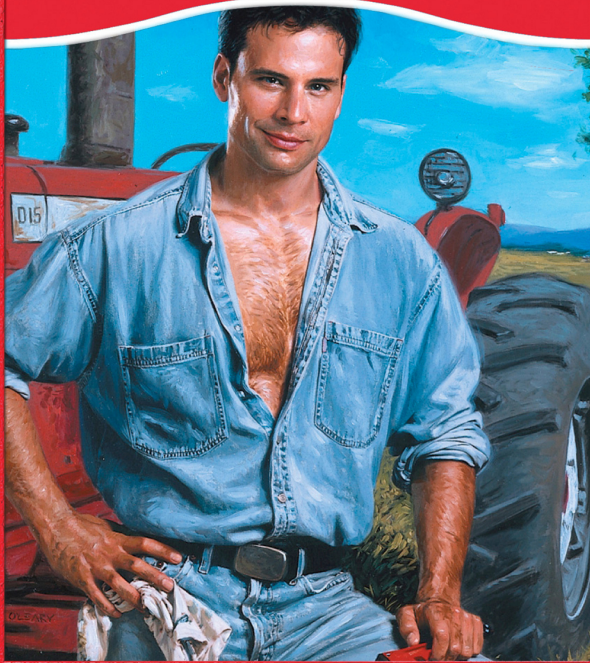


MILLS & BOON

The Way to a Rancher's Heart

Peggy Moreland



Vintage Desire

Peggy Moreland

The Way To A Rancher's Heart

Аннотация

For a hard-edged cowboy, sweet young virgins were trouble. So Jase vowed to steer clear of his children's new nanny, Annie Baxter. But it wasn't easy for the single father to deny his attraction to the sassy beauty. With warmth and laughter she filled his home...and the lonely corners of his heart. Her innocent yet sensual kisses were almost enough to make a man wonder if sometimes rules were made to be broken....

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Would Annie Come To Him?

Though Jase's body thrummed with need and had since leaving her, he hoped she wouldn't. He feared he wouldn't be able to resist her.

With those laughing green eyes and that sassy mouth, she'd teased him into remembering the pleasures a man could share with a woman. Bewitched him into forgetting the hurt that was inevitable if he allowed anyone to get too close. For the length of an afternoon he'd let go of the memories, the fears.

He heard the door open softly and tensed, knowing it was Annie. Her scent reached him first, that subtle, feminine fragrance that teased his senses.

"Jase?"

He prayed for the strength to send her back to her room. But when he looked at her, he knew the prayer was wasted.

There was no way in hell he could send her away. Not now.

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Silhouette Desire, the ultimate treat for Valentine's Day—we promise you will find six passionate, powerful and provocative romances every month! And here's what you can indulge yourself with this February....

The fabulous Peggy Moreland brings you February's MAN OF THE MONTH, *The Way to a Rancher's Heart*. You'll be

enticed by this gruff widowed rancher who must let down his guard for the sake of a younger woman.

The exciting Desire miniseries TEXAS CATTLEMAN'S CLUB: LONE STAR JEWELS continues with World's Most Eligible Texan by Sara Orwig. A world-weary diplomat finds love—and fatherhood—after making a Plain Jane schoolteacher pregnant with his child.

Kathryn Jensen's The American Earl is an office romance featuring the son of a British earl who falls for his American employee. In Overnight Cinderella by Katherine Garbera, an ugly-duckling heroine transforms herself into a swan to win the love of an alpha male. Kate Little tells the story of a wealthy bachelor captivated by the woman he was trying to protect his younger brother from in The Millionaire Takes a Bride. And Kristi Gold offers His Sheltering Arms, in which a macho ex-cop finds love with the woman he protects.

Make this Valentine's Day extra-special by spoiling yourself with all six of these alluring Desire titles!

Enjoy!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joan Marlow Golan". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and larger than the rest of the letters.

Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

The Way to a Rancher's Heart

Peggy Moreland



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PEGGY MORELAND

published her first romance with Silhouette in 1989 and continues to delight readers with stories set in her home state of Texas. Winner of the National Readers' Choice Award, the Golden Quill, the Texas Gold and a finalist for the prestigious RITA Award, Peggy's books frequently appear on the USA Today and Waldenbooks bestseller lists. When not writing, she enjoys spending time at the farm riding her quarter horse, Lo-Jump. She, her husband and three children make their home in Florence, Texas. You may write to Peggy at P.O. Box 1099, Florence, TX 76257-1099.

This book is dedicated to my editor, Lynda Curnyn, with heartfelt thanks for all the guidance and support offered to me...and my apologies for forcing her to learn a new language, Texas-ese. Thanks, Lynda!

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One

There was tired, then there was tired, the boot-shuffling, butt-dragging, bleary-eyed kind of exhaustion that followed too many nights without enough sleep and too many days filled with nonstop activity. Jase Rawley's current physical state fell into that latter category.

After parking his semi-rig and trailer filled with stocker calves he'd hauled from Kansas to Texas beside the loading chute attached to his corral, he trudged wearily through the inky darkness to his equally dark house in the distance. Once inside, he toed off his cowboy boots by the kitchen door, left them there for easy access the next morning, then tugged his shirttail from the waist of his jeans and headed down the hall to the master bedroom, unbuttoning his shirt along the way. At the side of his bed, he stripped off the shirt, leaned to set the alarm on the bedside table for 6:00 a.m., then, all but limp with exhaustion, fell face-first across the king-size bed. He was instantly asleep.

Three hours later he awakened to the irritating electronic beep of his alarm clock. Groaning, he made a fist, whacked it against the alarm, then buried his face against the mattress again. He inhaled deeply, wearily, weighing the pros and cons of putting off unloading the calves for a few more hours. But the rich, nutty smell of coffee brewing had him slowly lifting his head again.

Bracing his palms against the mattress, he lifted himself

higher, sniffing the air. “Sis,” he murmured almost reverently as he heaved himself from the bed and to his feet, “you’re a saint.”

With his nose lifted high like a radar device, guiding him to the coffeepot, he padded his way down the hallway, still dressed in the jeans and socks he’d slept in. A yawn took him as he stepped into the kitchen, and he closed his eyes, giving in to it, as he passed by the island, rubbing a wide hand over his burly chest. “Mornin’,” he grumbled as he drew a bead on the coffeemaker and headed for it.

“Good morning. Would you like your eggs fried or scrambled?”

He froze at the question, then slowly turned, focusing in on the woman who stood on the opposite side of the island calmly rolling out biscuits. Above a pert nose sprinkled with a light spattering of freckles, bright, cheery green eyes met his, while full lips curved upwards in a not-normal-for-this-time-of-morning smile. Brown hair, the color of roasted chestnuts, spilled over slim shoulders and framed an oval, youthful face...a face that looked nothing like his sister’s.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked in dismay.

Her smile widened and she wiped a palm across the bib of her apron as she rounded the island. “Annie Baxter,” she said and held out the hand, now free of flour. “I’m your new housekeeper and nanny.”

He stared at the flour streaks her hand had left on the apron’s bib, the T-shirt and cut-off jeans the apron didn’t quite

hide, then moved his gaze farther down to the length of long, tanned legs beneath the apron's hem, the bare feet, the toenails painted a putrid shade of blue. Slowly he lifted his gaze back to hers, without making a move to accept the hand she offered. "Housekeeper?" he repeated dully.

Her smile turned curious. "Well, yes. Your sister hired me. Penny Rawley?" she offered helpfully, as if hearing his sister's name might prod his memory. "You were aware that she planned to hire someone, weren't you?"

He gulped, then swallowed, remembering, vaguely, a conversation with his sister a couple of weeks earlier in which she'd told him she was moving out. He seemed, too, to remember her saying something about hiring someone to take her place in his home. But he hadn't taken his sister seriously. Had thought she was bluffing. She had more than once over the years. Penny had always lived with him. Had ever since their parents had died more than fifteen years before. He hadn't thought she'd really leave. Ever. Hadn't even considered the possibility. Penny was a fixture, a solid rock of dependability that he'd relied on heavily since his wife's death two years before.

"Yeah," he said and swallowed again. "I seem to remember her mentioning something about that." Realizing she still held her hand extended, he closed his fingers around hers and slowly pumped her hand.

"Whew," she said, laughing softly. "That's a relief. I thought, for a minute, that either you or I were in the wrong house."

She withdrew her hand to move back to the opposite side of the island. "Penny told me that you'd be returning today, although I didn't realize it would be quite this early."

"I decided to drive straight through," he murmured, still having a hard time absorbing the fact that Penny was gone and had left a stranger in her place. "How long have you been here?"

"Six days. Penny hired me on Monday, stayed until Thursday to make sure I had settled in well and the children had accepted me, then she left."

And Jase knew why his sister had cleared out before he'd returned from his trip. If he'd been home, he never would have allowed her to take the first step out the front door...at least not without him first putting up one hell of a fight. "Did she say where she was going? How she could be reached?"

"Well, of course she did," she replied, as if surprised by his question, then wiped her hands across her apron again and turned to the desk behind her. Snagging a pad between the tips of a flour-dusted finger and thumb, she turned and held it out to him. "She said that she was staying with Suzy for a couple of days. You do know who Suzy is, don't you?"

He frowned at her skeptical tone, though he could hardly blame her for questioning him. Not when he hadn't even known that his sister was planning on moving out or that she was hiring him a new housekeeper and nanny. "Yeah," he grumbled. "I know Suzy." Tearing off the top piece of paper, he stuffed it into his jeans pocket, then tossed the pad on the island before heading

for the coffeemaker.

“You never did say how you liked your eggs,” she reminded him, dropping plump rounds of dough into a pie tin. “Fried or scrambled?”

He filled a mug with coffee and turned, gulping a swallow, praying that the caffeine would clear his brain, and he’d realize that this was all a bad dream. Something he’d imagined. Hell, a full-blown nightmare!

But when the strange woman didn’t disappear in a cloud of mist as he’d hoped, but kept right on cutting dough into rounds and dropping them into the pie tin, he muttered, “fried,” and headed for the door that led to the hallway. “I’ve got to make a few calls,” he called over his shoulder. “Holler when breakfast is ready.”

The first—and only—call Jase made was to Suzy’s house and to his sister.

He waited impatiently through four rings before his sister’s childhood friend answered.

“Hello?” Suzy mumbled sleepily.

“Put Penny on the phone,” he growled.

“Well, good morning to you, too, Jase,” she snapped peevishly, then dropped the phone with a clatter and yelled, “Penny! Phone! It’s the bear.”

Scowling at the nickname Suzy had tagged him with years before, he drummed his fingers impatiently on the top of his desk while he waited for his sister to pick up the phone.

“Jase?”

“What the hell were you thinking!” he shouted as soon as he heard her voice. “Running off and leaving these kids with a complete stranger.”

“Annie’s not a stranger,” she said defensively, then added, “Well, not totally, anyway. I interviewed her thoroughly and checked her background and references before offering her the position. She’s perfectly safe and more than capable of taking care of the children.”

“I don’t give a good goddamn if she’s Mary Poppins’s trainer. You get your tail back home where you belong, and I mean now!”

“I’m not coming home, Jase. I’ve already accepted a job in Austin.”

“You’ve what!”

“I’ve accepted a job in Austin. Quite a good one, in fact. I’ll be the executive secretary to the owner of a large computer security company.”

“Quit,” he said, tossing up an angry hand. “Resign. Do whatever you have to do, but you get yourself back here where you belong. I don’t want some stranger raising my kids.”

“Then you raise them!”

Jase jerked the receiver from his ear and stared at it, shocked by the anger in his sister’s voice, and even more so that she would defy him. Scowling, he slapped the phone back against his ear. “Is Suzy behind all this? Is she the one who put these crazy ideas into your head?”

A heavy sigh crossed the phone lines. "No, Jase. Suzy had nothing to do with my decision to leave the ranch."

"Oh, that's right, Jase," he heard Suzy mutter in the background. "Blame everything on me."

"Well, she's usually the one who fills your head with these crazy notions," he snapped irritably. "This isn't like you, Penny. Running off half-cocked. Leaving the kids with a complete stranger. Hell! What if this woman doesn't work out? What if she decides to up and leave? Who's going to take care of the kids then?"

"You," she informed him firmly. "They're your children, not mine, and it's high time you pulled yourself together and assumed your responsibilities as their father."

He sprang from his chair. "I've never shirked my responsibilities as their father! I've provided for these kids, haven't I? I've seen that they have everything they need."

"You give them everything but yourself. Oh, Jase," she said, suddenly sounding tearful. "They need you. Can't you see that? They not only lost their mother when Claire died, they lost their father, too."

After showering and dressing, Jase returned to the kitchen, still furious with his sister for abandoning him and sticking a stranger in his house without discussing it with him first. He heard the sound of his six-year-old daughter's laughter from the hallway as he pushed open the swinging door. "What's so funny?" he asked, pausing with a hand still braced against the door.

Four heads turned from the table to peer at him.

In the blink of an eye, Rachel was up and racing across the room to throw her arms around his waist. “Daddy!”

He dropped an awkward hand on her head and scrubbed, frowning. “Hey, dumplin’.”

She caught his hand and gave it a tug. “We’ve got a new nanny. Annie. She’s really cool.”

His frown deepened at the term Rachel used to describe the new nanny, suspecting that she had picked it up from her older brother and sister. “Yeah. So I hear.”

He clapped a hand on his thirteen-year-old son Clay’s shoulder, then dropped down onto the chair at the head of the table. He nodded a greeting to Clay’s twin sister, Tara, and pulled his napkin from beside his plate. He draped it across his thigh while carefully avoiding making eye contact with the new nanny. “Shouldn’t you kids be getting ready for school?” he asked gruffly.

Tara rolled her eyes dramatically, her newest way of expressing what a “dweeb” she thought her father was. “It’s not even seven yet, Dad. We’ve got lots of time.”

Jase reached for the basket of biscuits. “Don’t want you missing the bus,” he informed her. “I’ve got a trailer full of calves to unload and don’t have time to cart you kids’ butts to school.”

Tara tossed her napkin down and shoved back her chair. “Since when do you have time to do anything with us?” she snapped and stormed from the room.

Jase watched her leave, noting the hiking boots, the low-waisted, baggy-legged, faded jeans and the inch of bare skin her cropped T-shirt exposed. "Change into something decent!" he yelled after her. "No daughter of mine is going to school dressed like some tramp."

He heard her sass something in return, but couldn't make out her words. Scowling, he spread a heavy layer of butter over his biscuit and remembered his sister's comments about him assuming responsibility for his kids. Well, he was responsible, he told himself. He had let go of a lot of things over the last couple of years, but he'd never let go of his responsibilities to his kids. To prove it, he asked, "Did you kids do all your homework?"

"Yes, Daddy," Rachel said obediently.

As he took a bite, he angled his head to look at Clay, who had remained conspicuously silent. Butter dripped down his chin, as he gave it a jerk in his son's direction. "What about you? Did you get yours done?"

Clay shoved back his chair. "Didn't have any," he mumbled and headed for the door and the hallway beyond.

Jase snatched up his napkin and wiped it across his mouth and chin. "I better not be getting any calls from your teachers," he called after his son. He shifted his gaze to Rachel, who remained at the table, staring at him, round-eyed. "Well? Are you planning on going to school today, or not?"

"I'm goin'," she replied quickly and slid from her chair. "Thanks for breakfast, Annie," she said, giving the new nanny a

shy smile. "It was real good."

Annie graced her with a radiant smile in return. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. Don't forget your lunch," she reminded the girl.

Rachel sidled to the side of Annie's chair, winding a finger through a pigtail. "Did you pack me a surprise like you did on Friday?"

Annie draped an arm around Rachel's waist and hugged her to her side. "You bet I did. But don't peek," she warned, tapping a finger against the end of the child's nose. "It won't be a surprise if you do."

A pleased smile spread across Rachel's face. "I won't," she promised and skipped to the counter to collect her lunch sack. "See you this afternoon, Annie," she called cheerfully as she raced for the back door.

"Not if I see you first," Annie teased, waving.

Jase frowned, more than a little surprised by his children's obvious approval of the new nanny—and maybe a little jealous, if he were willing to admit to the emotion. And now, with all the kids gone, only he and the nanny remained at the table and he wished he hadn't been so quick to hustle them off to school. Uncomfortable with the silence that suddenly seemed to hum around him, he cleared his throat. "I guess Penny informed you of your duties."

"Yes. She was very thorough."

Unsure what else to say, he quickly slathered butter over another biscuit. "I'm outside most of the day, but if you should

need anything, I have a cell phone in my truck. The number is on the wall by the phone,” he added, gesturing with the biscuit toward the wall.

“Penny explained everyone’s schedules to me and showed me where to find everything.” She propped her elbows on the table and leaned forward, studying him, her chin resting on her hands. “The children miss you when you’re gone.”

Feeling heat creep into his cheeks, Jase shoveled a forkful of eggs into his mouth. “I’m seldom away. When I am, it’s never for more than a week at a time.”

“Just the same, they miss their daddy.”

He cleared his throat again and reached for his cup, gulped a drink of coffee, then shoved back his chair. “I’ve got calves to unload.”

She kept her gaze on his face as he rose. “Do you plan to come in for lunch?”

He was tempted to tell her no, just to avoid being alone with her again, but thought better of it. It was a helluva long time until dinner. “Yeah. But you don’t have to cook. I can make a sandwich or something.”

She rose, too, and started gathering plates. “I don’t mind cooking. In fact, I really enjoy it. Is there anything special you’d like me to prepare?”

Jase snagged his hat from the countertop where he’d dropped it the night before and glanced her way as she headed for the sink, juggling dirty plates. He couldn’t help noticing that the bibbed

apron she wore didn't cover her rear end or hide the sway of a very delectably shaped butt. He cleared his throat yet again when his gaze lit on her bare feet, and heat climbed up his neck, burning his cheeks. "I'm not a picky eater," he mumbled and tore his gaze away from what shouldn't have been a erotic sight. "Whatever you put on the table is fine with me."

She glanced over her shoulder and warmed his face even more with a smile. "Good. I'll surprise you, then. Should I expect you about noon?"

Flustered, he rammed his hat over his head and turned for the back door. "Yeah, noon," he muttered, and wondered if the surprise she had in store for him was anything like the one she'd secreted in his daughter's school lunch.

Annie strolled through the small fenced area, studying the ground and the barely discernable rows that lay beneath the high weeds, enjoying the feel of the sun warming her skin. A garden, she thought dreamily. She could imagine rows of tomato plants, their branches sagging with fat, juicy tomatoes; cantaloupe vines crawling across freshly hoed rows, their plump, succulent rounds of yellow-and green-veined rinds peeking between the plants' velvety, scalloped leaves.

Oh, how she'd love to plant a garden, she thought, sighing wistfully. It had been years since she'd worked a garden, dug her fingers in rich, fertile soil, feasted on a garden's bounty. Four years to be exact. The summer before her grandmother passed away.

With another sigh, one filled with bittersweet memories this time, she walked on, deciding she might just ask her new boss for permission to clear out the weeds and plant a few vegetables. There was time yet before spring arrived fully.

She frowned as she thought of her new boss. Penny Rawley certainly hadn't exaggerated when she'd said that her brother was a little reserved, perhaps might even appear a bit gruff. Gruff? She snorted at the mild description. The man was positively sour. Frowning all the time. All but growling at his children.

But, my, oh my, she thought with a lusty sigh, he was one prime hunk of man.

She shivered just thinking about the way he'd looked when he'd walked into the kitchen that morning, his eyelids still heavy with sleep, rubbing a wide hand over the soft mat of dark hair that swirled over a muscled chest. She wondered if he realized that the first button of his jeans had been unfastened. She wondered, too, if he realized how sexy she had found that glimpse of navel shadowed by dark hair, the equally dark V that seemed to point below the waist of his jeans and to the soft column of flesh that lay beneath a strip of fabric faded a slightly lighter shade than the rest of the denim.

With a delicious shiver, she leaned to pluck a bachelor's button from the tangled weeds and straightened to tuck the bloom behind her ear.

"What are you doing?"

She jumped, startled, and turned to find her new employer

standing behind her watching her, his arms folded across his chest, his hat shading his eyes. She huffed a breath. "Mercy! You might warn a person before you slip up on them unsuspecting. You scared a good ten years off my life!"

He narrowed an eye. "How old are you, anyway?"

She snatched the flower from behind her ear, sure that it was her foolishness that made him question her age. "Twenty-six."

He snorted a disbelieving breath. "Try again."

Mindful of the stickers that might be hiding beneath the tangle of weeds, she made her way carefully back to the gate. "I am twenty-six. If you don't believe me, I can show you my driver's license." She reached the gate and opened it.

He stepped back, eyeing her suspiciously as she passed by. "You don't look a day over eighteen."

She chuckled, not sure whether to be pleased or insulted. "Thanks...I think." Flipping her hair back over her shoulder, she tipped up her face to smile at him, having to squint against the glare of the sun to do so. "How old are you?"

He stared down at her a long moment, making her aware of the skimpy tank top she wore, the Daisy Duke cutoffs, her bare legs and feet. Then he dropped his arms from his chest, stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and turned for the house. "Old enough to stay clear of young girls like you."

She sputtered a laugh. "Young girls like me?" she repeated, following him. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

He lifted a shoulder as he opened the screen door, then

stepped back to let her enter the house first. “When I was younger, we called ’em jailbait. But I guess now I’d just call ’em trouble.”

“Trouble?” When he didn’t offer an explanation, she stopped in front of him, folding her arms beneath her breasts and arching a brow, stubbornly refusing to enter until he had clarified that last comment. His gaze dropped to her chest and breasts that strained against her tank top’s fabric. She bit back a smile as a blush rose to stain his cheeks.

“Trouble,” he repeated, emphasizing the single word, as if it alone explained everything, then gave her a nudge with his shoulder, urging her through the door ahead of him.

“Okay,” she said and crossed to the sink to wash her hands. “Granted I’m younger than you. Even I can see that. But what’s wrong with a young woman, and why do you consider one trouble?”

“Woman?” He snorted at her choice of word. “I said girl. I would hardly classify you as a woman.”

She snagged a dish towel from the hook above the sink and dried her hands as she turned to peer at him. “And what does a girl have to do,” she asked, placing emphasis on the word as he had, “in your opinion, before she is classified as a woman?”

He elbowed her aside and hit the faucet’s handle, then stuck his hands beneath the water. “Live. Get some years on her. Some experience.”

Enjoying the conversation, but unsure why when she knew she

should be insulted by his chauvinistic attitude, she rested a hip against the counter and watched as he scrubbed his hands. “And what do you consider experience?”

He scowled and hit the handle with his wrist, shutting off the water. He stood, dripping water into the sink, and Annie pushed the towel into his hands. He shot her a look, his scowl deepening. “Live,” he repeated. “Life offers its own form of experience.”

She angled her body, watching as he crossed to the refrigerator. “Oh, really?” she posed dryly.

“Yeah, really,” he muttered, his reply muffled by the interior of the refrigerator. He pulled a gallon jug of milk from inside, closed the door, then lifted the jug, drinking directly from the container.

Clucking her tongue at his lack of manners, Annie pulled a glass from the cupboard, crossed to him and snatched the milk jug from his hand.

Scowling, he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, removing a white moustache. “What did you do that for? I’m thirsty.”

She filled the glass and handed it back to him. “Unsanitary,” she informed him prudently and opened the door to replace the jug of milk. “And a bad example for the children. Now I know where Clay picked up the habit.” She pulled out a bowl and crossed to the table. “I hope you like pasta, because that’s what I made for lunch.”

Still frowning, he followed her to the table and sat down in his

chair at the head of it, eyeing the bowl's contents with distrust. "What's in it?"

"Pasta curls, grilled vegetables, some herbs, a little olive oil and balsamic vinegar."

He reared back, curling his nose and eyeing the bowl warily. "I'm a meat and potatoes man, myself."

"Really?" she asked, nonplused, and sat down in the chair at his right. "I'd think after working around those smelly old calves all morning that you'd have lost your taste for beef."

He jerked his head up to glare at her. "I'll have you know those smelly old calves help pay the bills around here."

She lifted a shoulder and spooned a generous serving of pasta onto his plate. "If you don't eat the merchandise, then that just means more profit, right?"

His thick brows drew together over his nose. "What the hell kind of thinking is that?"

She lifted a shoulder as she served her own plate. "Rational. The less you eat, the more beef you have to sell." She lifted her shoulder again as she set the bowl back on the table. "Makes sense to me."

He huffed a breath and picked up his fork, shaking his head. "Yeah. I guess to a girl like you, that would make sense."

Heaving a long-suffering sigh, she turned to look at him. "Are we back to that topic again?"

He scooped up a forkful of pasta and shoveled it into his mouth. "Yeah, I guess we are."

Stretching across the table for the breadbasket, she tore off a section of the still-warm loaf and dropped it onto his plate before tearing off a piece for herself. “If that’s all you can think to talk about, your conversational skills are lacking. You really should work on that.”

“Nothing wrong with my conversational skills,” he informed her and lifted his fork for another bite. ‘You’re just pissed because I called you a girl.’”

She shook her head and sank back in her chair, watching him wolf down the pasta. And he’d said he was a meat and potatoes man, she thought, biting back a smile. “I’m not insulted because you referred to me as a girl. I am a girl. A female. And proud of it. But I am a bit surprised that you’d make an assumption on my level of experience, based on your definition of the term,” she added pointedly, “considering you know absolutely nothing about me.”

He cocked his head to peer at her, then waved his fork in her direction before returning his attention to his meal. “Okay. I’ll bite. Tell me about yourself.”

She reached for her glass of water and took a sip, then propped her elbows on the table, cradling the glass between her hands. “I’m a graduate of the University of Texas where I majored in art and minored in secondary education. I obtained my master’s degree in December.”

He lifted an eyebrow, obviously impressed. “A college graduate, huh? So what’s a woman with that much education

doing working as a housekeeper and nanny?"

It was her turn to lift an indifferent shoulder. "I like to eat. When you graduate in December, teaching jobs are a little hard to come by."

"You plan to teach?"

"Yes, and I hope to do some freelancing on the side."

"What kind of freelancing?"

"Photography. I plan to supplement my income by selling photos, and possibly accompanying articles, to magazines and journals."

"Sounds like you've got your future all planned out nice and tidy."

"Yes," she agreed, but was unable to resist the urge to dig at him a little. "So does that make me mature, more experienced? By your definition, a woman, rather than a girl?"

He snorted and laid down his fork, then reared back in his chair and leveled his gaze on her. "Experience comes with knocks. The hard kind. That's where I got my degree. The school of hard knocks."

"And what kind of knocks have you had in your life?"

His gray eyes, once intent upon hers and filled with something akin to humor, took on a hooded look, as if a black cloud had swept across them, hiding his emotions. He rose and carried his glass to the sink to rinse it out and refill it with water, then stood, staring out the window.

"My parents died in a car wreck when I was nineteen," he said

after a moment, his voice roughened by the memories. "I was a freshman at Texas A&M. Had to come home and take over the ranch. My sister, Penny, was thirteen. The courts appointed me her legal guardian." He stood a moment longer, staring out the window, then angled his head to narrow an eye at her. "My wife died two years ago. Brain aneurysm. Gone like that," he said, with a snap of his fingers. "Without any warning. Left me with three kids under the age of eleven to raise on my own."

"You had Penny," she reminded him, fighting back the swell of sympathy that rose.

Scowling, he turned to face the window again. "Had being the operative word."

"You still have her," she insisted. "Just because she chose to pursue her own life doesn't mean that she's extracted herself permanently from yours."

He shot her a glare over his shoulder. "Sure you didn't get that degree in psychology?"

She shook her head. "No. Art. But I'm a people watcher. It's a hobby of mine. And do you know what I see when I look at you?"

"What?" he asked drolly.

"A man who feels sorry for himself."

He slammed the glass down on the counter so hard that water shot above the lip like a geyser. He spun to face her, his face flushed with anger. "I don't feel sorry for myself. I've taken the cards I've been dealt and played them as best I could. Nobody can question that. Least of all you."

She rose and crossed to him. "Maybe I don't have the right, but I do think I'm correct in assuming you feel sorry for yourself. And now you're blaming your sister for leaving you to take care of your children alone."

He grabbed her by the shoulders, his eyes boring into hers as he glowered down at her. "You listen to me little girl," he grated out through clenched teeth. "I don't blame Penny for anything, other than taking off without giving me any warning."

Undaunted by his anger, by the dig of his fingers into her flesh, she met his gaze squarely, maybe a bit stubbornly. "She warned you she was leaving. You told me so yourself just this morning."

He continued to glower at her, a muscle ticking on his jaw, then he released her, pushing her away from him as he turned back to face the window. "I didn't believe her. She'd said before she was going to leave, but she never went through with it."

"And you're angry with her because this time she did what she said she was going to do."

He whirled to face her, his gray eyes hard as steel. "The kids need her. They depend upon her. And she walked out on them."

"They need you," she argued. "Their father."

He thrust his face close to hers. "And what makes you an authority on what a kid needs? Huh? What the hell makes you think you know better than I do what my own kids need?"

She drew in a long breath, never once moving her gaze from his. "Because I was a kid once myself. My father died of a heart attack when I was five. My mother never got over the loss. She

committed suicide when I was six. I needed my father,” she said, and blinked back the unexpected tears that rose. “And I needed my mother, too. But she wimped out. Left me all alone.” She hitched a breath but refused to let the tears fall. “That’s how I know,” she said, her voice growing as steely as the eyes that met hers. “You want to talk about hard knocks?” She tapped a finger against his chest. “Mister, I’ll compare lumps with you any day of the week.”

Two

Annie experienced a brief stab of remorse for the sharp words she'd exchanged with her employer...but, thankfully, it didn't last long. She dispensed with it by assuring herself that he'd deserved the tongue-lashing she'd given him.

Calling her a girl, she reflected irritably as she stripped the sheets from the children's beds. And carrying on as if he were the only person in the world who had suffered any losses. Well, she had suffered her share of losses, too. But she had dealt with her losses, accepting them as natural occurrences in life, situations totally out of her control, and had gone on living, which was more than she could say for Jase Rawley. Instead of dealing with his grief, it appeared he had dug himself a hole and climbed inside where he continued to lick his wounds, shutting out his children and anyone else who tried to get too close.

But his children needed him, she thought, feeling the frustration returning. Couldn't he see that? She certainly could and she'd only been living in his home for a week. Well, he was going to have to climb out of that hole, she told herself as she stuffed the linens into the washing machine. Even if it meant her throwing a stick of dynamite into the hole he'd dug for himself and blasting him out.

Pleased with the image that thought drew, Annie started the first load of laundry, then went to the master bedroom to remove

the sheets from Jase's bed. Though she'd been in his room several times during the week, she hadn't entered her employer's private quarters since his late-night return. She noticed immediately the changes his presence made in the room. The sharp, spicy scent of aftershave lingered in the air, as did the faint odor she'd learned to associate with the corral and the livestock herded in and out of it almost daily.

She stooped to pick up a pair of socks from the floor and held her nose, grimacing, as she deposited them in the hamper in the master bath where she noticed more signs of her employer's presence. A wet towel lay on the floor, discarded after his morning shower, she was sure. A toothbrush was angled over the edge of the sink and an assortment of coins were scattered over the tile countertop where he'd obviously emptied his pockets before dropping the jeans to the floor. She nudged a fingertip through the pile of loose change, finding a rusty nail and a crumpled receipt amongst the coins, as well as a tattered package of antacids.

Shaking her head at the odd accumulation, she picked up the jeans and dropped them in the clothes hamper before returning to the bedroom. She frowned slightly as she noticed that the bed, though rumpled, was already made. Had he made it up himself? she wondered, then snorted a laugh when she noticed the imprint of his body on the comforter and realized that he hadn't even bothered to turn down the bed when he'd arrived home, but had opted to sleep on top of the covers instead.

With a rueful shake of her head, she ripped back the comforter and quickly stripped off the sheets. Wadding them into her arms, she headed for the laundry room, but slowed in the hallway, her attention captured by the gallery of framed pictures hanging there. Though she'd looked at the photos before, she found her curiosity heightened after her earlier, heated conversation with her employer.

Pictures of Rachel and the twins dominated the wall, monitoring the children's growth from birth to present day, but Annie found herself skimming over them in search of pictures of Jase. She smiled as she recognized a picture of him with Penny, taken when his sister was probably about Tara's age. Jase stood apart from Penny, yet there was an unmistakable protectiveness in his posture that indicated he took his responsibilities as his sister's guardian very seriously.

Though he was much younger in the picture, Annie noticed that Jase hadn't changed much over the years. In fact, she was sure she recognized the grim scowl and the steely-eyed impatience as the same expression he'd graced her with at breakfast and again at noon.

With a sigh, she shifted her gaze to Penny. Plain, but by no means unattractive, in the photograph Penny projected an image of solemnity unnatural for one so young. Annie supposed it was due to the tragedies Penny had suffered so early in life, the responsibilities she'd been forced to assume.

Though she'd only known Jase's sister a short span of time,

Annie suspected she knew Penny better than her own brother did. She attributed that advantage to her fondness for studying people, noting their mannerisms and habits, the little quirks that spoke volumes about their personalities. Too, people tended to tell her things about themselves, guarded little secrets that they wouldn't dream of sharing with another. She wasn't sure why that was so, though she suspected it was simply because she was willing to listen. For whatever reason, throughout her life she had found herself serving as a sounding board and vault for the problems and dreams of countless others, just as she had for Penny in the short week they had spent together before Penny's departure.

Penny Rawley was way past spreading her wings a little, Annie reaffirmed as she moved farther down the hallway. From what Penny had told her, the woman had dedicated herself and her life to Jase and his family. Especially so after the death of Jase's wife.

Reaching a wedding portrait framed in gilt, Annie stopped in front of it, tilting her head slightly as she studied the couple pictured there. So young, she thought with a twinge of sadness as she focused on the bride smiling radiantly and lovingly up at her husband, a bouquet of white roses clutched beneath her chin. And what a scar her passing had left on Jase, she reflected with regret, noting the devotion with which he gazed down upon his wife and remembering the bitterness of his expression when he'd snapped his fingers, demonstrating the quickness of her passing. That he'd loved his wife was obvious in the gesture. That he still harbored resentment, maybe even anger over her loss was even

more obvious.

Pensive, she moved on to the laundry room, stuffed the dirty linens into the washing machine, then headed outside with a basket loaded with those she'd already washed. The warmth of the sun and the sound of birds singing in the centuries-old oak tree at the corner of the backyard chased her concerns for Jase and his family from her mind and drew a cheerful smile. Humming an accompaniment to the birds' warbled songs she drew a sheet from the basket, caught it by its corners and clipped it to the clothesline, then reached inside the basket for another.

"We have a clothes dryer."

Annie jumped, then sagged weakly, clutching the damp sheet against her chest as she turned to frown at Jase. "You've got to quit doing that," she scolded.

"Doing what?"

"Sneaking up on me like that."

He lifted a shoulder. "Wasn't sneaking. Was on my way to the house." He gestured to the sheet she still held against her chest. "Thought I ought to let you know we have a clothes dryer and save you the trouble of hanging the sheets on the line."

She huffed a breath as she turned. "I know there's a clothes dryer," she replied, thinking of the mountains of dirty laundry she'd washed since her arrival in his home. She plucked a clothespin from the line and clipped it over the sheet, securing it in place. "I just happen to prefer sun-dried linens."

He lifted an indifferent shoulder. "It's your back."

“Yes, it is,” she agreed and squatted down beside the basket to dig through the remaining linens for the matching pillowcases to hang. “And speaking of my back, would you mind if I strained it a little more by cleaning out the garden and planting a few vegetables?”

When he didn’t respond immediately, she glanced up and found that he’d turned and was staring at the garden plot, his eyes narrowed, his jaw set in a hard line. Seeing the slow bob of his Adam’s apple, she quickly rose. “If you’d rather I didn’t—”

He shook his head and walked away. “Do what you want with it,” he muttered.

She stared after him, wondering what it was about her request that he found so upsetting.

Still puzzling over Jase’s strange reaction to her request to plant a garden, Annie whacked at the weeds choking the small piece of ground. She’d cleared a space about three feet by three feet when the hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Sensing that she was being watched, she glanced up and saw Jase standing in the opening of the barn’s loft, shirtless, his hands braced high on the opening’s frame. Sweat gleamed on his muscled arms and chest and darkened the waist of his jeans.

Though his hat shadowed his face, she felt the intensity of his gaze, the unmistakable heat in it. As he continued to stare, she drew a hand to the hollow of her throat, suddenly feeling exposed, as if he’d somehow managed to strip her of her clothing and left her standing naked in the garden.

An awareness passed between them, something primitive and sexual that had Annie's pulse pummeling her palm, her mouth going dry as dust. She wanted to look away...but found she couldn't. She could only stare in slack-jawed fascination at the virile image he created standing high in the loft, one knee slightly bent, one hip cocked a little higher than the other. He looked so commanding, so utterly masculine, so bone-meltingly sexual. And when he dropped a hand to rub it lazily across the dark, damp hair on his chest, she closed her eyes, suddenly feeling weak, sure that she could feel the damp heat on her lips, taste on her tongue the salt from his skin.

Anxious for another look, she opened her eyes, but he was already turning away. Stifling the moan of disappointment that rose, the sense of loss, she slowly caught up the hoe and began to chop half-heartedly at the weeds again, her movements sluggish now, her strength drained by the attraction that churned low in her belly.

Her thoughts were so scattered, her senses so dulled, it took a moment for her to become aware of the rumble of the school bus. Straightening, she drew the hoe up, propped her hands on its handle and inhaled a deep, steadying breath, pushing back her lustful thoughts of Jase as she watched the bus near.

It stopped in front of the house and the door folded back. Rachel, always seated at the front of the bus, came tumbling down the steps, dragging her book bag behind her, and headed straight for the house.

“Hey, Rachel!” she called, lifting a hand in greeting. “Over here. How was school?”

A grin spreading from ear to ear, Rachel raced toward the garden, waving a paper above her head. “Annie! Look! I made a hundred on my spelling test!”

“Why, that’s wonderful, sweetheart!” Annie stepped from the garden and leaned the hoe against the low fence, then knelt and wrapped an arm around the girl’s waist, drawing her to her side. “And look,” she said pointing, “your teacher gave you a gold star, too.”

“That’s ’cause my penmanship was so good.”

“And it is,” Annie agreed, hugging the girl to her.

“What’s for dinner?”

Annie glanced up at the question and saw Tara headed her way, followed closely by Clay. She widened her smile to include the twins. “Dinner isn’t for a couple of hours, yet, but there are fresh vegetables in the refrigerator and some dip, if you’d like a snack.”

Tara rolled her eyes and did a neat U-turn, heading for the house. “Rabbit food,” she muttered under her breath.

Surprised by the teenager’s sour expression, Annie rose, staring after her.

“Ignore her,” Clay said. “She’s in one of her moods.”

“It certainly appears that way,” Annie replied, wondering if the mood was a carryover from the teenager’s brief but heated confrontation with her father that morning. “And how was your

day?" she asked, turning to smile at Clay.

"Okay."

"Kiss any girls?" she teased.

He ducked his head, blushing, and chipped the toe of a boot against the ground. "Nah."

Annie laughed. "Well, there's always tomorrow."

He glanced up at her, then quickly away, his blush deepening, then shifted his gaze to the garden. "What are you doing out here?"

"Getting the soil ready to plant." She glanced at the garden and sighed wearily, disappointed by the small amount of progress she'd made. "But it's turning out to be a much bigger chore than I anticipated."

"Does Dad know you're working in here?"

"Well, yes," Annie replied, puzzled by his question. "Why do you ask?"

He shrugged and hitched his backpack higher on his shoulder. "No reason. It's just that...well, nobody's planted a garden since Mom died."

"Oh," she murmured, understanding now why Jase had seemed so upset when she'd asked his permission to plant a garden. "I didn't know."

Clay shrugged again. "No big deal. It's just dirt."

Annie stared at the weed-clogged clods she'd managed to overturn, suspecting that, though the garden might be nothing more than dirt to Clay, it represented a great deal more to the

boy's father.

Feeling the guilt nudging at her for the painful memories her request must have drawn for Jase, she shrugged it off and forced a smile as she turned to Clay. "Are you hungry?"

He reared back and patted his stomach, grinning. "Starving."

Annie caught Rachel's hand, then slung an arm over Clay's shoulders, heading both children toward the house. "How about some rabbit food?" she teased.

"Just call me Thumper," he replied, grinning.

"Clay!"

Clay spun, his grin fading when he saw his father standing in the barn's doorway, scowling, his arms folded across his chest. "Yeah, Dad?" he called.

"You've got chores waiting."

"But couldn't I eat something first?"

When his father merely angled his head and arched a brow in warning, Clay heaved a sigh. "Yes, sir," he mumbled, then turned to Annie. "Sorry. Guess I'll have to grab something later."

Offering him a sympathetic smile, Annie slipped the backpack from his shoulder and lifted it to her own. "I'll save some dip for you," she promised.

As she watched Clay trudge toward the barn, she glanced Jase's way and saw that he waited in the doorway still wearing the now-familiar scowl...and wondered how much of the man's gruffness was direct fallout from the loss of his wife.

"Could I crank up the rototiller and plow up the garden for

Annie?”

Hunkered down beside the engine he was working on, Jase glanced up at Clay's question, then frowned and turned his attention back to the spark plug he was adjusting. "You've got chores to do."

"But afterwards?" Clay persisted. "It wouldn't take me long and it'll take her forever to clean out all those weeds using just a hoe."

"There's more important work that needs to be done than tilling a garden."

"Like what?"

At the frustration he heard in his son's voice, Jase dropped the wrench to his knee and glanced up, his frown deepening. "Like the fence that needs mending down in the bottom. The new calves I hauled in last night that need feeding and watering. The well house that needs painting."

Ducking his head, Clay scuffed the toe of his boot at the loose hay in the alleyway. "There's always work that needs doing around here," he mumbled.

Jase pushed his hands against his knees and rose. "And there always will be," he said, tossing the wrench to the workbench, "so long as you complain about your chores instead of just doing them."

"I'm not complaining," Clay argued. "I just wanted to help Annie out."

"If the new nanny wants a garden, then she'll have to do the

work herself.”

“You won’t let me help her because you don’t like her.”

Jase dug through the tools, reluctant to admit there might be some truth in his son’s accusation. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. But we like her. She’s nice. And she’s really funny, too. She’s always saying stuff or doing stuff that makes us laugh.”

Yeah, Jase thought, keeping his back to his son. He’d noticed those qualities in her, too. As well as a few others. “Whether she’s nice or not, isn’t the point. Getting your chores done is.”

Clay’s voice took on a pleading tone. “Don’t run her off, Dad. Please? We like her.”

Jase spun to look at his son. “Run her off? Where’d you get a crazy notion like that?”

Clay lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know. But if you’re mean to her, she won’t want to stay around here long.”

Which might be best for them all, Jase affirmed silently, then narrowed a suspicious eye at his son. “You wouldn’t have a crush on the new nanny, would you?”

Heat flamed on Clay’s cheeks. “Heck no! She’s way too old for me.”

Jase turned back to the workbench. “You wouldn’t be the first male to fall head over bootheels for an older woman. She’s young and fairly attractive.”

“Fairly attractive?” Clay echoed. “Dad, she’s a hottie!”

Jase angled his head to look at his son, his brow furrowing.

“Hottie?”

“Well, yeah,” Clay said, his cheeks turning a brighter red. “A looker. You know...a babe.”

Shocked to discover that his son was aware of the finer points of the opposite sex, Jase picked up a wrench, and began to clean it. “You shouldn’t be noticing things like that,” he said gruffly.

Chase snorted a laugh. “Shoot. I’d have be to blind not to notice.”

Irritated by his son’s obvious attraction to the nanny, but unsure why, Jase gave his chin a jerk toward the door. “Best get after those chores.”

Clay stuffed his hands in his pockets and turned away. “Yes, sir,” he mumbled dejectedly.

Jase angled his head to watch his son pull the feed bucket from its nail on the wall and noticed for the first time the slight swell of muscles on the boy’s arms, the length of his stride as he headed for the barn door.

Frowning, he stared after him, wondering what had happened to the pint-size kid with the gangly legs and the too-long arms. The one who had always claimed girls were stupid.

The one who had once looked up at his daddy with hero worship in his eyes.

Jase had never considered his house small. Fact was, his home was a spacious two-story built by his parents prior to his own birth, and could adequately accommodate a family of ten or more without putting a hardship on anyone in the house.

But ever since the new nanny's arrival, his house seemed to have shrunk to the size of a cracker box, as had the rest of his ranch. He couldn't take a step without running into her. Literally.

He couldn't count the number of times he'd bumped into her in the house or when stepping out of the barn, which invariably led to physical contact of some description. A hand on her arm to steady her, or one of her hands braced against his chest to prevent him from mowing her down on those occasions when he'd round a corner unaware of her presence.

And those brief, physical contacts were beginning to get on his nerves.

He'd known he wasn't going to like having a stranger in his house. He'd known, too, that having one who was so young and who was...well...such a hottie as his son had described her, might create a problem or two. But he hadn't been prepared for the amount of time he would waste thinking about her instead of working, wondering where she was, what she was doing, what she was wearing.

As far as he'd been able to determine, her wardrobe consisted of cutoff jeans, tank tops and other equally revealing articles of clothing. If that wasn't distracting enough, he'd discovered she had a habit of humming while she worked that never failed to draw his gaze...and usually to a part of her anatomy that he had no business looking at.

And tonight was no exception.

With the kids already in bed for the night, he and Annie

had the downstairs to themselves. And, though he kept his face hidden behind the newspaper he was reading, he was painfully aware of her exact location, which was, at the moment, less than five feet from his recliner and the tips of his boots. A laundry basket at her side, she sat on the floor folding towels... and humming an irritatingly cheerful little tune.

She glanced up, caught him staring and cocked her head, a questioning smile curving her lips. He quickly ducked his head behind the paper again and flipped the page, pretending to be engrossed in the day's news.

After a moment, he worked up the courage to peek over the top of the newspaper again and caught her just as she rocked up on one hip to stretch to place a folded towel onto the growing stack at her side. At the movement, the hem of her shorts crawled higher on her leg, revealing the thin, white elastic band of her panties and a peek of the lighter-toned skin on her rump that the sun hadn't seen. A low moan rose in his throat, as he stared, all but strangled by the sight.

"Did you say something?"

He snapped his gaze to hers, unaware that he'd let the sound escape. He jerked the paper back in front of his face to hide the heat crawling up his neck. "No," he mumbled. "I...I was just commenting on the weather report for tomorrow. Supposed to be in the high eighties again."

"Eighties," she repeated and sank back on her elbows with a long-suffering sigh. "Hard to believe it's only March. I can't

imagine what the temperatures will be by the time summer gets here.”

If the temperatures proved to be anything like the heat currently registering in his body, Jase couldn't imagine, either.

Aware of the uncomfortable swell in his jeans, he knew he'd best leave while he was still able to walk.

She glanced up as he rose. “Are you going to bed?” she asked in surprise.

“Yeah,” he growled and pivoted quickly, heading for his room.

“Sweet dreams,” she called after him.

Yeah, right, he thought irritably. As if his dreams would be anything but X-rated, an affliction he could trace directly back to the day he'd arrived home and found the new nanny in his house.

Annie knew she had a let-me-kiss-it-and-make-it-better tendency that had gotten her into trouble more than once over the years. But knowing that about herself didn't stop her from trying to think of ways to resolve the problems she saw building in the Rawley household.

In the week since Jase's return home, she had watched Tara go from a talkative and spirited young girl to a sullen-faced, headed-for-trouble teenager, who spent more time in her room than she did with her family. While Clay, on the other hand, had metamorphosed from an easygoing, if a bit shy, teenaged boy into a bundle of tightly wound nerves who jumped at the slightest noise, as if he expected a bomb to go off at any minute. And, Rachel, bless her heart, who had tagged Annie's every step since

Annie's arrival, soaking up every smile sent her way, every bit of praise, had begun to cling to Annie's legs as if she expected Annie to disappear, leaving her all alone.

Though Annie tried to find another explanation for the sudden changes in the children's behavior, she could find nothing to attribute them to other than their father's return, a realization that both saddened and frustrated her.

Not having a family of her own, Annie knew the value of familial relationships and hated to see Jase and his children not taking advantage of all they had to offer each other. But what could she do to wake them up to what all they were missing?

"You're not God," she reminded herself as she checked her camera for film. "You're just the nanny."

Hoping to find some subjects or scenes to photograph that would take her mind off the Rawleys' problems, she slipped her camera strap over her head and headed outdoors.

Jase stepped inside the barn, paused a moment to let his eyes adjust to the sudden change in light, then headed straight for his workbench. Finding the tool he needed to adjust the carburetor on his truck, he curled his fingers around it, then paused, listening, when he heard a rustling sound above. He glanced up at the rafters that supported the hayloft, then swore, dropping his head and blinking furiously when dust and bits of hay showered down on his face.

Dragging an arm across his eyes, he rammed the wrench into his back pocket and strode for the ladder to the loft, muttering

under his breath, “If that damn skunk is back again...”

He climbed the ladder and poked his head through the narrow opening that led to the loft, glancing around. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he carefully navigated the last few steps, trying to keep his movements as quiet as possible, so as not to frighten the skunk. It would be just his luck to get sprayed by the varmint, he thought irritably.

Tiptoeing, he made his way along the narrow pathway created by the tall stacks of baled hay he'd stored there the previous summer, peering into the shadowed crevices. When he reached the end without finding a sign of the critter, he started back, but stopped when he heard a soft whirring sound.

Frowning, he turned and retraced his steps, then paused, listening again. Sure that the sound had come from behind the last row of hay, he wedged himself into the space between the hay and the barn wall, and edged his way to the end, silently cursing the loft's oppressive heat that had his shirt sticking to his skin. When he reached the opposite end, he peered out...and nearly choked at the sight that greeted him. Annie lay sprawled on her stomach on the loft floor, her bare feet kicked up in the air, holding a camera before her face.

“What the hell are you doing!”

“Sshh!” she hissed, flapping a warning hand behind her.

Scowling, he stooped to keep from bumping his head on the low rafters and moved to hunker down at her side. He followed the direction of the camera lens to the far corner of the loft where

dust motes danced a slow waltz in a slanted beam of sunlight.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he murmured as he met the unblinking scrutiny of a mama cat who lay curled on a busted bale of hay.

Easing down to his hips, he drew up his knees, dropped his forearms over them and watched, enchanted by the squirming mass of kittens that suckled greedily at the mama cat’s swollen teats. The camera continued to click and whirl at his ear, recording the event, frame by frame.

A hand grasped his and he glanced up, surprised to discover that Annie had risen. Smiling, she pressed a finger to her lips to silence him, then tugged him to his feet and led him back through the tunnel of hay.

When she reached the loft’s opening, she released his hand to grasp the ladder’s braces and grinned up at him as she started down. “Wasn’t that just the coolest thing you’ve ever seen?”

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