

HIS PRACTICALLY
Perfect Plan B

A DreamWynd Whispers Romance
Book One

Neenah Davis-Wilson



DreamWynd
PUBLISHING

www.DreamWyndPublishing.com

Publication Note

Originally published as *All for the Love of Thomi*, re-released later as *The Courting of Thomasyna, or His Practically Perfect Plan B*.

This edition has been released with a new title, cover and revisions to better reflect the story experience.

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Cover art by 100Covers.

His Practically Perfect Plan B, Neenah Davis-Wilson Paperback ISBN **9780971094109**

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Fair Haven VT 05743

Dedications & Author Note

Here's a three chapter sample of the book. I hope it's enough to make you want to find out how things finally resolve between them. It is a roller coaster ride!

This book is dedicated to my mother, Virginia, who loved a good romance story herself. Because she passed those novels on to me, I was inspired to create a little romance myself. Before her illness took her away, she'd started to become a valuable critic to me. Never shy about telling me what did not work as well as what did.

This tale acknowledges all the lefties in the world—guys and gals of any age. And, of course, anyone who loves a good clean read with heart and humor.

As a writer who spends countless hours creating make-believe worlds in my writer's cave while the real world goes on around me, I sincerely thank my family for their understanding, patience, and support while the laundry and dishes pile up around them.

Also, I'd like to mention that there is toddler speak herein. One has a lisp, but occasionally, he hits it right. As they all do as they grow, until they get it pretty much all right. So any "inconsistencies" are due to that fact. They're learning to get it right. And sometimes, they imitate what they shouldn't!

I don't apologize for using kid dialect. They don't all speak like little English professors. And it adds to the humor of it all. I hope you understand and enjoy!

—Neenah Davis-Wilson

A Few Reviews

M elody Laramie - Reader Review

What I appreciated most about this story is that all the characters were REAL people and it showed how REAL families deal with each other. Despite family issues that arise shows there is a strong sense of family, which is lacking in most families. I loved that it wasn't a trashy Romance novel that cheapens romance . . .

This novel is refreshing, and it is very easy to get attached to the characters. The author is easy to follow and is very good at keeping your attention. I highly recommend this for young and old.

Kimber ~ Coffee Time Romance Review

Set among horse farms and the glamour of success and failure of believable situations and characters. . . . Ms. Davis-Wilson has created an in-depth story of family, the promises, betrayal, and forgiveness woven within detailed plots and subplots. A truly enjoyable read for anyone who loves long, sweeping family sagas. I found it an engaging and heartfelt drama . . .

Maura Frankman ~ The Romance Studio Review

This is . . . a very entertaining story. Thomi's family and friends are very colorful and I really like the setting on the coast of Rhode Island. There are many subplots, but they do not overshadow the main story. I could identify with Thomi's frustration with Stephan and his cousins. They seem to ask for total honesty from her while withholding very important facts from her . . .

Overall, this is a good if complicated story . . .

Divulging His Plan B

ONE

“**S**tephan Gregory Deverill—you cannot be serious!” Karla Storm Deverill Van Kirk brought the lawn swing abruptly to a halt with a white sneakered foot and fixed her cousin with a gaze of disbelief and reproof. “Stephan, that’s the most callous thing I’ve ever heard you say!”

Kourtney Quinlan Deverill reclined in a chaise lounge to her sister’s left, her small niece sleeping cuddled against her side. She, too, fixed wide eyes upon Stephan. But, while astonished at his pronouncement, she wasn’t quite as disapproving of his scheme. “Whoa, Stephan . . . that is callous—ly . . . *brilliant!*”

“Thank you for thinking so, Kourtney. I’ve thought it over carefully, and I don’t see how it can fail.”

Replied Stormi dryly, “*I* can see how it could!”

Leaning against the giant maple under the shade of which the girls had been lazing, he told them, “I’ve just come from a chat with my illustrious father. Not a joyous occasion as you might imagine! Since his latest matchmaking scheme has been undone once again, thanks to the conniving undertakings of our jealous cousin Charley, my esteemed parent is, right now, making desperate phone calls in an effort to rectify this setback.” He let that sink in for a moment.

“If I have to meet *anyone* else of his choosing . . . be expected to marry some beautiful, but brainless, female he believes will suit me, I will have to jump off the highest point of the Newport Bridge!” With an expressive gesture, he ended, “I’ve had enough. I have only five weeks to find someone I can at least live companionably with. I am moving on with Plan B.”

“Well, I’m happy to hear you’ve had enough of that! Been dancing to Uncle Gregory’s tunes far too long! Even so, I can’t approve of this *Plan B* of yours, Stephan! Go with Plan C. Find someone who hasn’t been mixed up with this whacked out family at all—in any shape, way, or form! You’ll fare better.”

Stephan shook his head. “Plan B, there is no Plan C. Thomasyna Tollefson, or *Tami*, as Charley called her, is our obvious salvation, can’t you see that? Charley is skipping out on her with Aveleen. What lies has he told her? I’m betting she’ll write him off her book, as *I* have written off my father’s wishes!”

“To do with *this*, anyway,” responded Stormi. “You’re still working for him!”

He let that pass with just a look. "Aveleen came by my office to hand in her resignation, deplore my scheme of a family of at least six children, and flung this at my head." He withdrew a large diamond solitaire ring from his pocket for their brief perusal and thrust it back. "The others kept theirs. Not that I care about that—not having bought any of the rings myself! This one was the biggest my father purchased for this scheme."

"*Six* kids!" echoed Kournay, amazed. "Wow, he laid it on thick this time, didn't he? *One* would have done the trick! I'm amazed she has a *dog* even!"

"Yes," said Stormi with some amusement, "how could anyone think she'd prefer the snotty nose of an infant over the cold, moist nose of her *furry* baby?" She cast a wry, but affectionate glance at her three-year-old daughter, who'd wiped that little nose on her shoulder many a time since her birth. Then, looking back at Stephan, she said, "Bet your father will expect you to try your luck next with Aveleen's sister, Holly Noelle."

"Those Hallwells are more snobbish than even our family—if that's possible! It's why we've called them the Hellwells since forever!" declared Kournay roundly. "Go with your Plan B! Tami, I'd love to meet!"

"Kournay! Don't encourage him for this!"

"Hey, we'd have another reason to visit DreamWynd if he was engaged to her!"

"We don't need another reason. You sold Rogue and Fairwind to her father before we left. That's the *only* reason I need to visit their stables. Find a Plan C, Stephan!"

He shook his head. "I've made up my mind. I'm confident that I can charm Tami out of her tears by the end of the month, if not the week. Because as charming as Charley can be, *I* am more so! *Definitely* I am far nicer than Dean van Kirk! Voila!—my wedding goes on as planned! All's safe!" He fixed Stormi with a meaningful look. "*Everybody's* happy!"

"Oh, not *everybody*, Stephan!" Stormi tossed back. "We're all well aware of your father's opinions about actresses—thanks *there* to his ex-wife! Even if Tami hasn't a temperament like Delaney Gaylord's, he won't see it. Delaney's betrayal ruined it for him. Leaving him for some director who'd promised her the moon; dragging him through a messy divorce. Telling her story to all those stupid gossip tabloids which might have really ruined him had not Grumpa Deverill stepped in. He'll shove poor Tami into Delaney's mold, sure as I'm sitting here telling you so!"

"Yeah. Yeah, and your mother's forever trying to prove herself to him," Kournay pointed out. "How unfair is that? *She's never* had a dream to perform. Maybe *see* a play or a show; but that's it."

"So," concluded Stormi, putting the swing in motion again. "he'll never stand for you wasting your life and our inheritance on an actress—Tami, or any other!"

"If it gets you the means of settling with Dean, I won't count it a waste. You promised *him* the moon when you petitioned for divorce. Yes, I know you were desperate. I haven't forgotten the circumstances. But, once again, Charley's robbed me of the chance to help you get rid of him! Have I mentioned I have only five weeks left to meet the terms of Papa's will?"

Which, of course, he had no need to, as they were well aware of it from the time the contents of the will had been disclosed to them all.

She didn't care. "Papa wasn't fair to any of us, least of all you! Okay, and Uncle Charles. So, of course, Charley is angry. Since Papa disowned Uncle Charles, he and Ryon were never acknowledged as his grandsons!"

"Yes, all right," Stephan conceded impatiently, "he has a right to feel angry about that! It doesn't help matters, nevertheless! I could right that for them, though, if he'd only stop to consider that! Which I may do out of my respect and deep affection for *Uncle Charles*."

Stormi conceded him that plan. "Yes, do. But, as his son hasn't considered you'd be so generous, just as soon as the world hears of your hooking up with Thomasyna Tollefson, his recent steppingstone to *his* schemes, he'll fly back to be sure you're still single right up to, and *after*, your birthday!"

Stephan shook his head, said gently, but no less firmly, "By the time he realizes dumping her to steal Aveleen was the biggest mistake he's ever made—his former darling will be my wife!"

"I swear, Stephan—"

"Come on, this could be a good thing," Kourtney persisted. "Seriously! *She* could turn out to be someone he could actually cuddle close! Aveleen never wrapped her arms around anything but her briefcase and that snooty Pekinese of hers! Now, if Tami *would* be impressed by his handsome face, his—" she flung out an expressive gesture, "—athletic bod, and those coppery curls! That smile that always makes *me* do whatever he wants, even if I *don't* want!"

"Sure, and let's not forget his *voice*," added Stormi, but with less enthusiasm. "Hypnotizes anyone listening to him—doesn't matter what he's saying!"

Amused, Stephan responded, "As if you hadn't a clue your own voice has similar effect! But all right—it's fortunate for my plan's success that I possess those worthy assets. And I mean to use all of them shamelessly. Open my wallet wide, too! If none of that makes her see I'm the best thing that's ever happened to her, *we are* doomed! If you'll excuse me now, I'll be off on my mission!"

"Stephan!"

He halted and looked down at her, a hint of a challenge in his voice. "You planning on reconciling with Dean any time soon?"

"Oh, you know Papa's purpose with those conditions was to try forcing me into that! As if money means more to me! Let it all pass to his wolves, his horses, and the rest of his zoo! Stephan, marry when you're ready to be, not by command!"

"Oh, I think your parents, *and* mine, would cut your tongue out for that! So would Dyana since she's got a share in this. My darling sister never fails to complain of your selfishness and unreasonableness in putting your interests before all others. You were Papa's favorite, after all. Why did you defy him? Dean *couldn't* have been *that* bad! He's *always* the gentleman when he comes to Deverill Hall. And much, much more to the same tune!"

"Well, I'm sorry for her loss." In tones anything but sorry. "But, like you, I've had enough of dancing to someone else's commands. Not sacrificing myself just so she can live more expensively than she already does! Papa may have banished me from SeaCrest at the time of my divorce, but I can't forget he supported us with our career choices

when our families wouldn't. So, I need *nothing* more from him!" She eyed Stephan pointedly. "*You* don't either!"

"I'm not doing this for *me*." And, reaching out, he ever so lightly touched her back and shoulder. She flinched but met his gaze unwaveringly. He said, "You show up here in Littleton, with raw welts on your back from your latest run in with Dean, inform me Lawron's been killed in a car accident days before you were to marry him, then say that Dean *may* have had a hand in that, and you expect me to turn my back on the only means I have of rescuing you?"

"Short of murder . . ." murmured Kournay suggestively.

"True," said Stephan with a nod. Then, to Storm, "Look, no one witnessed the accident, you said. So, it may never get proven Dean, or some accomplice of his, actually ran Lawron off the road. Or sabotaged his truck . . ."

"Probably won't," said Kournay. "Was a dark rainy night, and it occurred on one of those winding roads with no guardrails to save him from going over the embankment. Ruth and I took a drive out there—Storm wouldn't go. They hadn't yet gotten his truck up out of that chasm. Mangled mess . . . They had to cut him out . . ."

She paused a moment to regain her composure. "The police are calling it an unfortunate accident. But, Stephan, the things he said to her while he beat the crap out of her—he did it! So obsessively jealous he is! He killed Lawron just as casually as you just squished that mosquito." As he flicked that dead insect off his arm.

"Yes," agreed Storm with feeling. "He'll take the money—and eventually . . . *me*!" Her stomach sickened as she said it, but still she firmly ordered, "Don't sacrifice your happiness for a lost cause! Why make him richer when he's just—" She broke off, her feelings overcoming her.

"You're not a lost cause, Storm! *He* is!" He studied her face a second. "You try to say that with indifference, but I know what your fears really are."

She shrugged. A slight one, for any movement caused her considerable pain. "I'll spare you my panicked hysterics!" She gave a wry smile, made reference to her six foot two stature. "I'm *much* too big for that! Oughta be big enough to look after myself, thinks the world. And I can if I'm not caught off guard. Look, all I have to say is, let it all go!"

"I'm not likely to do that, Storm. I am much too fond of you!"

"Stephan, how the hell can you think even for a second of wrapping yourself in a meaningless marriage that has to last ten years—*ten years* before we see the bulk of it? You should know what a horrendously *miserable* prison sentence that could turn out to be! You helped me escape *my* horrendous three and a half years!"

"Miracle she survived it," uttered Kournay, who'd witnessed several brutalities against her sister besides this last one. She shifted her position in the glider, trying to ease the ache in her right hip. Deliberately leaving those memories, she tossed a saucy grin at Stormi. "I'll say it again . . . pretty clever—skipping out on him while he showered!"

Stormi accorded it a slight smile, but a deep concern and a certain regret clouded her eyes. "Yes, and then he nearly killed *you*! When I saw those pictures of his wrecked Caddy . . . and the car he'd pulled out in front of . . . I was sure you wouldn't make

it! When Stephan ordered me not to try to see you . . . *that* nearly killed me! And Dean—*Dean* got off with a few bruises.”

Stephan answered, “Couldn’t let you compromise your own safety. Had you gone to Kourt, he would have confronted you then and there and forced you to go back with him. With Kournay lying there, looking so bad, you might’ve felt guilty enough to agree! Couldn’t let you do that. Everything we’d been through that night would’ve been for nothing. Kournay’s *alive*, if lamed from the accident! It could’ve been much worse. And if I do this, you’ll both stay that way!”

“Oh, Lord, *open his ears!*” uttered Stormi exasperated. “There is *no* guarantee of that! Even with my promise of a generous settlement, he’s never accepted the divorce as final! Doesn’t matter where I go, he eventually finds me! He’s—” she stopped, her gaze coming to rest again on her little daughter stirring slightly in the circle of Kournay’s arm. “He’s frightened Kailey so badly, she hasn’t spoken in months.”

Said Stephan, “See, that’s what I’m talking about! You and Kailey deserve a life, Storm. Kournay ought to get one of her own!”

Before Stormi had a chance to respond, Kournay hotly retorted, “Excuse me? I’ve had a life, don’t you worry about that!”

“You plan to live forever in her shadow? Don’t recall you ever dating anyone. You must be the female version of me, Kournay!”

She laughed, saying “Oh, I’m betting I will be at my prince’s side quicker than you’ll have your princess at yours!” She fixed him with a look of arrogant confidence. “What if tomorrow I meet the man I can’t possibly live without, and we were married? Would that make you happy?”

He laughed, shaking his head at her playful exaggeration. “Sure, if it happened like that, and you *were* ecstatically happy! In what kingdom will you meet this Prince?”

“In his.”

He laughed and shook his head again, then glanced over at Stormi, favoring her with a mock severity. “In the meantime, Karla Storm, quit running—it hasn’t, as we’ve seen, helped your situation in the slightest, sell that bus you’ve been living in all this while, and make a life—a *real* life—for yourself, and for Kailey!”

“Not sure a *real* life is possible. But hey, I’ll consider it *if* you resume your practice as Dr. Stephan G. Deverill, DVM, use that trust Papa set up for you for that purpose, and get a place of *your* own!” retorted Karla Storm, not much moved. “Why do you waste your time at your father’s factories? Forget the sailboats and all that! *That* should have been a condition in that idiotic will! Papa had faith in you when he sent you to Cornell. You have a real gift with animals!”

“That’s why he could put up with Aveleen and the other cats Uncle Gregory tossed at him.” murmured Kournay, stroking Kailey’s reddish locks. “*You* were the beauty, Stephan, and *Aveleen* was the beast!”

Stormi laughed, then demanded, “What happens if Miss Tami manages to resist all your charms? What then? Forget your charms and wealth. Why do you imagine she’ll *trust* you—you being related to *Charley*! I think that’s going to be the biggest issue. Trust has been shattered, my beloved cousin! *That’s* what you’ll have to fix first! And

that will take more than a few weeks. Should she ever have the occasion to ask me what I think—”

“Oh, don’t *you* sabotage this one!” he warned, laying two fingers against her lips. “The wolves, the horses and the rest of ’em will *not* reap our fortunes—and you *will* pay Dean his settlement as promised! So, yes, it *will* happen, If at all possible, on the eighteenth of next month.”

His fingers slid under her chin, pushed it up so that her smoke grey eyes met his sapphire blue ones. “She’ll be better off sacrificed in marriage to me, don’t you think? No more arguments!”

His look and tone changed, and he told her, “As you say, I will need a place of my own since I can’t bring her to live at Deverill Hall! She wasn’t even permitted to step out of the car when Charley brought her here to introduce her to us just a week ago. We were gathered in the Blue Room at the time, but I understand it wasn’t pretty!”

Stormi pushed his hand away. “All your father cares about is the woman’s social standing and wealth! Everyone he’s shoved on you was a tall, blonde, cold hearted, rich bitch! Exactly like Delaney! I think he hates her profession more than he hates her. Otherwise, he’d be choosing someone a lot more like Auntie Irina!”

“Maevis was the exception,” Kournay reminded her. “*Her* heart had hot desires! And she was as redheaded as he is! How’d that happen? Uncle Gregory run out of blonde goddesses for you between whatshername and Aveleen?”

Stormi waved it away as of no consequence. “Ah, her wick was lit, but the candle was short! All of them were so idiotically gullible! I’m thrilled you want to marry someone *you’ll* choose—who’ll love *you*! But why should you rob Tami of that for herself? She’s an innocent bystander here!”

“In war,” he replied lightly, “there are casualties! But don’t worry! She’ll never realize she is one! I’ll court her in a way she can’t resist! Never will I be anything but my own sweet self—never deny her anything! A gorgeous home, not to mention a Newport mansion, cars, the best clothes, staff to cater to her every whim—what more could a woman ask for?” He paused, then added, “Children . . . if she wants.”

“I wanted that with my *true* love,” responded Stormi pointedly. “And if it hadn’t been for Mrs. Stonefield, I would’ve had it. We wouldn’t now be having this conversation.”

“Not this exact one,” he answered. “But your mother would’ve had Stoney’s head on a platter had she not reported your plan to elope . . . and *my plan* to help you do it!”

“She could have waited an hour,” observed Kournay with a scowl.

“Oh, she regretted not doing just that when she learned about the plan to send Storm away to some mental institution if she didn’t, that night, marry Dean! Money pulls strings . . . ! Too bad there’re no restrictions in Rhode Island, no wait periods. We might’ve had the time to have figured out a rescue for you, despite.”

His look turned dark. “I lost all respect for them that night. Was a heartless thing to have said and done to one’s own daughter!”

“What bothered me is that Papa went along with it. I was barely seventeen . . . scared silly by their horror stories of such institutions. Seemed marriage to anyone, at the time, was preferable. Turned out to be a lose-lose situation.”

Stephan shook his head. “No, they lied to you about Papa. I mean, I *can* imagine that my father may have had a hand in it. He’s had as much of a commanding hand in Uncle Edward’s life as he has had in mine. But Papa Ascott would never have condemned you to a mental asylum. He may not have been pleased you eloped with Lawron, but he would’ve accepted it. He gave Lawron a generous parting wage when he quit.”

“Yes, Lawrey told me it was what let him get into horses once he went back to West Virginia. Not that he gave up cars totally.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I couldn’t go back to it now. His mother can do with the place as she wants.”

“You and Ruth don’t get along?”

“She felt as everyone else did. I was too good for him, and we’d never really get it to work. She was civil, but that was it.”

“You could go back to Ascott Meadows. You know I’ve had the house and barns rebuilt. Or would you rather sell it?”

“Yeah . . . we’ll see . . . I still have flashbacks of that night . . . the fire . . . hearing my horses screaming . . . Kailey only days old . . . I wasn’t sure I’d get to her in time.”

“Dean put you in a lose-lose situation—save the horses or save your daughter.” Stephan weighed her options at the time as if on scales. “You did what you had to. When I discussed the plans with the contractor, I made sure it wouldn’t resemble the old layout. Except, to rebuild the wraparound porches you loved.”

When she still looked undecided, he said, “Why don’t I take you out there when I get back. Start thinking about what sort of place you want it to be now. So, go buy Rogue and Fairwind back from Tami’s family. I imagine Kourtney will insist on living with you and helping with that. As best she can!”

“She’s welcome to stay with me until she’s ninety,” returned Stormi promptly, then once more gave vent to her objections to his impossibly improper plan. “Don’t do this, Stephan! If you can’t love her first, don’t do this!”

“If I wait for love, Stormi, it’ll be too late! Charley’s handed me this golden opportunity, I’m taking it!” He bent to kiss Kailey’s cheek, then straightened up. “Tami’ll never guess I that I *need* her, rather than *want* her!” A pause, and he added, “Anyway, hot desires have never been my main priority!”

“Or *any* priority!” Stormi eyed him impatiently. “Charley told Maevis only the truth there! You had less than brotherly affection for any of them! I don’t blame you, but—you’ve never tried to find anyone you *could* feel passionate about! You worry me!”

Amused, he replied, “I’m amazed you’ve never lost yours married to Dean. What was it Papa said? He always knew *you’d* be the lusty one!”

“Oh yes, of all the things anyone’s ever said of me, remember that! Will you ever *want* a woman?”

“I’ve never met a woman worth wanting,” he returned apologetically. “Except you two, and you’re my cousins! Highly inappropriate, even if this state does allow for such marriages!” He paused, considering this possibility. “I suppose that *could* be our last resort, should it come to that. Wouldn’t the folks die of shock over *that* plan! Call that our Plan C, all right? For now, stop trying to deter me from my purpose! I’ve no doubt Miss Thomasyna Tollefson will be as happily in love with my multimillions as the others were.”

Before she could retort as she wanted to, Stephan thrust his hand into his pocket and pressed the ring into her hand. "Here, take this! Sell it! Go have some fun! You need that! It never had any meaning for me, anyway."

When she would've objected, he curled her fingers around it. "No, it's yours. I'll get Tami one of her own—from *me* personally! I'm trusting in her hurt and humiliation to keep us safe from Charley's conspiracies. We will all live happily ever after!"

"This isn't a *book*, Stephan!" She called after him as he purposefully strode across the side lawn to the last of the several garages where his emerald green Corvette was parked. "And even if it was," she added for her sister's benefit, "doesn't mean it's going to go like he thinks it will!"

They watched him back out of the garage, turn, and buzz down the driveway.

"Uncle Gregory's going to have baby elephants."

"Yes, but he'll swallow 'em whole if Stephan saves all. Eventually." Stormi gazed at the gem in her hand for a moment, then thrust it into the pocket of her jeans.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"I don't know. Probably slip it into his sock drawer."

"He'll only make you take it again," said Kournay, once more attempting to relieve the ache in her hip. "Hard to have had good times on the run as we were. Every time we thought we were safe—"

Stormi rose stiffly to her feet, the deep wounds upon her back causing her to catch her breath and a soft groan escaped her lips. "Well, if he had only accepted that the d-i-v-o-r-c-e was f-i-n-a-l, I wouldn't have had to. You had no real reason to flee with me. Here, let me take Kailey. Time you went inside and gave that hip a proper rest. Although, I'll need you to dress my wounds first."

"You could ask Mrs. Stonefield or Auntie Irina's m—" And chuckled when Stormi cast her a look of extreme censure. "I know. It's best if we keep it to ourselves."

"Yes, absolutely! I'll see Dr. Wray if I must." Storm gingerly lifted her sleeping daughter. With a note of resignation, she said, "Knew he'd try saving it whatever the cost!"

Kournay followed her across the lawn to the back entrance of Deverill Hall, the stately mansion belonging to Stephan's family. "Try saving *you*, whatever the cost, you mean! Well, at least *this* time he's using his *own* plan. I think I'll give him credit for *that* whatever happens! You know, when you think about it, it is a practically perfect idea!"

Stormi chose to let that last bit pass, replied to the first part of her remark. "Okay fine—he's trying to save *me*. If Thomasyna doesn't work out, he'll have to find a Plan *D*! Plan *C* is, without question, out of the question. He's like our brother. Who marries a brother?"

"Very true. Shouldn't we be going round to the front entrance? Auntie Irina won't be too put out . . . but if Mother were to find out we came in the back door—and went out it even . . ."

Stormi blew out a scornful breath. "The hell with her! She and Father shouldn't be here if you ask me! Why aren't they in Europe now? Or Florida, at least. Or at Sea Haven? We are not walking all the way around to the front to please her, when

a perfectly good bathroom is right inside this door! And *that* is *my* Plan B—B for bathroom . . .! And so I'll tell her if she wants to fight about it!"

"She will, she will . . . And they're *all* going to fight with fangs and claws, *Stephan's* Plan B!"

Pondering Regrets

Two

Waves, crashing against jagged boulders below, sent spray upwards as far as the sparse bushes that poked determinedly out from the cliff side. The Atlantic, an ominous deep slate gray and rolling with huge white-capped waves, reflected the sky in one of its blackest moods. Dark clouds towered into thunderheads, and the awesomely booming clashes and dazzling flashes that had teased in the distance, now threatened the immediate vicinity. The storm wouldn't hold off much longer, but at least it would alleviate the heat of a late June day.

Thomasyna Tollefson stood near the cliff's edge, absently pulling the ears of her magnificent black Chow and contemplating the events of the past several weeks. One in particular haunted her—made her jump at any sudden sound, her heart freezing, then racing like a Porsche on a straightway—rendering her bones and her will nothing but a pitiful gelatin blob.

The Villain, in the form of Charles Wolfram Ascott IV, had peeled off his princely disguise Saturday night. Now he was on his way back to Los Angeles with someone else. But who knew with him? He might change his mind and return. Beg her to take him back.

She would really rather jump off this cliff than ever take him back.

Musing through the *if onlys*, Thomi came to the conclusion finally that, *if only* she'd had a working brain in her head at the time, she could have avoided the whole mess in the first place! Both it and her heart had betrayed her. Not even to Simon Lindell had she given trust so completely! So readily . . . so blindly . . . oooh, so *gullibly*! Simon had some faults too, but none like Charley Ascott's! In addition, Simon's love for her had been real. Was still, as a matter of fact.

Never had she appreciated that—until this moment. He'd been a friend of the family for so long, she'd had trouble thinking of him as a potential mate as had been his hope. They'd done some films together and two television miniseries. He and his actor/director brother, Keath ran tame at her family's stable, DreamWynd Equestrian Center, for they both boarded horses there. For all the time they'd spent together these past few months, somehow Simon's devotion hadn't impressed her enough to see him the way he'd wanted to be seen by her. A little late to beg him to take her back too. He'd found someone else. Ah, why—why had she kissed him off so heartlessly?

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Why did you think Charley was worth it? demanded her Mind for the ten billionth time.

What had it been that had roped her in like a wild filly on the prairie? Had it been that soft caressing tone that none other had used with her before? His insistence—at first—of doing everything for her? Or was it his smile? No, no . . . probably was those hopeful brown eyes when he begged her to let him see her—that the wrap of the filming of *Kate of the Oglala* shouldn't be the last time they saw each other.

Of all her suitors, only he and Simon had presented her with more than a rose and the rare card. Gratifying—except Simon had actually used his own wallet to get them for her.

Charley—different story there.

And people say you can act! Never again, honey!! Never, NEVER, again!!!

Probably she'd have a bonfire later on and burn all the things he'd given her. They'd only been tools to him. Tools to impress the heart and lull the mind's defenses. Charley had not only dazzled, then drained her heart, he'd pretty much vacuumed her bank account down to paper dust. Which must have been his principal reason for wanting to be with her in the first place—hence all the sweet smiles and gifts . . . well, sweet smiles. Those gifts she'd more than likely bought herself.

Had been a sizable account too. She'd risen quickly in the ranks of higher paid performers and was still rising. Likely, she wouldn't be in this empty state long. But she'd pledged some of her resources to her favorite charities and other good causes. Her altruistic spirit was no secret, although she tried to keep it quiet for as long as she could. A virtue that served to offset some faults, chiefly a maddeningly insolent arrogance she reserved for those apt to mind her business for her. It didn't surface often, fortunately, but still, often enough to exasperate those on the receiving end of it.

She ought to have employed more of it with dear Charley, for this attitude had always seemed to work for her where men were concerned. She'd certainly curbed Simon's ardor with it when he'd taken liberties she'd given him no permission to take. Was a great defense in difficult situations . . . any difficult situation.

Well . . . most situations. Nothing had helped Saturday night.

Oh, sigh. Talk about blind infatuation!

The door of her mind opened a crack, and the events of the weekend peeked out. As had been his habit of late, Charley'd spent the whole of Friday with his friends, missing the date he'd earlier made with her. She and her sisters had gone to Christie's for the evening without him. Actually, she'd had an excellent time without him.

The notion she ought to bail out of this affair became, that night, more of a conviction when the girls returned home and found Charley staggering in the middle of the road, quite a bit more soused than he usually was—and this time he had no remorse for it. His expression ugly, his mood belligerent, he wasted no words in apology to her, no plea for forgiveness. He bluntly told her he'd driven his Camaro down the dirt path next to her property when he couldn't get in through her front gates.

He wasn't happy that he'd hung his Camaro up on a stump when he'd hit a rut and bounced off the path, landing on that damned thing. And he wasn't happy to have walked all the way to the back of her place only to find those gates also securely locked.

Where had she been all this time, anyway? Well, she ought to have a damned cell phone so he could get hold of her when he needed to!

Yep. The notion to terminate their relationship strengthened a good deal right about then.

From lamenting hanging his car up on a stump, ripping up at her and her sisters for keeping their gates locked all the time, and the cell phone issue, he went on to gripe about his other woes. In particular, the one concerning his Grandfather Ascott's unfair will that left out his eldest son, Charles III and his family. The old cuss had heartlessly disowned his firstborn when his second wife, Frederica, left him.

"My grandmother is better people than he ever was, and he punished my father for *her* leaving him! What was he supposed to do? He wasn't even born yet! The fool! But, hey, his first wife left him too, because she couldn't put up with his rules, restrictions, and limitations. Said it was no home to her, and she'd be damned to conceive a child in that sort of environment! So, he shoulda got the message when Gramma Freddy ran from him!"

They'd gotten Charley into Rikki's purple Mustang, but then they couldn't get him out once they passed through the gates and parked as close to the house as they could without driving on the lawn. He just kept up his tirade.

"All their lives, he's given *them* whatever they wanted! Sent 'em to the schools *they* wanted to go to—Stephan, Karley, and Kourtney, even Dyana—who's the snobbiest bitch! Musta felt sorry for her—or no! Musta been he'd seen how like himself she was, and *that's* why he loved her! The others ain't so bad. I like *them* . . . it's just the *principle*!"

He'd gone silent a moment thinking about this, then he spouted on, "So, only *they* get to split his wealth! The old man's a fool! Rejecting his firstborn like that—my father! Never once asked to see him once he found out about him! So, I can't think why he favored Karley so much! She's a damned clone of my grandmother! I told you no one's allowed to even mention my grandmother's name, right? Probably burned her portraits. I would've liked to've had 'em! But no-oo, I'm her grandson, so I'm nothing! Then the old man turns around and marries my grandmother's *sister*, Theadora! Now there's an intelligent move! But I'll bet my life he did it to spite Gram!"

Between his anger and his intoxication, it'd been difficult to get him to understand it was time to let it go and find a place to crash for the night. Naturally, they'd promised to help him find someone to come for him and see to his car. He'd finally come out of the Mustang, but he could hardly stand, much less walk. It looked, at first, like they'd have to leave him on the lawn. But after a couple false starts, Charley'd picked himself up and staggered up the steps to the porch, lamenting still his grandfather's unfairness to his firstborn and only son. Once inside, he'd fallen in the space between the overstuffed sofa and the oak and glass coffee table. Made one attempt to get himself up again, but he had the strength only to rise upon an elbow.

He'd looked up at the three sisters, all in a row, identical as team uniforms, and informed them, "I'm gonna . . . be the nail in their tire when . . . when I take her away like I took the others! My father'sh not good enough—*nobody* is! I'll fix 'em all!"

"Charley—"

"You wanna bet on that?" His tone turned belligerent, daring her to challenge him.

"No. Be quiet now. I have to find someone to come get you!"

"Go ahead, call somebody. Don't matter to me!" His gaze narrowed, and he'd peered at each girl in turn. "Which one o' you *is* . . . Tami? Dammit, you all do this to me on purpose! I'm seein' . . . triple as it is . . . ! Care about you, Tami Lynn! Gonna prove it to you, too! Gonna get you things you never dreamed of! Gonna . . . I'm gonna . . . love you like . . . shweet—"

She'd cut him off then, not in the mood to listen to his drunken claims of affection and his empty promises. Moreover, right at that moment, she loathed hearing that particular nickname on his lips. Good chance she might never want to hear it again ever—from anyone!

"Sure, fine, whatever. I'm calling Tony now! Don't get comfy there!"

For Charley'd collapsed entirely before she'd spoken the words. Which, while inconvenient, thankfully ended his ranting. Ming stood guard over the inert form, just in case. The young Chow hadn't liked Charley from the beginning. Of course, the feeling had been totally mutual.

She'd called around, hoping to find someone with the first one. Unfortunately, all of Charley's friends were in the same shape he was. Rikki'd wished they'd just taken him to Deverill Hall and dumped him outside those gates instead of bringing him into Cliff Top. "Call them!"

"Yes, this is one puppy we've been saying *no* to for the past three months," Halleigh'd added, annoyed.

"Listen to us!" they insisted in unison, each at a shoulder shaking her. "Take him to the pound! Put him to sleep! Put us all out of our misery!"

Thomi had pointedly ignored that beyond saying, "He is sleeping!" and addressed Rikki's demand. "You know there's no point in calling his uncle's place. He hates me so much I barely get to say my name. If one of his servants answers, I'm told there's no one available to take my call." Thomi eyed Charley's prone form regretfully. "No getting him up now if I wanted to dump him off at his uncle's gates . . ."

"You're not asking him to come get *you*!" Halleigh said, royally irked. "He could send someone else for him, couldn't he?"

"He could, but he won't. So, we'll just leave him where he is—again! Ming'll watch him for us! He won't be waking up until past noon anyway! And I wanted to ride tomorrow! Figures! Why couldn't he have just crashed at Tony's?"

Because he liked giving the illusion that he was welcome to stay at Cliff Top at any time! Between your sheets, dear, to be specific.

All right, all right, *yes*! She ought to have corrected that early on. Now, almost no one believed it when she said it wasn't true. Since that was the case, Charley kept hoping she'd simply give in and make it true. But she'd held her ground to his disappointment.

She ought to have investigated more closely all the instances he'd asked for money, too. But she hadn't wanted to believe he'd do anything other than what he'd vowed he was doing. Hadn't wanted to admit he wasn't much different than the other men she'd briefly dated—except Simon. For Charley's claims of seeing to *investments for their future* hadn't had anything to do with their future at all. He'd been clever about hiding his real purpose for asking her for so much money.

He'd gambled every coin in his pockets and under his car seats to oblivion—an obsession of his she hadn't realized the depth of until a half hour ago, when someone had shown up at her gates looking for him and the vast sum of money he owed. And that, she'd been informed, was just one of his obligations.

On Saturday, he'd woken up and had seemed human again. Apologized for his behavior of the night before, begging just one more chance—and wouldn't you know it, right after that, he'd pleaded for one last loan. The *last* one, *really*!

"What for *this* time?"

He'd been taken aback by her cold tone, but not daunted. "Tami, please! I'll pay you back, I promise. I've lent some cash to Tony—which I was expecting to get back last night—so I could lend it to my brother, Ryon. I don't want to go into what sort of trouble he's in, but I can't abandon him like that! We're brothers! Please, Tami! He's a great guy—just . . . impetuous!"

Well, she had impetuous brothers too, and she'd come to their rescue more than once, so she'd allowed herself to be persuaded one more time. He'd kissed her so sweetly and promised he'd spend the afternoon with her, doing anything she wanted to do. Even go to DreamWynd. Put up with her family—none of whom admired him.

And why would they? Charley'd largely ignored their existence, and never troubled to make himself agreeable to any one of them. Her family was large. It had tired his mind to keep track of them all. Especially her sisters; so very alike were she and they . . . although Lyndsay was thirteen months younger and five foot six inches to their five two. But he'd been as good as his word. Hadn't minded Lyndsay and Jacqi coming along on their trail ride. Even agreed to stay to supper afterwards.

"What happened to him?" had demanded Lyndsay, "He's actually human today!"

He'd found enough favor with most of her family, that her younger brother, Brett invited him and Thomi to go sailing with him as they'd gotten up from the supper table.

With a possessive arm about Thomi's waist, Charley'd replied with smiling politeness, "Thank you, but we have plans!" At Thomi's protest, he'd laid a finger across her lips, chiding, "No, I've gone to a lot of trouble for this—you can't refuse!"

But you should have! Only once again, you were foolishly lulled by his sweet attentions! That smile.

To be fair, she had insisted they go sailing for Brett hadn't hidden his disappointment. If she could bail out his brother from his trouble, well, he could give a couple hours more to her and one of her brothers!

Only then, little Stacia had run up to inform her that Ming was sick in the pony ring.

You could have gotten Geoffrey to take you and Ming to Dr. Ayer! You should have! What are older brothers for? Especially favorite ones?

Mechanically, Thomi's hands moved to rub her maltreated arms. Gingerly, for the bruises were tender and quite vivid. In spite of the day's warmth, she wore jeans, and a long full sleeved tunic to hide her injuries. The thoughts her mind threw at her wouldn't be stilled, and it served to exacerbate her feelings of guilt. She should never have been so trusting.

Ming, attuned to her moods, whined. His short broad nose nudged her leg, and he glanced up worriedly. Dropping down on the ground beside him, she hugged him to her, and some of the tension left her body.

Fortunately for her, whatever drug had been administered to him hadn't lasted as long as Charley'd intended. But for her loyal pet's intervention—

And here, all thought of Saturday night, she cut off abruptly. Now if she could only shake this incredible guilt—this sad humility.

O, Humility . . .! Rather a new experience for her! She'd treated them all with unpardonable callousness where Charley was concerned, but in an instant, her sisters, at least, had forgiven her all, rallying about her as though none of it had been her fault.

Ah, man, if only she could take back all the unkind things she had flung at them. At them all! She'd been particularly obnoxious to her father and her brothers. How difficult it was to swallow crow! Almost every syllable of what they'd warned about Charley was true!

I'm sorry! I'm sorry!! I truly am sorry!!!

Before leaving this morning with their brother, Tristen, to attend an arts and crafts show in Saratoga, at which they would both display their respective works for pleasure or profit, Halleigh'd impulsively pulled Thomi into a close embrace. "How can I go? You had such horrible nightmares last night, and you haven't stayed alone in a room much less alone in the house! I wish you'd let us call the police—or at least tell the boys! Something's going to happen while I'm gone, I *feel* it!"

"Go Halleigh," Rikki'd said, dragging her away and marching her to the door. "You can't pass this up—Tristen has all your stuff packed in the van! He's impatient to leave! We'll take care of her. Don't worry! If Charley tries to see her, I'll call for help. Call both the cops *and* the boys!"

Thomi'd mustered a slight smile at that, then wanting to change the subject, recommended that Halleigh sell that dreadful portrait of her which she'd only recently finished.

"I'm not selling it, Thomasyna! It's for show only! If something ever happened to you, I'd have it to remember you by! It's one of the best things I've done so far! I'm going to miss you both! Please, please, be careful while I'm gone!"

She'd promised, but Rikki and Halleigh's worry only triggered those worthless feelings again. She wasn't deserving of such concern—from anyone.

If only the earth would open and swallow me up!

Hugging Ming close again, she let out a depressed breath. "You knew what a rat he was. But I thought you were just jealous of him. Not very bright of me, was it?"

From the moment Simon Lindell had placed the then four-month-old puppy, more teddy bear-like than leonine, into her arms, Ming had been her devoted slave. He'd forgive her any number of transgressions—as long as he was fed, made a fuss over, and allowed to go Everywhere with her.

Now he nosed her cheek, flicking it with a blue-black tongue. Pulling his tiny rounded ears, Thomi told him firmly, "I promise you Mingi, I will never do this again! It's just you and me. And Rikki and Halleigh—and Lyndsay! Okay? Don't let me forget that!"

He looked her over seriously and licked her face again. *He* wouldn't forget!

Thomi's left hand slipped to the ground. Feeling a smooth stone under it, she picked it up, and hurled it over the cliff.

That felt good.

But not good enough.

She rose to her feet in order to put real power into her pitches. Which was considerable when she began to imagine Charley on the receiving end of it. Not very long after Tristen and Halleigh had departed, hadn't Charley the nerve to show up at Cliff Top Manor. Announced through the intercom that he was leaving Rhode Island for California and wanted her to know it.

"Tami, I need to see you before I go. Let me in! Please! Give me the code. Why'd you change it?"

"Really, you moron? *Why* did we change it?"

From the front windows of the upstairs hallway, she'd watched, not answering any of his entreaties—except to herself. He no longer had a right to let himself in through her gates. Rikki had changed the security code immediately after Thomi had come home Saturday night.

"Oh, for heaven's sakes, Charles!" had intervened a querulous female voice. "She obviously doesn't want *you* anymore than *I* want Stephan! Quit wasting time and get us out of here! A month ago!"

Thus, they'd departed on the long road west. From the sounds she'd heard through the intercom, apparently the pair had also the companionship of a snuffily little dog. Just the perfect pal for the both of them!

Too bad they hadn't slipped away a month ago. She wouldn't be standing here now in quite so deep a pile of regret!

Intruder!

THREE

The crunch of stone behind her startled her. She turned, expecting to see Rikki back from taking Lyndsay home to DreamWynd. Or, perhaps, a fan bold enough to have ventured down that dirt track to explore the unprotected part of her property. Ming's menacing growl became more sinister the closer the intruder came.

Thomi, although glad of her dog's protection, curbed his belief that she desired an attack in her behalf—at least, just yet—commanding him to be quiet and get back here! He complied but kept up his strict vigil. He had no more trust for this guy than she had.

She knew at once who the man must be. For while his resemblance to Charley was not striking, his likeness to his father was most certainly. Her encounter with Gregory Deverill wasn't one she'd likely forget in a hurry! This man had the same red-gold hair and eyes of a deep sapphire blue as had his father, though she couldn't remember the elder having such glorious curls. Nor had he this look of sunny warmth and delighted anticipation. No, the other's eyes had been more like a frosty winter's day.

The meeting had lasted less than five minutes, but it had left her with no doubt of the elder man's opinion of his nephew's present romantic interest.

Thomi kept her gaze coldly aloof. Charley's happy expression had belied his true temperament. Why should it be any different with his cousin? Whatever could he want? Come with an offer from his father to bribe her into leaving Charley alone? Maybe she'd take it so she could face her own father with less trepidation! Wasn't a stretch of the imagination to figure out what *he'd* say if he knew she'd greased Charley's wheels so generously!

Not put off by her unwelcoming attitude, the man proceeded leisurely forward, keeping a watchful eye on Ming. Thomi turned away, hurled a few more rocks into the sea, ignoring him rather than challenging his trespass of her property. Hopefully he'd take the hint and go away.

He didn't. He stopped at what Ming considered to be a safe distance away and watched her, waiting with infinite patience for her recognize his presence. Irrked, then, that she was herself under scrutiny, Thomi mentally set the newcomer beside his cousin and flung a smooth, nicely balanced stone at this vision with force and precision.

But, alas—no regard to safety.

The step taken in order to execute her throw found no ground beneath it. In a winking of an eye, she tumbled over. Twisting desperately, she latched a lucky grip onto

a scrubby little bush. There she clung, heart pounding so loud it drowned the thunder of the waves below—and that from the clouds above.

Oh please . . . please! I didn't mean it when I said the earth could open up and swallow me!

Even her father's displeasure and her brothers' scorn would be infinitely preferable to being dashed to pieces on those merciless rocks below, swept away as fish bait thereafter. The first root of the bush ripped from the cracks. Through the thin stuff of her blouse, Thomi felt the rough unyielding rock against her body. She reached for a hold in a groove above her with one hand, but it wasn't quite deep enough. Her fingers slipped off, and another root let go of the cliff side.

Above her, Ming whined and barked his concern, then suddenly gave an ominous growl. An exasperated, deep, liquid voice responded to it. "Here, we've no time to argue! Let me help!"

Ming backed him off. Meanwhile, the bush loosened its grip some more.

Urgently Thomi cried out, "*Stop it*, Ming! Let him help!"

Ming acquiesced but refused to let down his guard, keeping an eye on the man's every move, right down to the blink of his eyes.

The bush heartlessly dropped her another inch or two, and she caught her breath on a frightened gasp, involuntarily glancing down. Foaming, swirling waters held her mesmerized. They beckoned her, persuaded her to let go and be received into their depths. Time and again, they surged up, reaching to drag her back with them. Each wave more powerful, more insistent than the last one.

So much so, she could feel the mighty force in their thrust. Their crashing descent back into the sea reverberated through the rock and into her body, dragging her heart with them. She froze, unable to do anything but wait for the inevitable.

"Tami! Look up here! Grab my hand!"

Although he lay as close to the edge as he dared, his hand was just beyond her reach, and she was reluctant to try for it. "I don't . . . think I can!"

He was pardonably annoyed by her reluctance. "You'd better! That bush is definitely history!"

One . . . two . . . roots popped out from the cliff side as he spoke. She would have to move at once or forever lose the opportunity. Another gave way. A powerful wave slammed into the cliff, showering her with its spray. Taunting her, bragging the next time would be her last one . . .

"Come on, Tami! *NOW!*"

The urgency of her situation and that in the man's voice motivated Thomi to thrust herself upwards, assisted by a small toehold her scrambling foot discovered. His hand caught hers in a strong clasp as the bush parted from the cliff wall and tumbled into the surging sea below in a shower of dirt and rocks. Hauling her unceremoniously over the edge, he guided her to a spot some distance away from the edge.

Thomi twisted out of his hold. Her legs gave way, and she sank to the ground. Propping her head in her hands, she sought to recover her composure.

"Are you all right?" He bent slightly over her, one hand on his hip, the other at her shoulder.

"I'm fine!" Without looking up. "No big deal!" Never giving it a thought that her trembling fingers would belie that piece of nonchalance. She shrugged off his hand.

Ming didn't believe her. Anxiously, he probed her head and then her arm, finally forcing his way under it. He whined, snuffling her face, begging for reassurance. She wrapped her arms around him. "Ah, Ming, it's okay! I'm all right!"

"Fortunately," observed the man dryly. "Careless move, wasn't it—or was it meant to be?"

She shot him up the briefest of impatient glances. "Well, of all the stupid things to say! I'm not about to kill myself over *anything*—or *anyone* . . . yet!"

"That's telling me!" He knelt beside her, keeping an ever-watchful eye on Ming. "I am right—you *are* Tami, aren't you?"

Thomi gave him no answer, nor any other indication she'd heard him. Intrigued though he might be with the radiance and thickness of her true black locks—for even in the shadow of the impending storm, he could detect the blue highlights in them—he desired her complete attention, and he meant to have it. With imperative fingers, he made her look up.

In her eyes, of an emerald green, glinted a measure of resentment and a certain hauteur. "I am *Thomasyna*! Or *Thomi*!" she informed him coldly. "Sometimes *Syna*! Don't call me *Tami*—or *Tami Lynn*!"

Taken aback, he uttered, "There's a name you don't hear every day!"

"Yes, I do!"

He laughed. "I meant in the general way, it's not a common name!"

"Take it up with my father," she told him. "He named me—and all my sisters!"

"I'll look forward to that," he said smilingly. "I'm Stephan Deverill!"

Replied Thomi, unimpressed, "Yes, I know. Chucklehead's cousin!"

It surprised a laugh from him. "You're better off without him, you know!"

Thomi hadn't the least desire to discuss her affairs with him. "Yes, I know that, too!" She stared at him broodingly a moment, then bluntly stated, "She said *she* was better off without *you*! That why you're making a gift of her to him?"

"Oh, I'm infinitely better off without her! No one special, believe me!"

Must've been true. He displayed no hurt, no anger or resentment, nor even any disappointment. Well, hadn't Charley mentioned his cousin's wedding was just around the corner? Despite his claim right now, he must have loved her in the beginning to have considered a marriage with her. Thomi marveled at his supreme indifference. Must be handy to be able to do that! Oho, but what was *this* look coming into his eyes? A look like this could only start trouble!

Her regard turned both suspicious and apprehensive. He'd come expressly to see her, and not, apparently, to bribe her, nor even to discover what she might have known about this affair between Charley and his fiancée—whatever her name was. Aveleen, was it? Charley'd generally referred to her as Stephan's Latest.

For what then?

"Thomasyna, have dinner with me."

This unexpected request, sincerely delivered, startled even Heart—who betrayed her earlier resolve, wanting to give in to the sweetness of his smile, the lazy warmth of those

oh, so blue eyes, and the glory of his chestnut curls. Although, by far, Stephan Deverill's most dangerous quality was his deep liquid voice, its hypnotic effect lulling the best of defenses. Nothing like it had she ever heard before. Beside it, Charley's voice seemed now heinously ordinary! It wanted to suck her under just as those waves had.

Hastily, she rose up, backing away from him, stumbling over Ming close beside her. "Not on your life!" Her voice choked with suppressed emotion.

"No," he agreed, rising with her. "On *yours*! Because I've saved it!"

Thunder cracked, and twin forks of lightening lit the sky. But that didn't cause her to catch her breath as did those words. Oh, she couldn't allow him to hold this circumstance over her. One dinner could lead to the very situation she vowed to avoid—for life if possible. At least for the next ten years!

"So, I'm supposed to fall at your feet and swear myself your most devoted slave forever!"

"I'd be honored!" he answered simply.

"Oh, please!" with great skepticism, and she turned abruptly to leave.

Stephan prevented her. His fingers closed upon one of the most tender of the bruises Charley had inflicted, and she involuntarily cried out. Ming swiftly revealed his opinion of that move. Stephan swiftly released her. Her sharp command prevented disaster. Just barely.

Assured that Ming wouldn't finish the attack unbidden, Stephan watched her gently massage the arm he'd just released. He said contritely, "I'm sorry! I hadn't the intention of hurting you!"

Unthinkingly Thomi uttered, "Ah, it wasn't you who did!" Her bitter tone piqued his interest, but she put up a defiant chin. "You've no right to be here! Leave—please!" Her please decidedly more a command than a plea.

"Such a small favor I'm asking," he said mournfully, showing no inclination of obeying her.

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't do that!" she warned him. Lightning illuminated the gloom. In the same instant, so did a certain revelation. "But that's what you came for—isn't it? To get me to go out with you! Why? Because he took off with *Whatsherface*, you think you're entitled to *me*? I don't think so!"

"Tami—" It flamed her anger, and he corrected hastily, "Thomi! Thomi . . . ! I'm sorry—*Thomi*! But Charley always referred to you as—"

"So? I don't want to hear those names again! Thank *him* for that!"

"I promise, I'll never make that mistake again!"

"You won't have the chance!"

In his eyes, she read otherwise. With annoyed indignation, she demanded, "Oh, look, *why* would you want to? Your father would disown you as fast as Charley says your grandfather disowned *his* father!"

There was that in his manner, in his gaze, and the way his mouth tightened for just that instant. "Ah, no! Come *on*! You actually *want* some kind of *revenge*!" Her emotions raced through stages of anger, incredulity, and frank bewilderment. "What makes you think he'll care?"

“Long before they reach L.A., he’s going to realize what he’s left behind and want you back. Charley has an aversion to winter, and he’s making the trip with the Snow Queen!”

It gave her pause. Could that have been Charley’s purpose this morning? To beg forgiveness of his brutal treatment of her Saturday? Of having used her for whatever the relationship might gain him? Was it possible he would at some point return to beg for it again? Even claim his love for her still burned? Actually expect her to run right back into his arms?

Oh, no! No, I couldn’t handle that!

To Stephan, she replied obnoxiously, “So, let him suffer! Why should I care what happens between them? And don’t look at me like that! You’re all the same! Always wanting something! Somebody’s *body* or else their *money*—or *both*! Never a *real* relationship! And they want those things right after they pay for that dinner!”

His hand shot out as she backed another step away but dropped back to his side at Ming’s response to that action. Thomi’s cynical gaze conveyed plainly that she wanted *this* time to be the *last* time she ever saw him.

With a curt word to Ming, she set her back to him, and went off down the path opposite the one he had come by, disappearing directly through a slight gap in the thick hedges that hid from sight much of the high white stone wall that surrounded the house.

Pushing open the heavy wooden door in the wall that gave entrance to the property, Thomi waved her dog through. “Ming,” she said, locking the door behind her, “if he’s stupid enough to come back—I won’t mind if you charge him an arm and a leg!”

No worries, though. Who’d come back after a reception like that?



Neenah began writing fantasy and mysteries in the fifth grade, fan fiction and westerns in her teens, and romances after her mother introduced her to Harlequin novels in her twenties.

She has taken courses in fiction writing and journalism, earning highest honors in short story writing. She has also spoken in classrooms and at workshops on writing, self-publishing, and writing as a career.

A proud lefty, Neenah often reflects that trait in her characters. Rather than portraying lefties as clumsy or inept, she enjoys showing them as capable, confident, and anything but ordinary—inspired by her two sisters and the many relatives and friends who also share that distinction.

She is the author of several novels and short stories, and is currently working on the next book in her romance series, *A Storm in My Heart* which should be out early in the coming new year.

Vermont is home to Neenah and her husband of forty-two years. She has three sons, a stepson, two granddaughters, and a cute granddog named Tobi. When she isn't writing, she enjoys reading, biking, hiking, bowling, game nights with family and friends, her faith, and just about anything involving horses—having once owned a small herd herself.

With Sincere Thanks . . .

Thanks so much for reading *His Practically Perfect Plan B*! I hope you enjoyed your time with Thomi and Stephan—and their families.

These characters have lived in my head and heart for so long that they've become like family to me. In fact, when people talk about their own twins or triplets, I have to bite my lips not to chime in with stories of Thomi, Rikki, and Halleigh—or Tristen and Adrien, and Daine and Stacia! Crazy, but true.

The romance isn't over yet. I'm far too close to these characters to abandon them after just one story. I hope you'll continue the journey with them in the sequels as they are released. With the exception of Joleigh's story which is already available, the books will likely unfold as full, saga-length novels. I'm working on the third in the series which should release in 2026.

If you have a moment, I would truly appreciate it if you'd consider leaving a review of *His Practically Perfect Plan B* at the retailer where you purchased your copy. Reviews help more than you know, and I'm grateful for every one.

Thank you again for reading the story, and for spending time with me and my worlds.

You can find more about my books and updates at NovelsByNeenah.com.

Or connect with me on [Facebook.com/NeenahDavisWilson](https://www.facebook.com/NeenahDavisWilson)

With warm gratitude,
Neenah Davis-Wilson

More by Neenah

DreamWynd Whispers Romances Resurrecting His Love

Book Two

In the aftermath of tragedy, will Irvy resurrect his love for Joleigh-Anna?
Or has the lovely Holly Noelle Hallwell stolen his heart away from her permanently?

A Storm in My Heart – Book Three

Karla Storm van Kirk has survived cruel obsession, buried her true love,
and is now risking her heart again with a new love.
But will ghosts of her past kill this dream as well?

Ride 'Em Tough - A Short Story

**One determined cowboy. One infamously ornery bronc. Which one will win
today?**

Thanks to Eustace – A Short Story

One chaotic day . . . One heart wrenching revelation.

Tiers of Trouble – A Short Story

**What could go wrong when your twin sister's wedding is in your hands? For
Keryll? *Everything!***

My New York Decision – A Short Story

**What's a girl to do when life leads in two completely different directions—with
no map?**

