

THE
ROOM
WITH THE
Second-Best
VIEW

VIRGINIA SMITH



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

Published in association with Books & Such Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409-5370, www.booksandsuch.com.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover by Garborg Design Works

Cover illustrations and images © Pink Pueblo, Little Lion / Bigstock

THE ROOM WITH THE SECOND-BEST VIEW

Copyright © 2016 by Virginia Smith

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-6481-4 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-6482-1 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Smith, Virginia, 1960- author.

Title: The room with the second-best view / Virginia Smith.

Description: Eugene Oregon : Harvest House Publishers, [2016] | Series: Tales from the Goose Creek B&B ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2015051366 (print) | LCCN 2016003834 (ebook) | ISBN 9780736964814 (softcover) | ISBN 9780736964821 ()

Subjects: LCSH: Bed and breakfast accommodations--Fiction. | City and town life--Kentucky--Fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3619.M5956 R66 2016 (print) | LCC PS3619.M5956 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015051366>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 / BP-CD / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter One



The moment his wife set a steaming bowl of chicken and dumplings on the dinner table, Al Richardson knew she was up to something. He narrowed his eyes and studied her too-casual expression as she scurried to and from the stove to deliver more dishes filled with his favorites. Scattered suspiciously among the green beans were bits of bacon, an ingredient Millie frequently refused to serve, claiming wifely concern for his health. The telltale scents of cinnamon and brown sugar wafted from a bowl of fried apples.

Al straightened his spine against the back of his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and leveled a mistrustful glare on her. “Mildred Richardson, what is the meaning of this?”

She paused in the act of setting a frosty glass of iced tea in front of him to lift a round-eyed stare his way. “It’s called supper, dear. We do it every night.”

“Not like this, we don’t.” He waved toward the brimming bowl of plump, delectable dumplings and added an accusation. “Is there lemon cake for dessert?”

His favorite lemon cake was reserved for special events, like anniversaries and Christmas, but occasionally she’d been known to brazenly wield the treat as a tool to accomplish an end of which she knew he would not approve. A powerful weapon indeed. If she whipped out a lemon cake, he might as well throw in the towel—or napkin, in this case—before he even knew the source of the upcoming conflict.

“No lemon cake.” She seated herself, her expression prim, but before he could heave a relieved sigh she mumbled, “It’s coconut cream pie.”

“You’re shameless.” His second-favorite dessert and one she seldom prepared because she insisted he would eat himself into a diabetic coma. He caught her gaze, not bothering to filter the accusation from his tone. “There’s a scheme rolling around in that head of yours. Out with it.”

Instead, she extended a hand toward his. “Can we at least say the blessing first? It’s your turn.”

He almost snorted. Another obvious move, a veiled insinuation that her objective enjoyed heavenly approval. Her lips pursed in a prim bow, she bowed her head. Taking her hand, Al cleared his expression for the few seconds it took him to murmur a quick prayer and then resumed his glower.

“Well?” he demanded as he pulled the dumplings toward him. “Explain yourself before the suspense drives my blood pressure any higher.”

If thirty-eight years of marriage to the woman seated beside him had taught him anything, it was that Millie refused to be rushed. Whether applying her makeup, stripping paint from the ancient carved banister in the entry hall of the monstrous Victorian-era house they’d purchased, or reading the comic section of the newspaper while he drummed his fingers on the breakfast table, his wife insisted on taking her time. Judging by her imperturbable expression and the slow, methodic way she ladled green beans onto her plate, not even the threat of her husband’s rising blood pressure would force her to speak before she was ready. Heaving a sigh, Al served himself an extra-large helping of dumplings. Might as well make the most of the edible bribe.

“Justin is moving out this weekend.”

She delivered the information casually, though she knew full well he was aware of their handyman-boarder’s schedule. An obvious ploy,

one he easily recognized. She'd drop a few seemingly random tidbits of information, skittering madly from topic to topic while he grew dizzy trying to perceive a connection. All the while she'd be building a case, leading up to the final piece of data that tied them all together and revealed her objective.

All right. He'd play along. "On Saturday, I think he said." He scooped a generous portion of fried apples and welcomed the sugary cinnamon aroma with a deep inhale. "That's in three days, in case you're keeping count."

She ignored the statistic. "Violet and I are going to finish painting the back bathroom on Friday."

Another random tidbit. Not the bathroom connected to Justin's room in the front of the house, but the back one. Millie and Violet had worked their way from the front bedroom toward the rear, cleaning, repairing, painting, and decorating as they went. Between the two of them they had stripped enough hideous wallpaper (hideous in Millie's estimation, though most of it looked perfectly fine to him) to smother every wall in Goose Creek.

Fork hovering over a morsel of juicy chicken, she watched him. Apparently a reply was expected.

"Okay." He almost added, *Sounds like a good plan*, but put a dumpling in his mouth instead. Better keep his comments to a minimum until he knew the stakes.

"That gives us three finished bedrooms, each with an *en suite*."

"Mm-hmm." He chewed the delectable dumpling, glad for an excuse to stay silent. Normally he would have corrected her use of the fancy word. Richardsons were plain folk. They used bathrooms, not *en suites*. But just now, the quieter he stayed the better.

She speared the chicken and lifted it to her mouth, pausing long enough to add, "The wedding is in thirty-one days."

Another seemingly unrelated statistic, but he was beginning to see a connection. Nine months ago Justin Hinkle moved in to the upstairs front bedroom in a work-for-rent arrangement with which

Al was perfectly satisfied. During the day the young man performed his handyman work for a growing clientele, while on evenings and between jobs he tended to the gazillion-and-one repairs necessary to ensure that this cataclysm of a house didn't collapse and bury them in decades-old rubble.

This weekend Al and Millie would lose their handyman, who had bought a house with his fiancée, Dr. Susan Jeffries, owner of the Goose Creek Animal Clinic, where Millie worked as a part-time receptionist. He would live alone in the couple's new home until the end of May, readying the place for his bride.

In other words, Al would have to begin paying for repair work again. He stabbed at an apple slice. The reminder of the impending drain upon his retirement funds zapped his patience with his wife's verbal game.

"What are you driving at, Millie?" The words contained more peevish sting than he intended, but he refused to back down. "Tell me and get it over with."

"Well." She set her fork down on the edge of her plate and eyed him with a calm gaze that didn't fool him one bit. He noted the rigid way she held her arms, indicating that her hands were clasped tightly in her lap. "A few of the wedding guests need a place to stay, and of course the closest hotel is twenty miles away. So I thought since we have three perfectly good *en suite* rooms sitting empty—"

"Wait a minute." He stiffened his spine and deepened his glower. "Are you suggesting that we invite complete strangers to stay *here*? With us?"

"We *are* opening a bed-and-breakfast, Albert." She picked up her fork and coolly scooped up a few green beans. "Hosting strangers goes with the territory."

"Not until we retire. That was our deal, Millie." He ducked his head to catch her eye. "You agreed to the timing, remember?"

"Of course I remember. This is only a little early."

“Two years and eight days,” Al announced. “I have a countdown on my computer.”

She lifted a calm gaze toward him. “It’s not like I’m suggesting we put up a sign and start taking reservations. I think of this as kind of a practice run.”

“What’s to practice? You already know how to make beds and cook breakfast.”

Her answer was an exasperated sigh that came out more like a grunt. “I knew you would make an issue out of this. It’s not as if you’ll be inconvenienced. I’ll do all the work. You won’t even know they’re here.”

“I’ll know.” He cast an irritable glance toward the ceiling. “We’ll hear them tromping around up there. Flushing toilets in the middle of the night, waking us at all hours.”

Millie loaded her fork with apples. “Besides, it’s not like they’ll be complete strangers. They’re Susan’s and Justin’s relatives.”

“They’re strangers to me.” Now he sounded petulant, an attitude he detested. A mouthful of beans shut off further whining and gave him a moment to come up with an effective argument.

Truthfully, a few overnight guests didn’t sound all that intrusive. He’d be at the office during the day, and they’d probably spend their evenings with the bride and groom. What bothered him was the larger issue. If this practice run turned out well—and knowing his capable wife, it would—Millie would press to do it again. Next time the guests might be relatives of someone at church coming to town for a family reunion. Or a long-lost high school friend who needed a place to stay for a few days during horse racing season. If he agreed to this first intrusion, he could be subjecting himself to any number of strangers parading through his home, eating his food, shattering the peace of his morning coffee routine on the veranda. Before he knew what was happening he’d be the pudgy proprietor of a fully functional bed-and-breakfast, his pants too snug from devouring delicious bribes of cake and pie.

No. Sometimes a man must stand his ground. Stiffen his spine. Put his foot down.

He swallowed and looked Millie directly in the eye. “No.”

A split second later he wished he could recall the word. Wrong tone. Wrong tack. An arctic blast invaded the cozy kitchen. Had frost appeared on her eyelashes, he would not have been surprised.

“Pardon me?” She set her fork on the edge of her plate.

A decision lay before him. He could backpedal, try to climb out of the icy hole he’d just stepped into, and attempt to restore marital harmony. No doubt a wiser man would do exactly that. But that would mean conceding the argument, something he was not prepared to do. Time to reveal a bit of that stubborn streak she so often accused him of having.

“We have a plan, Millie. An agreed-upon timeline.” He picked up his glass, adopting a casual attitude he did not feel.

“So that’s it? I have no say in the matter?”

“You had plenty of say when we bought this place.” He waved his tea glass toward the kitchen doorway and the sprawling house beyond. “*We don’t need six bedrooms*, I said. *We need room for the children at Christmas*, you said. A deliberately misleading statement, I might add. You wanted to open a bed-and-breakfast all along, a fact that you kept from me.”

At least she had the grace to lower her eyes. “I don’t see why you have to drag up old arguments that have nothing to do with the current discussion.”

“But they do. The timing for the opening of your hotel—”

“Bed-and-breakfast.”

He heaved a sigh. “*Bed-and-breakfast*, then. You specified the timing. It was your idea to take our time fixing this place up and then open when we retire. Your plan, not mine. Plans are plans. They shouldn’t be changed at the drop of a hat.”

For a long moment she studied him, her eyes narrowing as though

testing his resolve. Al kept his posture rigid, jutted his chin, and met her gaze.

With a stiff nod, she retrieved her fork. "Fine. Have it your way."

It took a moment for her words to register. Was she really conceding defeat already? He cocked his head, not quite ready to believe her. "Do you mean you agree with me?"

"Not at all. I think you're being a stubborn old poop." She lifted a forkful of green beans and carefully flicked away a piece of bacon. "But I love you, and I don't want to argue with you, so let's just drop it. Eat your dumplings."

Temporarily speechless, Al watched her cut an apple slice neatly in two. He didn't believe her, not for an instant. Oh, not about loving him. They'd been together for too long, lived too much life together, to doubt their love for each another. But he knew his Millie. She possessed a stubborn streak every bit as inflexible as his. This retreat was temporary, a dodge so she could regroup and come up with another approach.

He turned his attention to his plate. Might as well enjoy the dumplings and pie while they lasted.



"You didn't tell him?" The creases in Violet's forehead traveled upward toward steely gray curls peppered with brown.

"That I've already invited Justin's Aunt Lorna to stay?" An uncomfortable flush rose into Millie's cheeks. She'd been so certain that Albert would see the wedding as an opportunity to practice their hosting skills, she'd agreed before asking him. Now she faced the unenviable task of telling her boss that plans had changed and she'd have to find another place for the relatives to stay.

She took a teacup from her best friend's soapy hands, rinsed it, and applied a damp dish towel. "The opportunity never presented itself."

"Hmm." Violet paused in the act of wiping a saucer and assumed

the stance of one about to utter a piece of sage wisdom. “*Three things cannot long be hidden: the sun, the moon, and truth.*”

Impressed, Millie asked, “Who said that?”

“Beats me, but it’s a fact.” She shrugged and plunged the saucer beneath the suds. “Maybe Al will change his mind.”

“Maybe.” Though she intended to try, Millie didn’t hold out much hope of convincing him. He’d seemed adamant. Not only that, but he’d struck a guilty chord with the reminder of her subterfuge concerning their purchase of this house. She returned the dry teacup to its place in the cabinet. “I felt sure the dinner would soften his attitude.”

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach,” Violet quoted.

Millie awarded her a sour grimace. “Apparently not.”

“The pie was delicious.” Violet gave her a sympathetic pat on the arm.

Millie cast a dissatisfied glance toward the remaining two pieces, covered and ready for the fridge. She’d been forced to rescue them from Violet who, after tasting a slice during their ritual Thursday afternoon tea, would have devoured every morsel without restraint. If the evening was as mild as the weatherman promised, Millie and Al could have pie and a cup of decaf on the veranda after supper. Then, when Al was happily satiated with leftover dumplings and pie, she would broach the subject again. Perhaps if she suggested only *one* houseguest, and that one an elderly lady, he’d be more receptive.

When the dishes had been put away and the kitchen table wiped, Violet retrieved her purse from where it dangled on the back of her chair. “One o’clock tomorrow?”

“Better make it two thirty. The celebration committee is meeting down at city hall at one.” Millie shook her head as she draped the damp dish towel over the oven handle. Why in the world had she volunteered to serve on the committee planning the ceremony to commemorate Goose Creek’s one hundred fiftieth anniversary? The biweekly meetings were boring and never accomplished anything,

which she found beyond frustrating. If *she* were the committee chair, she'd—

No. Her days were full enough without the added responsibility. For once in her life she was determined to sit back, let someone else be in charge, and cheerfully do as she was told.

Besides, she had her sights set on a loftier goal.

She helped Violet on with her jacket and opened the back door. "I'll get the last of the sanding done tonight. Painting that bathroom shouldn't take more than an hour or two."

"Then I'll be home in time to watch a couple of episodes of *Dr. Who*." Violet zipped her zipper all the way up to her chin.

Millie shook her head. "I don't understand what you find so fascinating about that show."

"*By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail*. Ben Franklin said that." Violet's eyes gleamed. "If a phone box ever appears on my front lawn and a handsome time traveler steps out looking for a companion, I'll be prepared."

Millie stared at her friend, momentarily at a loss. Sometimes the wisest answer was none at all. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She opened the door. Rufus, whom she'd thrust outdoors in an attempt to coerce him into enjoying the spring sunshine, nearly knocked them over charging inside. Apparently the lazy beagle had been hovering, waiting for an opportunity to escape the enforced healthy activity. He scurried between them, nails tapping on the linoleum, and collapsed with a sigh onto his padded doggie cushion in the corner.

"You really are as lazy as Albert says," Millie informed him. Without lifting an eyebrow, he answered with a single languid wag of his tail.

Chuckling, Violet left the house. After the door closed behind her, Millie gave the damp kitchen counter another swipe with the dishrag and then turned to do the same with the table. Violet possessed

many fine qualities, bless her, but thoroughness in cleaning was not one of them.

The kitchen finally tidy enough to suit her, Millie headed upstairs to begin sanding the nail holes she'd spackled this morning before breakfast. On the way she ran an admiring hand along the curved banister as she climbed the stairs, pleased with the smooth feel of the gleaming wood. All the effort to strip, sand, and varnish had been worth every aching muscle and broken nail. When guests stepped into the entry hall through the double front doors, their eyes couldn't help but be drawn up the elegant staircase to rest on the pair of vintage button-backed chairs on the first landing, the mahogany arms ornately carved. She paused to pat the puffy upholstery of the nearest chair. One day she would find a spindly-legged table to set between them. Her mind's eye pictured the exact style she sought in order to create a subtle invitation for her guests to pause, rest, and perhaps pick up the book of poetry resting on the table's polished surface. Faulkner, of course. With a velvet ribbon to mark the poem Albert had read to her the day she'd decided to marry him.

The front bedroom, currently occupied by Justin Hinkle, had been the first one she and Violet finished. She paused in the open doorway to sweep an admiring gaze around the interior. Albert insisted on referring to this room as the Humpty Dumpty Room. Her eyes narrowed when they rested on the place where once a hole had gaped in the wall, and she suppressed a shudder at the memory of mold growing inside. The damage had been minimal and the evidence completely eradicated thanks to Justin's exacting work and several coats of sky-blue paint. The subtle pattern of the bedspread she'd found on the sale rack at Walmart lent an air of elegance to the bedroom furniture left—or abandoned, as Albert liked to say—by the house's previous owners. With a happy sigh, Millie withdrew.

Across the hallway stood the second guest room. This was her favorite of the five upstairs bedrooms. Not only was it the largest, but this room boasted two floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the

tree-covered backyard. Last summer she'd spied a robin's nest cradled in the branches of the nearest sturdy walnut tree just beyond the window, and had come upstairs often to peer through the glass as the mama bird cared for her eggs. The day the eggs hatched, Millie had remained plastered to the window for hours and had successfully recorded the emergence of one scrawny, scraggly baby on her phone. She'd sent the video to five-year-old Abby, who then called to say, "Grammy, that's even uglier than Ursula in *Little Mermaid*."

In winter, without the covering of leaves, the bare, prickly branches gave a clear view of the pond, where Canada geese would soon begin to nest. From the master bedroom, located directly beneath this one, Millie and Albert enjoyed an unobstructed view and had already identified three distinct pairs.

Music echoed up the stairway, drawing her away from the window. She'd left her cell phone on the kitchen counter. Someday she would ask someone to show her how to select a ringtone for different people so she could tell who was calling without having to see the display. That way she'd know whether or not to dash for the call. At this time of the afternoon, it might be Alison calling from Italy to say good-night before she went to bed.

Intent on hurrying, Millie hastened down the staircase. Though there was basically zero chance she would make it to the kitchen in time to take the call, something urged her forward. If it *were* her daughter, Millie could call back immediately and hopefully catch her before she silenced her phone for the night.

Hand resting on the banister at the bottom of the staircase, Millie took the last two steps with a hop. The moment the heel of her slipper touched the polished wooden floor, a dreadful certainty seized her. She was going to fall. These adorable fuzzy pink slippers were made for comfort, not for leaping down staircases. Grappling with her right hand, she grabbed the newel post and flailed the air with her left in an attempt to shift her weight to land on the part of her body that possessed the most padding. With a teeth-jarring jolt that sent tears to

her eyes, her posterior thudded onto the bottom step. Or maybe the tears weren't the result of the landing so much as the agony that shot up her arm when her right wrist, wedged between the posts, wrenched sideways.

At first she thought the pounding that penetrated the cloud of agony was only in her mind. She identified hurried footsteps as a figure, blurred behind a veil of tears, rushed toward her. Albert's familiar voice sounded in her ears.

"Mildred Richardson, what have you done?"

Chapter Two



It's going to be a small wedding. A few family members in Reverend Hollister's office." Susan smiled at Mrs. Barnes and positioned the stethoscope drum over the cat's left lung.

"Arnold and I were among your first patients." Seated in the only chair in the small exam room, the elderly lady's hands rested on the shiny black pocketbook in her lap. "We almost feel like family."

Susan maintained a pleasant expression, though the urge to laugh nearly overpowered her. On the first day after she bought the Goose Creek Animal Clinic, Mrs. Barnes had nearly ended her career before it began. One minor slipup in referring to Arnold's sixth toe as a mutation—an unfortunate word choice, though entirely accurate—and the sweet little old lady had bristled like a porcupine. She'd called on all her friends to boycott the clinic. Thankfully, Susan had managed to win the approval of enough of Goose Creek's pet owners to keep the clinic afloat.

She kept a gentle hold on Arnold's plump body to keep him from leaping off the metal exam table. The slight wheeze she'd detected in his right lung was more pronounced on this side. A year ago she would have drawn blood and sent it off to the lab, but since moving to Goose Creek, where the feline population nearly equaled the human, she'd become something of an expert in cat maladies. Arnold had feline calicivirus, or possibly herpesvirus. Both infections were

prevalent in shelters and multicat homes, and easily transmitted to other cats through sharing food and water bowls, or coughing and sneezing.

As if to prove her point, Arnold sneezed. A fine mist sprayed the metal surface in front of him.

“The poor dear has been doing that for two days,” Mrs. Barnes said, *tsk-tsking* at her pet.

Susan removed the stethoscope from her ears. “How many cats do you have now?”

“Five.” Clear blue eyes twinkled. “The baby came from Tootsie Woosie’s litter.”

Making a mental note to call Tuesday Love, the owner of Tootsie Woosie and proprietor of Tuesday’s Day Spa to schedule an exam, Susan gave Arnold a final stroke along his spine and lifted him from the table.

Mrs. Barnes stood, looped her pocketbook over her arm, and gathered him up. “What’s the matter with my little man?”

“He has an upper respiratory infection.” Susan plucked a pen out of her lab coat pocket and picked up Arnold’s chart. “We’ve caught it fairly early, so I think he’ll make a full recovery. I’ll give you an antibiotic, enough for all your cats. You’ll also need to keep them isolated.” She glanced up. “They don’t go outside, do they?”

“Weeeelll.” She lifted Arnold higher in her arms to nuzzle his furry neck with her chin. “Arnold and Belinda do enjoy an afternoon stroll in the sunshine.”

Great. Susan jotted a note on the corner of the chart, a reminder to stock up on antibiotics for the clinic’s supply cabinet. “For the next three weeks, please keep them inside. This virus is highly contagious.”

She held the door open for Mrs. Barnes and stopped at the medicine cabinet on the way to the reception area to gather enough antibiotic to treat five cats. Thank goodness Arnold was the last patient of the day, and there had not been another feline in the Kuddly Kitty waiting room when he arrived. There went her plans for a relaxing

evening at home with Justin. It would take a couple of hours to sanitize the clinic.

Alice Wainright, the afternoon receptionist, took the exam sheet from Susan and began keying the codes into the computer.

“And how’s poor Fern, dear?” asked Mrs. Barnes.

Only someone who knew Alice as well as Susan did would have noticed the slight wince at the mention of her oldest daughter’s name. *Poor Fern* had turned eighteen several months ago and returned home from the juvenile detention center, where she’d lived since being convicted of theft and possession of methamphetamines. Though Alice was shy and private by nature, she’d revealed enough details for Susan to realize her daughter wasn’t readjusting well to small-town life. Especially a small town with an active gossip chain and a penchant for dredging up old news if current events didn’t provide something juicy enough to keep them entertained.

Alice flashed a smile that faded as quickly as it appeared. “She’s a big help to me with the children, watching them while I work.”

Mrs. Barnes’s lips tightened and her tone dropped into the disapproving range. “I’m sure she has her hands full with those boys of yours.”

The Wainright brothers enjoyed a reputation around town for being rough-and-tumble and more than a little mischievous. Justin referred to the ten- and eleven-year-olds as *high-spirited*. In Susan’s opinion they’d crossed the line between impish and delinquency last fall when they strapped a kite on Nina Baker’s dog, Pepe, and tied him to Edith Boling’s hundred-and-thirty-pound Boomer, for what became known around town as the Flying Chihuahua Caper. Poor Pepe still had to be sedated whenever a breeze blew.

When Mrs. Barnes and Arnold left, Susan twisted the dead bolt and sagged against the door. “Could you do me a favor before you leave? Call Tuesday Love and ask her to bring her cat in for an exam. Tell her not to worry, but I want to check for a feline virus.”

“Okay.” Alice picked up a note and extended it. “Miss Hinkle

called. She wants you to let her know which florist you've decided to use."

A familiar pain began in the base of Susan's skull, and she rubbed a knot that had taken up permanent residence in the back of her neck. She didn't want to offend her future aunt-in-law, but Aunt Lorna's phone calls were becoming bothersome. "I've lost count of the times I've told her we're *not* having flowers. Or music. Or printed invitations." She shoved the note in her pocket, glad once again that she had not given Aunt Lorna her cell number. She'd return the call later, from the office phone. "You might want to add disinfectant solution to the supply list. I'm going to wipe us out cleaning up after Arnold." She sighed. "It'll probably take all evening."

"Do you want me to send Fern over to help?" A hopeful expression appeared on Alice's face.

The poor woman had confided her concern over her daughter's inability to find a job. Creekers possessed long memories, and not many were forgiving.

Though Susan sympathized with Alice, the few times she'd met Fern had left her unconvinced of the thoroughness of the girl's rehabilitation. She might be completely trustworthy, but why tempt her with free access to a veterinary clinic, where a variety of medicines were kept in stock?

"Thanks, but I prefer to do it myself. Otherwise I'll worry about cross-infections." She flashed a quick grimace. "My control-freakish tendencies, you know."

She was saved from further discussion when her cell phone rang. Retrieving it from her pocket, she glanced at the screen and experienced a pleasant rush of warmth at the appearance of her handsome fiancé's image. With a farewell nod at Alice, she answered the call and headed toward the privacy of her office.

"Hey you," she said into the phone, using the soft tone she reserved just for him.

"Hey."

The one word, clipped in a tight tone, told her more than a twenty-minute conversation. She halted and gripped the phone tighter. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Millie,” Justin said. “She fell down the stairs and is on her way to the hospital.”

“Were you there when she fell?”

“No, I pulled into the driveway as Al was helping her to the car.”

Car, not ambulance. That was a good sign, anyway.

“I offered to go with them,” he continued, “but she said no. Kept insisting she was fine, but I don’t think so. She was white as a sheet and hobbling like a cripple. And crying, though she tried to hide it. Al said he’d call as soon as they knew anything.”

“Keep me posted, okay? I’ll be here at the clinic for another couple of hours.”

“I thought you were cooking dinner for me tonight.”

“Change of plans.” She grimaced, though he couldn’t see her expression. “I’ve got cleanup duty here.”

For the first time during the conversation his voice relaxed. “Want some company?”

“If you can operate a mop, I’d love the help.”

A low chuckle rumbled deliciously in her ear. “Last time I checked, my mop operator’s license hadn’t expired.”

She smiled. How many men would volunteer to scrub floors just to spend time with their woman? There wasn’t a luckier girl in all of Kentucky, of that she was certain.



“I’m fine, really.”

Al didn’t believe her, not for a second. Despite the brave words, tears flowed in rivers down Millie’s face to soak the crisp white sheet. She shifted on the hospital bed and sucked in a shuddering breath.

He stood at his wife’s bedside, arms resting on the metal rails that

kept patients from tumbling to the floor. No danger of that happening to Millie though, when even a slight movement caused a gasp and a fresh flood of tears. "You're obviously not fine."

"I am," she insisted. "I don't know why I can't stop crying."

"Shock," Al intoned in his most gentle tone. "The doctor says it's natural after the body suffers a traumatic experience."

"Traumatic?" Her lower lip protruded. "That's ridiculous. I fell down the stairs and landed on my rump."

"And hurt your arm," he added.

"I'm aware of that," she snapped. "It feels like a dozen tiny pickaxes have embedded themselves in my wrist and are trying to hack their way out." She attempted to roll onto her side and didn't quite suppress a sob. "Why do they make these mattresses so hard?"

Al deemed it the better part of wisdom to treat the question as rhetorical, and held his tongue. In thirty-eight years of marriage he'd rarely seen his sweet-natured wife so irritable. That must mean she was in a lot of pain. A niggling worry erupted in his mind. What if she'd broken her back, or worse, ruptured a kidney? A person could live with one kidney, but what if the fall had damaged her liver? Could a severe fall jar a person's liver loose?

A wave of fear washed over him. What would he do without his Millie? Life would not be worth living. In sudden need of the reassurance of physical contact, he reached for her hand.

"Ow!" She glared at him. "That's my sore wrist."

He snatched his hand away and clasped it with the other behind his back. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No." Her lovely features contorted, the warning sign of the impending renewal of the salty flood. "What if it's broken? How will I finish painting the back bathroom with a broken wrist?"

Al plucked a couple of tissues from the box on the bedside. "The bathroom can wait. There's no hurry."

"B-b-but there *is*." She grasped the tissue with her left hand and covered her face. "You don't know what I've d-d-done."

Alarm buzzed in a distant corner of his mind, immediately overshadowed by concern for his wife. Millie never cried like this. The sight of her overcome with sobs disturbed him at a deep level. Far more than the time she broke his electric razor using it to shave a sweater. More even than when she left the car in neutral and it crashed through the side of Junior Watson's tobacco barn.

He leaned over the rail until his face hovered inches above hers. "Look at me, Mildred Richardson."

A corner of the tissue dipped a fraction, enough for one eye to peek up at him.

"I love you." He allowed the depth of his emotions to creep into his voice, unashamed when it broke like an adolescent boy's. "Whatever you've done, we'll handle it together."

While her sobs did not cease, they did begin to slow. Al waited, more or less patiently, for her composure to return so she could confess what she'd done. His sense of alarm inflated. Whatever it was, he felt sure he wouldn't like it. With Millie in this state he'd be forced to hide his annoyance, swallow his displeasure, and maintain a calm demeanor. He'd probably get ulcers.

The curtain behind him whipped aside and the doctor entered, holding a chart. At least he'd identified himself as a doctor when they arrived at the hospital. He looked more like he might be working on a Boy Scout merit badge.

"Good news, Mrs. Richardson." The young man slapped the folder against his thigh and smiled at Millie. "Nothing's broken."

She succumbed to a fresh wave of sobs. Relief, Al assumed, though he found it hard to tell the difference.

He faced the doctor. "You're sure? You checked everything?" A pause, and he held the doctor's eye. "Her liver's okay?"

The child-pretending-to-be-a-doctor looked startled a moment and then laughed. Al forced himself not to bristle.

"Everything's fine. She's going to have a sore tailbone for a few weeks." He shifted his gaze to Millie. "We'll give you an inflatable

donut that'll make sitting more comfortable. And we're going put a brace on that wrist to give the scapholunate time to heal."

Millie blew her nose into the tissue. "The what?"

"The ligament between the two bones in your wrist. The MRI didn't show any tears, but you've sprained it pretty badly. You'll need to wear the brace all the time." He shook a finger as he might to a young child, which set Al's teeth together. "No cheating."

Fretful creases appeared in Millie's forehead. "For how long?"

"Two weeks at a minimum. Possibly as long as six."

"Six weeks!" She turned wide eyes on Al. "I can't be out of commission for six weeks. I have too much to do."

Al opened his mouth to ask what tasks were so important, but the doctor launched into a lecture.

"Mrs. Richardson, the wrist is a complex group of bones, cartilage, and ligaments held in a delicate balance. If an injury like this isn't allowed to heal properly, it could result in long-term pain, stiffness, and swelling." He'd been speaking seriously, but then the patronizing tone returned. "We don't want that, do we?"

"No," she replied, meeker than Al had ever seen her. "We don't."

"Good." He turned to leave, speaking as he exited. "Hang tight until the nurse brings the splint and your discharge papers. Take ibuprofen for pain. Ice the wrist and the tailbone for twenty minutes, four times a day. Oh..." He paused and looked over his shoulder. "You're going to have a nasty bruise on your bottom. Nothing to worry about. It's normal." With a final grin, he disappeared.

Millie scowled after him. "There's nothing normal about a black-and-blue bum."

Reassured that his wife was in no imminent danger, Al returned to his place beside the bed, intent on forcing a full disclosure of whatever information she'd kept from him. "About that thing you mentioned."

"Thing?" She plucked at the sheet and did not meet his eye. "What thing is that?"

He planted his feet. “You know exactly what thing I’m talking about. The thing you haven’t told me. The thing you did. Out with it.”

To his dismay, tears once again pooled in her eyes and spilled over rims already red with crying. He plucked another tissue and handed it to her.

“It’s just that—” Her voice cut off with a squeak. She swallowed and tried again. “I know you don’t want the wedding guests staying at our house, b-b- She drew in a breath and finished the sentence on a sob. “But I already invited them!”

Now the weeping returned in earnest. While Millie blubbered, Al concentrated on drawing deep, cleansing breaths through his nose and passing her the occasional fresh tissue when the others became soggy.

How could she invite people into their home without asking him first? The dumplings and pie proved that she knew he would not approve, and yet she’d done it anyway. He’d been deceived. Manipulated. Played for a sucker by his own wife.

He opened his mouth to voice his outrage, but closed it again. She had a heart of gold, his Millie. He could almost see the way this situation must have come about. Dr. Susan, who was not only Millie’s boss but also something of a substitute daughter since their own lived in another country, was planning a wedding. What woman didn’t relish weddings? Suppose one day at work Dr. Susan voiced concern that there was no place for her relatives to stay. Softhearted Millie would immediately have wanted to fix the problem. A fixer-upper—that described Millie perfectly. Since she had the means to help, she would have volunteered without thinking twice.

Inhaling a final deep breath, Al laid a hand—extra softly—on her shoulder. She looked up at him, misery plain on her blotchy features.

“If you’ve invited them, then they’re welcome in our home.”

His swift capitulation must have stunned her. The weeping halted mid-sob. “Do you mean it?”

“I do. We’ll receive them with open arms.” He glanced down at her injured wrist. “Or I will. You can receive them with open *arm*.”

“But the upstairs bathroom—”

He laid a finger across her mouth. “I will paint the upstairs bathroom.” Bending low over the bed railing, he removed his finger to brush a featherlight kiss across her lips. “We are a team, Mildred Richardson. Whatever we do, we do it together.”

A new flow of tears began. These didn’t bother Al in the least, accompanied as they were by Millie’s good arm snaking around his neck to pull him more firmly toward the lips he loved to kiss.