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The Cowboy And The Calendar Girl

Nancy Martin



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«HarperCollins»,

Opposites Attract 100% PURE COWBOY? Ever since calendar publisher Carly Cortazzo had laid eyes on handsome Hank Fowler's photograph, she'd been dreaming about this rugged cowboy. So she finally headed out to the Black Hills of South Dakota to meet him. This tall, lean, mysterious rancher was even better in person. And after spending one-too-many nights held safely in his strong arms, Carly knew she'd found the man of her dreams... Problem was, Hank wasn't quite who she thought he was. Unexpectedly, he'd fallen hard for the pretty, trusting romantic. But once he told her the truth, how could he convince her he was still the cowboy she wanted... forever? Can these opposites attract?

[A Cowboy Came With Fewer Complications Than A Man From The City....](#) [Letter to Reader](#)
[Title Page](#) [About the Author](#) [Chapter One](#) [Chapter Two](#) [Chapter Three](#) [Chapter Four](#) [Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#) [Chapter Seven](#) [Chapter Eight](#) [Chapter Nine](#) [Copyright](#)

A Cowboy Came With Fewer Complications Than A Man From The City....

Or so Carly thought. He ought to be easy to get along with. He didn't come with a lot of excess baggage. He rode his horse, drove a pickup truck while listening to country-western music, looked after his cattle and didn't worry about issues that plagued the rest of the world. The fantasy man had spun around in Carly's imagination for weeks.

But is that Hank? Carly frowned to herself. Is he the fantasy cowboy I dreamed up?

Maybe not, she reasoned. He wasn't a cardboard cutout of a man. He wasn't shallow and empty-headed.

He was real. He was smart and capable, not to mention definitely an accomplished lover....

Dear Reader,

This month Silhouette Desire brings you six brand-new, emotional and sensual novels by some of the bestselling—and most beloved—authors in the romance genre.

Cait London continues her hugely popular miniseries THE TALLCHIEFS with The Seduction of Fiona Tallchief, April's MAN OF THE MONTH. Next, Elizabeth Bevarly concludes her BLAME IT ON BOB series with The Virgin and the Vagabond And when a socialite confesses her virginity to a cowboy, she just might be Taken by a Texan, in Lass Small's THE KEEPERS OF TEXAS miniseries.

Plus, we have Maureen Child's Maternity Bride, The Cowboy and the Calendar Girl, the last in the OPPOSITES ATTRACT series by Nancy Martin, and Kathryn Taylor's tale of domesticating an office-bound hunk in Taming the Tycoon.

I hope you enjoy all six of Silhouette Desire's selections this month—and every month!

Regards,



Senior Editor

Silhouette Books

Please address questions and book requests to:

Silhouette Reader Service

U.S.: 3010 Walden Ave., P.O. Box 1325, Buffalo, NY 14269

Canadian: P.O. Box 609, Fort Erie, Ont. L2A 5X3

The Cowboy And The Calendar Girl

Nancy Martin



www.millsandboon.co.uk

NANCY MARTIN has lived in a succession of small towns in Pennsylvania, though she loves to travel to find locations for romance novels in larger cities—in this country and abroad. Now she lives with her husband and two daughters in a house they've restored and are constantly tinkering with.

If Nancy's not sitting at her word processor with a stack of records on the stereo, you might find her cavorting with her children, skiing with her husband or relaxing by the pool. She loves writing romance fiction and has also written as Elissa Curry.

One

"Every woman falls for a cowboy at least once in her life," said Bert Detwiler, tossing the sheaf of black-and-white photos down on his immaculate black acrylic desk. "Looks like your number's up this time, Carly."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Carly Cortazzo blew cigarette smoke as she paced the tenth-floor office she shared with Bert, her partner at Twilight Calendars. In their slickly modern headquarters, Bert and Carly had created some of the bestselling provocative pinup calendars that ever graced America's gas stations, office water coolers and teacher lounges. But their success, Bert claimed, came from their mutual cold-bloodedness when it came to choosing the sexy photographs featured in Twilight's calendars.

Except Carly wasn't feeling very cold-blooded these days.

"I'm not going to fall for the guy," Carly insisted, trying to sound sincere. "I just think he's photogenic, that's all. Look at those sample shots again. He's dripping with sex appeal!"

Bert studied the photos once more, then raised his brows fastidiously and shot a piercing glance up at Carly. "He's dripping with sweat, dear."

"Well, sweat is always a hit with our customers—and the mustache and muscles don't hurt, either. And look at that horse! He's magnificent!"

"How Freudian," Bert observed coolly. "Look, it's too expensive to do location shoots. We've always agreed on that."

"Well, I think we need to spend the extra money. Our calendars are getting stale. If we're going to compete with Fabio and that basketball player with the purple hair, it's time we wowed our customers again."

"And you think this cowboy can do the wowing?"

"Absolutely. If we take the photos on his ranch with horses and that beautiful sky to counterpoint his look."

Bert bent closer to examine the photos. "He's not bad, I guess."

"Not bad! He's incredible!"

"I've never seen you so taken with someone." Bert glanced up at Carly, his eyes twinkling. "Should I be jealous?"

Carly sighed impatiently and hastily snatched up the top picture, the one she liked most. "Bert, you and I haven't been an item for three years."

Bert turned up the wattage on his smile. "Still, I get pangs now and then. You're looking terrific these days, Carly. I love the new haircut."

"It isn't new, Bert," she returned, automatically brushing the straight blond tendrils behind her ears. "But thanks for noticing."

"I notice more than you think." Bert put one elbow on his desk and leaned toward her. "Like how you've been feeling lately."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

Carly turned away from her partner, lest he see her reaction. Better to keep this relationship with Bert strictly professional, she thought. After their mercifully short affair three years ago, Carly decided to keep her feelings to herself to insure Twilight Calendars continued to run successfully.

Back then business had been far more important to Carly than a love life. But Bert had apparently picked up on her current state of mind.

It must have become obvious that Carly had recently begun to feel—well, jaded. Cynical. The calendar business could have that effect on a girl. A few years of looking at every man in terms of how he'd photograph without his clothes on under some good studio lighting has turned me into just another L.A. vulture.

She crushed out her cigarette with a vengeance in the cut-crystal ashtray on Bert's desk.

Looking at the mess she'd made in his ashtray, Bert said, "I think this cowboy thing has really affected you, Carly. You truly want to get this guy's shirt off, don't you?"

"Oh, that's not it at all!" Carly turned to the huge office window. Keeping her back to Bert, she frowned at the hazy panorama of Los Angeles. But she didn't really look at the familiar cityscape that stretched as far as the eye could see before disappearing into the smoggy horizon. Instead, Carly looked into her own heart for the first time in years.

"I've been doing this too long," she said aloud—before she could catch herself.

"What do you mean by that?" Bert sounded truly surprised.

Although she hadn't meant to reveal her innermost thoughts, Carly found herself confiding in Bert Detwiler of all people—her partner and former lover, who paid more attention to the care of his cashmere sweaters than the women in his life. But these days Bert was all Carly had.

Without turning around, Carly shook her head. "I've been obsessed with appearances, Bert. It's part of our job, of course—taking pictures that will titillate men and women everywhere—but, well, I've let it take over my personal life, too. The people I photograph are completely empty. Now they're the ones I socialize with, too. And they're not real."

"Oh, don't give me that beautiful-people-have-no-soul garbage again, Carly! We have rich social lives. Why, you're always running to some gallery opening or movie premiere or dinner with the gang —"

"And my biological clock is running, too."

"Good heavens." Bert clapped a hand over his heart as if to calm its lurching. "I never expected you to want a family. What an extraordinary idea."

Carly spun around and found Bert looking amused. "All right, all right," she said wryly, indicating her spike heels, black stockings and black minidress. "So I'm not exactly an earth mother," Carly said. "But I see my sisters building wonderful lives with men who are interesting and talented, and what do I have to show for all my thirty-two years? Six shiny calendars featuring completely mindless guys who've smeared their pectorals with petroleum jelly!"

"You think this cowboy person has a soul?" Bert tapped the photo on his desk.

"At least he looks like he puts in an honest day's work that doesn't require false eyelashes and a chin tuck every five years the way most of our male models—"

"What is this?" Bert demanded with a laugh. "A midlife crisis?"

"I don't know what it is! I just looked at these pictures and saw a real person for the first time in ages."

"Okay, okay!" Bert used both hands to shove the rest of the jumbled photographs across the desk to her. "Take your camera and go to North Whatsit—"

"South Dakota."

"Whatever." He waved his hand dismissively. "If you really want to get a taste of a real man, forget the studio shots for once! Just remember...we need another bestseller this year, Carly."

"I'll remember," she said with a soft smile for her partner.

Bert's perfect grin twinkled again. "And one more thing. The front of the horse is the part that bites, and the back of the horse is the part that kicks."

"Bert—"

“I know,” he said, nobly holding up one hand to prevent her from saying something that might embarrass them both. “Sometimes I’m a jerk, but once in a while I’m wonderful, right?”

Carly laughed. “See you next week.”

Heading for the airport two hours later, Carly felt extraordinarily free. Suddenly she couldn’t get to South Dakota fast enough.

Things were going to change!

One photograph had done it. Just one of the thousand amateurish pictures sent by fans of Twilight Calendars for the annual talent search. One Becky Fowler had submitted the winning photo—a picture of her own brother, a rancher with amazingly deep blue eyes, an awe-inspiring profile and—oh, well, she might as well admit it—gorgeous shoulders.

And ever since she’d laid eyes on that picture, Carly hadn’t been able to think straight. All she wanted was to meet the man in the photo.

He looked like the kind of guy a girl could kiss until his cows came home.

He was magnificent. One photograph had captured this exquisite example of the male animal.

And his name was Hank, the letter said. Hank Fowler.

Hank. Perfect. Ever since seeing his picture, Carly had felt drawn to Hank Fowler as if by an unbelievably powerful magnet. Secretly she had started keeping his photo in her briefcase. At night she even put the picture on her nightstand. It was as if Hank called to some basic female instinct in Carly. And like a hormone-demented salmon swimming for the pool in which it was spawned, Carly suddenly knew she had to single-mindedly propel herself to the place where the handsome Hank Fowler lived and breathed.

And she didn’t even know the guy.

But she wanted to meet him. A real man. Nothing artificial, nothing dishonest. The genuine article.

The plane deposited Carly in Sioux Falls. There she was informed that renting a car was her only choice for transportation, so she plunked down her gold credit card and acquired a four-by-four Jeep.

“I don’t think you’ll run into any snow,” said the rental clerk. “It’s pretty late for weather like that, but you never know.”

“It’s summer,” Carly protested.

“You’re in South Dakota now, honey. Anything can happen.”

With a grin, Carly heard herself saying, “Oh, I hope so.”

She drove a few hundred miles, occasionally looking at the map spread out on the passenger seat and muttering to herself when towns did not appear where they were supposed to. Within a few hours, much closer to her goal, she hoped, she ended up on a wide-open landscape with tall grass as far as the eye could see.

And then Carly saw him. She knew it was him.

Hank.

His first appearance was like something out of a movie finale.

On the horizon, the silhouette of a rearing horse lashed the setting sun. Then the horse landed on all fours and bolted along the ridge with his rider clinging effortlessly to his rhythmic strides. They galloped along the brilliant sunset-painted horizon—a thundering black stallion and the one man who could control him.

Carly could almost hear theme music.

She got out and leaned weakly against the hood of the truck and watched, speechless. In her chest she felt her heart start to thrum like a tuning fork vibrating to an exquisite sound, as he turned and galloped straight toward her—a knight on his charger swooping down to carry off a maiden.

Carly’s knees actually began to tremble. She put one hand to her forehead to shield her eyes from the sun, and her mouth got very dry. But her gaze remained riveted on the man and horse bearing down upon her with all the unstoppable power of a prairie twister.

But he did stop. Inches from the Jeep, the horse suddenly slid to a halt in a cloud of dust. And with all the grace of a dancer, Hank Fowler flew down from the saddle and landed on his feet just a yard from where Carly stood.

Breathless, Carly stared into the bluest eyes she had ever seen—crinkled at the corners, marked by commanding dark brows, set deeply into a rugged male face—the face she had memorized ever since receiving his photograph. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

“You...you're Hank Fowler,” she gasped when her brain kicked into gear.

“And who the hell,” he said roughly, “are you?”

Carly still couldn't manage to verbalize a complete thought. He's gorgeous. He's everything I imagined. A real-life cowboy. I'm going to faint right here.

He glared at her, holding his reins in one gloved hand. His jeans were snug and covered by a pair of leather chaps that looked incredibly sexy. Carly could imagine his calendar photo already—just the jeans and leather, no shirt. And those dusty boots—perfect! His hat looked thoroughly broken in by years of riding the range, too. He looked real—lean and mean and just dangerous enough to send a woman's hormones into a tailspin.

Belatedly, Carly stuck out her hand. “I...I'm Carly Cortazzo. It's great to meet you.”

He used his teeth to yank off the glove on his right hand, then took Carly's in a bone-crushing grip. His blue eyes remained narrow, however. “Am I supposed to know you?”

Carly laughed, feeling like a starstruck basketball fan suddenly landing on the same planet with Michael Jordan. “Well, uh, not exactly, I guess. I just—you see, I'm from the calendar contest.”

“The what?”

“Twilight Calendars. Surely you—I mean, your sister did tell you I was coming?”

His suspicious expression changed into a glare that was far more disturbing. “My sister Becky? What inarnation has she gone and done now?”

For the first time since leaving L.A., Carly felt a twinge of consternation.

“You don't know?” she asked. “Nobody's told you about winning the contest?”

He lifted one menacing brow. “I'm betting it ain't like winning the lottery.”

“Well, a little.” Carly attempted to smile again, but suddenly found herself gulping in the presence of the man who had haunted her fantasies for several weeks now. If he only knew what's been flitting around in my head....

“Look,” he said when she didn't continue. “I don't know what you're talking about, but you've just crossed onto Fowler land, and—”

“Oh, I'm not trespassing. I've been invited.”

“You mean Becky's actually asked you to come onto the ranch?”

“Why, yes. To take your picture.”

“To take my picture? What the hell for?”

“Our calendar.”

He peered at her as if she were speaking a foreign language. “What kind of nonsense are you talking? You must have the wrong guy.”

“Believe me, I don't. You're perfect, Mr. Fowler. I've never met anyone so naturally photogenic.”

He squinted. “You calling me some kind of pretty boy?”

“Oh, no, of course not!” Carly said hastily. “Not exactly, that is. The camera does catch certain elements that might be unappreciated by the naked eye, so—”

His patience ran out and he interrupted her. “Look, I've got work to do. If you get this truck turned around, you'll find the main road in a couple of miles.”

“But...but...I've already made all the arrangements with your sister to take your photograph.”

“My sister,” said Hank Fowler, “is not my keeper.”

“But—”

“Forget it.” He turned back to his horse.

Carly felt the beginnings of anger start to steam behind her eyelids. “Look, Mr. Fowler,” she said, “I’ve communicated with your sister on this matter and I thought we’d reached an agreement. A ten-thousand-dollar agreement. Perhaps you’d better give me directions so that I can settle the details with her.”

He tilted his hat and shot a measuring glance at Carly from beneath the brim. “Why don’t you take a picture of yourself, Miss—what was your name?”

“Cortazzo. Carly Cortazzo.”

“Right. Now, your picture might actually sell.”

Carly felt herself flush. “Is that a compliment, Mr. Fowler?” It hadn’t felt terribly complimentary.

With an easy swing, he climbed back into the saddle. An unsettling ghost of a grin flashed briefly across his rugged features as the magnificent horse danced beneath him. He put two fingers on the brim of his Stetson in a John Wayne salute before saying, “Take it any way you like, Miss Cortazzo.”

“Where are you going?”

“Back to work.”

“But...but...you can’t leave like this!”

“Can’t I?”

Carly gritted her teeth. “I...I...oh, hell.” Throwing pride to the four winds, she said, “I’m lost! I’ve been wandering around these same three godforsaken counties all afternoon, and I’m darn sure I’ll never find my way out of them without Sacajewea to guide me.”

“All right, all right,” he said, perhaps hiding a grin. “Maybe you’d better not try driving back to town before dark. Something tells me you’ll get worse than lost. Go up to the house.”

“What house? I never saw a house.”

He pointed. “Backtrack a mile. Take a right at the clump of pine trees, go two miles and you’ll see the ranch. Becky’s there. The two of you can wrangle this out.”

“But you—”

“Get along, Miss Cortazzo,” he growled, reining the horse around. “It’ll be dark soon.”

And he left her in a cloud of dust. With a gulp, Carly watched him go, forgetting her troubles. Dazzled by the glare of sunset and the vision of manhood that disappeared as magically as he’d come, she stared after him, entranced. Her heart pounded along with the rapid strides of the galloping horse.

“Wow,” she breathed.

Thundering into the corral, Hank Fowler let out a whoop.

Of terror.

Then his horse jammed his forefeet into the ground, and Hank tumbled head over heels over the animal’s head.

He landed in the dust at his sister’s feet and lay stunned at the impact.

“You’re a diaster!” Becky exclaimed, not moving from the spraddle-legged stance that was as natural to her as breathing. Becky was the real cowhand—the one who’d been born to run a ranch. When the horse reared over Hank’s prone body, Becky grabbed the loose reins to keep the panting beast from trampling Hank into a million pieces.

“What the hell,” she demanded, furiously glaring down at her brother, “do you think you’re doing, Henry? Don’t you know how valuable Thundercloud is?”

He spat dust from his mouth. “That stupid horse of yours ran away with me!”

“I told you. You have to show him who’s boss!”

“I tried!” Hank cried, painfully sitting up on one elbow. “But you know how I hate horses, and they must be able to feel it! This isn’t going to work, Beck.”

“It has to work, Henry. I need the money!”

Gingerly Hank felt along his ribs to make sure none of them were broken. “I can’t believe you talked me into this,” he muttered. “I swore I’d never come back to this damned ranch as long as I live. And the charade you came up with gets more ridiculous by the minute! I’m just not a cowboy!”

Becky hunkered down on her heels and grinned at him. “But you’re still going to help me, right? Look, we’ll practice with Thundercloud all day tomorrow. I promise he won’t run away with you again. By the time that lady from the calendar company gets here, you’ll look like a real cowhand.”

Wryly Hank shook his head. “There aren’t enough years left in both our lifetimes to change me, Beck. Besides, she’s on her way.” Hank put his hand up for Becky to help him to his feet.

Her grip was firm and sure, and she hauled him up easily. “What do you mean?”

Suppressing a groan as his muscles protested, Hank tried to brush some of the dust off his borrowed chaps. “I met her.”

“You met her? What are you talking about?”

“This precious horse of yours practically dumped me in her lap. He tore over the hill and threw me as soon as we were out of your sight. By some miracle I landed on my feet. She was there.”

“Where?” Becky demanded.

“Out on the south road. I gave her directions. She’ll be here any minute.”

“Any minute?” Becky cried. “You’re kidding! Did she fall for it? You didn’t mess things up, did you?”

“Don’t worry. I kept the script simple.”

“You talked? First you fell off the horse and then you talked? What did you say?”

“Nothing intelligent, I assure you. After this four-legged locomotive threw me I was a little rattled, so I improvised, that’s all.”

Becky groaned. “Oh, no. I thought I’d have at least a week to get you into shape!”

“A week or a month,” Hank said with a grin. “It wouldn’t help, Becky. I was never cut out for the cowboy life.”

It was true. Even though he’d spent the first fifteen years of his life growing up on his parents’ ranch deep in South Dakota, Henry Fowler was never meant to live anywhere but a few blocks from the nearest urban transit system. Despite his father’s insistence that he learn to rope, ride and eat beans by a campfire out on the prairie, Henry Fowler had escaped the wide-open spaces for an East Coast prep school as soon as he had been able to get away.

After prep school had come four blessed years at Columbia University in New York, after which he’d bounced from one journalist job to the next—staying in each city only long enough to get his fill of the culture, the restaurants and the nearest climbing mountains. He’d made friends in every major city in the country and never once looked back on the life he might have had on the family homestead.

Until his sister, Becky, called with a crazy scheme.

“I think we’d better call it quits before she figures us out, Becky,” Hank said, reaching for the borrowed Stetson that had rolled under the nearest fence rail. “Nobody’s going to fall for me being a cowpoke.”

“Don’t say that!” Becky ordered, grabbing his elbow and steering Hank determinedly toward the barn. “We’ve got to make this work! If I don’t get the money, I’ll lose the ranch, Henry!”

“I thought you were supposed to call me Hank. You said it sounded tougher.”

“It does,” she agreed hastily. “Besides, if she’s coming from Los Angeles, she might actually have heard of Henry Fowler.”

“What do you mean ‘might’?” Henry demanded. “My column is syndicated all up and down the West Coast. She’d have to be a hermit like you not to know who I am!”

Although he was based in Seattle now, Hank had begun to make a reasonably good living by writing his syndicated column—a few short paragraphs of weekly diatribe that resulted from the forays he made into the mountains with so-called celebrities. Mostly Hank invited local politicians on physically challenging outings and wrote about their reactions. His piece on a presidential hopeful

had ruined the man's plan for a national campaign. Good thing, too. A man who threw trash on a mountain trail didn't deserve to be president of anything.

Over the past couple of years, Hank had begun to attract a loyal following, who now sent him more material than he could use. Every day he received a bucketload of letters that fulminated on subjects ranging from the logic of pasting brassiere advertisements on the sides of city buses to the latest political faux pas committed by an elected dunderhead. Hank used the material to create funny columns that newspaper readers loved.

"You're the perfect guy for this column," one of his former girlfriends had told him. "You hate everything but your precious mountains. And you're funny about it."

"I don't hate you," he'd said to her.

"Not yet," she predicted, and she'd been right. Soon thereafter, her habit of chewing gum during every waking moment had driven him to distraction.

Dragging her brother into the privacy of the barn, Becky began to coach him urgently. "All right, the best thing to do is the strong and silent act. Cowhands are always strong and silent."

"Aren't we perpetuating movie stereotypes?"

"Don't talk like that! You can't—Oh, just keep your mouth shut when she gets here, and—"

"Have you ever known me to keep my mouth shut?"

"You've got to try!"

"Listen, Beck, this woman can't be looking for anything but a pretty face—or in my case, a beaten-up mug. She isn't going to care if I can ride a horse or swing on a flying trapeze! Trust me. I know these Hollywood types, and all they want is a square jaw to photograph. If she's so demented as to want mine—"

"She said she wanted a cowhand. For ten thousand dollars, we're going to give her a cowhand!" Becky pulled the huge black horse into a stall and proceeded to loop the reins around the hay rack. Then she moved to untie the saddle girth, saying, "Just behave yourself, all right? Can't you remember anything about ranch life?"

"I've spent the past twenty years trying to forget."

Becky sighed impatiently and shook her head. "I can't believe you're really my brother!"

Hank put his arm across his sister's narrow shoulders, finding them tense with emotion. "Hey, take it easy, Beck."

"This is important, dammit! I could lose this place. And it's my home!" Her blue eyes suddenly flashed with tears. "I really need the money, Henry."

"Cool down," Hank soothed, sorry he'd teased her. "I said I'd help, didn't I?"

Becky tried to focus on unfastening the saddle again. "It was a silly idea. I should never have asked you to come out here—"

"Hey, I had a few vacation days saved up. No problem. I'll just explain to this calendar lady that I'm not who she thinks I am. I'm sure she doesn't give a damn about my line of work."

"But she does! She wants a real person. She said so on the phone."

"I am a real person."

"I mean an authentic cattle rancher."

"It doesn't matter what I do. She'll still want to put my face on her silly little calendar, so—"

"It's not just your face, Henry," his sister interrupted.

"What?"

Slowly Becky said, "Maybe I should have told you the whole story before now, but I thought we had a few more days before she actually got here and started—"

Hank glowered at his sister. "What whole story?"

"This...this calendar thing," Becky said uncomfortably. "It's not just pictures of good-looking guys' faces. If that was the case, you wouldn't have made the finalists' list."

Hank felt his mouth go very dry. "What are you talking about?"

“All those years of climbing and racquetball have done you some good, big brother. She wants to take pictures of the whole package.”

A pang of dread shot through him. “Hold it—”

“I sent a bunch of old photos to the contest. She said she liked your look. Your total look.”

“But—”

“I know, I know, you’re not as young as you used to be, and there’s a little flab around your middle, but modern photography—”

Incensed, Hank interrupted, “There is no flab around my middle!”

“Great,” said Becky. “Then you won’t be afraid to take off your shirt.”

“Now wait a minute!”

“Or your trousers.”

“Just a damn minute!”

“I hear a truck.” Becky frantically tugged Hank’s bandanna askew and tilted his Stetson to the correct angle. “There’s no time to give you a complete makeover. Can’t you—Oh, don’t you have some tobacco to chew, at least?”

She dashed out of the barn. Stunned by the information his conniving sister had just sprung on him, Hank stood frozen for a split second—just long enough for Thundercloud to reach around and sink his big yellow teeth into Hank’s arm.

With a yelp, Hank leaped out of the stall and slammed the door behind him. He could swear he heard Thundercloud chuckle with satisfaction. Fuming, he followed his sister outside.

Becky was already outside, calling hello to someone.

“Hi. Miss Fowler?” asked a female voice.

“That’s me,” Becky replied. “You must be Miss Cortazzo from Los Angeles.”

“Call me Carly.”

Hank arrived at the open barn door in time to see his sister clasp hands with the slender young woman dressed almost entirely in black. Her white-blond hair was a dramatic counterpoint to the dark clothes, and her fair skin and pale blue eyes looked gorgeous in the fading sunlight.

“We weren’t expecting you yet,” Becky said.

“I’m sorry. My office was supposed to fax you.”

“Oh, we don’t have a fax machine.”

“Well, I guess you really wouldn’t need one out here,” said Carly Cortazzo with a smile. She glanced around the barn and corral and let her gaze travel to the view of the Black Hills beyond. “This is beautiful country. I almost enjoyed getting lost in it.”

“Hen—I mean, Hank says he gave you directions to the ranch. Maybe he should have led the way.”

“Oh, I don’t think Hank wants to get too friendly with me.”

She turned and met his eyes with a wry smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Hank hadn’t gotten a good look at her before. His terror of Becky’s runaway horse had muddled his head. But now he had a chance to give her a thorough once-over, and he liked what he saw.

Carly Cortazzo had self-assurance in every sinew of her lean, athletic body. Her blue gaze was confident, and her clothing had a cosmopolitan flare of drama. Hank liked the way her light hair wisped around the sharp contours of her face and emphasized the slender grace of her long neck. She had a businesslike manner—belied only by the lush curve of her sensual lips that lent a vaguely vulnerable cast to her face.

She wasn’t one of the fresh-scrubbed country girls Hank had grown up with in South Dakota, but had an energetic kind of beauty accompanied by a slight gleam of cynicism in her gaze.

He felt a shiver of excitement zap through his body as their gazes held and crackled with electricity.

Almost too late he remembered he was supposed to be a cowboy, so he lounged against the barn door and pulled his Stetson a little lower over his forehead.

“Nope,” he drawled laconically, doing his best Wyatt Earp imitation. “I don’t aim to get too friendly. Not just yet, anyway.”

Carly raised one elegant eyebrow and seemed undaunted.

Becky cleared her throat noisily and gave Hank a what-the-hell-are-you-doing glare. Then she said, “How about if my brother takes your gear up to the guest room, Carly? I’ve got a horse to tend at the moment.”

“Don’t let me keep you from your work,” Carly replied, still eyeing Hank with laserlike intensity. “I can take care of myself.”

“Fine. Hank, will you—”

“Sure,” said Hank, pushing off from the barn door and moseying over to the Jeep. He grabbed two large suitcases from the front seat. Together, they weighed almost as much as a Hereford steer, but Hank pretended he was accustomed to carrying much heavier loads as he hoisted the leather strap of one suitcase over his shoulder. “Think you packed enough duds, ma’am?”

“I wasn’t sure what to expect,” she retorted. “So I brought a little of everything.”

“Always good to be prepared,” he shot back in his best cowboy drawl. “You never know what might happen out in these parts.”

Maybe his cowboy act wasn’t as good as he’d hoped. He thought he heard Becky give a little moan of dismay as he led Carly Cortazzo toward the house.

Two

It was all Carly could do to keep from ogling Hank Fowler as he led her up the plank steps of his modest farmhouse. He had the nicest butt she’d ever seen encased in dusty blue jeans. And those leather chaps seemed to—well, she wanted to rip open one of her suitcases, get out her camera and start the test shots immediately.

“After you, ma’am,” he said, pushing open the door and stepping back a pace.

“Thanks.” Carly preceded him into the small house and hoped he hadn’t guessed where her thoughts had lingered. She glanced around to get her bearings in the house.

The main room was humble, with heavy wooden beams supporting the ceiling, but it was cozily decorated with calico curtains at the windows, rough-hewn furniture scattered around a stone fireplace and a hand-carved checkers game set out on a low coffee table that was also strewn with magazines, enamel coffee cups and a well-used sewing basket.

Very homey, Carly thought. Very country. Frankly, she hated the look, going in for the uncluttered modern mode of decorating herself. But it was definitely... homey.

From the connecting room wafted the rich aroma of hot food slowly steaming on the stove. A multicolor braided rug lay on the floor, and a large woolly dog snoozed contentedly by the fire.

Upon their arrival, however, the dog got up and growled. He was the size of a small pony, with a ragged gray coat snarled with shaggy tufts that gave him the appearance of a huge porcupine that had been tumbled in a clothes dryer.

“Don’t mind Charlie,” said Hank, behind her. “He’s too old to do any real damage.”

“He looks like a wolf,” Carly said, stopping in the middle of the room as the dog approached. Normally she liked dogs—the kind small enough to be carried in a woman’s handbag at least. But this one looked as though he could swallow her arm for an appetizer.

“Half wolf,” Hank explained. “He’s my sister’s idea of a pet.”

The beast came closer and smffed Carly suspiciously, still making a gurgling growl in the back of his throat. But his tail started to wag gently, so she risked patting his broad head. “Nice boy. Nice Charlie.”

As Hank went past, Carly could have sworn the dog started to growl again, but Hank didn’t seem to take notice. He said, “Don’t worry. Charlie only bites if he’s hungry.”

“Are you trying to scare me into leaving, Mr. Fowler?”

He turned and grinned. It was a devastating smile, complete with crinkled eyes that glistened appealingly. “Would it work if I tried?”

“Not likely. I’d like to stay and give your sister ten thousand dollars.”

“In exchange for my picture, you mean.”

“I think it’s a fair deal.”

Hank unslung the suitcase he’d been carrying and braced one shoulder casually against a timbered beam. Leaning there, he looked almost too big for the room—like a man who belonged in the wide-open spaces instead of a little house cluttered with countrified knickknacks. Carly might have felt small and insignificant—if she hadn’t seen the gleam of mutual attraction in his blue gaze.

He said, “There must be guys who are really worth that much money. But me—I’m just ordinary.”

“Ordinary can be nice.”

“I hate looking silly.”

“The photo doesn’t have to be silly.”

The amusement in his gaze sparkled. “I’ve seen the particular kind of calendars you make, ma’am. And they look mighty silly to me.”

“They make money. A lot of money.”

“Money’s not the most important thing in the world.”

“It seems pretty important to your sister,” Carly reminded him. “Are you going to disappoint her because you’re afraid to let yourself look foolish?”

“But—” he shook his head as if confounded “—why me, Miss Cortazzo?”

“Why not you?”

“There’s nothing special about me!”

“You’re wrong.”

Carly almost told him the truth then. About her daydreams and nighttime fantasies ever since laying eyes on his photograph. There was something special about Hank Fowler—something that spoke to the deepest part of Carly’s soul. Maybe not every woman would see him the same way, but she knew she had the right man to use to create an object of desire. A lot of women were going to pay money to admire Hank Fowler. He was good-looking. He had a strong, lean, tensile kind of body that could seduce a camera.

Better yet, there was something in his gaze that few men possessed. It was magnetism and intelligence and humor and—oh, hell, Carly wasn’t sure exactly what else. She only knew that looking into his eyes made her feel sexy.

“You’re the right guy for this contest,” she said finally. “You have the look that our marketing department wants most.”

“Marketing department?” he said doubtfully. “You actually pay people to decide what kind of pictures go on those calendars of yours?”

Carly hesitated to reveal that the marketing department was made up of herself and Bert—just like nearly every other department at Twilight Calendars. But it sounded good.

She went on. “Our marketing department has been very successful in the past. We manufacture one of the bestselling products in the country. We know what we want. And we want you, Mr. Fowler. We want a cowboy who can handle a horse, ride the range, shoot a gun—”

“Oh,” he said with a grin. “For a while there, I was afraid I was going to have to take my clothes off.”

“That wouldn’t hurt, either.”

He blinked, startled. “Do you have any idea how cold it gets out in this godforsak—I mean, out here in God’s country? A guy would have to be nuts to take off his shirt and go riding around—”

“Our calendars are fantasies, Mr. Fowler. They’re not supposed to portray real life.”

“Fantasies,” Hank repeated.

He had a few fantasies starting in his own head at that moment.

Carly Cortazzo was the sort of woman he’d spent most of his adult life avoiding—smart, opinionated, ambitious and assertive. Probably temperamental, too. Mostly, Hank preferred to keep the company of beautiful but soft-willed women who let him dominate the relationship. It was immature of him, he knew, but it was easier to be the boss, he’d decided long ago. With the right partner, he got to do the things he enjoyed most and have the added benefit of a beautiful companion, too.

But Carly was a challenge. He guessed that starting a relationship with her would be like setting off a boxful of fireworks in a closed room. Just watching her tight, erect posture as she confronted him made Hank think of hot, passionate arguments. She was unpredictable and could probably do a lot of damage, if she chose.

He found himself fantasizing how explosive she might be in bed, too.

“Mr. Fowler?”

Hank yanked his attention back to the present and gave her a grin. “Sorry. What did you say?”

She controlled her patience with an obvious effort. “I asked if you have any objections to taking off your clothes for the calendar.”

Hank nearly choked. “Hell, I haven’t agreed to do it with my clothes on, let alone—”

“But your sister needs the money.”

True, Hank thought, suppressing a groan.

For some insane reason he would never fathom, Becky had tied her heart and soul to the Fowler cattle ranch, and she needed a miracle to save the place from bankruptcy. A few years of low beef prices, hard winters and the high cost of feed had driven Becky to desperation. Of course Hank had pitched in his savings to help his sister, but eventually his own finances had run painfully dry. They needed a miracle, all right.

Unfortunately, Hank hadn’t foreseen the miracle requiring him climbing into cowboy duds just to have them stripped off for a camera-toting beauty with a kissable red mouth and blue, bedroom eyes.

“Look, Miss Cortazzo,” he began firmly, “I guess I have to go through with having my picture taken because my sister gave you her word, but wild horses won’t get me out of my jeans.”

She pounced. “How about your shirt?”

“No.”

“But—”

“Absolutely not.” Thoughts of his fellow journalists catching a glimpse of his photographed face had been hard enough to imagine. But if his colleagues got hold of anything more risqué, Hank knew he would be getting blackmail notes for the rest of his life. “No way, Miss Cortazzo.”

She tried a more subtle approach. “I was thinking we could try some shots of you chopping wood. You might actually do that without a shirt, right?”

“I don’t think so.”

“How about—”

“There’s no way I’m taking off anything.”

He was saved from further arguments as they were interrupted at that moment by rushed footsteps on the porch. A moment later Becky burst into the house, breathless and flushed.

“Hen—I mean, Hank! Doc Vickery just stopped by. He says there’s a buyer coming from out East who wants to look at our stock!”

“Great,” said Hank, although he had no idea what in the world his sister was talking about.

Becky must have understood his meaningful glare, because she glanced toward Carly Cortazzo and explained—as if for the benefit of a newcomer, “That means we’ve got to have a roundup. You know, to gather up all the cattle and pen them here at the ranch for inspection.”

“How exciting.”

How awful, Hank almost said aloud. “What about Fred? Didn’t you just give him a few days of vacation?”

“Who’s Fred?” Carly asked.

“My—our hired hand,” Becky replied, already headed for the telephone. “He helps around the ranch. I better call him right away. I can’t round up all the cattle by myself.”

“What about Hank?” Carly asked innocently. “Can’t he help?”

Becky stumbled just as she reached the telephone, but Hank was glad to see she managed not to howl with laughter at the idea of her brother actually performing cowboy work. “Hank? Oh...sure. He’ll help. Won’t you, Hank?”

“Of course,” Hank said, hoping he hadn’t turned white at the thought of galloping all over the ranch in search of runaway cows.

“This will be great,” Carly said with a big smile. “A real roundup! Maybe I’ll get some good action shots—preliminary ideas to give to our photographer when she gets here.”

Hank swallowed hard. “Uh, Becky, how about if I show Miss Cortazzo to the guest room, then you and I can talk this over?”

“Good idea,” Becky said. “I’ll call Fred while you take her upstairs.”

Hank picked up Carly’s luggage again. “This way, Miss Cortazzo.”

He led the way up the narrow steps to the cramped second floor of the house. There was no hallway at the top—just a landing with four doors leading into the three small bedrooms and the bath. Hank shouldered open the door to the smallest of the three bedrooms.

And he promptly whacked his head on the low-hanging dormer. He staggered in pain, and smothered a curse.

“Are you all right?” Carly asked, right behind him.

“Yeah, sure.”

Manfully pulling himself together, Hank tossed her luggage onto the single bed that was tucked under the eaves. He hoped she hadn’t guessed that he hit his head because he’d forgotten the layout of the house he’d grown up hating.

Carly strolled to the bed and glanced around the small bedroom that Becky had carefully aired out and decorated with a watering can full of wildflowers. “How... quaint.”

“Well, it’s home,” Hank said, for lack of anything more imaginative. His head was still spinning from the crack he’d taken on the dormer. Or maybe it was the heady perfume Carly wore that made him slightly dizzy. The scent was intoxicating. “Make yourself comfortable.”

“Thank you.”

“The window props open if you like fresh air at night.”

“What an novel idea.”

“No fresh air where you live?”

“In Los Angeles? We have smog, not air.”

“I see. Well, the bathroom’s the door opposite.”

“Thanks.” She turned away from the window and stood facing Hank just eighteen inches away in the small room. “I’d like to fix my makeup before dinner.”

For a moment Hank forgot about risking his life in a roundup. Carly had the pale, peaches-and-cream skin of a pampered English lady—unusual for a California native. That creamy skin stretched down an elegantly long throat and plunged to the softly rounded curves of her breasts. Hank thought about tracing the line of her throat with his thumb just to test the delicacy of her skin, but banished the idea in favor of an indirect compliment instead. “You won’t need makeup out here, Miss Cortazzo.”

She heard the double meaning laced in his murmur and slanted a wry smile up at him. “I need makeup no matter where I am, Mr. Fowler. It’s my link to civilization.”

He laughed. He liked her, and decided it was safer not to discuss civilization. “Supper’s ready when you are.”

“I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

Hank lingered another moment, inhaling her fragrance, enjoying the light in her eyes and wondering what made her so damn tempting. She was good-looking and clever—a combination he enjoyed very much.

He hoped to hell she wasn’t so clever that she’d see through his masquerade too quickly.

Remembering to keep up appearances, Hank tipped his hat and drawled, “Welcome to the Fowler ranch, ma’am. I hope you enjoy your stay.”

“I’m sure I will.”

Then he left the bedroom and thumped down the steps. Charlie growled at him. Hank growled back, then hurried to the kitchen. He cornered his sister there. Becky was just hanging up the phone as he arrived.

In a hushed whisper he demanded, “What the hell have you gotten me into, Becky?”

“I’m sorry!” Becky hissed back, trying to keep her voice down so they wouldn’t be heard from upstairs. “How was I supposed to know a buyer was coming this week?”

“When’s he coming?”

“Day after tomorrow. We only have one day to round up all the cattle.”

“Did you get in touch with Fred?”

“He already left for his vacation in Disney World!”

“Then who—” Hank saw the expression on his sister’s face and felt the cold claw of dread grab his heart. “I can barely sit on a horse, let alone get it to do anything but run away with me! You’ve got to find somebody else to help, Beck.”

Becky folded her arms over her chest and leaned back against a shelf full of preserved peaches. “It’s going to look awfully suspicious to the calendar lady if you don’t saddle up and work the ranch, cowboy.”

“Then we need to come up with a plan—a logical reason why I’m not trying to get myself killed in a stampede.”

“You’re not as bad at ranch work as you think you are,” Becky soothed. “Heavens, you were riding before you were three years old!”

“And getting thrown off every pony within five hundred miles. I hate horses, Becky, and they know I hate them. Now it’s a conspiracy thing with the whole species.”

“We can’t tell the calendar lady who you really are. She specifically wants a cowboy, and we don’t get the money unless you come through.”

“Maybe I could break my leg or something. That would keep me out of harm’s way.”

Becky shook her head and frowned. “Too wimpy.”

“Wimpy! A real cowhand would work with broken bones, is that it?”

“Probably. Think of something else.”

He groaned. “Like what?”

Becky snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it. I’ll send you to look for strays! All you have to do is leave the ranch and stay gone for the whole day.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere! You can ride over the nearest hill, take a paperback book out of your saddlebag and read while the rest of us break our backs!”

“What happens if the horse runs away with me again?” Hank grinned as Becky blew an exasperated sigh. “Okay, okay, I can manage to stay in the saddle for a few hundred yards, I guess.”

“Good. The alternative would be to distract the calendar lady.”

“Distract her?”

Dryly, Becky added, “Of course, that wouldn’t be too hard, by the looks of things.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The two of you can’t take your eyes off each other.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Hank prided himself on his ability to resist women when the situation merited.

Becky looked delighted at having annoyed him. “Your tongues are practically hanging out.”

“Not true!” Hank flushed, hating the idea that he’d been so obvious.

Becky breezed out of the pantry and started to work on supper. “And she thinks you’re the sexiest thing since colored underwear.”

Hank followed his sister into the kitchen and couldn’t help asking, “You think so?”

Becky took a container of premixed biscuits out of the refrigerator, cracked it open and proceeded to line the biscuits up on a cookie sheet. “Believe me, big brother, you could distract Miss Cortazzo with one hand tied behind your back.”

Hank considered the situation. Yep, there was something exciting happening between himself and Carly Cortazzo. He found her very attractive. And according to Becky, the feeling might be mutual.

Trouble was, as far as Carly was concerned, Hank was supposed to be a tough cowboy.

Hank, however, preferred to live within walking distance of a subway system, fine restaurants, a good newsstand and at least one modern art museum. But every week he got out of the city to climb. Rock climbing was his passion. Fresh air, rock and ice. Those elements kept him sane. He wasn’t a trail-mix kind of guy, of course. No, he could appreciate fine dining. But now and then he needed to test himself. Hacking out a foothold in any icy cliff made him feel alive.

Hank shook his head. “If I get close to her, she’s going to see I’m no cowpoke.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she’s smart, dammit! Any fool can see I’m not Roy Rogers!”

Becky slid the tray of biscuits into the oven and bumped the door closed with her hip. “Did you get a look at her clothes?”

“Well, sure. They looked great.”

“That’s just it. She’s dressed to look good. Even you knew enough to bring your oldest, warmest clothes out here. She’s a complete dude!”

“Surely she’ll see through me.”

“Maybe you’ll have time to cloud her vision before she sees too much.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning,” Becky said, lifting the lid on the stew pot and giving the contents a quick stir, “you ought to take her out to the hay barn and see what develops.”

“My allergy to hay?”

Becky laughed and replaced the lid on the pot. “You’re determined to despise this place, aren’t you?”

Putting his arm around Becky, Hank said fondly, “I just know I don’t belong here, Beck.” Looking down into his sister’s tight expression, he felt his heart soften. “But you do, so let’s do everything we can to keep the old family homestead.”

Becky gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, Henry.”

“Call me Hank. I’m starting to like it.”

Becky laughed and punched his shoulder.

Dinner was ready by the time Carly came downstairs with her makeup freshly applied and a red bandanna around her throat just to get into the spirit of things.

“Dinner smells delicious.”

“It’s beef stew,” Becky said proudly, busy at the stove with plates and a ladle. “I grew the vegetables myself.”

“Not to mention the beef,” Hank added. “And the herbs are better than ever this year.”

“Herbs?” Carly asked.

Becky said, “Hank planned the herb garden himself, and his suggestions for seasonings are—well—uh—”

Hank opened the refrigerator. “Beer, anyone?”

“Why not?” Carly asked, wondering why Becky had faltered. She accepted a steaming plate of biscuits and stew from her as Hank got out the beer. There was enough food on Carly’s plate to feed an entire family in L.A.

Becky prepared another plate for her brother. “I’ve got some phone calls to make if I’m going to round up enough men to help tomorrow. You two mind eating without me?”

“Not at all,” Carly said, secretly pleased to have Hank all to herself for a while.

Hank seemed to hesitate for a split second. “You have to eat, Becky.”

“I will,” his sister promised. “In a few minutes. You go ahead. Entertain Carly for a while, all right? Tell her some stories about life on the ranch, why don’t you? I’m sure she’d be interested in—Ouch!”

“Did I step on your foot?” Hank asked innocently. “Sorry, sis. This way, Miss Cortazzo. Let’s eat on the porch, shall we?”

Carrying her plate, a bottle of beer and a napkin that Becky had thrust into the crook of her elbow, Carly followed Hank through the house and out onto the front porch. Besides two wooden rocking chairs and a porch swing suspended by chains from the rafters, there was a small painted table placed in one corner between a couple of old wicker chairs. Someone had already set the table with silverware and plaid place mats. A flickering yellow candle in a jar made the table look surprisingly romantic.

“Alfresco,” Carly said. “How nice to be dining outside tonight.”

“Unless the mosquitoes show up. Have a seat.”

“Thank you.” Carly set her plate on the table and made herself comfortable in the wicker chair. Then she noticed Hank wasn’t following her example. He stood over her, as if undecided about joining Carly at all. She smiled up at him, one eyebrow raised. “I hope you don’t feel as if you’re having dinner with the enemy.”

“The enemy?”

“Me.” She gestured for him to sit down, which he finally did. “I’m your enemy because I’m pushing you to pose for my calendar.”

“Trust me. If you were really my enemy, we wouldn’t be so civilized, Miss Cortazzo.”

“Carly,” she corrected automatically, picking up a fork. “I detect a chill in the air, nevertheless. Or don’t you go for city girls?”

“I go for all kinds of girls,” he retorted, slugging his beer as if to steel himself for a difficult conversation.

“All kinds of girls? Care to tell me about some of them?”

He regarded her warily over the glowing candle. “Well, we don’t get many unattached women in these parts.”

“What about attached ones?”

“Married women? No, I don’t go in for that stuff. Too messy. I like to get in and out of relationships as cleanly as possible.”

“I gather you don’t go in for the lasting kind of relationships, either.” Carly sampled the stew and found it warm and savory.

“I haven’t been lucky in love.”

“You certainly are the quintessential cowboy.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Carly glanced up, surprised by the heat in his voice. “Why, nothing really. You must fall in love with horses, not women.”

He snorted. “That’s a laugh.”

“Then you do have a girlfriend?”

“Look, I don’t know why we’re talking about me,” he began irritably, looking surprisingly uncomfortable.

“I like to get to know my subjects, that’s all.”

He leveled her a suspicious stare. “Really?”

Carly sipped from her own beer bottle to give herself time to think. “To tell the truth, no. But you—well, I’ve never met a real cowboy before. I just—I want to know what your life’s like. Call it professional curiosity. For example, do you and your sister run this ranch all by yourselves?”

“Um, well, we have a hired hand, of course, to help out. But usually, it’s just a one—er, two-person operation.”

“That must mean a lot of hard work.”

He shrugged. “If you love it, it’s not really work.”

“You love it, then?”

He took a huge forkful of stew into his mouth and took forever to chew it. “This stew is great, isn’t it?” he asked, after swallowing.

“Yes, it’s delicious.”

“Becky has been adjusting the recipe again. I like the sage. And not too much onion.” He thoughtfully selected a carrot with his fork. “The touch of jalapeno is just right. Not overwhelming, but definitely a statement.”

Delighted, Carly laughed. “You’re a cowboy foodie!”

He looked up at her as if startled out of his thoughts. “A foodie?”

“Someone who appreciates good food.”

He bristled. “I’m not a gourmet. I hate pretentious stuff—”

“Like snooty French restaurants?”

“I do like French cuisine,” he said cautiously, “if it’s done well. But not an overly rich menu and a wine list that’s past its prime.”

“Provençal food, though?”

He nodded. “Simple, but elegant.”

Carly leaned forward, glad to see him relaxing at last. “What’s the best restaurant you’ve ever visited?”

Hank hesitated only for an instant. “There’s a diner in Cheyenne that’s top-notch. The best homemade sausage this side of the Mississippi.” He looked cautious again. “Why are you asking?”

“No special reason. Conversation, I guess. And I like food myself. I keep a scrapbook of my favorite restaurants.”

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