

SHERRYL WOODS

Sweet Magnolias

STEALING HOME



CHAPTER ONE

Maddie focused on the wide expanse of mahogany stretching between her and the man who'd been her husband for twenty years. Half her life. She and William Henry Townsend had been high-school sweethearts in Serenity, South Carolina. They'd married before their senior year in college, not because she was pregnant as some of her hastily married friends had been, but because they hadn't wanted to wait one more second before starting their lives together.

Then, after they'd graduated, there had been the exhausting years of medical school for Bill, when she'd worked as an entry-level bookkeeper, making poor use of her degree in business, just to keep their heads above water financially. And then the joyous arrival of three kids—athletic, outgoing Tyler, now sixteen, their joker, Kyle, fourteen, and their surprise blessing, Katie, who was just turning six.

They'd had the perfect life in the historic Townsend family home in Serenity's oldest neighborhood, surrounded by family and lifelong friends. The passion they'd once shared might have cooled ever so slightly, but they'd been happy.

Or so she'd thought until the day a few months ago when Bill had looked at her after dinner, his expression as distant

as a stranger's, and calmly explained that he was moving out and moving on...with his twenty-four-year-old nurse, who was already pregnant. It was, he'd said, one of those things that just happened. He certainly hadn't planned to fall out of love with Maddie, much less *in* love with someone else.

Maddie's first reaction hadn't been shock or dismay. Nope, she'd laughed, sure that her intelligent, compassionate Bill was incapable of such a pitiful cliché. Only when his distant expression remained firmly in place did she realize he was stone-cold serious. Just when life had settled into a comfortable groove, the man she'd loved with all her heart had traded her in for a newer model.

In a disbelieving daze, she'd sat by his side while he'd explained to the children what he was doing and why. He'd omitted the part about a new little half brother or sister being on the way. Then, still in a daze, she'd watched him move out.

And after he'd gone, she'd been left to deal with Tyler's angry acting out, with Kyle's slow descent into unfamiliar silence and Katie's heartbroken sobs, all while she herself was frozen and empty inside.

She'd been the one to cope with their shock when they found out about the baby, too. She'd had to hide her resentment and anger, all in the name of good parenting, maturity and peace. There were days she'd wanted to curse Dr. Phil and all those cool, reasoned episodes on which he advised parents that the needs of the children came first. When, she'd wondered, did her needs start to count?

The day of being completely on her own as a single parent was coming sooner than she'd anticipated. All that was left was getting the details of the divorce on paper, spelling out in black and white the end of a twenty-year marriage. Nothing on those pieces of paper mentioned the

broken dreams. Nothing mentioned the heartache of those left behind. It was all reduced to deciding who lived where, who drove which car, the amount of child support—and the amount of temporary spousal support until she could stand on her own feet financially or until she married again.

Maddie listened to her attorney's impassioned fight against the temporary nature of that last term. Helen Decatur, who'd known both Maddie and Bill practically forever, was a top-notch divorce attorney with a statewide reputation. She was also one of Maddie's best friends. And when Maddie was too tired and too sad to fight for herself, Helen stepped in to do it for her. Helen was a blond barracuda in a power suit, and Maddie had never been more grateful.

"This woman worked to help you through medical school," Helen lashed out at Bill, in her element on her own turf. "She gave up a promising career of her own to raise your children, keep your home, help manage your office and support your rise in the South Carolina medical community. The fact that you have a professional reputation far outside of Serenity is because Maddie worked her butt off to make it happen. And now you expect her to struggle to find her place in the workforce? Do you honestly think in five years or even ten she'll be able to give your children the lifestyle to which they've become accustomed?" She pinned Bill with a look that would have withered anyone else. His demeanor reflected a complete lack of interest in Maddie or her future.

That was when Maddie knew it was well and truly over. All the rest, the casual declaration that he'd been cheating on her, the move, none of that had convinced her that it really was the end of her marriage. Until this moment, until she'd seen the uncaring expression in her husband's once-warm brown eyes, she hadn't accepted that Bill wouldn't

suddenly come to his senses and tell her it had all been a horrible mistake.

She'd drifted along until this instant, deep in denial and hurt, but no more. Anger, more powerful than anything she'd ever felt in her life, swept through her with a force that brought her to her feet.

"Wait," she said, her voice trembling with outrage. "I'd like to be heard."

Helen regarded her with surprise, but the stunned expression on Bill's face gave Maddie the courage to go on. He hadn't expected her to fight back. She could see now that all her years of striving to please him, of putting him first, had convinced him that she had no spine at all, that she'd make it easy for him to walk away from their family—from *her*—without a backward glance. He'd probably been gloating from the minute she suggested trying to mediate a settlement, rather than letting some judge set the terms of their divorce.

"You've managed to reduce twenty years of our lives to this," she said, waving the settlement papers at him. "And for what?"

She knew the answer, of course. Like so many other middle-aged men, his head had been turned by a woman barely half his age.

"What happens when you tire of Noreen?" she asked. "Will you trade her in, too?"

"Maddie," he said stiffly. He tugged at the sleeves of his monogrammed shirt, fiddling with the eighteen-carat-gold cuff links she'd given him just six months ago for their twentieth anniversary. "You don't know anything about my relationship with Noreen."

She managed a smile. "Sure I do. It's about a middle-aged man trying to feel young again. I think you're pathetic."

Calmer now that she'd finally expressed her feelings, she turned to Helen. "I can't sit here anymore. Hold out for whatever you think is right. He's the one in a hurry."

Shoulders squared, chin high, Maddie walked out of the lawyer's office and into the rest of her life.

An hour later Maddie had exchanged her prim knit suit and high heels for a tank top, shorts and well-worn sneakers. Oblivious to the early-morning heat, she walked the mile to her much-hated gym, with its smell of sweat pervading the air. Set on a side street just off Main, the gym had once been an old-fashioned dime store. The yellowed linoleum on the floor harked back to that era and the dingy walls hadn't seen a coat of paint since Dexter had bought the place back in the 1970s.

Since the walk downtown had done nothing at all to calm her, Maddie forced herself to climb onto the treadmill, put the dial at the most challenging setting she'd ever attempted and run. She ran until her legs ached, until the perspiration soaked her chin-length, professionally highlighted hair and ran into her eyes, mingling with the tears that, annoyingly, kept welling up.

Suddenly a perfectly manicured hand reached in front of her, slowed the machine, then cut it off.

"We thought we'd find you here," Helen said, still in her power suit and Jimmy Choo stiletto heels. Helen was probably one of the only women in all of Serenity who'd ever owned a pair of the expensive shoes.

Beside her, Dana Sue Sullivan was dressed in comfortable pants, a pristine T-shirt and sneakers. She was the chef and owner of Serenity's fanciest restaurant—meaning it used linen tablecloths and napkins and had a menu that extended beyond fried catfish and collard greens. Sullivan's

New Southern Cuisine, as the dark green and gold-leaf sign out front read, was a decided step up from the diner on the outskirts of town that simply said Good Eatin' on the window and used paper place mats on the Formica tabletops.

Maddie climbed off the treadmill on wobbly legs and wiped her face with the towel Helen handed her. "Why are you two here?"

Both women rolled their eyes.

"Why do you think?" Dana Sue asked in her honeyed drawl. Her thick, chestnut hair was pulled back with a clip, but already the humidity had curls springing free. "We came to see if you want any help in killing that snake-belied slime who ran out on you."

"Or the mindless pinup he plans to marry," Helen added. "Though I am somewhat hesitant to recommend murder as a solution, being an officer of the court and all."

Dana Sue nudged her in the ribs. "Don't go soft now. You said we'd do *anything*, if it would make Maddie feel better."

Maddie actually managed a faint grin. "Fortunately for both of you, my revenge fantasies don't run to murder."

"What, then?" Dana Sue asked, looking fascinated. "Personally, after I kicked Ronnie's sorry butt out of the house, I wanted to see him run over by a train."

"Murder's too quick," Maddie said. "Besides, there are the children to consider. Scum that he is, Bill is still their father. I have to remind myself of that on an hourly basis just to keep my temper in check."

"Fortunately, Annie was just as mad at her daddy as I was," Dana Sue said. "I suppose that's the good side of having a teenage daughter. She could see right through his shenanigans. I think she knew what was going on even before I did. She stood on the front steps and applauded when I tossed him out."

“Okay, you two,” Helen interrupted, “as much fun as it is listening to you compare notes, can we go someplace else to do it? My suit’s going to stink to high heaven if we don’t get out in the fresh air soon.”

“Don’t you both need to get to work?” Maddie asked.

“I took the afternoon off,” Helen said. “In case you wanted to get drunk or something.”

“And I don’t have to be at the restaurant for two hours,” Dana Sue said, then studied Maddie with a considering look. “How drunk can you get in that amount of time?”

“Given the fact that there’s not a single bar open in Serenity at this hour, I think we can forget about me getting drunk,” Maddie noted. “Though I do appreciate the sentiment, that’s probably for the best.”

“I have the makings of margaritas at my place,” Helen offered.

“And we all know how loopy I get on one of those,” Maddie retorted, shuddering at the memory of their impromptu pity party a few months back when she’d told them about Bill’s plan to leave her. “I think I’d better stick to Diet Coke. I have to pick the kids up at school.”

“No, you don’t,” Dana Sue said. “Your mama’s going to do it.”

Maddie’s mouth gaped. Her mother had uttered two words when Tyler was born and repeated them regularly ever since: no babysitting. She’d been adamant about it then, and she’d stuck to it for sixteen years.

“How on earth did you pull that off?” she asked, a note of admiration in her voice.

“I explained the situation,” Dana Sue said with a shrug. “Your mother is a perfectly reasonable woman. I don’t know why the two of you have all these issues.”

Maddie could have explained, but it would take the rest

of the afternoon. More likely, the rest of the week. Besides, Dana Sue had heard most of it a thousand times.

“So, are we going to my place?” Helen asked.

“Yes, but not for the margaritas,” Maddie said. “It took me the better part of two days to get over that last batch you made. I need to start looking for a job tomorrow.”

“No, you don’t,” Helen said.

“Oh? Did you finally get Bill to hand over some sort of windfall?”

“That, too,” Helen said, her smile smug.

Maddie studied her two friends intently. They were up to something. She’d bet her first alimony check on it. “Tell me,” she commanded.

“We’ll talk about it when we get to my place,” Helen said.

Maddie turned to Dana Sue. “Do you know what’s going on?”

“I have some idea,” Dana Sue said, barely containing a grin.

“So, the two of you have been plotting something,” Maddie concluded, not sure how she felt about that. She loved these two women like sisters, but every time they got some crazy idea, one of them invariably landed in trouble. It had been that way since they were six. She was pretty sure that was why Helen had become a lawyer, because she’d known the three of them were eventually going to need a good one.

“Give me a hint,” she pleaded. “I want to decide if I should take off now.”

“Not even a tiny hint,” Helen said. “You need to be in a more receptive frame of mind.”

“There’s not enough Diet Coke in the world to accomplish that,” Maddie responded.

Helen grinned. “Thus the margaritas.”

“I made some killer guacamole,” Dana Sue added. “And I got a big ole bag of those tortilla chips you like, too, though all that salt will eventually kill you.”

Maddie looked from one to the other and sighed. “With you two scheming behind my back, something tells me I’m doomed anyway.”

The tart margarita was strong enough to make Maddie’s mouth pucker. They were on the brick patio behind Helen’s custom-built home in Serenity’s one fancy subdivision, each of them settled onto a comfy chaise longue. The South Carolina humidity was thick even though it was only March, but the faint breeze stirring the towering pine trees was enough to keep it from being too oppressive.

Maddie was tempted to dive straight into Helen’s turquoise pool, but instead she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. For the first time in months, she felt her worries slipping away. Beyond her anger, she wasn’t trying to hide anything from her kids—not her sorrow, not her fears, but she did struggle to keep them in check. With Helen and Dana Sue, she could just be herself, one very hurt, soon-to-be-divorced woman filled with uncertainty.

“You think she’s ready to hear our idea?” Dana Sue murmured beside her.

“Not yet,” Helen responded. “She needs to finish that drink.”

“I can hear you,” Maddie said. “I’m not asleep or unconscious yet.”

“Then we’d better wait,” Dana Sue said cheerfully. “More guacamole?”

“No, though you outdid yourself,” Maddie told her. “That stuff made my eyes water.”