn Morse. She hated *him*, a carbon-copy of his father, James Morse, in his early fifties, big and burly and vulture-ugly. He kept a fifth of whiskey tucked in his bottom desk drawer at the family's Ford and Chevy automall dealership. Willing to sleep with any woman but his own wife, he was the scourge of the town. And he had the embarrassing habit of patting his privates whenever he talked to customers in the dealership showroom. Becca looked at Conn and shook her head. *Like father, like son.*

The Morses were one of the wealthiest families in Fenton and owned several major sources of commerce in the area besides the dealership, including Greenvalley Dairy, one of the largest milk processing plants in the state. Counting the dealership, the dairy plant, the dairy farm Greenvalley Acres, and the trucking firm Greenvalley Transport, the Morses employed over two thousand rural workers. But Conn didn't care about any of that. Like his father, he pretended to sell cars at the dealership while devoting most of his energy to drinking and carousing. Rumors circulated about him taking advantage of underage girls, but he'd never been held accountable, probably due to his mother's formidable influence in Fenton and the county.

Slamming his car into a telephone pole when he was a junior in high school left him with glass cuts permanently riddling his acne-scarred face. He might have had passable looks before that senseless accident, but now he was just as ugly on the outside as he was on the inside. Considering his sketchy backseat reputation and the crowd he ran with, Becca could see why his mother decided it was time to secure him a wife and force him to settle down. Left on his own, all he'd come up with would be some gold-digging tramp hunting a meal ticket – someone unworthy of Lila Morse's stringent approval.

Massaging her brow, she tried once more to think of a way out of this mess, but couldn't. Lila Morse would see that their wedding took place as scheduled. Mrs. Morse always got her way, and with that 'evidence' hanging over her father, there wasn't a damn thing Becca could do to stop it.

Conn reached over and clenched her thigh with his big rough paw. He rubbed her leg with embarrassing familiarity until she knocked his hand aside and jerked her knee away. "Your mother told you to keep your hands to yourself. If you—"

"Only till after the wedding," he snarled. "Once we're married, I'll do whatever I want with you. And I only have to wait one more weekend."

Scowling, she smoothed her flowered cotton skirt to erase the disgusting sensation of his touch.

He eyed her and smirked. "If you weren't such a damn priss, Reba Jean, maybe we could have a little fun before the wedding. And you owe me, since you're the one that got us roped into this mess in the first place."

She glared at him. "I didn't get us into anything. It was you and your antics that made your mother intervene and force you to settle down."

"Yeah, but *you* made the deal with her." His face twisted with anger. "I was doing just fine before you came along. Now everything is all screwed up!" He hit his steering wheel again. "I don't *want* to get married!"

Becca stiffened. "Neither do I. At least, not to you."

"Then why'd you let the old hag talk you into it?"

"You know exactly why. Your mother made it clear what would happen if I didn't go through with this farce of a wedding."

He snorted. "Your old man's just a stumbling drunk. Always has been, and always will be. Anybody else would've let him take the blame whether he deserved it or not. He's—"

"I'm not just anybody else. I happened to believe him when he said he wasn't drinking on the job. And I'm not going to let him pay the penalty for something he didn't do. He was *not* responsible for Larry Carter's death. You know that, I know that,

and your mother knows it most of all.”

Eyeing the road ahead, Conn shook his head and smiled. “You sure are a piece of work, Reba Jean. You even got yourself believing your excuses. But we both know this ain’t about your daddy. It’s the money. How much was it dear old Mom offered to pay you to play housewife and mommy? Thirty-thousand?”

Becca bristled. “No amount of money in the world would convince me to marry you.”

“Yeah? Well, you’re doing it, ain’t you? Thirty-thousand dollars is a tidy wad. How about I pay you a little on the side to give me a sample before we say ‘I do?’” He reached behind as if he were about to pull his wallet out of his hip pocket. “Would twenty bucks loosen you up some?”

She turned away. “I wouldn’t have to endure your gutless insults if you were man enough to stand up to your mother.”

He grabbed her wrist and wrenched her arm painfully. “I’ll show you I’m man enough!”

She jerked away from him. “All you have to do is say ‘no,’ Conn. That’s all it takes. Tell your mother you’re not going to marry me.” Eyeing him with sudden eagerness, she urged, “There’s still time. You could—”

He stomped on the accelerator and the tires screeched, sending the car fishtailing wildly down the street. As he approached a stop sign, he slammed on the brakes, and Becca’s seat belt clenched her chest hard.

“You know the great Lila Morse,” Conn bellowed, gripping his steering wheel as if he were trying to strangle it. “She doesn’t let nobody say ‘no’ to her. And she doesn’t give up on an idea once she gets it in her head. She picked you to be her daughter-in-law, and she ain’t gonna accept nobody else. She already told me that.” He stewed in silence as he guided the car out of the modest residential area toward downtown Fenton.

The setting sun grazed the tops of trees behind aged brick buildings lining the rain-dampened thoroughfare. In the fading pink light of the cloudy evening, Conn lit a cigarette and puffed in distraction. With his gaze riveted on the road, he frowned and

murmured, “You better not nag me after we’re married, Reba Jean. I don’t need no griping old lady. And, no matter what my Mom says about grandkids, I don’t want no bunch of squalling brats making my life hell. You better not hatch any little monsters, or I swear I’ll make you sorry you’re alive.”

“Believe me, you’ve already done that.” Becca stared at Conn’s sagging, bloated profile and paled at the possibility of their impending marriage producing a brood of youngsters in his image. The idea nauseated her. She gulped and turned away.

After a moment she made herself look back at the cigarette dangled from his slack lips. He didn’t want to marry her any more than she wanted to marry him. Her only real hope of avoiding the nightmare of living with him was to ensure he wouldn’t go along with the deal his mother had forced on her. “Isn’t there any girl you know that you really like, Conn? Haven’t you ever been in love? Surely there’s someone you’d rather marry besides me.”

He blew smoke at her. She coughed and turned away as he said, “How come *you* ain’t never been in love, Reba Jean? You’re twenty-six years old. Most girls your age already got an old man and a couple rug-rats running around. And not many of them are as good-looking as you. So how come you’re still single? Huh?” He settled back in his seat with a self-satisfied grin. “Been waiting for ‘Mr. Right,’ ain’t ya? Well, lucky for you, I just happened along with a big wad of money to light your fire.”

Becca sneered. “For your information, Conn, thirty-thousand dollars is not a big wad of money. It’s chicken feed compared to what you’re used to spending on yourself in a year’s time.”

“Don’t forget about my trust fund.” His beady gray eyes glittered as he looked her up and down and added, “You ain’t forgot. You probably can’t think of anything else.” He laughed and flicked ashes over the side of the car as he pulled away from downtown Fenton’s one and only traffic light. “So, what are we gonna do, baby? Race to see who can spend it all first?”

Becca swiped a hand over her face. There was no reasoning with him. From the things his mother had said, she knew he

couldn't discipline himself to stay within a budget. His quarterly trust fund distributions amounted to about fifteen thousand a year. Living rent-free at home with his parents, with careful spending habits, he should have been able to live comfortably. But he still depended on his mother's handouts disguised as paychecks from the dealership to supplement his very expensive hobby – wrecking cars.

When they married, he would be able to fully access his trust fund. But the way he blew money, in no time the trust would be gone, and then they'd be living on whatever Becca managed to bring home working at the bank, which wasn't much. Evidently he hadn't thought things through that far.

She sighed. There had to be a way to talk sense to him. Surely he wasn't that stupid. Well, maybe he was, but she wouldn't give up. "If you want what's coming to you, Conn, you'll have to do exactly what your mother tells you. You'll have to get married and settle down and behave yourself. And," she chided carefully, "your mother wants grandchildren. You'll have to do everything just the way she wants. Otherwise, your portion of the profit shares from your family's farm, the dealership, the dairy, and the trucking firm will stay locked away in trusteeship, and you'll have to make do with the quarterly distributions you're getting now. You won't be able to get your hot little hands on one additional red cent until you turn thirty. If your mother cuts off your allowance before then, you'll have to watch your spending. You won't have any other money to blow in the meantime."

He smacked his steering wheel again. "I show up at the dealership every day and do whatever the old bag wants. I *earn* that money! But every time I piss her off, she threatens to cut off my pay. She's been holding that over my head for years." He went quiet for a second then ended, "But no matter what she says, she can't make me turn into a card-carrying family man if I don't want to. Even after we're married, I ain't gonna let some dumb broad lead me around by the nose like *she* does my dad. I can wait her out. I only have two-and-a-half more years to go, then I'll be old enough to get my money. And to hell with her!"

Becca perked her brows. There was a chink in his armor and she aimed straight for it. “*Think*, Conn. Since your mother has threatened to cut off your allowance, you don’t have the luxury of time on your side. You can either do as she says, or get a real job and work like the rest of us.”

He huffed and blustered like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum. “I don’t give a damn about the dealership, the dairy, or the money. She can shove it all where the sun don’t shine!”

Becca glared at the overgrown child sitting beside her. No matter how cleverly Conn’s mother schemed, she would never make him into a respectable adult. He would always be a selfish, evil little boy trapped inside an ugly man’s body. And left on his own, he would never do what was right. Someone else would have to push him.

“It seems to me your mother is making you do exactly what she wants, regardless of what *you* want,” Becca taunted. “The only way you’re going to stop her is tell her you won’t marry me. Find someone else totally unsuitable, that you know she’ll despise, and elope right away. Then she won’t have any reason to hold me to our deal, and maybe she’ll let my father off the hook. That’s the only way, Conn. You have to stand up to her.”

He gave her a murderous look. “Yeah, that’s just what you want, ain’t it? I take the heat and you get away free. Well, I ain’t gonna make it that easy for you to get rid of me.” He looked her over from head to toe. “Maybe having you for my little wifey ain’t gonna be as bad as I thought.” Abruptly he turned the car and headed toward the edge of town.

Becca stiffened. “What are you doing?”

“Taking a detour.” Conn grinned and flicked his burning cigarette out of the car.

Her heart seized as she glared at him. He seemed more than angry, almost sinister. She didn’t know the cause – either the liquor he’d consumed, or his building resentment over the deal she’d been forced to accept from his mother. The last time he exercised his brute superiority and expressed his displeasure over their impending marriage, he hadn’t bothered to find a secluded

place. He had simply slapped her right where she sat in the seat next to him as he drove to his mother's house. As she glared warily at him, she got a gut feeling this time he wasn't planning a repeat of his boorish display three nights ago, but something far more despicable.

The deserted blacktop led to Fenton's small airfield a few miles out of town, and connected to a state route further north. Becca wasn't sure what Conn had in mind and didn't want to find out. Attempting to remain calm, she hugged her purse and sweater in her lap and warned, "We're supposed to be at your parents' house in fifteen minutes, Conn. You know how your mother despises tardiness. We should—"

"Trust me," he growled, gunning the accelerator and whipping the car around an oncoming curve, "this ain't gonna take long. They don't call me 'The Minute-Man' for nothing."

She gripped the armrest and careened against the door. *What the hell is he planning?* "Conn—"

"Shut up, Reba Jean! Just shut the hell up! This is all your fault – yours and your daddy's. And I ain't gonna sit around anymore and let you treat me like crap. If I have to get married because of you, then I'm gonna enjoy myself. And you ain't gonna talk me out of it or scare me with threats. I don't care what my mother says, I ain't marrying no little piece I ain't taken for a test drive first."

He maneuvered around another curve, then slammed his foot on the brakes. The car skidded to a halt on the wet pavement near the soft dirt shoulder. Low-hanging trees dripped dew from the hard shower earlier that afternoon.

He turned on her. "You been prancing around with your nose stuck up in the air long enough. Now I'm gonna do what I shoulda done from the start. I'm gonna show you who's boss. And you ain't gonna say a word about it to nobody. You hear? You're gonna shut up and take it. Now, come here!"



CHAPTER 3

Conn reached for Becca, but with her seat belt already unfastened and her hand on the door latch, she eluded his grasp. By the time he realized what she was doing, she had already scrambled out of the car. Cursing, he flung his door open and charged after her.

She was frightened, but he was out of shape, and her fear gave her an edge. Unable to catch her, he yelled some choice vulgarities, then loped awkwardly back to his car. When she heard the engine roar and the tires squeal, she turned to see the car barreling straight for her. At the last instant she jumped out of the way. Conn plowed past her, hitting a small tree and putting a nasty crinkle in the right front fender. Spouting more profanity, he put the car in reverse and stomped on the accelerator. Mud sprayed everywhere, and the car spun sideways, its rear tires digging deep ruts in the soft wet shoulder.

Shaking from an adrenaline high, Becca gasped for air as she eyed the car. With its back tires buried almost to the top of the wheel wells, it was definitely stuck. Keeping watch on Conn, she scurried sideways up the road.

He climbed out of the car, slipped, and went down in the wet grass and mud. Lumbering to his feet, he called her a few ugly names, swung around to kick the car door shut, and fell backward again. Yelling obscenities, he hoisted himself up and hung onto the car for support. When he steadied his footing, he bellowed, "That's it, Reba Jean! Put out or get out! You can have it your way till we're married. But after that, you won't have a choice!"

Hugging her purse and sweater, she turned and trotted away

from him.

* * * * *

Becca's cornflower blue flats, caked with mud, rubbed her heels as soon as she started her trek, but she kept walking. As darkness encroached, the damp summer evening turned cool. Glad she'd had the sense to keep hold of her purse and sweater while vacating Conn's car, she bundled up. She glanced at her watch, then looked back over her shoulder again. She'd been walking ten minutes, but it seemed much longer.

Instead of heading back toward town, she had run toward the airport. She thought Conn had driven down the road far enough that she'd be closer to the airport than to town, but now she doubted her judgment. She hadn't considered the fact that she might not find assistance at the air center. It was late and no one was liable to be at the airport office or hangars. She doubted a commuter flight would arrive in the middle of the week. Regardless, she wasn't going to turn around and backtrack. Conn might still be waiting for her, mad enough to do her real harm. She had no choice but to follow the path she'd chosen.

Tears formed in her eyes. She didn't bother to wipe them away, but neither did she indulge herself and let more tears come. Swallowing back the urge to cry, she quickened her pace. She knew she had every right to be unhappy about her situation, but wallowing in self-pity wouldn't make things better. Through no fault of her own, her life was in a mess. She had assumed the burden for her father's misfortune and knew she could do nothing else. She might have temporarily escaped Conn, but sooner or later she'd have to go back to him and accept her fate. Her father's future depended on that.

Once she and Conn were legally married, she wouldn't be able to refuse what he'd obviously wanted this evening. She had dreamed of the day she would marry and live happily with a loving husband. But when she thought of Conn touching her, that dream became a sickening nightmare and nauseated her. She

couldn't imagine closing her eyes and lying still for it.

The glow of headlights rounding the curve ahead of her sent a jolt of terror through her whole body. Her first instinct was to dart for cover until she remembered Conn's car was stranded back in the opposite direction. In the unlikely event he'd managed to free it from the mud, he would drive up behind her. She assumed he would abandon the car and head toward town for help rather than try to hitch a ride and pick her up, or exhaust himself by running after her.

She stepped to the side of the road and waved her arms to flag down the oncoming vehicle. It drove past but instantly came to a halt. The back-up lights flashed on, and the car smoothly approached her in reverse.

As she scurried toward the black BMW sedan, she saw a Fornelli Imports license plate frame. Lou Fornelli owned a fleet of dealerships in Chicago and various towns dotting the state. His ads ran all the time on the local TV stations but didn't offer serious competition for the Morses in the three surrounding counties. Not many farmers bought expensive luxury sports cars. She stopped a short distance from the car, feeling fortunate to be rescued by a passerby who didn't patronize the Morse family car business.

As the car sat idling, the driver's door flew open and a huge silhouette in a business suit emerged. A lump of raw fear lodged in Becca's throat when she realized she was about to ask a stranger – a tall, brawny man – for help. She might be running across someone worse than Conner Morse, if that were possible. Before she could second-guess her decision, a baritone male voice edged with concern called out, "Are you all right, miss? May I give you a ride into town?"

Trapped between apprehension and desperation, she stammered, "I ... uh ... I don't know. I—"

With a few rapid steps he stood before her, towering over her. Her heart pounded, and she shivered. "I'm Steeleman Krueger," he declared. "I just drove down from Chicago. Did your car break down? Do you need a ride into town? It's really

not a good idea for you to be out here alone.”

In the fading evening light, she managed to make out his features. With raven hair and eyes that shone like sapphires against tanned skin, he was a dream-man coming to her rescue. He wore an obviously expensive, well-tailored suit that fit his trim, muscular body to perfection. His face was shadowed with concern as he extended a hand and offered, “Let me help you. You look as if you’re about to collapse. What happened?”

The tears she’d refused to let flow earlier suddenly flooded her eyes. Either her tense emotional state, or the compassion in his voice, or a combination of both made her fall apart. As her sobs racked her, she tried to gulp them back, but it was no use. She hid her face in her hands.

She stiffened when he cradled her shoulders with his arm and escorted her toward his car. “You’ll be all right,” he assured. The irony of his words made her cry harder, and her stomach clenched. She knew she definitely wouldn’t be all right. He pressed her close, and she caved in to him, giving free rein to her pent-up anger and fear.

Accepting the white linen handkerchief he took from his inner jacket pocket, she caught a faint whiff of crisp, clean cologne. When her tears subsided, she felt hot and weak. Pulling away from him, she wiped her face and murmured, “I’m sorry. I’m such a blubbering idiot.”

“Don’t apologize,” he said with a smile. “If it makes you feel better, then it’s what you need to do.”

He opened the passenger door, helped her into the soft gray leather seat, then closed the door for her. During the moment she was alone, she sucked in a calming breath. Overdosing on the addictive new-car smell, she watched him circle around the front of the car. She tensed as he opened the door and slid into the driver’s seat. When he turned to face her and gave her a quick once-over, she lowered her gaze.

“Are you ... do you need to go to the hospital?” he murmured. “Or the police?”

She felt her face glow with embarrassment when she

realized what he must be thinking. “No. I just ... I had a little trouble. *Car* trouble. That’s all.”

In the dim light of the instrument panel, she saw the tension in his face relax. He eyed the road and put his car in gear. “Where did you break down?”

She huddled in the seat. She didn’t want him to take her back to Conn. “A couple miles down the road. The car’s stuck. I think it will need to be pulled out. Could you just ... um ... take me into town so I can call my sister and get a ride home?”

“I have a cell phone you’re welcome to use. And I’ll be glad to drive you wherever you want to go.”

Becca nodded, then averted her eyes from his probing stare. He drove on in silence. The few moments it took to reach Conn’s Mustang made her walk of escape seem like an arduous exercise in futility. She gulped when her escort slowed to a stop, his headlights shining on Conn’s car parked askew off the side of the road. Frantically she looked for Conn. She didn’t see him anywhere, but she wasn’t taking any chances. “Could you ... would you mind locking your doors?”

Her gentleman driver turned in surprise but quickly obliged her by hitting the power lock control. He eyed her for a long moment, then looked back at Conn’s abandoned car. “You really got stuck, didn’t you?”

She cleared her throat. “Yeah, I, uh...” She couldn’t come up with a quick lie to conveniently explain away the truth, so she fell silent.

Still eyeing the Mustang, he observed, “Those are dealer plates.” He turned on her as if he were expecting an explanation. His expression was peculiar, almost accusing.

She felt herself blushing again. “It’s not my car. I was riding with someone else, and...”

“And that’s why you wanted me to lock the doors? Because you thought he might still be around somewhere?” She looked shamefully down at her lap when he prodded, “Perhaps you should tell me what happened, Miss...”

“Sedder. Rebecca – Becca – Sedder.” She swallowed hard

and sucked in a rasping breath. "I'd appreciate a ride back into town, Mr...." Swiping at her eyes, she sighed miserably. "I'm sorry. I know you told me your name, but--"

"Krueger. Steeleman Krueger."

"Steeleman?" She glanced at him. "That's an unusual name."

He shrugged. "A family surname. Please, just call me Steele."

She frowned. Mr. Krueger wasn't the only man with a family surname for a given name. Conn was dubbed Conner Lee Morse in honor of the maiden names of his grandmother and great-grandmother on his father's side of the family. Perhaps the naming convention was more common than she had imagined.

"You're having more than just car trouble, aren't you, Becca?"

The sound of her name spoken in this man's soft, deep, compelling voice made her feel warm and safe. Her eyes stung with new tears, and she longed to confess her problems to him. But he wasn't here to rescue her from her fate – he was merely someone who'd happened along. It wasn't fair for her to burden him with her situation. She looked away from his penetrating eyes and mumbled, "I appreciate your concern, Mr. Krueger, but I really don't want to talk about it right now. Could you just drop me off in town? I'll call my sister to come and get me."

"Let me take you home. Where do you live?"

The thought of her father seeing her in her present condition – teary-eyed, with her makeup smeared and mud on her shoes – made her want to avoid going home. "I wouldn't want to put you out. Really, Mr. Kru--"

"Steele. Please."

She gulped. "Steele. I just--"

"I insist. You look as though you could use some help. It won't be any trouble at all for me to take you home."

She bit her lower lip. "I really need to get cleaned up first. I don't want to have to explain to my father..."

He perked his black razor brows and looked her over.

“Understood.” As he drove away, leaving Conn’s abused car behind like a discarded carcass, he offered, “If you want to freshen up, you’re more than welcome to use the facilities at my hotel room. I have a reservation at the Standish Inn.”

“The Standish! Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly—”

“It won’t be a problem.”

“But the Standish is a really classy place and—”

“I know.” He glanced at her, then looked back at the road. “You’ll be my guest. No questions asked.”

Becca gasped and slid down in her seat the moment Steele’s headlights illuminated the form lumbering along the road.

“Is that the man you were riding with?” Steele asked as he slowed to a rolling coast and looked in his rearview mirror.

Becca whirled around in her seat, cowering as she watched Conn lope toward them. Obviously he thought they were going to pick him up. She turned on Steele in terror. He took one look at her and urged the car away. She heard Conn cursing behind them. With a deep breath of relief she sank back in her seat.

Mercifully, Steele didn’t ask for an explanation as he drove into Fenton. In the silence that descended on them, Becca fumbled with her face and hair. She knew she must look a fright after riding in Conn’s convertible with the top down and then bawling like a lost calf. As they approached Fenton’s downtown square, she became more anxious. “I don’t want anyone to see me like this. Please, could you pull over somewhere and let me call my sister?”

Steele sighed and pulled the car into a parking space on the deserted square, not far from the Standish Inn. Becca eyed the courthouse and the regal Standish sitting one block off the square. She’d never been in the hotel but knew it was frequented by the social upper crust of Fenton – if there was such a thing. A favorite dining spot for well-to-do locals, out-of-county residents, as well as tourists, the historic inn had become a haven for weekend getaways. With its wraparound porch supported by stately white columns, the old brick three-story building was an area landmark.

When Becca dared to look at her escort, she found him frowning as his gaze danced over her face. Impulsively he reached out and took her chin in his hand. “Did he do this to you?” he growled.

She blinked in astonishment. Steele Krueger sounded as if he knew Conn Morse and harbored a strong dislike of him.

“The bruise on your cheek. Did he hit you?” Steele skimmed his thumb lightly over her injured cheek, and his touch made her skin heat. Unable to admit the truth, she shied from him.

He put the car in reverse and pulled onto the street. “You’re coming with me right now, Becca.”

“But—”

“No argument.” He drove into the back parking lot reserved for Standish Inn guests, then turned off the car and faced her. “That’s the last time he’ll lay a hand on you. I promise.”

Becca scowled at the man beside her. He seemed to take personal offense at the abuse she’d suffered. She didn’t know what his interest was, but she was determined to phone her sister and get home as soon as possible. She’d had enough of men for a while, and she knew she had no business putting her trust in a stranger, no matter how attractive and compelling he was.