
Carlisle Bride

by Leigh Michaels

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CHAPTER ONE

SPRING at Oakley Manor ... Could there be another spot on earth where the sun shone quite so brightly, and the flowers had the same perfect clarity of color? And the smells!

Brooke inhaled deeply as she walked across the sloping back lawn. The sharp scent of jonquils, softened by the delicate fragrance of the first early bluebells and the rich smell of dew-wet ground, tickled her nose as she walked slowly towards the back door.

“I suppose it’s possible that I’m prejudiced,” she murmured, with a half-smile that poked fun at herself. “But there’s still nowhere that can beat Oakley in the spring.”

In another week, the hillside would be hazy with bluebells. A couple of weeks after that would come lilac, and then irises and peonies, and another gorgeous summer at Oakley would be on the way.

It would be the first summer without her father. Sadness clutched at her throat. Who would have guessed a year ago what sweeping changes twelve short months could bring to the Carlises? And what of the coming year? What waited for them in the months ahead?

“Don’t borrow trouble,” she told herself sternly. “You’ve never been known for your talent in predicting the future anyway.”

A plump robin, looking for worms in the loose earth of a flower bed, cocked his head to one side and watched her warily. Then, apparently deciding that she was harmless, he resumed his search for breakfast.

“Is that a message?” Brooke asked him quietly. “Are you telling me I’d better get out into the world and scramble to put food on the table, too?” She sighed, looked back across the hillside blanketed in yellow, and opened the kitchen door.

At the breakfast bar, a child sat on a high stool, a bowl of cereal in front of her, stirring aimlessly. Her lower lip was thrust defiantly out, and as Brooke came in, the child gave a violent push at the backpack that lay beside her bowl. It slid off the counter, taking a glass full of orange juice with it.

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“Now see what you’ve done!” The teenage girl on the other side of the bar had jumped back, avoiding the worst of the splash, but a few drops had hit her brown tunic. “I’ll have to change, and this is the last clean uniform I have,” she complained. “You little—”

“It was your orange juice,” the child returned. “You shouldn’t have left it there!” The teenager wheeled around. “Brooke, you should have seen it,” she appealed. “Tara the Terrible did it on purpose!”

“Did not,” the child said calmly. She started stirring her cereal again.

“I did see it, Emily.” Brooke folded her arms, leaned against the counter, and looked directly and unblinkingly at the child. “What about it, Tara?”

The little girl looked up. “It was her orange juice,” she said. “Emmy left it in my way, so it spilled.”

Brooke sighed. Another normal day at Oakley Manor, she thought. Not even eight o’clock, and Emily and Tara were already at it. Why, she wondered, had fate chosen to saddle her with not one but *two* younger sisters! They fought each other continually, but if anyone outside the family made a critical comment, they defended each other like wildcats.

“But you pushed it off, Tara,” Brooke said firmly. “It doesn’t matter whether you did it on purpose, you still get the honor of cleaning up the mess. Wet a cloth and wipe up the floor. Now!”

Tara sniffed once, and then climbed down from her stool.

“Would you look at this!” the teenager muttered, trying to brush drops of orange juice off her tunic.

Brooke reached for a towel and dampened a corner of it. “This should take care of it,” she said, as she dubbed at the spots. “What’s the matter with Tara?”

Emily sniffed, with all the assurance of seventeen years old. “She doesn’t want to go to school. She thinks that since I graduated last week, she shouldn’t have to go anymore, either.”

“It’s only fair,” muttered Tara. “Why should she get out two weeks early?”

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“The seniors always do. And there’s just one problem with your logic,” Brooke told her. “There’s a bit of difference between a young lady who’s in third grade and one who just finished high school.”

Tara thrust out her bottom lip. “It isn’t fair that she gets a longer vacation.”

“Some vacation!” snorted Emily. “Frying hamburgers at the Burger Barn!”

“Speaking of which,” Brooke asked, “aren’t you early? I thought it didn’t open till lunchtime.”

Emily shook her head. “Dave said now that I’m out of school, I can start coming in early to clean. It means an extra ten hours a week, Brooke. If I can put all the money in the bank, then maybe I can go to Cedar this autumn anyway.”

The hope in her eyes was bright. Brooke didn’t have the heart to extinguish it, to point out to her beloved younger sister that—no matter how many hours she worked this summer—Cedar College in the autumn would be beyond their budget. She gave Emily a hug. “I hope so too, darling,” she said, and hated herself as she said it for feeding this impossible dream.

Emily would adjust, she told herself. At any rate, it wasn’t as if she wouldn’t be going to college at all. She’d soon accustom herself to the local one, and staying here in town would have advantages, too. She wouldn’t be leaving all her friends, and she could still live at home.

Brooke glanced down at the floor. Of course, she thought wryly, Emily might not think of living at Oakley as an advantage, as long as Tara was around.

Emily poured herself another glass of orange juice and gulped it. “I’d better be going,” she said.

“Wait just a minute and I’ll drive you,” offered Brooke. She flipped through the mail piled on the counter, and stopped at a cream-colored envelope. It was of heavy bond paper, obviously expensive, with a return address that made her stomach queasy. That, she told herself, was a nonsensical way to react to a name on an envelope. Why would Tyler Marshall be writing to her now?

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He had sent flowers to her father's funeral three months ago. She hadn't expected it of him; she certainly hadn't wanted the flowers. But if it made him feel better to acknowledge Elliot's death, that was all right by her. It was a small enough gesture, after all, for the man who had done so much for him.

So she had done the polite thing and sent a stiff little note thanking him for the thought. But she certainly hadn't invited this, she told herself, staring down at the cream-colored envelope.

If he believed that her note had been an invitation to start up a correspondence—*Well, Brooke thought, I'll soon tell him I'm not interested in a pen-pal.* She was finished with Tyler Marshall. That had all been over with four years ago, when Ty left town.

She put the letter in her handbag. She'd open it later, when sharp-eyed Emily wasn't around.

"No, thanks," said Emily. "I'll ride my bike. I'm going to the club after work for a tennis lesson."

"Dave's paying you wages, and charging you for lessons?" Brooke said dryly. "Wouldn't it be easier if he just kept his money?"

Emily blushed a little, then said, in a rush, "He's not charging me any more. He told me he knew we couldn't afford lessons, but that I was too good a player to lose."

That was true enough, Brooke admitted. Dave, whose business was hamburgers but whose first love was tennis, had told her more than once that Emily was championship material. Cedar College thought so too; the athletics department there had offered her a scholarship based on her skill at the sport. Unfortunately, even with the grant, the tuition was more than Brooke would be able to afford.

And it was also true that tennis lessons didn't fit easily into the budget any more. They were doing all right on Brooke's salary, but there wasn't much left for extras.

"Sometimes I think we should resign from the club and ask for a refund on our dues," she said, almost to herself.

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Emily was horrified. “No, please, Brooke! I have to keep up my skills, and you said yourself that since Daddy had paid for the whole year, we might as well enjoy it this summer, at least – before we’re really poverty-stricken.”

“I have a question. What’s poverty-stricken?” asked Tara, from the floor, where she was still aimlessly rubbing at the orange juice.

“Something that we’re not,” Brooke said. “As long as we still have Oakley and each other.” She pulled Tara to her feet. “Wash yourself off and put the rest of your soggy cereal down the garbage disposal, and I’ll take you to school.”

“Mrs. Wilson used to clear up,” Tara informed her loftily. “Why don’t we still have Mrs. Wilson?”

“Because we’re poverty-stricken,” said Emily. “You can talk all you like about Oakley, Brooke, but how long can we afford to keep it? It’s a white elephant.”

Brooke bit her lip. “It’s our home, Emily. We have to live somewhere, and Oakley is paid for. And you know how important it is for the three of us to stick together. Remember how Mom used to say that there’s nothing in the world that can defeat three Carlisles, if they put their minds to it?”

Emily’s mouth twisted. “I remember. Well, let’s put our minds to restoring the family fortunes, shall we?” She didn’t wait for an answer. A couple of minutes later, Brooke saw her sister’s bicycle coast down the driveway.

Tara looked troubled. “I don’t remember, Brooke,” she confided.

“Of course you don’t, darling. I’m sorry.” She gave this smallest sister an impulsive hug. Tara had been only two when their mother died. Sometimes it seemed to Brooke like a very long time since she’d gone, but on other days it felt as if her mother were still there, at Oakley, just in another room. Occasionally Brooke thought she could almost smell her mother’s perfume. She had always smelled like jonquils, Brooke realized. Perhaps that was what made spring Brooke’s favorite time of year.

At any rate, she told herself, she would not sacrifice Oakley. That, after all, was why her mother had left the house to Brooke instead of to Elliot. “Good thing too,”

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she muttered. “Or Alison would have it now, along with nearly everything else he ever owned.”

Just the idea of her lovely but hard stepmother owning Oakley was enough to send cold shivers up Brooke’s spine. Emily had called Alison *The Duchess*, and the girl hadn’t been far wrong. The woman had been scarcely older than Brooke herself, but she had loved playing the part of the lady of the manor. Brooke would never forget the look on Alison’s face, shortly after she had married Elliot, when she had mentioned her plans to redecorate the house, and Elliot had told her casually that she couldn’t, because Oakley belonged to Brooke. It had been the first time, but not the last, that Brooke had met a look of hate from Alison Carlisle.

It had been bad enough, having Alison living at Oakley, lording it over them all and pretending to mother little Tara, while Elliot was alive. But the mere thought of Alison owning everything that Brooke’s mother had inherited, cared for, and added to, was too horrible to think about.

I should be thankful, Brooke thought, that she left before he died. Otherwise I’d have had to evict her.

Enough of this, she told herself. Funny how the mere sight of Tyler Marshall’s name could bring those awful old memories back in a flood. Or perhaps it wasn’t so odd, she mused. For Tyler had been a part of that period in their lives. The Alison Era, Emily called it. If Tyler had still been in Oakley Mills, Elliot Carlisle’s business would not have failed. But Ty had been gone by then, and Carlisle Products had crashed, taking the family fortune with it. And without his business, and deserted by his young wife, there had been nothing left for Elliot to live for.

No wonder Ty had sent flowers, Brooke thought. After everything her father had done for him, he must have felt just a little guilty that he was the one who indirectly caused it all.

But there was no sense in dwelling on the past; she had to earn a living. “Come on, Tara,” she said, “or we’ll both be late.”

Tara looked less than enthusiastic, but she retrieved her backpack and went out to the garage.

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Brooke stopped the car at the end of the curving driveway and looked back at Oakley. Emily was right, she thought. The house was too big for the three of them. But it was home, this massive L-shaped pile of rough-surfaced brick, with its beamed ceilings, and diamond-pane casement windows and ornate wood carvings.

Besides, she thought, if she decided to sell Oakley, who would buy it?

She answered her own question. The same sort of people who had bought the house just down the block and split it up into the Remington Arms apartments. *And that*, she swore to herself, *I will not allow to happen to Oakley.*

A woman waved from the front gate of the Remington Arms, and Brooke braked. “Do you want a ride downtown, Jane?” she called.

“You’re a saint!” Jane called back.

“Tara, would you get in the back seat, please?”

“Why?” Tara asked reasonably. “I was here first.” But she obediently slid out of the car and held the door for Jane, who was carrying a box of green plants.

“What are those for?” asked Brooke. “Don’t tell me. You’re starting a greenhouse.” She turned a corner and headed for Tara’s school.

Jane laughed. “No, but I thought they’d look nice in that high window in the Friends’ shop at the library. It will soften the place up a bit, you know.”

“And you’ll just happen to stick price tags on them, so if the patrons see ones they like... Here you go, Tara the Terrific.” Brooke offered her cheek for Tara’s somewhat sticky kiss. “Have a good day in school. I’ll see you at the library this afternoon.”

“It still isn’t fair,” muttered Tara, and went off towards the playground.

Jane lifted an eyebrow. “Do I smell a revolution?”

“Only a minor rebellion. Since Emily’s graduation last week, spring fever has hit Tara hard.”

“Think positive. Two weeks into summer, she’ll be bored to tears.”

“That’s positive?”

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Jane laughed. “Well, perhaps not. I don’t know how you handle it, Brooke. You’re only twenty-five yourself, and you’re mothering a nine-year-old and riding herd on a teenager.”

“Emily doesn’t need a supervisor. She’s a good, solid kid.”

“I know she is, but...” Whatever was causing the doubt in Jane’s voice, she didn’t expand on it. Instead, she brushed a fleck of dust off the shiny leaf of an ivy plant and said, “If these sell well in the Friends’ shop, perhaps we should try a full-fledged plant sale. We could call it—oh, I don’t know. Love in Bloom, perhaps.”

Brooke groaned. “Please, Jane! I haven’t recovered from your last brainstorm yet—Brooke’s Books.”

Jane shrugged. “We needed a little public relations, and a book review column in the local paper was the best way to get it.”

“Which reminds me,” said Brooke, “I haven’t written it yet this week.” She parked the little car in the director’s spot behind the old stone building. “Unless you’d like to do it for me? As the president of the Friends of the Library...”

Jane grinned and slid out of the car, holding the box of plants carefully. “That’s the director’s job, Miss Carlisle,” she said, with assumed humility.

“Along with a lot of other things, in a library this size.” The back door was already unlocked. Brooke pushed it open.

The building was old, its limestone exterior stained and weathered with the dust, rain, and grime of a hundred years. It had been built to the specifications of another era, when coal for heating was cheap and high ceilings were necessary to keep the summer heat from suffocating the librarians. The result was that now Brooke was always skimping on the rest of the budget to pay the heating and cooling costs.

A new building, Brooke thought longingly. Once, she had thought they would build the new library. She had been assistant director then, just out of library school and ready to set the world on fire. The director, whose ideas seemed as though they sprang from another century, had not approved of the prospective move from the old conventional building to a new, sprawling, single-story media

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center. She had retired in fury when the board ordered her to look into the possibility, and so Brooke had stepped into the directorship. Some still said it was because her father had been the main fund-raiser behind the drive for the new building.

But before the necessary funds were accumulated, the bottom had dropped out of the Carlisle family business, throwing dozens of people out of work. The resulting ripples through the town's economy had brought the fund drive to a grinding halt. The plant had limped along for another year, functioning at a fraction of capacity, and closed for good shortly before Elliot's death. Now, only Brooke's job remained as a reminder.

"Brooke? Are you all right?"

"Sure." She looked around with a critical eye, and shivered. It was cold inside the heavy walls; spring's warm sunlight didn't stand a chance of getting through. But just wait till summer arrived, she thought. Once the heat built up in those stone walls, it would be a continual battle to keep the place below the temperature of a sauna. "I was just thinking about how much I hate this place."

"Well, be careful who you say that to. Would you help me get these plants into the Friends' room? My key is buried in the bottom of my handbag."

Brooke found hers and unlocked the grating that served as a door when no volunteer was on duty. This room seemed to be the only bright and cheery one in the whole building, she thought.

It had been her idea in the first place to set up a little shop staffed by volunteer members of the Friends of the Library group, where used books that the library no longer needed could be sold. Jane had taken over from there, and now the Friends' room also offered bookplates, embossed stationery, greeting cards, pens and pencils for sale. *And now plants*, Brooke added, watching Jane set the greenery out to show to the best advantage.

"You know," Jane said thoughtfully, in the tone of voice that Brooke had learned to be wary of, "I was thinking the other day that with summer coming up, a soda fountain would do a booming business around here."

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“Not in the library!”

“I know. The kids would smear ice cream all over the books. But isn’t it a lovely idea? In the middle of a heat wave, you could walk down the hall and get a strawberry sundae.”

“Make it a strawberry daiquiri and I’d be more inclined to approve the idea. Do me a favor, Jane. Don’t tear out any walls without my approval.”

“Would I do a thing like that?” Jane sounded horrified.

“Of course you would.”

“Well, perhaps you’re right. But only if it benefitted the library. Here, have a plant to put on your desk.” She put a sprig of ivy in a plastic pot into Brooke’s hand.

“Why? Don’t you have room for this one?”

“Not exactly. Besides, in your office it will be like another advertisement for the shop.” Jane put on the lapel pin that marked her as a volunteer. I’M A FRIEND, it said.

Brooke looked at the ivy doubtfully, then carried it back to her office and set it on the corner of her desk. She didn’t feel like arguing with Jane today.

The library’s mail was already piled in the center of the blotter, where the janitor had left it. She started going through it. Most of it went straight into the wastebasket, and Brooke was uneasily aware that this morning she was not paying full attention to her job. Finally she reached into her handbag for the cream-colored envelope. The sooner she face up to Tyler Marshall’s letter, the sooner she could get back to work.

She handled it carefully, half-afraid it would burn her. After all these years, she thought she had put the memories behind her, but now, all the old pain seemed to boil up inside her again as if it had just been yesterday.

She had thought she loved him, once. For a few weeks she had even worn his ring—a tiny chip of a diamond set in a fragile band. His pride had forbidden him to put himself in debt for a larger stone. She had thought it a little silly of

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him—after all, her father would have been delighted to make him a loan—but there was no arguing with Ty Marshall’s pride. She had learned that early on.

He had been Elliot’s chief assistant then, the one who did most of the day-to-day work in keeping the Carlisle plant running at full production. Brooke had faint memories of him, hanging around Oakley and making himself indispensable, from the time she was a teenager. Even before Tara was born he had been there, she thought. Brooke had never paid much attention to him until she started working in the plant office herself, in the summers when she came home from college. Then she had quickly become aware of the young man with the eyes that could change from silvery-grey to black in an instant. He had had a way of looking at her that had made her feel all woman.

Enough of that, Brooke told herself crossly. There was no point in remembering how she had felt about him, or how pleased Elliot had been when they had announced their engagement. Ty had been the son Elliot had always wanted. Despite his youth, Ty had practically taken over Carlisle Products.

That was the worst of it, she thought. He had been good at his job, and if he had stayed, Carlisle Products would have made a fortune on the strength of Ty Marshall’s new discoveries.

How innocent I was, Brooke thought. I believed I knew what love was. I didn’t know that all we shared was sexual attraction. I’m so very lucky that I found out when I did that it went no deeper than that for either of us.

But she didn’t feel lucky, and she fought against a wave of sickening memory. She would never forget the look of guilt on Tyler’s face the day she had found him with Alison in his arms. It was something she would never be able to erase from her mind. Within a week, Ty had left Oakley Mills for good. He had gone to work for another office supply firm, and less than a year later he made the discoveries that had destroyed the market for Carlisle Products.

“Typewriter ribbons,” said Brooke, under her breath. “Who would have thought Dad could go broke manufacturing the same typewriter ribbon that made him rich?”

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Well, Mr. Tyler Marshall, she thought, and ripped the envelope open. We'll just see what you want this time.

The letter left her unenlightened. It was crisp, formal, polite, informing her that he would be in Oakley Mills on Wednesday the fifteenth, and would call to see her.

“No, thanks,” Brooke muttered. “I shall be out of town, even if I have to make a special trip.” Except that today was Wednesday the fifteenth. He would be here *today*.

She glanced at the postmark. The letter had been mailed only two days ago; Ty, apparently, was willing to take his chances on finding her. Either that, or he was certain she would want so badly to see him that she would toss to the winds any plans she had made.

Perhaps it would be best if she found out what it was he wanted. What harm could it do to see him? In a way, she wanted to know what the years, and the acquisition of money, had done for him. And what, she wondered, would he think when he saw her?

She glanced at the photograph of herself, with her father, Emily, and Tara, that stood on the corner of her desk. She was wearing the same lime-green suit today; it skimmed her slender figure and accented the darker green of her eyes. Her honey-blond hair was loose and wavy around her shoulders. She hadn't changed much, physically, in the last four years, and she was a self-assured woman now, instead of a foolish girl. Yes, she thought, satisfied, she could still set a man back on his heels. If Ty expected to see a woman who regretted what she had given up four years ago... Well, he'd be in for a surprise.

She put the letter back in her desk drawer and started on her routine work. It was just another day in the library, broken up by complaints from a couple of patrons and arguments between staff members. They were currently short of two employees, and as the budget frowned on hiring anyone extra at the moment, Brooke found herself filling in on whatever job needed doing.

That was why she was at the desk in the reference department, helping a student with research on capital punishment for a speech he was giving, when Tyler Marshall came in.

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Both telephone lines were blinking impatiently at her. The woman in front of the desk was shifting from one foot to the other. The student was reading out a list of magazines he needed to see, and Brooke was writing them down.

There was no reason why she should have looked up just then. Ty Marshall had made no sound as he crossed the carpeted room. He had not said a word. Yet in the middle of a phrase, Brooke looked up through the crowd around the desk, and saw him.

I wouldn't have recognized him if I hadn't expected to see him here, she thought. He looks so old...

No, she corrected. He doesn't look old at all. He looks timeless, and dangerous.

Now what had made her think that? There was nothing about him that was actively threatening. He looked calm, mildly interested in his surroundings. And the only thing that had changed about him was his hair. When he had left Oakley Mills, it had been black. Now it was startlingly, flamboyantly, silver. Not grey, not white, but silver.

It was the hair that had made her think at first that he had grown old. She could see, on second glance, how wrong she had been. His face was unlined and tanned, his eyes bright, his shoulders square, his eyebrows and lashes still dark. Of course, she thought. He was only thirty-three.

"Miss," the woman said finally, "if you'd hand me the price guide for old bottles, I'll get out of your way."

Brooke gulped and colored. What a wonderful way to start, she cursed herself, to stand there and stare at him like a love-struck kid! She handed over the requested book, and turned towards the student. "If you'll just give me that list," she said, "I'll order the issues you need. We don't carry all of those magazine titles." The telephone lights were still blinking. "I have to answer these questions first," she added, looking up at Tyler Marshall, and hated herself because it sounded like an apology.

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He shrugged. "I'll wait," he said. He took a chair near the desk, leaned his elbows on the arms of it, tented his fingers together, and watched her with steady concentration.

She tried to ignore his scrutiny, but she couldn't. She was fiercely aware of him, sitting there silently motionless. It made her angry, that he had the gall to sit there and stare at her, and by the time she finally turned back to him she was furious. "Well? Are you satisfied with what you see?" she asked. "What do you want?"

"Could we discuss it in private, perhaps?" he murmured.

"I didn't think you were merely paying a social call," she snapped, "or I'd have ordered up the tea tray. I have nothing to say to you that can't be said right here."

"In private," he said. It was very soft, and it didn't sound in the least like a command.

But Brooke found herself on her feet. "I'll have to get someone to cover for me," she said.

"I have all the time in the world."

A few minutes later she led him into her office. He closed the door, and Brooke felt panic rise in her. She hadn't been alone with him, closed into a room like this, since the day she had thrown her engagement ring at him.

He picked up the picture frame on the corner of her desk and looked at it closely. "Your father had lost a lot of weight."

"He'd been ill for a long time. That was taken just a few weeks before he died."

"The girls have changed."

"We all have. I don't have all day to chat, Tyler. What is it you want?"

He moved his chair closer to her desk. "I understand you inherited your father's stock in Carlisle Products."

So, it was business. *Well, you didn't expect it to be anything else, did you?* She shifted some papers around on her desk. "I'm touched that you chose to pay your condolences in person," she said sweetly.

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“Are you? In that case, you may consider that I’ve offered them.”

Somehow she didn’t feel she had won that round. “As for the stock,” she went on, “your information isn’t quite correct. Of course, I don’t know exactly where you got it,” she smiled up at him, “but you can tell Alison she was wrong.”

“To be just a little more precise,” he added, “your father owned sixty per cent of the company. Shortly before he died, he transferred one-fourth of his holdings to Alison, as part of their separation agreement. The rest was split at his death between you, Emily and Tara.”

She tried to conceal her surprise. He’d hit that on the nose. And so what? she told herself irritably. Alison might have known the details, even though she had left before Elliot died. Or it could have been a lucky guess. It had been the logical way to divide the stock.

The only problem was, Brooke thought, that by the time it was divided, the stock had been next to worthless.

“Wills are a matter of public record,” Tyler pointed out. “And your father’s was an interesting one. He named you as guardian for Emily and Tara until they’re of age.”

“So what? I can’t see that it’s any of your concern.”

“That means that you control their shares as well as your own. Forty-five percent of Carlisle Products is in your hands.”

“At the risk of being redundant, why should it matter to you?”

“I want that stock,” he said.

“Why? As a souvenir of past joys?” The words were out before she thought. She felt herself flushing again.

Ty smiled grimly. “No. I have souvenirs enough. I’ll pay twenty dollars a share for it today.”

Brooke gasped. “Alison’s portion was valued at a hundred a share in the separation agreement.”

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Tyler shrugged. “That was before the public found out how much trouble your father was in. I can’t help it if the market for office-product companies, especially this one, has gone to hell in the last year. I’ll give you twenty. It’s probably worth ten.”

“Don’t do me any favors,” she said baldly. “If it’s barely worth the paper it’s printed on, then why do you want it?”

“My reasons are my business.”

“I suppose you want to buy me out so you can boast of giving me charity!”

The accusation glanced off him. “Shouldn’t you check with your sisters to see how they feel?” he asked.

“The Carlises stand together. We’re not interested in turning our father’s company over to you.”

“That attitude sounds familiar,” he mused. “It’s almost precisely what your father told me, when he decided not to modernize the plant.” He rose, and replaced the chair against the wall. “Perhaps it’s only fair to warn you, Brooke, that I already own a considerable portion of the rest of the firm.”

“Alison’s share, I suppose,” Brooke said bitterly. “I hope she held you up for it.”

Tyler smiled. “I see no reason to tell you where I made my purchases or how much I paid. I’ve made you an offer.”

“Get out!” she snapped.

That imperious dark eyebrow raised again. “But, my dear Brooke,” he said softly, “this is a public place, funded with taxpayer’s money. And since I’m now a resident of Oakley Mills, I have every right to be here.”

A resident? Why on earth would he be coming back to Oakley Mills?

“But since it bothers you to see me,” he said, “I’ll stop another time to apply for my library card. I’ll be seeing you again, Brooke. We have so much in common—including our co-ownership of Carlisle Products.”