

Susan May
WARREN



Unfortunately, PJ's reputation precedes her . . .

Nothing but Trouble

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Nothing but Trouble

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For Your glory, Lord

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To all the crazy, messy, wonderful friends in my life—this book is for us.

Chapter ONE

PJ Sugar would never escape trouble. Clearly she couldn't shake free of it—regardless of how far and fast she ran. It had followed her from Minnesota to South Dakota to Colorado to Montana, down the shore to California, and finally over to Melbourne Beach, Florida, where it rose with teeth to consume what should have been the most perfect night of her life.

She stood on the shore, her toes mortared into the creamy white sand, the waves licking up to her ankles and, with a cry that sounded more like frustration than fury, threw her linen espadrille with her best underhand pitch. It sailed high, cutting through the burning sky, disappeared briefly in the purple haze of night, then splashed into the ocean.

Gone. Along with her future.

A seagull soared low, screaming, pondering the morsel it may have missed.

“PJ, come back inside.” Matthew's voice sounded behind

her as he trekked out onto the beach, kicking sand into his loafers, looking piqued as the wind raked fingers through his brown, thinning hair, snagged his tie, and noosed it around his neck. He dangled her oversize canvas purse from his hand, as if it might be a bomb.

Ten feet away, he held it out to her like a carrot. “They haven’t even brought out the crab legs yet. You love those.”

“Oh, sure I do. Right along with brussels sprouts and pickled herring.” She’d been so soundly ensconced in happily-ever-after land she’d failed to see that the man she wanted to marry didn’t even know she hated crab legs.

Pretty much all shellfish.

Thanks to the fact that she was allergic to it.

Matthew lowered the purse, as if her words stung him. “Really?”

PJ shook her head, her mouth half-open, not even sure where to start. Behind them, calypso music drifted out of Dungerees Restaurant, festive themes for happy couples. Twinkle lights stringing along the thatched roof overhung the porch, and the piquant smell lifting off the grills on the patio snarled her empty stomach. Maybe she should go back inside, pick up the wicker chair she’d knocked over.

He owed her dinner, at least.

She stood her ground, forcing him to march her belongings across the sand.

“Here’s your, uh . . . suitcase.” He held it out to her, letting go before she had her hand on it. It dropped with the weight of an anvil onto the glossy sand.

“Hey, that’s my personal survival kit—show some respect.” She scooped it up, realizing she’d been entirely too civil dur-

ing his execution of their relationship. “You never know when you’re going to need something.” Laugh all he wanted—if a gal was going to haul around a purse, it should be filled with all things handy. Tape to shut someone’s mouth, for example. Or a flashlight to guide her way home across a black expanse of shore.

“Sorry.” He stuck his hands into the pockets of his khakis, his sports coat like a warning flag as it whipped around him. “C’mon, PJ, come back inside. Please. It’s cold out here.”

“Seriously? Because ten minutes ago you were telling me how I wasn’t the girl for you. How, after nearly a year of dating, on a night when I expected—” Nope, she wasn’t going there. Wasn’t going to give him the slightest satisfying hint that she might have come to dinner tonight hoping—convinced, even—that he’d actually take a knee and put words to what she thought she’d seen in his eyes. Devotion. Commitment.

How could she have cajoled herself into believing that perfect Matthew Buchanan, church singles group leader and seminary student, might see a pastor’s wife in her?

Maybe she wasn’t exactly the picture of a pastor’s wife, with her curves, dark red hair, too many freckles spraying her nose as if she were still fifteen. She’d never considered herself refined, more on the cute side, her height conspiring against her hopes of being willowy and elegant. But her eyes were pretty—green, and honest, if maybe too wide in her face. And she’d cleaned up over the years. Even if Matthew didn’t think her beautiful, couldn’t he see past her rough edges to the woman she longed to be—a friend of Jesus, a woman of principle, a servant of grace? a girl who’d finally outrun her mistakes?

Apparently not.

She should be flinging herself into the surf right behind her espadrille.

“Expecting what, PJ?” Matthew had a faraway, even stricken, look in those previously warm eyes.

PJ couldn’t believe she was actually answering him and in a tone that betrayed her disappointment. “I just thought we were heading somewhere.”

“Like the missions trip to Haiti? You wanted to go on that with me?”

She stared at the place between his eyes, pretty sure she still had her shortstop aim. Her grip tightened on the other espadrille. “No,” she said slowly, crisply. “Not the missions trip.”

“Oh.” Wonder of wonders, he got it then, his face falling as he replayed his rejection. “I’m sorry. It just isn’t working for me.”

What did that mean exactly? Wasn’t working? Like she might be a cog that fouled up his perfect image? Clearly he’d forgotten the depths from which he’d climbed. Especially since, in her recent memory, he’d been a Budweiser-drinking surfer.

“You said that.” PJ hauled her bag up to her shoulder and curled her arms around her waist as her sundress twisted through her legs. She turned away, watching the ocean darken with its mystery. She never really swam in the ocean, just waded. The riptides and the unknown predators that lurked below the surface scared her. She tasted the salt in the cool spray that misted the air, heard hunger in the waves as they chewed the sand around her feet. She sometimes wondered what lay beyond the shore, in the uncharted depths of the sea.

And if she'd ever have the courage to find out.

"It's just that, I want to be a pastor, and . . .," Matthew said, his voice closer to her.

"And?" She wrapped her arms tighter around herself, fighting a shiver.

"You're just not pastor's wife material."

PJ refused to let his epitaph show on her face and found a voice that didn't betray her. "Do you remember the last time we were out on the beach together?"

"What? Uh . . . no . . . wait—a couple weeks ago, we got ice cream on the pier."

PJ closed her eyes. "That wasn't with me."

Silence. She didn't temper it.

"Then, no."

"It was the night of the sea turtles. Remember, we had to use flashlights because they made all the residents along the shore turn off their outside lights? We had our arms woven together to keep from losing each other. I remember wondering if it was possible to read your thoughts, because I couldn't see your face."

"We nearly walked on a sea turtle coming to shore," Matthew said, reminiscence in his tone. She glanced at him, and something like pain or concern emerged on his face, edged in the shadow of whiskers.

PJ turned away, back to the ocean. "I kept thinking—that turtle mama's going to bury her babies onshore and never see them again. She was going to leave them to fend for themselves, to struggle back to the sea, tasty defenseless morsels diving into an ocean where they're the main course."

She stared at her shoe, dangling in her hand. The wind ran

its sticky fingers through her shoulder-length hair, tangling it into a nest. Gooseflesh prickled her skin—she *was* cold and hungry, but she'd wrap herself in seaweed and dig a bunker in the sand before she'd return to the restaurant with Matthew. Probably she could even find something to eat in her so-called suitcase.

“Do you think they made it?” She wasn't sure why she asked, why she prolonged this moment, their last. Probably trying to unravel time, as usual, figure out where it had snarled, turned into a knot.

Matthew dug his foot into the sand, watching it. “If they were supposed to, I guess.” He sighed. “Let's go inside, PJ.”

PJ ran her eyes over the profile she'd previously—about an hour previously—told herself she loved. His sharp jaw, that lean rectangle frame. Barefoot, she still came to nearly his chin.

She wanted a taller man. “You've got to be kidding.”

He frowned.

“I'm not doing this 'let's be friends' thing with you.”

“But we were friends before.” He reached for her and she dodged him, raising her shoe.

“Back away.”

“Whatya gonna do, PJ? Bean me with a shoe?”

“Don't tempt me.”

He shook his head. “See, this is why we'd never work out. I need someone who is . . .”

“Perfect? Doesn't show her emotions?”

He raised his shoulder in an annoying shrug. “Pastor's wife material.”

Now he was going to get hurt. “Oh, that's rich. Coming from a former surfer with a scar where his eyebrow bar used

to be. What happened to ‘Ride the waves, PJ, and see where they take you?’”

His eyes darkened. “I’ve changed.”

And apparently she hadn’t. “Good-bye, Matthew. And by the way, yes, I hate crab legs. Because I’m *allergic* to them. Pay attention.”

She kicked up sand as she marched across the beach, thankful she could see her condo/motel/efficiency—depending on who she talked to—in the distance. She’d give just about anything for her Chuck Taylors to run home in. But she’d dressed to kill, or at least for love, this evening in a floral sundress and new espadrilles that gave her a sort of out-of-body feminine feeling. She needed her Superman pajama pants and a tank top—and fast.

“PJ! Don’t run away!” Matthew’s voice lifted over the surf.

“Running away is what I do best!” She didn’t turn.

“Why do you have to be such a drama queen?”

Okay. That. Was. *It*. She spun around, dropped her bag to the sand, and with everything in her, hurled her other shoe at him, a hard straight shot that any decent first baseman could have nabbed or at least dodged.

His four-letter snarl into the night put the smallest of smiles on her lips as she turned away.

The restless ocean stirred into the sounds of the club music as she hiked up the beach. She clung to the shadows, avoiding the pool of light from houses and condos, restaurants and cafés.

Not pastor’s wife material.

She broke into a little jog, hiking up the confining circle of her hem.

Angling up the sand, she hopped over the boardwalk toward

her building. Brine-scented sea grass brushed the walkway, carpeted the trail to the two-story Sandy Acres motel/apartment complex, the half-lit sign now reading only “Sa d Ac es,” a term that seemed particularly apropos as she opened the metal gate alone, again.

Around the patio area, rusty pool furniture glimmered under the tinny, buzzing fluorescent lights. A horde of moths flirted with death around the heat of the bulbs; the earthy palmetto smell tangled with the coconut oil smeared onto the deck chairs, tempering the sharp odor of chlorine. Hip-hop thrummed under her downstairs neighbor’s door, and wet towels taunted by the wind slapped the metal rail above her as she climbed the stairs to her unit.

Home sweet home.

A temporary home. Three years *could* mean temporary. In fact, until tonight, she’d already been mentally packing, giving away her garage sale wicker and, finally, her Kellogg High School Mavericks sweatshirt. Maybe even Boone’s leather jacket, the one she’d stolen the night she left town. It seemed an uneven prize to all he’d cost her.

Her skin prickled as she fought the dead bolt.

Boone had probably forgotten the girl who wound her arms around his waist and dug her face into the leathery pocket between his shoulder blades as he roared them away from Kellogg on his Kawasaki.

Loneliness met her in the silence, the lights between the slats of the blinds striping the bedsheet that cordoned off her so-called bedroom. Her faucet dripped, and she dropped her key onto the counter, surrendering to the habitual attempt to turn it off. Then she *ca-lumped* her bag onto the chair,

folded her arms, and stared out the window at the dark, hungry ocean.

Almost without realizing it, she clamped her hand over her left shoulder, high, near the apex, where the word *Boone* marked her in flowery script.

Beep. Behind her, the answering machine beckoned her away from the past and what might have been.

Boone was probably in jail or, worse, reformed and married with children. The great taboo, he wasn't mentioned in her mother's phone calls; his name wasn't scrawled in her letters. She was sure he'd forgotten her, just like everyone else had.

Beep.

Forgotten that she'd left Kellogg, Minnesota, accused of a felony—an accusation too easily pinned on a high school senior whose reputation indicted her without trial. Her only crime had been abysmal judgment in men and allowing her heart to trespass into places her common sense told her not to tread.

A crime, apparently, she kept committing.

Beep.

Forgotten that her mother cut a deal with the director of the country club, one that included a full tank of gas and promises of a new kitchen. Her mother's instructions to her included the phrase "just until things blow over."

Beep.

Perhaps things had blown over long ago. Perhaps she was the one not ready.

Beep!

She pushed the Play button as she opened the freezer. *Please let there be ice—*

“PJ, it’s me.” Connie. The fact that her sister’s attorney-solemn voice tremored made PJ close the freezer door.

“Don’t panic.” Of course not. Because Connie never called her without some earth-shattering joyful news: *I passed the bar. I bought a house. I’m having a baby. I’m getting married again!*

PJ forced herself to remember that dissecting all that joy was the dark news of husband number one’s death. No one, regardless of how successful, thin, wealthy, and smart, deserved to be woken up at 2 a.m. by the police and asked to identify her husband’s remains. Or those of his mistress, with whom he’d been traveling when his car went off the road.

Still, PJ *could* hear panic under Connie’s voice. Especially when Connie continued, a little too quickly.

“Okay, listen, I know you don’t want to hear this, but . . . I need you to come home.”

Connie took a breath. And PJ held hers.

“Mom’s been in an accident.”

Everything went silent—the hip-hop beating the floorboards, the far-off hunger of the ocean, Matthew’s criticism in her ear. The years rushed at her like a line drive knocking her off her feet, regrets scattered like dust in her shadow.

Then Connie sighed and hung up. The beep and time signature noted no further messages.

PJ reached for the phone.



Connie sounded as if she might be on her fourth cup of coffee in some cement-lined corridor, tapping out the hour in her Jimmy Choos.

“PJ, where have you been? Mom’s already had her cast set and is in recovery.”

“Please, Connie, not now. Just . . . what happened?” PJ pressed the phone tight to her ear and paced to the window, the ten-year near estrangement with her mother hollowing her out. Had her mother forgotten her silent pledge to carry on, to be waiting if and when PJ summoned the courage to point her car north?

“She fell on the tennis court and broke her ankle.”

The window’s cool surface broke the sweat across PJ’s forehead. Tennis? “For pete’s sake, Connie, I thought . . . oh, man . . . Don’t call me again.”

“PJ!”

“What?”

“Don’t you want to know how bad it is?”

PJ sank into a chair. “How bad is it?”

“They casted her ankle; her bones are secured with a pin. She’ll be out of the hospital tomorrow. But I need you to come home. I’m getting married in a week, and I need help.”

Married. Of *course*. PJ had seen a picture of Sergei, Connie’s fiancé, and seriously wondered why a double-degreed lawyer might be marrying her tae kwon do coach. But who was she to question—after all, she, a near felon, had dreamed she might pass as a pastor’s wife.

“I thought you two were eloping.” PJ had managed to catch her breath and now returned to the freezer, cradled the phone against her shoulder, and dug out the Moose Tracks. As she opened the lid, crystallized edges and the smell of freezer burn elicited only a slight hesitation. She lifted a spoon from the dish drainer cup in the sink.

“We were flying down to Cancún, but Sergei’s parents couldn’t get a visa for Mexico, so I planned a little soiree at the country club. But the thing is, I have vacation time coming, and if I don’t use it, I’ll lose it. So we need to get away now if we want a honeymoon, and Mom certainly can’t watch David while she’s in a cast. I need you, Peej.”

PJ leaned a hip against the counter and cleaned the sides of the carton, the chocolate swirls melting against the roof of her mouth—sweet with only an edge of bitter.

“So let me get this straight—it’s okay that you weren’t going to invite me to the sunny sands of Mexico to watch you tie the knot with Mr. Muscle, but you want me to leave my life and return home at your whim?” She kept her eyes averted from the threadbare wicker and the chipped Formica table and stomped the floor once, real loud, hoping the boyz in the hood might hear her over the rap.

On the other end of the phone, Connie’s voice waddled into a small, tight ball. “I know how you feel about Kellogg and Boone and especially Mom, and frankly I don’t blame you. I’ve even tried to respect your decision. But it’s time to come home. You have family here. I need you. David needs you. . . .”

PJ tossed the empty container into the sink, licked off the spoon. Down the street, a car peeled out in a hurry, and a dog barked in disapproval.

“You know how I feel? Really? Because you got to stay, Connie. After graduation, you went on to college, to a life. I left town right after the ceremony, a Tupperware bowl of fruit on the seat beside me, praying my ancient VW Bug would make it to the South Dakota border. I’ve spent the past ten years wandering from one tank of gas to the next, trying

to figure out where I should land. You lived the life Mom dreamed for you—”

“You lived the life you dreamed for yourself.”

PJ flinched, Connie’s voice sharper than she remembered. She stared out the window, wondering if Matthew still stood on the beach, a hand to his bruised head. “Is that what you seriously believe?”

Silence on the other end made PJ rub her fingers into her eyes. Connie had become an unlikely ally over the past ten years, mediating between PJ and their mother, once in a while sending her enough to cover her rent. However, it still wasn’t so easy to share the limelight with the sister who was wanted.

As opposed to being the one left on the proverbial doorstep. Being adopted sounded so endearing to everyone but the adoptee. The fact that Connie had been born just a few months later, close enough to share the same classes in school, constantly earning better grades and more awards, only served as a constant reminder that PJ hadn’t been good enough, even from birth.

“I’m sorry,” PJ said, letting a sigh leak out. “I’ve had a rough night.”

“Then come home, PJ. If only for a couple weeks. Or longer. You can stay with me until you find your own place.”

“Did you ask Mom?” PJ winced, hating the question and that she didn’t yank it back. Hadn’t she learned anything?

“I asked. Even if Mom won’t admit it, she needs you.”

PJ stood at her screen door, staring out at the now star-sprinkled night glistening on the rippled landscape. The Milky Way streamed across the sky, heading north.

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“Please?” Admittedly, it was the closest to pleading she’d ever heard from Connie. “I need you.”

“How long before your wedding?”

“Six days. Sunday at two.”

PJ hung up without promises and walked back outside, over the boardwalk to the beach. The wind had chased the clouds, and a diamond chip moon hung in the sky, surrounded by the jewels of the night, brilliant and close enough to wrap her fingers around. She pressed her bare feet into the sand, then lifted them out, listening to the water slurp, then fill the imprints. Finally, she stared out again at the ocean and wondered how many turtles really made it back to the sea.

Author's Note

Sometimes, do you feel like you just don't fit in? You look around you and think that if anyone knew how difficult it was just to put yourself together, to smile when you feel completely overwhelmed, to even figure out what you were making for supper, they'd know what a mess you were. Maybe you totally relate to those words in 1 Peter—"God's elect, *strangers* in the world." Do you feel like when you look in the rearview mirror, all you see are your mistakes?

Maybe not. But if so, then PJ is your gal. I wanted to write a story about the person in so many of us who just wants to get it right . . . but can't seem to stay out of trouble. My friend and I have what we call the "stupid mouth" club . . . and we report our weekly foibles (usually on Monday, after Sunday church!). PJ is our charter member. She's the girl that changes her mind, always hopes for the best, is always discovering that she is just a little different from everyone else. PJ is us.

And that's good news. Because God loves PJ. He loves her messiness and her impulsiveness, her heart bent toward others, the hope that fuels her actions. And He has a plan for PJ—one that includes her weaknesses as well as her strengths.

Yep, I need to hear that—need to hear that I don't have to be perfect for God to love me, use me, sing over me. Need to hear that although I don't fit in, I'm not supposed to. . . . In fact, I'm supposed to be a little . . . alien.

Susan May Warren

So, to all the PJs out there—and anyone who knows a PJ—this book is for you. Thank you for reading PJ’s adventures—I hope you come back for her continuing craziness with Boone and Jeremy and her PI dreams in the next book: *Double Trouble*. And meanwhile, may you live with joy on the outside the unique and delightful person God has created on the inside.

IN HIS GRACE,

Susan May Warren

About the Author

Susan May Warren is a former missionary to Russia, the mother of four children, and the wife of a guy who wooed her onto the back of his motorcycle for the adventure of a lifetime. The award-winning author of over twenty books, Susan loves to write and teach writing. She speaks at women's events around the country about God's amazing grace in our lives. Susan is active in her church and small community and makes her home on the north shore of Minnesota where her husband runs a hotel.

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