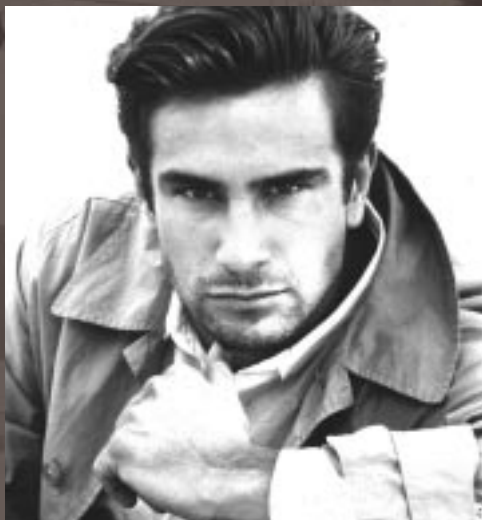


# Charades



Ann  
Logan

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To Lora who said I could;  
to Jack who said I should;  
and to Kelly and Tanya who said I would.



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# Chapter 1



Never, never accept a blind date! Why, oh, why couldn't she ever follow her own rules? Mercy Fuentes groaned and delivered a perfect roundhouse kick to the body-size punching bag. But this was a date she couldn't refuse, particularly after all Hazel Prendergast had done for her. Mercy grabbed a towel and wiped her face as she headed for the shower. Hazel was calling in her markers—a personal favor for a friend. How could Mercy argue? The fight was over before it even began, a knockout in the first round. She stuck her head under the shower and turned the water on full, letting the heat steam some of her anxiety away.

It was her own fault, really. She'd fallen for the ultimate sucker punch: Money. She was actually getting paid to go on this date, though why Hazel had chosen her instead of one of her theatrical employees was a bit mystifying. But still, seven hundred and fifty dollars a day for seven days was

nothing to sneeze at. Five thousand, two hundred, and fifty dollars. That would make a big dent in her student loan obligations.

Mercy finished her shower and slipped into the forest green suit Hazel insisted she wear. She ran her fingers through her still damp long curls, grabbed her purse, and headed to Hazel's office.

Ten minutes later, Mercy stepped into an elevator and punched the button for the seventh floor. She glanced at her watch; her timing was good.

Hazel had hinted that the man didn't date much and that "workaholic" described him best. Good. That made him somewhat more acceptable. It meant he was a nerd. She should know; she was one herself. Actually, being a nerd sounded far better than what she really was—a coward.

All she had to do was ignore the clammy hands and breathlessness that signaled a panic attack. She inhaled deeply and pushed back her still moist dark hair, studying herself in the elevator mirror.

The suit was flattering, but the sophisticated look didn't feel right. Mercy tugged at the skirt clinging to her hips; she hated wearing clothes that attracted attention. She'd rather be hiding behind her roll top desk, the one piled high with books and notes and the work she should be doing right now. Just a few more weeks of work, a month at most, and she'd be through with her dissertation in German literature.

The elevator pinged. Mercy wiped her damp hands and entered Hazel's office suite. The scents of lemon oil and potpourri brought memories flooding back. Memories of her mother, hard at work on a Saturday morning finishing paperwork. How she'd loved sitting on the carpet, listening to her mother's faint German accent as she spun stories of Hazel's cosmopolitan lifestyle.

Now, however, the days of youthful idealism were all past. How ironic that just when Hazel wanted to absorb her into that enviable world, Mercy wanted nothing to do with it. Academia, with its ivy-covered walls was her sanctuary now.

Judy Garner, Hazel's secretary, sat at her desk shuffling papers. She pulled a pencil out of her teased, bleached blonde hair and thumped it a couple of times on her desk. She shook her head, peering over the glasses perched on her nose. "I can't believe you're doing this." Judy had a West Texas twang that could peel the spine off a cactus when she was angry. Today, it held some concern.

"Neither can I," Mercy muttered. "Do I look okay?" She straightened her lightweight linen jacket, her gaze not quite meeting Judy's.

"Hell, yes, you look okay. That green looks great on you. Brings out the color in your eyes."

"Thanks."

"Don't worry, kid. When I found out what Hazel planned, I read through this guy's background. He checks out cleaner than a whistle. Just

another petroleum engineer, kiddo. We have a bunch of those guys here in Texas. He's no different than the rest of 'em, even if he does have an accent." Judy paused. "You don't have to do this, you know."

Mercy grimaced. Judy had a real nose for the unusual or suspicious. If she hadn't found anything bad about this man, then he was undoubtedly the card-carrying workaholic Hazel had described. Probably he met the three "b's" of a blind date—bald, blubbery and boring.

"Thanks," she said again, her eyes finally meeting Judy's, "for everything. Wish me luck. Okay?"

"You got it." Judy flourished a hand at the closed door. "Her Royal Highness awaits you."

Mercy tapped a couple of times on the door, then let herself into Hazel's office. The plush blue and gold Aubusson rug on the gleaming oak parquet floor absorbed the sound of Hazel's footsteps as she came around the desk to embrace her. "Darling, you look fabulous," Hazel gushed in the upper class, British accent that never failed to entrance everyone. Lifting one eyebrow, she inspected Mercy. "Do you have to wear those glasses?" she asked, frowning.

Mercy shrugged. Glasses were her first line of defense against the world, and she normally clung to them with dogged persistence.

"I suppose I don't really need them," she

admitted, tucking them into her purse. When she saw the glare Hazel continued to give her, she laughed. “Don’t give me that look. I put them away.”

“My dear,” Hazel shook her head in mock despair, “sometimes I don’t know what to do with you. You have a figure sent by the gods, but why you don’t do more with it, I’ll never know. Just look at all that beautiful, thick, dark hair.” Hazel lifted Mercy’s hair out from her face and let it fall back down. “Such flawless olive skin and lovely, exotic green eyes. It makes me weep, yes, weep to see how you ignore yourself.”

Mercy flushed. “Hazel, you exaggerate.”

“I do not. Turn around. Let me really look at you.” Mercy pirouetted for Hazel’s inspection, then laughed as she reciprocated with her own inspecting gaze. “You’ve been gone for almost a month Hazel, too long, but as usual you look super.” It was remarkable how tanned, toned and fit Hazel Prendergast always looked. She had to be in her late fifties or early sixties, but you’d never know it.

Hazel shrugged. “The Caribbean always does that for me.”

“There’s something different, though.” Mercy narrowed her eyes and shot Hazel a pointed look. “You’ve been to Dr. Fix-it again, haven’t you?”

“Darling, *I’ll* never tell.” Hazel laughed. “No woman would admit such a thing, unless she’s a

fool, which, you know I'm not. Besides, a woman who'd tell that kind of secret would tell *anything* and should never be trusted."

"You did say ten, didn't you?" Mercy squinted at her watch.

"I did say ten." Hazel nodded. "And you can see fine without those hideous glasses. I wanted to talk to you before Mr. Reinhart arrives. It seems your assignment will involve more twists than we'd originally discussed."

Mercy held her breath. "Twists, what twists?"

"Oh, sit down. You make me uncomfortable standing there." Hazel waved her to a chair. "I didn't know about this until this morning. Of course, I demanded that he pay you *twice* the normal rate when he told me his new requirements."

Mercy gulped, ten thousand, five hundred dollars! She could almost pay off her loans! She took a deep breath. "I know I owe you. I should volunteer to do this for free."

"No way!" Hazel snapped. "He's going to pay, and pay through the nose, too."

"Look, I still don't understand why you need *me*."

"I need you," Hazel said with some exasperation, "precisely *because* of your unusual assets. You're attractive, you're..."

"Oh, Hazel, not that again."

"No, don't argue with me. Just listen. You're not only attractive, you're educated, and I need

someone who speaks German fluently.”

“But Ursula can speak German,” Mercy interrupted, knowing Ursula was one of Hazel’s favorite clients for her dating service. What was Hazel up to? It wouldn’t be the first time she’d tried to trick Mercy into dating someone.

“Yes, she does, but she doesn’t play golf. Certainly not like you do. Nobody I have is in your league.”

What Hazel said was true. Mercy could’ve been on the pro circuit if she’d wanted to be. However, the pro circuit held too many unknowns—meaning men. “Okay,” Mercy conceded with as much grace as she could muster, “but what about these ‘special twists?’”

“Nothing outside your abilities,” Hazel replied with a flippant shrug. “But it will involve a little more acting than originally planned.”

“Come on, Hazel. What gives?”

“Simple, darling. You just have to pretend that you’re, um, shall we say, affectionate?”

Mercy took a deep breath and wiped her hands on her skirt. “Define affectionate,” she began. “I draw the line at anything more than holding hands.” Not that she had anything to worry about. Men rarely looked twice at her.

Hazel skirted the question with ease. “I’m sure Judy told you, he’s been investigated thoroughly. He’s a legitimate workaholic who is totally inept with women.”

“So, what *is* the problem?”

“The problem, my dear, is he’s trying to explore for oil in Ecuador. Everything is lined up, the government, the site, they even know the oil is there.”

Mercy shrugged. “I repeat, what is the problem?”

“Unfortunately, to get the oil, he needs Red Ryder’s company, Reveille Drilling. They’re the company with the patent for the new laser drill that practically melts rock as it bores a hole.”

“Keep talking.”

“Well, this Ryder chap likes to get to know a person better before he signs on the dotted line with them. In the interest of further negotiations, he’s asked Mr. Rheinart to join him for a week at his Texas ranch near Boerne. That’s where you come in. You’ll complete a foursome with them on their private golf course. Ryder’s wife is a golf nut, you see.”

Hazel waved a hand in the air. “You’ll get to play golf to your heart’s delight, as well as ride, fish, hunt, or whatever else it is you Texans do on your ranches. I hear they have a Scottish style course, a bit more wild and challenging. Sound like fun?”

Fun, yes. But it still sounded too easy for all that money. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Hazel coughed. “Well, actually, you won’t be just his date for the week, you’re to be his fiancée.”

“His *what?*”

“You know, his ‘intended?’” Hazel said patiently.

“Mr. Rheinhart is quite adamant about this. It has to look as though you’re planning to marry in the very near future. Red Ryder only works with family men.”

“I don’t know about this,” Mercy said. She stood up, shaking her head.

“Let me explain. Mr. Rheinhart is a self-made man who’s never had time for a girlfriend, much less a fiancée.”

Mercy walked over to the window, unsure. She took a few calming breaths. “Okay, so he’s a nerd like me. How old is he? It won’t be very convincing if he’s too old and I look like a young ‘chippie.’”

Hazel pursed her lips in obvious irritation. “He’s only thirty-one, so you certainly won’t look like anyone’s ‘chippie.’”

Mercy nodded. She was still betting on the nerd part, praying for it, in fact. “All right, all right. So when do I meet him?”

Hazel looked at her watch. “He should be here any minute. I scheduled him later than you. I’ll just buzz Judy for some tea while we wait.”

Before she could press the button, however, Judy’s nasal twang echoed over the intercom announcing Mr. Rheinhart. Mercy swallowed a large lump in her throat, sat down to keep her knees from shaking, and smoothed her skirt. Her blind date, ah... ‘fiancé’ had arrived.

“Send him in,” Hazel cooed, settling herself into the leather chair behind her desk, a Cheshire

cat smile dancing over her face.

When the door opened, Mercy turned her head. Never until that moment had she believed in the idea of chemistry between two people, much less love at first sight. The man who stood in the doorway however, made her heart stop beating.

Mercy tended to avoid men like the plague, actually she thought of men more like a virus—if she wasn't exposed, she couldn't get sick. Suddenly she felt ill.

Several inches over six feet, his height gave him a commanding, over-powering appearance. Neither his navy blue jacket nor his khaki pants could hide the width of his shoulders or the slimness of his hips. The light blue shirt, open at the throat, set off his tanned, incredibly handsome face.

Damn virus. Her mouth went dry, her bones were suddenly soft, and fever and chills had already set in.

His large, tanned hand brushed rich dark hair back from his high, broad forehead. A nervous gesture? Not likely. Intelligent blue eyes, as dark as they were mesmerizing, pinned her with a penetrating gaze through dark-framed glasses. She noted how the angular bones of his face shaped a strong jaw and a determined chin. But it was his eyes that drew her.

Mercy made herself breathe slowly through her nose as he broke into a wide smile that radiated

openness and sincerity. She pulled her gaze from his face, catching only the last bit of Hazel's sentence.

"...is Wulfgar Rheinhart, your fiancé for the next week. Wulf, this is Mercedes Fuentes. You may call her Mercy. I understand you go by Wulf, is that right?" Hazel guided the introductions with her usual practiced ease.

"That is my preference," he agreed, nodding.

His German accent charmed Mercy right away. It reminded her of her mother and the many German students she'd tutored. If only she could view him as just another student.

"Fine," Hazel continued. "Please sit down." As Wulf sat down next to her, Mercy concentrated on her breathing. Her heart beat so erratically her head swam. She tried to keep her attention on what Hazel was saying, but failed miserably. She'd never felt so self-conscious and yet so fascinated. She glanced at him, trying to keep the look casual and found those incredible blue eyes gazing back.

"Wulf, if you would," Hazel said, turning to him, "please tell Mercy what you require."

"It is simple," he began, captivating Mercy again with his mellow baritone voice, his charming accent, and his awkward syntax.

"Mr. Ryder and his wife have been married many years. To them, marriage is stability." He looked directly at Mercy. "I am unhappy to say

because I have no plan to marry, I would not be considered stable to them. Steiger Oil is still the best company for the job,” he insisted.

Mercy watched, fascinated, as he pushed his glasses up on his nose with a shaky hand. *Could* he be as nervous as she?

“I did all analyses myself,” he maintained with a small smile of obvious pride.

“I’m sure you did,” Hazel added, nodding encouragement.

He looked so sincere, so serious, so earnest, Mercy’s heart went out to him. She frowned. He should have plenty of girlfriends with his looks. Maybe he *did* work too hard.

“I must make Ryder believe,” Wulf continued, “I am in the process of marrying and will soon be as stable as he wants.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that you’re being...” Mercy hesitated, not wanting to hurt his feelings, “just a little dishonest with him?”

“Of course.” He stiffened though his gaze remained fastened on hers. “Do you think I like this? I am only trying to stop his, his...” He ran his fingers through his hair. “*Voreinggenommenheit.*”

“His prejudice?”

“*Ja*, prejudice! I must be married or engaged if I want to do business with him. Me, I just want business to be business.” Mercy smiled at his problem with vocabulary and phrasing, and at his candor. “Then you’re never planning to marry?”

she teased.

“When is time? I work very hard. I think some day I marry, maybe, if the right woman is there.”

“I’m sorry if I’m being so inquisitive,” Mercy interjected. Had she hurt his feelings? “I’ve never done anything like this before. Nor have I ever been engaged.”

“It *is* dishonest,” he said, looking glum. “I do not like it either.”

The dejected sound in his voice, made Mercy almost forget her own fear. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad after all. He seemed perfectly harmless and seemed just like the nerd she had hoped he would be.

His posture was open, arms spread, and legs extended. Mercy frowned. She, on the other hand, sat all wrapped up, her legs crossed at the knees *and* the ankles, and her arms folded across her chest with her hands tucked into them. It wasn’t hard to tell who was the uncomfortable one here. No reason to be so wary, she decided, pulling her hands from her elbows and uncrossing her ankles. Even if she felt that way.

“Are there any other questions, Mercy?” Hazel asked.

“I’d like to get clear on, uh, what we’re supposed to do to act like an engaged couple,” she explained, annoyed at the way the heat rose in her cheeks.

“I think we keep it simple,” Wulf said, a frown creasing his forehead. “Maybe hold hands?” He

shrugged, looking at Hazel. “Ms. Prendergast?”

“That’s probably enough. Otherwise, just act as you normally would.” Mercy turned to him. “I’m sure Hazel told you that I’m not one of her regular employees, just a good friend doing her a big favor.”

Hazel inclined her head like royalty.

“Yes, Ms. Prendergast told me the circumstances and that you are the daughter of Pedro Fuentes. I think you are excellent for the job.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling.

Wulf stroked his chin and nodded at her, his eyes gleaming with an unfamiliar look. “Yes. I think you are much better than a professional because of your, your...” He shook his head. “*Natürlichkeit.*”

“My naturalness?” If it was one thing Mercy wasn’t feeling it was natural. “Thank you. I’ll do my best.”

In spite of his height and breadth, his sheer masculinity, he didn’t daunt her as much as he had when he’d first walked in. Actually, he didn’t frighten her at all now. He appeared to be just a nice guy, maybe a little too intense, but harmless.

“I’m sure Wulf understands your misgivings,” Hazel told her. “I’ve already explained to him that you’re just a graduate student, not an actress.”

Wulf nodded as Hazel talked, smiling at Mercy as though she was the answer to his prayers.

“Shouldn’t we have some kind of story about

how we met?” Mercy faltered, blushing again. He hadn’t mentioned anything about how they were supposed to have met or where or... Why was *she* the one trying to concoct a story? It wasn’t her problem, but he didn’t seem any better at pretense than she. She groaned. How were they going to ever pull this charade off?

“I will be filling in Mr. Rheinart on anything more he should know.” Helen volunteered. “By the way, my policy is for clients to meet here. Is nine in morning okay?”

“That’s fine,” Mercy agreed.

Wulf smiled and nodded. “I will wait in the parking lot for you.”

Hazel made quick work of the contracts and stood to signal the meeting was over.

“Until tomorrow then,” Mercy said as she stood to leave. She wondered how this could be happening to her and when the panic would set in. Walking toward the door she tried to look self-assured, yet felt as awkward as a newborn colt. She waved goodbye and left before she did anything klutzy.



As the door closed behind Mercy, Wulf turned to Hazel giving her a wordless glare. Hazel arched her brows, saying nothing. He let the chilling moment of silence stretch out before he stood and

strode to the floor-to-ceiling windows.

He finally saw Mercy several stories down, walking to an old, shabby Mercedes coupe, no doubt a cast-off of Hazel's.

"She knows nothing, does she?" he demanded, dropping the accent and nervous gestures with relief. He was anything but nervous now. In fact, his growing sense of guilt added itself to the frustration at being coerced into *Aunt Hazel's* newest scheme.

He hated intrigue and Hazel's dealings with the Organization had always seemed a bit cloak and dagger. He watched Mercy back the Mercedes out of its parking space, missing the fire hydrant by inches, and lurch out into the street. Mercedes Fuentes had a figure meant for a man's exploring hands, and eyes of such an unusual green a man could lose his soul in them.

"How can I say anything when I'm not sure what the information will do to her?" Hazel shook her head. "Don't get me wrong. She has her strengths, too. If she's anything like her mother, she's a lot stronger than she looks."

"I thought innocence went out with the Dark Ages. Is she really that naive?" he asked, walking back and sitting down with a sigh. He didn't really expect an answer and Hazel didn't offer one. "Go ahead. Fill me in," he said. "I know you can't wait."

Wulf held back a chuckle as Hazel made a big

production of bringing out a large manila envelope and pulling a file from it. Old photographs and loose bits of paper added to the hodge-podge appearance.

“Mercy’s grandfather is former SS General Erich Stratton, alias *der Buchhalter*,” she began. “He disappeared from Germany before the end of the war with an enormous cache of stolen gold, resurfacing in Mexico in the late 50’s under the name Suarte. The Organization traced him to his brother, Adolph Suarte, who still lives there. Unfortunately, we lost track of Stratton in the early 70’s, not long after his wife died.”

“And where does Mercy fit into all this?”

“I’m getting to that. Stratton’s daughter, Lisa eloped with Pedro Fuentes. Stratton didn’t approve and disowned her. He didn’t know until now they had a child.”

“Go on,” Wulf said impatiently. “Mercy’s father, Pedro Fuentes, a remarkably handsome man, as you might remember, was on the pro golf circuit and played for several years. Lisa and he eloped when he came back from his last winning tour. He had a lot of money and a good job in Dallas by then.”

“Why is that important?”

“Everything is important. If you—”

“Leave it,” he interrupted. “Just finish the story.” Hazel cleared her throat. “They named Mercy after her grandmother. Lisa always said

she got to know her mother better through Mercy.”

“Why did she say that?”

“As Mercy grew older, it became obvious she could almost pass for her grandmother’s twin.” Hazel shook her head. “This is Mercy’s grandmother, Merci Bisieux. Here.” She shoved an old black and white photo at him depicting a woman with dark hair like Mercy’s done up in a 1940’s pompadour.

“I understand she even had green eyes like Mercy’s,” Hazel continued. “The similarity is incredible. Your mother and I looked a lot alike, but not like this.”

“Didn’t Mercy’s mother work for you for more than ten years? Did you just now connect her with Stratton?”

“Lisa was like a second sister to me after all those years.” Hazel shook her head. “But I had no idea of her relation to Erich Stratton when I hired her. When she died three years ago I helped Mercy with all the arrangements for the funeral. I nearly had a stroke when I saw Lisa’s birth certificate. Do you know how long we’ve been hunting Stratton? It absolutely boggles the mind, particularly since I was so close to her.”

“Why didn’t you just go after him then?”

“It took this long to find him.”

Wulf took a deep breath. “Why do you need me and how does this affect Mercy?”

“Stratton demands to see his granddaughter

before he'll give us any information about the gold. At least with Mercy looking so much like his late wife, there'll be no doubt of her identity."

"So, after Texas we head for Germany—why Germany? Didn't you say you found him in Mexico?"

"Have you ever tried to work with the Mexican government?"

"Yes," he admitted. "Worse than an Arab sultanate."

"You can see then how expensive it would be to pay all those bribes. Germany was willing to handle Stratton without cost. Besides," Hazel continued. "Mercy has family in Mexico, if you can call them that. There's only two decent people in the whole lot, and one of them is working for us."

"Okay, so what's a few thousand miles? But why the charade? Why didn't you just ask her to meet her grandfather in Germany and convince him to say where the gold is?"

"Her grandfather *is* a notorious criminal, you know. Why would she go? And what would we do if she refused? Kidnap her?" Hazel shook her head. "You must get her to fall in love with you, then take her to Germany to meet her relatives and *voilà*. The Organization does the rest."

"So," he said, growing tired of Hazel's intrigues, "you lie to her and get me to go along with it! ...What?" he asked, noting the odd look on her face.

Hazel sighed. "Mercy has been struggling to complete her doctorate, even taking part-time jobs and laying out a semester or two to make money. I wanted to do it this way so I could help her out and not make her feel as though it was charity."

"How's she going to react when she finds out you used her? She may never forgive you."

Hazel was silent for a moment as she blinked up at him. "I guess I'll just have to take that chance. Some things are worth a sacrifice." She paused. "I've done it before." He remained silent, unimpressed.

"Well," she said, shrugging, "if you can think of a better way to do it, I'm open to suggestions. Now it's up to you to smooth the way between Stratton and Mercy so we can get that money."

Wulf took his time going over the scheme in his head. He took a deep breath, got up, and walked over to the plate-glass windows again. "I can't think of a better way either. I get my oil deal and the Organization gets its gold." He paused, turning back at Hazel and frowning.

"Is she really as naive and innocent as she looks?" He knew how to handle women, but felt distinctly uncomfortable around such a babe in the woods, even such an attractive one. His fingers itched to run through that dark, curly hair and see it spread out on a pillow. Even the glasses she pulled out when they signed the documents didn't detract from her beauty, but only served to frame

her exotic green eyes.

“Some man hurt or frightened her,” Hazel said, a bitter edge in her voice. “If I ever find the bastard, I swear I’ll kill him.”

Wulf frowned. Although he hardly knew Mercy, he didn’t like thinking of her as injured or hurt. “Are you sure this will work out the way you planned?”

“I was unsure right up until the time you walked into the office.” She clicked her tongue and smiled. “Were you faking that reaction?”

“What reaction?” he asked.

She dipped her head. “Nothing, I must’ve been mistaken. But Wulf,” she said, still smiling at him. “That accent?”

“You should know the first thing you do with an opponent is disarm him. I’ve already adopted the accent for my negotiations with Ryder. There’s nothing better to take away her fear of me than my needing her. Hell, if nothing else, I’ll let her translate for me.”

“But what about later, in Germany?”

He snorted. “Hazel, we’ll be speaking *German* in Germany.”

“Can you keep that accent going for a whole week?”

He shrugged. “I’ve done it for longer periods of time. I’m good at languages. You know that.”

His gift for languages had already helped Steiger Oil more than once. In business a lot of

people dealt their cards from the bottom of the deck, it was just part of the game. But this was different. He wasn't proud of his abilities at the moment; he felt manipulative and calculating.

Wulf stood and paced back to the window. If he and Anton didn't need this venture with Reveille Oil, he'd tell Hazel to go to hell. No, that's not entirely true. Anton wanted the deal with Reveille Oil, but he was really doing it for his father. Jacob worshiped the state of Israel, and if the Organization could accomplish its goals, they would see that the money fell into the right hands. With his help, of course. Help that Jacob couldn't avoid acknowledging. For as long as Wulf could remember, he'd striven for his father's praise and approval. This time he might get it. He just had to ignore his gut reaction when he thought about deceiving an innocent like Mercy.

Besides, Mercy wasn't as innocent and naive as she seemed. She was a woman, and Wulf hadn't trusted women since he found out how his mother had lied to his father. Was he any better, though? At least his mother had deceived his father because she loved him.

He took a deep breath, praying for the first time in years that God would forgive him for the lies he'd already told, and the ones he'd be telling in the future.

## Chapter 2



Mercy decided to look on the coming week as an unexpected vacation. The Ryder's' nine hole golf course was an intriguing prospect. She made a solemn vow not be scared, awkward, or uncomfortable during this next week. Unfortunately, she had no idea how to go about that. The attraction she felt toward Wulf was not only confusing but annoying and alarming. What would it be like to pretend to be his fiancée?

She recognized all the signs of anxiety—the fluttering hands, the rapid erratic pulse, but most of all the breathlessness. In spite of all that, she couldn't wait to see him. No logic to it at all, but since when had she ever been good at logic?

Wulf's fumbling with the language barrier, heavy accent, bad grammar, verbal grasping for words and laughable pronunciation was almost as endearing as it was comical. He reminded her of a child trying to play the violin with a hacksaw. He needed her, and she needed to be needed. Hadn't

she worked with German students for just that reason?

Taking deep breaths through her nostrils, her pulse raced as she scrambled to finish her packing. In spite of the incipient panic, only the thought that this must be difficult for him, too, propelled her as she tossed the final items into her suitcase.

As Mercy pulled into the parking lot, she spied Wulf leaning against a car, his arms folded casually over his chest. He wore khaki slacks, a long-sleeved plaid shirt rolled up to his elbows, and wire-rimmed aviator's sunglasses. She stopped the car and watched spellbound as he unfolded his long length and walked over to greet her. The sheer physical awareness of his masculinity made her breath catch and her skin tingle with alarm.

"Good morning," she said, a little too cheerfully, stumbling out of her car and then cringing when she noticed how she'd parked between the lines. "Oh, dear! Just a minute, I have to straighten this out."

Mercy jumped back in her car and rearranged it, her heart pounding. How would she ever make it through the week? She got out of the car again and opened the door to drag her suitcase and golf clubs out of the back seat.

As he walked closer, her mind suddenly went blank. After "hello," she hadn't the slightest idea what to say. Following her yoga instructions, she took a deep, calming breath, swallowing to wet

her vocal chords. Maybe, snatching at the first subject she could think of, they could talk about German literature.

“Good morning,” Wulf said, taking her luggage and golf clubs out of her hands with an ease that made them seem weightless. “Are you afraid of small planes?”

“Planes? What do planes have to do with German literature?” she asked, blinking up at him in surprise.

“German literature?” he echoed in a puzzled tone.

“I—I’m sorry. My mind was thinking of something else. What did you say?” She swept her hair back from her face. How in the world would she manage a whole week with this man?

“Small planes,” he mumbled, a frown marring his forehead. “Single engine, turbo-charged, pressurized.”

What was he talking about?

Wulf shook his head, a fleeting impression of frustration on his face. “Are you afraid to fly in small planes?”

“Oh! No, I don’t think so.” Should small planes scare her? She didn’t know. “I’ve never been in one,” Mercy said, lifting her shoulders in a shrug. “A small plane, I mean.”

“Would you like to fly instead of drive? I am commercial and instrument rated. I’m a very safe pilot.”

His solemn, little-boy look won her confidence better than all the honeyed persuasion in the world. She smiled at him, feeling her face flush. "All right, yes."

"Good!" He beamed from ear to ear. "We will fly." He threw her luggage and clubs into the back seat of his car, and held the door for her. As he started the car he dialed his cell phone and talked rapidly to someone in German. Wulf smiled as he hung up the phone. "We have a Bonanza. Good plane. I fly Bonanza in Germany," he assured her, as if that should relieve her mind.

"That sounds great," Mercy said, her earlier enthusiasm fading almost as fast as it had arisen. What if she didn't like flying after all?

"We will take off from Love Field. Are you sure this is okay with you?"

"Sure," she said, suppressing a nervous giggle. Giggling destroyed the grave image of herself she wished to portray to the world.

He smiled broadly. "Almost forgot," he said, and dug in his pocket and brought out a small jeweler's box containing the largest diamond solitaire ring Mercy had ever seen. He held out his large hand. "Give me your left hand."

She gave him her hand and tried not to pull it back when a tingle skittered up her arm. The ring slid down to her knuckle, then it stopped. Wulf frowned. "Hazel gave me the measurement."

"Don't worry." She jammed it over her knuckle.

“There.” She smiled at him, holding up her hand and meeting his grin of approval. Why did his look give her such a funny feeling in the stomach?

He took her hand again. “We must agree on how we met.”

Mercy tried to ignore how warm his hand felt holding hers. “I thought we’d just say we were introduced by a mutual friend. That way it wouldn’t exactly be a lie.” Any kind of deception made her nervous, but was it their deception that made her nervous, or the way he kept holding her hand? Studying his hand, she could see the strength in it. It appealed to a hitherto hidden, unknown, feminine part of her.

“This is like the first date, *nicht wahr?*” Wulf asked, interrupting her thoughts. Playfully he shook her hand, reminding her of an overgrown, St. Bernard puppy.

“Is this the first time you’ve ever been in Dallas?” she asked. Should she tell him he was holding her hand too long?

“No, I am in Dallas last year when I planned this venture.”

“That’s nice.” She gently slipped her hand out of his.

“Okay then,” she said. “So, we met last year. That just about covers time for us to have fallen in love and gotten engaged. Love at first sight?” That was safe to assume. Any normal woman would be immediately attracted to him.

“Love at first sight,” Wulf repeated, as though testing the thought. “I like that.” He nodded and his smile wrapped her in a warm blanket of approval.

“Would you prefer we speak in German?”

“No. I must practice my English. You will help me?”

“Of course.” she promised. The glow of his smile knocked her stomach for a loop. She swallowed hard.

The private plane area of the airport reminded Mercy of a Hollywood movie set. Once through the gated entrance, she saw nothing but men doing manly things—running the gasoline trucks, working on planes, or just standing by planes talking and joking with one another. Inside men were behind the counter, all of them talking about airplanes or flying. Although the masculine territory gave her a shiver of discomfort, she managed to hide it. She was good at hiding things.

Wulf pulled his car up to a beige-colored plane with red and blue stripes. After helping him stow their luggage and golf clubs in the back of the plane, she watched with fascination as he did his pre-flight check. He explained everything as he went, taking measurements of fluids, checking the prop for nicks, draining some gas, even inspecting the tires for wear before removing the blocks.

He has to be an excellent pilot, she reassured herself. He’s so meticulous. She, on the other hand, was a study in contrasts. Great education,

no practical life experience.

Fifteen minutes after filing his flight plan they were in the plane and he rapidly went through another pre-flight checklist. After getting clearance from ground control, they taxied out toward the runway. Wulf gave her a set of earphones to wear while they waited for their turn to take off.

With rapt concentration, Mercy listened to the conversations between the pilots and ground control as they flowed back and forth. She watched spellbound as Wulf scribbled down instructions on a little note pad strapped to his knee. The concentration contrasted vividly with the image she had from the day before. Where was the same hapless man of yesterday? Apparently not in the pilot's seat.

She was so riveted on what he did she forgot about her anxiety. She got the thrill of her life when he pushed the throttle forward and they zoomed down the runway quickly gaining speed until they lifted off and began to climb. It was exhilarating, beyond anything she'd ever experienced before. Plain, mousy Mercy was having an adventure!

Wulf maneuvered the plane with ease and soon she observed a larger plane now far beneath them. Her heart skipped a beat, but Wulf stayed calm, speaking into his headset. He spoke a different language up here: vectors and flight paths, altitude and directions.

Was it the novelty of doing something she'd

never done before which captivated her so? Had she cut herself off from living so much that her fears owned her?

Leveling off at ten thousand feet, Wulf turned to her. “Would you like to take the yoke?” He gestured to the funny shaped steering wheel of the plane.

“Me? Oh, no!” she squeaked, shaking her head vigorously.

He nodded and shrugged. “Next time.”

Fat chance, she thought. “By the way,” she informed him, “did you know your accent almost disappears when you talk over the radio?”

He turned and gave her a wide smile. “I suppose when I concentrate, I talk better. Remember, you promised to help.”

“Sure, no problem.” Mercy sat back and stared out the window, panic setting in. Didn’t accents normally grow worse under times of stress, not better? All of a sudden she noticed that buildings and cars on the ground were very small. What had she been thinking to let Hazel talk her into this? She was alone in a plane with a man. All the doubts and fears of the last couple of years tumbled through her mind. She turned and forced herself to smile. Wulf nodded and turned back to the controls.

Even with headphones on, the noise level in the cabin discouraged conversation. Mercy pulled out a novel from her voluminous purse to pass the time.

Within two hours, they were circling the private landing strip of the Triple Bar X, the Ryder's ranch in the hill country of Central Texas. The people standing by the hangar below looked like toy action figures. Clumps of trees surrounded water tanks and the area around the house. The adjoining pastures and tilled fields formed a patchwork quilt of greens, browns, and golds. Mercy caught sight of the Scottish golf course, but from this height, she couldn't see anything unusual about it.

Suddenly they were descending and she finally felt the plane bouncing slightly on the asphalt runway. They had landed!

"Forgive me," Wulf apologized once they rolled to a halt. "I wanted to make my landing more smooth since this is the first time in a small plane for you. The Bonanza is a good little plane, *ja?*" he said, his mellow baritone voice coated in excitement.

He reminded her so much of a little boy she forgot her doubts and almost laughed. "No big deal." Mercy touched his arm to reinforce her words. A jolt of awareness flew across her skin. Like touching a live wire, it gave a different feeling of breathlessness.

"It was not a squeaker." His voice sounded so disappointed, she almost reached out again.

"A squeaker?"

"*Ja*, a squeaker. When the wheels touch down

right on landing, you hear only a squeak. No bounce. Every pilot wants to land with a squeaker.” He motioned her to get out of the plane, then followed her out onto the large low wing and jumped after her to the ground.

The man approaching them in faded jeans and a red plaid, western shirt looked like an old ranch hand. As he came closer, however, she recognized the familiar face and red hair of the flamboyant, Texas oil-drilling entrepreneur, Red Ryder. His thick hair had receded into a widow’s peak with gray liberally streaking the sides of his temples. An infectious grin spread across his sunburned face as he strode toward them.

“Wulf, where’d you get such a purty little filly?” Red asked, putting his arm companionably around Mercy’s shoulder as she stood by the wing of the plane. “Are you sure about marrying this fella, it’s not too late to change your mind?” he asked her. “I got me a boy who’d be real pleased with the likes of you.”

Thrown off guard by his folksy humor and joking, Mercy smiled weakly. She looked around wondering what to do. Wulf was busy tying down the aircraft to large bolts in the asphalt.

“Now don’t you worry, honey,” Red said in a conspiratorial voice, “if you change your mind about this furriner, you jest let me know. Ben’ll fall for you like a ton of bricks.”

“Mr. Ryder, please,” she said, more disconcerted

than ever, “uh, you’re going to make Wulf jealous.”

“Hell, it’s good for a man to be jealous,” Ryder said, jerking his thumb at Wulf as he came over to join them. “Keeps a man on his toes, if you know what I mean. And you just call me Red, honey. Everyone does, even my own grandkids.”

“I am never jealous,” Wulf said, grinning and thrusting his hand forward to shake Red’s.

“Never say never, son,” Red warned, shaking a long, bony finger at him before grasping his hand. “I know what I’m talking about. It’s natural for a man to be jealous of his woman.”

Wulf shrugged. “Not me.”

Once the three of them and their luggage and clubs were crowded into the bright-red Bronco, they headed for the ranch house, bouncing along the winding dirt lane. Mercy noted with amusement the haphazard planting of the shrubs and flowers. Blooming yucca plants shared precedence with mesquite and towering live oaks and some kind of ivy she didn’t recognize at all. In spite of the heat, everything flowered in bright, profuse colors of pink, white, yellow, purple and blue, clashing vividly with each other.

“Who did your landscaping?”

“My wife, Dorie. She’s got a way with plants, don’t she?”

“Yes, she, uh, sure does.”

“She calls it free-form landscaping.” Red smiled, showing off a mouthful of teeth. “Well,

son, how was the trip?” Red asked, turning to Wulf.

“Perfect. Tailwinds all the way. What do you fly?”

“Me? I don’t fly. My son, Ben, does though. I drive. Never set foot in a plane in my life.”

“Is that why you have a reputation of driving like a madman?”

“At least I always get where I’m going.” Red defended himself, “which don’t always happen to friends of mine who insist on flying.”

“But with the distances in Texas, why drive when you can fly?”

“Son, that’s why I have to drive so fast.” Red clapped a hearty hand on Wulf’s shoulder and chortled.

Mercy thought she saw a hard, penetrating look on Wulf’s face before he smiled at Red. But the look was gone in an instant, leaving her wondering if it had ever been there at all.

After Red showed them to their rooms across the hall from each other, he narrowed his eyes. “Dorie and me don’t hold with any of this new-fangled stuff of folks that ain’t married sleeping together. We don’t let our kids do it, and I hope y’all don’t intend to give me no problems.”

Wulf and Mercy looked at each other. Heat rushed to Mercy’s cheeks as she shook her head. Wulf looked like he was chewing the inside of his cheek, as if his brain had gone into overdrive.

Who knew what he might say? She'd better do the talking.

"No problem," she declared.

Red looked relieved. "Good, good. Glad we understand one another. Say, I knew a Pedro Fuentes in Dallas, the golf pro at Regal Oaks Country Club a while back. Me and him played golf a time or two. He any kin of yours?"

"He was my father." Mercy replied.

"Pedro Fuentes was your dad? Well, I'll be danged. He's the one give Dorie her first lesson. Ain't that something?" Red gave her a bemused look. "Okay, why don't y'all settle in. We'll meet in the den in, say an hour?"

"That is fine with me," Wulf said.

"Me, too," Mercy concurred, slipping into her room and closing her door. She leaned against it. So far, so good. In spite of all her earlier doubts. Wulf's air of competence, of being in complete control while he was flying made her doubts now seem childish and stupid. Besides, how could she not trust him? The stumbling speech and the slightly inept social skills were endearing qualities. They showed how much he needed her. Or someone like her, Mercy quickly added. Lying to the Ryder's was enough; no need to lie to herself as well.

Then why was her anxiety accelerating? The wet hands, the dry mouth and breathlessness? A full-blown attack hadn't happened in years now,

but it would if she didn't keep control of herself. Mercy gritted her teeth and rapidly searched for something else to think about.

Red and Eudora Ryder! She already liked Red, particularly knowing how much he liked her father. It bothered her that they couldn't be more truthful with the man. No telling what Eudora would be like, Mercy thought as she stretched across the huge bed. She yawned and looked at her watch. Time for a short nap before meeting the other half of the Ryder team.

One hour later, Mercy stepped out of her room. She spied Wulf leaning against his door waiting for her, his arms folded casually across his chest. What happened to the nerd "workaholic?" Was he really who he seemed to be?

His smile shattered her doubts and sent the pieces scattering. In the lower regions of her stomach, vague stirrings came to life, leaving her disturbed and uncertain.

When he held out his hand to her, she clasped it, trying to ignore the slow flame burning inside her, one that didn't want to go out. Stop it, she told herself. Concentrate on something else.

It was only several steps from their rooms to the den, but what a den. The conglomeration of Texas A&M decorations, emblems, and regalia, with their immutable Aggie colors of maroon and white went beyond eclectic. The "B-E-V-O" inscribed on both halves of the sofa back and the

longhorns that served as armrests made Mercy smother a laugh. Only in Texas!

“What does ‘B-E-V-O’ mean?” Wulf asked.

“Why, son, BEVO’s the name of the mascot steer o’ the University of Texas, A&M’s major competition. Every year before the annual game some enterprising students try to steal him and feed him to the corp of cadets for barbeque. Once or twice, I think they actually did it.”

“He’s kidding,” Mercy whispered when she saw Wulf’s puzzled frown. The legendary rivalry between the two Texas universities always sparked the Texas imagination with results like the room they sat in now. Red let out a bark of laughter at Wulf’s confusion, and after taking their drink orders, made himself at home behind the bar.

On the white terrazzo floor in front of the sofa and under the game table in the corner were large throw rugs of bleached white calfskin with BEVO’s name branded on the skin. Red chuckled again as he poured the drinks.

“Hi, I’m Dorie,” a tall, large-boned, blonde woman said as she came into the den. “What do y’all think of this eyesore of a room?” Strong features enhanced her warm smile as her light blue eyes sparkled with amusement against dark gold skin. As Dorie came over to shake hands, Mercy floundered, trying to come up with something complimentary about the decor.

“At a loss for words, aren’t you, honey?” Dorie grinned at her. “Don’t worry. It affects everyone that way. I’m sorry I ever let him go nuts in here.”

“At a glance,” Mercy temporized. “I would say someone here worships the football god of A&M.”

“Class of ‘53,” Red said with pride.

Dorie brought the drinks to Mercy and Wulf. Sitting down herself, she studied Wulf closer. “Don’t think I’ve ever heard of a name like Wulfgar before. You have a nickname or something?”

“Just call me Wulf.”

“God, that’s worse,” Dorie said with a chuckle. “I imagine all manner of barnyard animals must run from you.”

Wulf’s laugh was hearty. “*Ja*, and Mercy slaps me if I act like a wolf, too.” He reached over and flung his arm around her shoulder, smiling at her with such goofy affection, she felt herself blush.

His heavy-handed flirting was so inept—even to someone like her. It said better than anything else that he hadn’t been around women very much. She was so touched by his obvious inadequacy she didn’t even flinch at the physical contact.

The unfamiliar weight of Wulf’s hand on her shoulder, however, began to generate a host of other sensations. His hands fascinated her—the square-cut nails on long strong fingers and the dark, fine hairs on the back of the hand perched so tantalizingly close to her face. What would his

hand feel like on her cheek?

Red joined the group and the conversation shifted to the weather, oil prices here and abroad, and, of course, Texas politics. A late afternoon tour of the ranch in the shiny red Bronco rounded out the day.

Red's eyes crinkled with humor as he showed them the pen behind the house containing twelve longhorn steers. When they walked up to the pen, the animals shuffled over, bumping against each other but somehow never harming themselves with their wickedly long horns.

"We named 'em after the twelve apostles," Red explained. "See that scraggly one over there? We call him Judas." Although Judas wasn't very pretty, he still liked being scratched between the ears as much as the rest of them. Mercy laughed, wondering how anyone as powerful and rich as Red could act and sound so much like a country bumpkin.

Dorie smiled as if she knew exactly what Mercy was thinking. "Don't look at me, honey. I can't do anything with him."

Red chortled, his Texas accent deepening. "She don't always appreciate my wit. But then she's one of them women who graduated from A&M before they allowed women in. Her pa was an English professor. She took school real serious."

"It was a crying shame the way the English Department was treated at A&M for so many

years,” Dorie interrupted, grimacing. “I’m *not* an A&M fan even if I did graduate from there.”

After a huge supper of barbecued brisket, pinto beans with jalapenos, and German potato salad, Red waived good night. “Walk around, but don’t stay up late. We tee off at seven in the morning. It’s cooler then.”

“I hope you are right,” Wulf said, wiping his brow with a handkerchief. He’d already rolled his sleeves up as far as they would go.

The sun was down and the temperature had dipped a good ten degrees. Thank God, Mercy thought. Wulf already generated too much heat for her comfort. It surprised her that his height didn’t bother her. Instead, it made her feel incredibly feminine and petite. The boy in college had been tall, she remembered with a shiver, but Wulf’s height wasn’t threatening, just unnerving.

She was getting used to their touching and tonight his large hand felt warm and companionable. Of course, hands were as innocuous as the weather. Unlike other body parts. The thought jolted Mercy.

“We don’t need to hold hands anymore. No one is watching us,” she said, starting to pull her hand free.

He looked down at their joined hands, then at her. “I like holding your hand. Does it bother you?”

“N–no.” The silence between them lengthened.

She lifted his hand and studied it. “Your hand is awfully callused for someone who has an office job.”

“My calluses are from six months on an oil rig in Prudhoe Bay.”

“Oh. I didn’t know executives did things like that.”

“I do,” he said with pride. “We have production problems. I was...” He groped for the word. “*Sturungsucher?*”

“A troubleshooter?”

“*Ja*, that is it. Very hard work.”

“With the time in Prudhoe Bay and then traveling back and forth between Germany and Dallas, I guess you didn’t have much time for a social life, did you?”

“*Nein*,” he said, laughing. “No,” he corrected immediately.

“Maybe,” she began, feeling her way, “we can remain friends after this is over.”

“*Ja*. Friends.” He nodded enthusiastically. “I like that.”

Cicadas whirred in the mesquite trees, crickets chirped in the long Johnson grass alongside the lane, and small animals scurried in and out of the underbrush. Mercy felt as though she was in heaven and wanted it to continue forever. For the first time since college, she felt comfortable being alone with a man. This is what other people feel all the time, she realized.

Wulf hesitated when they found themselves once again back in the dim hallway to their rooms, Time to make his first move. “Would you...?” he started to say. “No, never mind.”

“What?”

“Forgive me, but may I, may I kiss you good night?”

“Oh, no.” She pulled back like a turtle ducking its head in a shell. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“What about a kiss on the forehead or cheek, like friends, okay?” In the dim hall light, he studied her darkened face, fascinated by the expressions that played over it.

“Okay,” she finally said. “I guess it would be all right. Yes. Just do it. Quick.” She squeezed her eyes shut and lifted her face.

He contemplated the woman standing before him, admiring her features. Damn! She acted as though he was going to behead her rather than kiss her.

“Friends do not kiss quick,” Wulf remarked, adding just the right amount of uncertainty to raise her sympathy, “*ja?*”

“Yes, I mean no, I mean... Oh, just get it over with, please,” she urged, her eyes still pressed closed. She stepped up to him, as he made an intentionally awkward move toward her.

He was much taller than she was, and he knew it would be uncomfortable if she had to put her

arms around his neck. He solved the problem by gently putting his hands on her shoulders, pulling her close and placing her hands at his waist.

Wulf gently lifted the glasses off her face and gave her a light kiss on her forehead. He heard her sigh, the look of anxiety and impatience dropping from her face. Stunned, he watched as dreaminess slowly replaced it. If she had even a clue what he was feeling, she would've leapt back from him like he was a roaring fire spewing blazing sparks. He was too tall for her, and she was too short for him. When she leaned into him, he knew she had to be unaware of the effect her breasts had pressing against his stomach. But somewhere between too tall and too short, his lips drifted down from her forehead to her lips.

What had started out as a calculated, tender kiss quickly evolved into a heated, fiery encounter and a ravenous hunger for more. Wulf locked her closer to him, sliding his arms down from her shoulders and around her back, reveling in the feel of her breasts flattened against him.

He felt her arms wind around his waist, her hands touching and stroking the taut muscles of his back and the deep indentation down his spine. Every muscle in his body tensed. Instead of her dropping in a dead faint at his hardness, as he fully expected, his arousal had the exact opposite effect. Her mouth opened on a small gasp of pleased surprise.

Wulf delved into her with delight, swirling their tongues together, sipping her newly awakened desire with greed. His body flamed, his mind losing track of his plans to take it slow and easy.

When he felt her rub herself against his hardness, he could barely stifle the groan. It was a fight to maintain control, particularly with this unsettling kind of reaction from her. He cupped her breasts, teasing her nipples into hardened pebbles with his thumbs. She whimpered, pressing into his hands.

Wulf groaned, willing himself not to tighten his hold and frighten her. The more he held himself back, the more she strained toward him, as though he was a magnet.

Why did she feel so good, so right? His body drove him forward so fast his brain heard only weak signals. Even so, the signals told him if he didn't stop this quickly, he'd soon be too far gone.

Why now? Why her? Aw, hell! Wulf slowly pushed her away from him, loosening her hold on his back.

The look of horror on Mercy's face made him feel like a heel. With growing alarm he watched as she touched her swollen lips with her fingertips. Wulf knew he had to say something but his teeth were still clenched with the strain of keeping himself away from her. He forced his ragged breathing to slow.

Mercy blinked several times as though to clear her head. Her rigid posture as well as all his

instincts warned against touching her at this moment. Getting her to trust him enough to fall in love with him required a delicate balance.

“I—I’m s-sorry,” Mercy said. “Oh, God, I’m so embarrassed.” She turned away from him toward the wall.

His heart wrenched when he heard her stammer. “Ah, *liebchen*, no,” Wulf said, pulling her against his chest as he gently wrapped his arms around her. “It was beautiful, our kiss. You are beautiful. When I kiss you, I feel so much I cannot say.”

He drew in a sharp breath as he realized his words were true. He forced himself to think in spite of the arousal that threatened to flood what little good sense remained in his brain.

Something he did or said must’ve been right because he felt her slowly begin to relax. Perhaps he hadn’t frightened her as badly as he thought. Hell! Not nearly as badly as he’d frightened himself.

*Mein Gott*, she aroused him like nothing he’d ever experienced before. Why hadn’t he anticipated the attraction? Damn it all! Lust, that’s all it was.

Damage control! Where did he start? “Maybe we have something more than friendship here,” he began. “Something we did not plan, *ja*?” His voice sounded hopeful without any effort. What a joke on him!

She nodded, looking scared and miserable. “Maybe.” She darted into her room, barely missing the door jam.

Wulf closed his own door and flung himself down on the bed. He'd already compromised what integrity he had for the deal with Ryder. Now he was discovering feelings he hadn't known were there. All he had to do was be a lying, cheating son-of-a-bitch. He groaned and turned over.

## Chapter 3



Mercy stood in front of the mirror trying to bring a semblance of order to her hair as well as her sanity. She studied her reflection, dismayed and frustrated by her uncooperative hair. Quickly she did the curly, dark brown mass up on her head in a loose topknot, her usual solution for a bad hair day. “There,” she proclaimed, more satisfied. Were those shadows under her eyes? Her dreams last night had been so mysterious and sensual she felt shaken.

Wulfgar Rheinhart had made her more uncomfortable, more excited, and more energized in the past forty-eight hours than anyone Mercy had ever known.

Her therapist had said it would take a long time to exorcise her fears about men, but up until now, she doubted it would ever happen. Mercy touched her lower lip, remembering last night’s kiss. Wulf, with his funny accent and gentle demeanor, had thawed her reservations and

conquered her defenses easier than any man in the preceding six years.

Since the episode in college, she'd avoided contact with men, but now, for the first time, Mercy wondered what she'd been missing. Was it too late for her to change? Could she work herself out of the past and into the future? She'd tried before, but every time something had happened to make her retreat to safety. Wulf, himself, didn't scare her, not anymore. Her *feelings* for him scared her.

Tired of her muddled thoughts, Mercy stepped out of her room to go to breakfast. Her knees went weak at the sight of him leaning against his door, waiting for her in that familiar jaunty pose of his. He wore a burgundy polo shirt today, the short sleeves tight around his biceps. The citrus scent of his aftershave made her yearn to touch his freshly shaven face, to graze those strong, angular bones with the tips of her fingers.

Mercy cleared her throat. How can he look so casual and relaxed when I've just spent a turbulent, miserable night trying to sleep? She forced her face into a mask of polite blandness. "You're staring at me," she accused him. "It's my hair, isn't it?" She touched the wispy strands framing her face.

He laughed. "No. I just like looking at you. I am glad I came here with you."

"Me, too," If only he knew!

"*Ja.*" He paused, looking down at her for a

few seconds before he took her hand in his. She cringed, knowing her palms were already damp.

“I think I could eat one of those longhorns that Red and Dorie keep as pets, don’t you?” she chattered, trying to keep a tight reign on her nervousness. Why was he still holding her hand? Would he try to kiss her again? Her heart started to flop. She’d soon have a full-blown panic attack if this continued.

Mercy watched mesmerized as Wulf brought her hand up to his lips. He smiled hesitantly.

“Forgive me,” he said, kissing her fingers and then her knuckles. “I have not wished you good morning yet.” Between nips and nibbles at her fingers, his eyes shot sparks at her. Goosebumps broke out on her arms and a chill shot like lightening up her spine.

Did he have any idea what he was doing to her, how her lower regions were heating up so dangerously? He brought her other hand to his lips and did the same thing. Mercy’s mouth opened, but only a whimper escaped. Her eyes closed as a small, sensual tremor ran through her body. She shook her head and blinked her eyes. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“Shall we go eat now?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, of course,” she said, trying to reorient herself. She took slow breaths as Wulf placed her hand in the crook of his elbow and walked with her into the Ryder’s large combination

kitchen-breakfast room.

“What happened to your glasses?” she finally thought to ask.

“I really only need them for reading. Where are your glasses?”

“Glasses?” Her brain felt as though it was swimming in thick, chocolate pudding. “I really only need them for reading, too.”

“*Ja?*” He smiled, a slow, lazy smile that made her want to purr like a kitten. “We have much in common.”

“Help yourself to whatever you like,” Dorie called from the sideboard as they entered the breakfast nook of the kitchen where the enticing odor of bacon and steak wafted to their nostrils. Dorie was ladling a gigantic waffle with gobs of heated butter and syrup, while Red was buttering a thick piece of Texas-sized toast to go with his steak and *chorizo*.

Mercy followed Wulf as he joined them, amazed at the amount of food he heaped onto his plate. She wasn’t aware of her disapproving look until he said with a lifted eyebrow, “I eat big breakfast.”

The evidence he didn’t put on weight easily—not if the quantity of his breakfast was any sign of his normal eating patterns—disgruntled her. Another example of the unfairness of the gods. She had to watch what she ate or she gained weight. Thinking back to the huge steaks he’d had

last night, she shook her head in further envy.

The golf game started as soon as they were through with breakfast. Thank God, Mercy thought, she needed some other form of exercise than panic and anxiety. She soon found out that a Scottish golf course could be just as challenging as she'd been told, with its rolling hills, uneven lies, and blind tees.

"It fits in with the country," Red explained to her as he saw her scanning the rolling fairways. "We're not called the hill country for nothing, you know."

Mercy nodded and inhaled the early morning air, redolent with fresh-mown grass. Birds chirped and squirrels nattered as they ran up and down the massive live oak trees scattered throughout the course. Almost every morning before school, she'd played golf with her father. It had been their special time alone together. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply again. This was going to be a great day!

Tabulating scores at the end of the afternoon, Mercy found herself in the lead, with Dorie behind her, followed by Wulf, and Red. Wulf's playing intrigued her. His drives were incredibly accurate, long or short, straight or curved, whichever way the course ran or dog-legged. The hills presented no problems for him either.

It was only on the greens that he played abominably. He did something else that intrigued

her. When he'd sink an extra long putt, he'd crack his knuckles. Mercy knew she'd either seen him playing before or had heard about someone doing that knuckle-cracking gesture.

Red made her laugh with his erratic playing. He had a horrific slice, that is, when he didn't hook. She and Dorie, on the other hand, played evenly all the way through. If she could face Dorie after the charade of this week, she'd enjoy playing with her again.

"I'm going in to take a rest. Who wants to go with me?" Dorie asked. Wulf and Red needed to talk alone, so Mercy agreed to go with her.

At the front door, Dorie stopped the golf cart and turned to Mercy. "Honey, you just blew us all out of the water back there. You should feel like you're in high clover, but instead you look as nervous as the proverbial cat on a hot tin roof."

She patted Mercy on the shoulder. "Life isn't near as difficult as you think, honey. 'Lighten up,' as my kids would say." She punched Mercy lightly on the arm. "The way I hear it, life's not intended to be permanent."

"You're right," Mercy said, laughing. "But have you ever noticed you're halfway through life before you realize it's a do-it-yourself course."

Dorie grinned. "You're learning, honey. Now take a rest or walk around a bit, but for Lord's sake, enjoy yourself." She turned the cart over to a houseboy and waved Mercy away.

Mercy wandered out to the backyard. The sounds of a working ranch—cowboys yelling at one another, horses stamping and neighing, cows lowing, cow dogs barking—were like a relaxing tonic. Farther down the lane were barns for horses and pens for cattle, including the small enclosure for the herd of longhorns.

She felt drawn like a homing beacon to the barn housing the horses, having ridden often with her mother in her youth. Two hours later she realized she should be cleaning up for dinner. She loved spending time with the Quarter horses and had lost track of time talking to the old cowboy who exercised them.

Mercy checked her watch, wondering if Wulf had returned yet. She found him waiting for her by the vine-draped backyard gazebo. In the fading heat of the day, the dark, shady gazebo looked enticing. She moved toward him, catching the aroma of leather and horse still clinging to her. She grimaced. No time to shower now, she thought as her pulse began to thrum.

Wulf leaned against the frame of the gazebo with his arms crossed, watching her. Heat spread through Mercy's body in gusty waves. Why did he affect her so oddly, and why did she feel so drawn to him?

"You must've finished early," she said. His presence excited her, her heart swelled with pleasure. He reached out and whisked her into the

gazebo with him, seating her upon his lap. Her surprised laughter stopped the moment she saw his face. Silence greeted her as he gazed into her eyes.

Mercy could only sit stunned as he slowly threaded his fingers through her hair, his deep blue eyes locked on hers with an intensity she'd never seen before. When her mouth opened in question, he shut it with his own, his lips slanting possessively over hers blending them seamlessly. Her breath stopped as he kissed possessively, passionately, hungrily. It should have scared her to death. Instead, a caldron of liquid, seething desire bubbled up within her. Mercy squirmed, trying to get closer, pressing herself into the large protective strength of Wulf's chest.

He drew away from her, scattering her wits to the wind. His breathing, like her own, rasped rough and uneven as he pressed his forehead to hers and closed his eyes. "I am sorry," he said in a husky voice, "but watching you..." He leaned back a little and shook his head.

"What?" Mercy asked in a small voice.

"I keep remembering our kiss last night," he said. "I want to do it over and over again. All day today. I am embarrassing you? I feel like fool, already. But..." His face colored and he looked away. "I am sorry. I have never learned to do this."

"It's all right, Wulf. I understand."

"*Ach*, too much study, study, study, work, work, work. Do you feel what I feel, too? Tell me

you do.”

Is this what love is all about? Mercy wondered. “I—I don’t know. What are you feeling?”

“You do not feel it too?” Wulf’s face crumbled. “Like I have know you all my life. You make my work hard because I cannot think. Always I wonder what you are doing? Where you are? And I am jealous when I see you down there with that cowboy.”

He gestured with irritation toward the barn. “I almost came after you. And, *liebchen*, you know I am never, ever jealous.” He hung his head. “I stay here and wait because I am afraid to look like a fool.”

His face grew bleak. “What do I do without you after this week goes? Is it possible we might look at real engagement?”

*Engagement?*

“Please do not laugh, but I think I love you. It makes me crazy!”

Wulf had such a look of desperation on his face Mercy’s racing heart softened and slowed. The dating game had passed him by too. Maybe that’s why her usual anxiety state had faded, the anxiety turning into something else, an engine inside of her that pumped heat in waves and sent showers of sparks spreading throughout her body. He means it, Mercy thought as she studied his face. How could something like this be happening to her?

The sounds of the ranch receded. All she could hear was their rapid breathing. The fragrance of the tiny white flowers on the gazebo's vine swept over them like incense. His rugged face with its late afternoon shadow tempted her to reach out and touch him. She stopped herself, looking down and twisting the ring on her finger. "Do you mean you want me to keep this ring, that you want to marry me for real?"

"Mercy, I..."

"I'm sorry if that sounds blunt, but I need to know exactly what you have in mind."

Wulf frowned. "*Ach, lieblich*, I..."

"I think I might love you, too." Mercy blurted, then covered her mouth with her hand.

"*Liebling!*" he exclaimed, managing to look satisfied and offended at the same time. "Yes, I want you to keep that ring. I have already told you that I love you." His face brightened. "I can prove it to you! Come with me to Germany to meet my family. We can go when I am through here." He stopped. "Have you a passport?"

"Well, yes, but I—"

"That is super! I have so much to show you in Germany."

His excitement communicated both invitation and encouragement.

Silently Mercy studied his face. Wasn't this going too fast? Contemplating marriage should take a long time, shouldn't it? It had hardly been

seventy-two hours since they'd met. Were they both crazy to be considering a real engagement?

"You are quiet. I have spoken too soon."

Her heart swelled with love and compassion at the dejection in his voice. Although she wanted desperately to say yes, Mercy forced herself to slow down. "I think we need more time," she began. "Why, we haven't even had a decent courtship interval."

She bit her lower lip. "It's not you," she hastened to say when she saw him stiffen and start to interrupt. "It's me. I'm just not sure what I'm doing. I mean, I'm twenty-five, but I've never been anywhere, or done anything. All I know about life is going to school. Yes, I have a lot of education, but as you can see, I'm not very sophisticated." Mercy faltered, looking down at the ground, "I'd feel awful if I failed you as a wife."

And how could she possibly explain her hesitancy about sex without telling him everything, Oh, God! "We haven't even talked about religion or children," she blurted. "They are two of the most important facets of marriage."

Wulf frowned and started to speak. "I'm old-fashioned, I guess, and..."

Mercy swallowed, her forehead wrinkling in concentration. All she wanted to do was touch him, feel him, have him touch her. Her breasts swelled, the tips aching. The dark, secret place between her legs dampened and swelled.

“Catholic and four,” he said.

“What?”

“I am Catholic. I want four children.” Wulf grinned at her.

She laughed. “You have answers for everything, don’t you?”

“*Ja*. I mean no. Mercy,” he said, his fingers playing with the silky length of her hair, “I am scared, too, but I will wait for you as long as you like. Just please say you will come to Germany with me after we leave here. I cannot bear to leave you. If you come with me, I promise no ‘hanky-panky,’ as you Americans call it.”

He looked so sincere, her heart warmed.

“*Liebling*, I do not want to say good-bye now that I have found you. My family will also want to meet you.”

Could she risk her heart, particularly after the way she’d hidden herself in self-imposed exile so long? In spite of her fears, excitement bubbled up within her.

“I’m Catholic,” Mercy said, trying to use what few functioning cells still worked in her brain, “although not a very good one. So, we have religion in common. I don’t know about the four children. Two sounds better.” Her voice trailed off, and she cocked her head at him. His background *had* checked out according to both Judy and Hazel. What woman wouldn’t be swept off her feet by a man as good-looking and as kind and

sincere as Wulf? “Perhaps the time spent here and in Germany will help us get to know each other better.”

“*Ja*. That sounds good.” Excitement glittered in his eyes.

*Going to Germany!* Whether she said the words or not, Mercy knew she’d already decided to risk everything on this once in a lifetime trip. “Give me until the end of the week to think about this, okay?”

“No problem. I’ll book flights now. We can cancel them if necessary.”

She nodded and inhaled a deep breath. Hand in hand they walked back up to the house. It was dangerous in that gazebo—the way he had looked at her, the way her body had felt when she was sitting on his lap. It was all she could do to keep from shivering with excitement.

Dorie and she played golf alone that next morning while the men closeted themselves in the library going over details of their joint venture. On the way back to the house after their game, they spied Wulf practicing on the putting green.

“Dorie? Can I ask you a question?”

Dorie braked to a halt and turned to her. “Shoot, girl. I can tell something’s troubling you.”

“There are so many cultural differences between Wulf and myself. I don’t know if it’s that or if it’s just my own nervousness about the upcoming wedding, but suddenly I’m just not so

sure about everything, myself included.” Stop beating around the bush, she told herself. “What do you think of Wulf as a future husband?”

“I don’t really know him that well,” Dorie protested.

“I know that, but...”

Dorie nodded. “You want to know what I think of him as potential husband material. Is that it?”

Mercy’s face flamed. That was exactly it!

“Well, honey,” Dorie said, “there’s so many things that go into the makeup of a good man, a woman is just darned lucky if she comes out with a winner. I did, but no one can promise you that. It depends on what goes into the relationship. How committed is he to love and faithfulness? How much loyalty, respect, and consideration does he show you in the little things of life or to the unimportant people he meets everyday? If those kinds of basics aren’t there, I think that’s a pretty good sign to stay away.”

Mercy frowned. Naturally, Wulf treated her and the Ryder's with respect. He wanted this deal badly enough to scheme and pretend to be someone he wasn't.

“But,” Dorie went on, “he’s got my vote. According to Red, he knows his stuff and his company trusts him with unlimited discretionary power. They must have a good reason to do something like that.”

“That’s a good point,” Mercy conceded.

“On a personal level,” Dorie continued, “I’ve noticed how he treats you. I can tell you’re important to him. A person can’t fake that. He’s very taken with you.”

Mercy nodded, relieved. “Neither of us has had much experience. He’s a workaholic and I’m an educational nun.”

“Well, he’s sure not a smooth operator, now is he?” They both laughed. “But on a more intuitive level,” Dorie continued, “I’d say you have a pretty good man there. I caution you, though, don’t let his actions deceive you.”

“What do you mean?” Mercy asked, suddenly wary.

“Hey, don’t go tensing up on me like that. I mean he’s a very complex, private person. There are probably levels to him you won’t find out about even ten years down the road. He may never open up with you, or he might open up *just* with you. Who knows? A woman takes her chances, like everyone else. Life is a risk, you know.”

“Thanks for talking with me,” Mercy said as she gave Dorie a hug. Who else but practical, forthright Dorie could put all those doubts and conclusions into such an understandable package?

“Sure thing.” Dorie grinned, letting off the brake and speeding up the golf cart. “Glad I could help. I guess Red told you that your father was my first golf teacher years ago.”

“Yes. He evidently taught you very well.”

“I’ll never forget him. That man was a real looker,” Dorie commented.

Mercy smiled. “I’ve enjoyed your company so much while we’ve been here. Although you don’t look like my mother, when I’m around you I feel her presence again.”

Dorie’s face colored under her deep tan. “I’m not saying anything I wouldn’t say to one of my own girls.” She climbed out of the cart and turned to Mercy. “Now, you just go back and join that long, tall drink of water on the practice green. Okay?”

“Thanks,” Mercy said, waving and turning the cart around.

Wulf stood up as her cart approached. As soon as she stepped out of the cart, he walked over and pulled her into his arms. Her heart leaped with barely suppressed excitement.

“Wulf?” she asked, teasing him, “Your putting is terrible. Is there anything wrong with your eyesight besides needing glasses to read?”

“No, *lieblich*. I chose you, didn’t I?” he said.

His leer was so comical, Mercy laughed at his roguish behavior. He was trying to be cool again, and, failing miserably. His fumbling flirtatiousness touched her in a way that little else could. “Pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“*Ja*. I know what I like,” Wulf said, pulling her against him and rubbing his chest against her breasts, “and I like you.”

“Stop that,” Mercy said, pulling away. She tried to look severe, but couldn’t keep the smile from her face. “We have to work on your putting.” She tried to line him up with the ball by putting her arms around him from the back.

Wulf looked over his shoulder and laughed. “This will never work. You are a pigmy.”

“A pigmy! Why, you great big horse, I wouldn’t look like a pigmy, if you weren’t so darned huge,” she retorted.

“Did I tell you how much I like pigmy monkeys at the zoo?”

“Now you’re calling me a monkey? You’ll live to regret that.” She shook her finger at him, the light-hearted banter spreading sunshine in her heart.

He grabbed her finger, bringing it to his mouth and biting on it playfully. Suddenly, the air felt too hot, her chest too tight. His expression intensified as he sucked her finger into the heat of his mouth. Mercy shivered as sensuous tremors burst throughout her body. *Oh, God! He’s doing it again!*

“Wulf,” she whispered as she pulled her finger away. “We’re here to work on your putting.”

“*Ja*,” he grinned, looking very satisfied with himself. “We work now.”

Her breathing slowly returned to normal as she stood back and watched him, giving him pointers. Within a short time, he began to do much better.

In fact, Mercy began to suspect he did poorly yesterday just to let Red catch up with him. Or maybe it was a lame attempt to be alone like this. She felt her face flush.

“Wulf, you’re a fraud,” she teased, after he sank his ninth or tenth putt over twenty feet.

He stopped, frozen in place. “What do you mean?” he asked, slowly turning around to her, his eyes unreadable behind dark glasses.

Why was he so upset? “You knew all along how to putt,” she explained. “You just used it as an excuse for me to put my arms around you, didn’t you?” She put her hands on her hips, trying to look severe, but still curious over his abrupt change in attitude.

Wulf let out a long, slow breath, slouched, and said with a teasing grin of his own, “Of course. I want you alone with me to have my way with you. It worked, *nicht wahr?*”

“Yes, silly. It worked.”

He walked the few steps over to her, kissed her soundly and went back to his putting. Each time he sank a long-distance putt, he cracked his knuckles. The memory suddenly gelled. There was a young man who had made waves in the world of golf, competing at the young age of twenty-one against far older contenders and winning. He had a habit of cracking his knuckles every time he putted a long distance in one stroke.

What was his name? Mercy frowned as she

concentrated. Wulfgar Rheinhart did *not* ring a bell. A name like that would be hard to forget. She racked her memory, but she'd watched hundreds of games and they all tended to run together. She remembered her father saying that many young golfers were just "flashes in the pan," who rose quickly and disappeared just as fast. "I was one of those," he had said. "I played for the money. I hated the traveling and being away from my family."

Hadn't that young man also been German? Joel? Josh? Joseph! Joseph something. Sturm? Stern? Stein? Steinberg! That's it, Joseph Steinberg. She studied him closer. Of course, he would have filled out since then, she thought. If Wulf was indeed Joseph Steinberg he would have added a good fifty pounds or more. No doubt that extra weight contributed to those exceptionally long drives of his. Few people could drive a ball that far with that kind of consistency.

But why had he changed his name? Was he embarrassed because it sounded Jewish? But Wulf had said he was Catholic. If he was that young man, he probably had a perfectly good explanation. Maybe his past as a golf pro complicated his current job as an oil executive, although Mercy couldn't think why that would be.

At that moment, Wulf turned to her with a wide grin. Her breath stopped, and she gulped, her knees weak. She let out her breath slowly.

Talk about temptation.

“*Liebling*, I sank every putt with one stroke,” he said, dropping his putter on the ground and coming over to her. “Are you proud of me?” He pulled her into his arms giving her a big hug, then leaned down and nuzzled her neck.

Mercy quickly lost all coherent thought. Her world spiraled down to liquid, hot sensations. A kiss like this could start forest fires.

When he grasped her buttocks, pulling her up on her toes to press against his hardness, she swallowed as the ache inside of her spread. The rigid feel of his hardness nudged that growing throb to blossom forth even more. He might be clumsy at flirting, but his instincts were right on. She tried to bite back the small moan of pleasure and delight but failed. A tiny whimper escaped as she gave up, surrendering to him. He moved his lips over hers, lining her lips with his tongue. Her mouth dropped open in a gasp as a surge of overheated desire hit her broadside.

*Yes, yes, yes!* Wulf’s body yelled as he gripped her tighter. For a moment, he considered the ramifications of taking her right here on the putting green, the lush grass providing a downy bed. As far away as they were from the house and barns, no one would ever see them. He bit down his lusty instincts with a vengeance. Never before had he felt so impulsive, so inclined to let the devil take the consequences. He damn sure didn’t

need to be feeling that way now. It scared the hell out of him that he felt so desperate to mark her as his, to brand her with the fiery lick of his passion before she slipped soundlessly away from him.

What a turnabout of fate. His former life haunted him with the visions of all the women he'd been intimate with. Now all he wanted was Mercy, frumpy clothes, crooked glasses, awkwardness and all. He'd never before encountered a woman like her. Her compassion and caring made him feel like a villain.

For years, he'd used women like tranquilizers. Mercy damn sure didn't tranquilize him. She affected him like a red-hot amphetamine, and she didn't even know it. Her eager, enthusiastic responses, so honest and so real bespoke her innocence. That very thought caused a surge that threatened to stop the flow of blood to his brain. His tongue thrust into her mouth, in blatant imitation of his desire for her. God! He wanted her so much he hurt.

Wulf forced himself to loosen his taut grip. Making small circles on her buttocks, he slowly let her back down to the ground, searching her face. He found nothing but openness and purity. What a grand, cosmic joke. To find the one female in the world he could love and live with forever, and to know that once she knew how he'd used and deceived her, she'd never want to see him again. He hugged her warm, generous

body close, rocking her gently.

At least she wouldn't have to know anything for a while. Wulf had time yet to build on their love and closeness. He rested his cheek on the top of her head, loving the way she filled his arms, the way she tasted like honey, the way the subtle fragrance of her hair reminded him of a meadow in spring.

Deception wasn't exactly a lie, was it? Yes, it was. He could lie to her, but he couldn't lie to himself. He pulled away to study her face and was struck anew by the serenity and trust reflected there. Oh, yeah. he was a real son-of-a-bitch.

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# Ann Logan

Ann Logan's background includes working for Naval Investigative Services. Although NIS spent a lot of time scrounging around for acts of espionage or sabotage, they still had to take care of day to day business. This took the form of thefts, burglary, misappropriation of government funds or crimes of larger magnitude such as rape, assault or murder. Needless to say, the FBI always grabbed up the really exciting things first.

She took the statements of all the usual suspects, real or imagined, including the periodic homophobic round-ups that the military says it doesn't do any more. In the five years she worked there, she saw more miscreants than she ever hoped to see in her life—and that was just the agents.

Her experience with a bloated bureaucratic organization stood her in good stead for her next five year rite of passage as a clinical psychologist. It amazed her how many crazy people were at state mental hospitals besides the administration.

Ann loves to travel, and her numerous trips to Europe, Great Britain and Mexico have given her more material than she will ever be able to use.

In between writing she runs a property management company she founded. Her husband of 30 plus years is a criminal defense attorney. They have two children and an ever-changing number of animals. Email her at [AnnLogan46@aol.com](mailto:AnnLogan46@aol.com).



Photo by Marci Benson

# Ann Logan

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