



HITCHED TO THE
HORSEMAN

STELLA BAGWELL

Cherish[™]

Stella Bagwell

Hitched to the Horseman

Аннотация

Falling for the boss's daughter Gabe Trevino came to the Sandbur Ranch to train horses, not fall for a sultry heiress. He could tell she was hiding a secret, tempting Gabe to solve the enigma that was beautiful, vulnerable Mercedes Saddler. Mercedes knew better than to trust the handsome cowboy. She'd come home to Texas to start a new life on the ranch she loved. And Gabe was a man who could break her heart. Yet he called to something deep within her, making her yearn to build a future with him.

Содержание

“You know as well as I do that the two of us can’t be together. What in hell was Geraldine thinking?”	5
Hitched to the Horseman	6
Chapter One	7
Chapter Two	24
Chapter Three	40
Chapter Four	58
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	63

“You know as well as I do that the two of us can’t be together. What in hell was Geraldine thinking?”

Her blood simmering, Mercedes tossed her head, sending her thick hair rippling down her back. “She was thinking that we’re two adults with a job to do. Not to claw and hiss at each other.”

Gabe’s eyelids lowered as his gaze settled on her lips. “Or to make love,” he whispered hoarsely.

Make love.

She didn’t know whether it was those two words or the low growl of his voice that sent a sultry shiver down her spine. Either way, she couldn’t stop her body from gravitating towards his. “That—won’t be on the agenda.”

“Unless you want it to be.”

Stella Bagwell sold her first book in November 1985. Now, she still loves her job and says she isn’t completely content unless she’s writing. She and her husband live in Seadrift, Texas, a sleepy little fishing town located on the coastal bend. Stella says the water, the tropical climate and the seabirds make it a lovely place to let her imagination soar and to put the stories in her head down on paper.

She and her husband have one son, Jason, who lives and teaches maths in nearby Port Lavaca.

Hitched to the Horseman

Stella Bagwell



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To my husband, Harrell,
my very own horse trainer.
All my love.

Chapter One

What the hell was he doing here?

Gabriel Trevino tilted the bottle of beer to his lips to hide his frown as his eyes cut across the sweeping lawn filled with people. Normally his social events consisted of sharing a beer with his buddies behind the bucking chutes at a local rodeo. This gathering at the Sandbur Ranch could hardly be compared to that sort of tobacco-spitting, curse-laden entertainment. Even the boring parties Sherleen had dragged him to during their ill-fated union paled in comparison to tonight's lavish celebration.

The best that money could buy.

The food, the drinks, the five-piece band, the women with hunks of diamonds glittering at their necks and wrists. Only in Texas, he thought wryly, could a woman justify wearing her best to an outdoor barbecue.

Leaning against the massive trunk of a live oak, he turned his attention to the portable dance floor that had been erected several yards away from the house. Presently, it was crowded with couples. Some of them old, some young, all of them having a high old time kicking up their heels to the Cotton Eyed Joe.

“What's the matter, Gabe? Don't you like to dance?”

Glancing around, he saw Geraldine Saddler, the matriarch of the Sandbur, approaching him. The tall, elegant woman with silver hair hardly looked like a woman who knew how to burn a

brand into a cowhide, but since he'd come to work here at the ranch two months ago, he'd seen her do things that would make even some cowhands squeamish.

"Sometimes," he replied.

Eyeing him keenly, she smiled. "Just not now?"

Embarrassed that his discomfort was showing, Gabe straightened away from the tree and turned to face her.

"It's enough for me just to watch, ma'am."

Kindness and grace emanated from Geraldine and for one brief moment, Gabe wondered what his mother's life would have been like if she'd been exposed to this sort of wealth, if she'd had a nice home, plenty of food and enough money to pay the bills with plenty left over for luxuries.

"This is the first party we've had since you arrived here on the ranch," Geraldine remarked. "I'd like to think you're enjoying yourself."

"Oh. Well, it's a real nice affair, Ms. Saddler. Real nice."

Looping her arm through his, she chuckled. "Come along, Gabe. I want to introduce you to someone."

Not about to offend her by protesting, Gabe allowed the woman to guide him through the milling throng of merrymakers until they reached the patio where several people were standing around in a circle.

Lex Saddler, Geraldine's son and the man who regulated the cattle sales here at the Sandbur, was one of them. Apparently he'd just said something funny, because a tall, blond woman

was laughing rowdily. She was wearing a skimpy white sundress with vivid tropical flowers splashed along the hem. The garment struck her long legs somewhere in the middle of her tanned thighs while the top was held up by tiny straps that could easily be snapped beneath the pressure of his fingers. Unlike most of the other young women present tonight, she wasn't stick-thin. She had enough flesh to fill out the sundress with delicious curves.

As Gabe and the boss lady drew nearer to the group, the blonde turned slowly toward them. Almost instantly, a faint look of unease crossed her features, as though seeing him with Geraldine was like spotting a wolf in a pen full of sheep.

"Mercedes, come here," Geraldine called to her. "I'd like for you to meet someone."

Mercedes. This was Geraldine's daughter, he realized. Lex and Nicci's sister. She was the reason hordes of guests had swarmed upon the Sandbur Ranch tonight. She was the reason he was standing here wishing like hell he was somewhere else.

Excusing herself from the intimate circle, the woman walked over to where they stood. Soft, expensive perfume drifted to his nostrils as he struggled to keep his eyes on her face, rather than the sensual curves of her body.

He sensed Geraldine releasing his arm as she quickly made introductions. "Gabe, this is my daughter, Mercedes. And this is Gabriel Trevino. He's our new head horse trainer here on the ranch."

The woman was young. Much younger than Gabe's thirtyfive

years, he decided. But her dark blue eyes were eyeing him with a shrewd perception that implied she was mature beyond her years. Pure attraction for the sultry beauty standing before him twisted in his gut.

Tilting the brim of his straw cowboy hat, he inclined his head toward her and she responded by thrusting her hand out to him.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Trevino.”

Closing his hand around hers, he was surprised by her firm shake, the warmth of her fingers.

“My pleasure, Ms. Saddler.”

Sure. He was feeling as pleased as a bull in a squeeze chute, Mercedes thought. The man was bored. She could see it all over his face. But oh, my, what a face. Strong square jaw, dimpled chin and a Roman nose that had arrogance written all over it. Storm cloud-gray eyes peered at her from beneath heavy black brows. And his mouth—well, it would have looked delicious if a smile had been curving the corners. Instead, the firm slash was bracketed with faint lines of disdain.

Much to her dismay, her curiosity was instantly aroused by his reaction and she continued to hold on to his hand. Partly because she found touching him pleasant, and partly because she knew it was making him even more uncomfortable.

“So you’ve taken over Cousin Cordero’s job,” she mused aloud. “How do you like it here on the Sandbur?”

His dark gray gaze momentarily slanted over to Geraldine, and Mercedes watched a genuine smile cross her mother’s face.

Apparently she considered this man more than just a hired horse trainer. But then Geraldine was the sort of person who'd always gotten close to her employees, who always focused on the good in people rather than their faults.

"I like it," he answered quietly. "Your family has been very generous and gracious to me."

There wasn't anything particularly distinctive about his voice, yet something about the gravelly tones left her feeling a bit breathless. Silly, she told herself. She wasn't about to give in to the sensation. The feeling would pass. Just like this man would no doubt eventually move on from the Sandbur. He sure didn't look like the establishing-roots kind.

"The Sandbur has always had an excellent *remuda*," Mercedes remarked. "I'm sure you'll enjoy working with them. And Uncle Mingo is a legend in the cutting-horse business."

"Your uncle is a very special man," he agreed.

Her fingers were beginning to sweat against his, forcing Mercedes to drop his hand. As Mercedes shifted her weight on high-heeled sandals, Geraldine began to speak.

"Gabe has worked for years with problematic horses," she proudly explained. "He gets them over difficult issues and teaches them to bond with man rather than fight him. We're very lucky to have Gabe with us."

So the man could tame a wounded beast. Wonder what he did for women, Mercedes asked herself as her gaze slid to his ring finger. Empty. No surprise there. Obviously there wasn't a

woman in the background to smooth out his rough edges. He looked as tough as nails and as wild as a rangy mustang.

“That must be challenging,” she said to Gabe.

A faint smile curved the corners of his rough-hewn lips, and Mercedes was both ashamed and shocked at the little thrill of attraction that suddenly zipped through her. He was pure male animal. Any woman would be attracted, she tried to reason with herself. But it had been years since any man had stirred her with a prickle of sexual interest. So why was this one stirring up cold ashes?

“That’s why I do it,” he told her.

Mercedes was studying his face, trying to read beneath the surface of his words when Lex suddenly called to her from across the lawn.

“Hey, Mercedes, come here! A long lost stranger has arrived!”

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Lex standing with an old classmate of hers. Vernon Sweeney, the nerd of St. Mary’s High School. He was sweet and not nearly as exciting as the man standing in front of her. But he was safe. And right now safe was far easier to handle.

Turning back to Gabe, she swiftly explained, “An old friend calls. Will you excuse me?”

His stoic expression didn’t falter. “Certainly, Ms. Saddler.”

For the next hour, Mercedes mingled, talked, laughed and danced with the endless guests that spilled across the two hundred feet of lawn separating the big house from the old

bunkhouse.

She'd been home for just a little over a week and truthfully hadn't had time to get her feet firmly planted back on Sandbur soil when her mother had started planning tonight's event. Mercedes hadn't really been up to this much socializing so soon. She would have preferred to get back in the groove of civilian life before being tossed into a crowd. But this homecoming was important to her mother and she'd not wanted to hurt her feelings for any reason. And these were her friends, she reminded herself. All of them except Gabe Trevino.

In spite of the evening's distractions of dancing, eating and reacquainting herself with old friends, she'd not been able to get the dark horseman off her mind. Which was really very foolish of her. They'd not exchanged more than a handful of sentences, and the few words he'd directed at her had been polite—nothing out of line. Yet she thought there had been an underlying condescension in his attitude, as though he found her boring or, even worse, a spoiled brat. She continued to bristle at the idea as her brother whirled her around the dance floor.

“Still as light on your feet as ever,” Lex said with a grin. “Guess all those ballet lessons you took as a child are still paying off.”

She laughed. “Poor Mother. I don't think I ever quit fighting her about those.”

“You wanted to wear chaps instead of a frilly tutu.”

Mercedes sighed. It seemed so long ago since she'd been that innocent age. If only her life had remained that simple and

sheltered. “I was a tomboy. She wanted me to be more refined, like Nicci. So did Daddy.”

“Nah. Dad loved you any way you wanted to be,” he said.

She couldn't help but notice a tiny shadow crossing her brother's handsome face. He still missed their father desperately. Mercedes missed him, too. She'd give anything to have him here with them. But back in 1996, Paul Saddler had died in what the police had called a boating accident. To this day, Lex didn't like to discuss the tragedy or say one way or the other what he believed happened that fateful day on the Gulf. All Mercedes knew was that her father was gone and their lives were far lesser because of it.

“Enjoying yourself, sis?”

She smiled up at him. “Certainly. It's a very nice party. Mother has outdone herself. And Cook still has her special touch, doesn't she? The brisket melted in my mouth.”

“Bet you didn't have anything like that over on Diego Garcia.”

No. The military air base located on the tiny island in the Indian Ocean didn't cater to parties or home-cooked Texas meals. She'd spent the last two years of her eight-year stint in the Air Force on the isolated island and had to admit that she'd forgotten just what a spoiled, luxurious life she'd once had here on the Sandbur.

“We had turkey and pecan pie on Thanksgiving,” she said, then laughed. “Course, it had to be flown in—just like everything else.”

Lex's smile was full of affection. "We've missed you, honey. Everyone is so glad to have you back home. We're all going to give you hell if you try to leave again. Just keep that in mind if you get the urge to travel."

Her brother's words made her feel wanted, yet at the same time uncomfortable. He and the rest of the family had simply taken it for granted that she was home to stay. But Mercedes wasn't at all sure that her life was meant to be spent on the ranch. Not when old memories and past mistakes continued to haunt her at every turn.

She was trying to push the unsettling issue of her future out of her mind when her gaze slipped past Lex's shoulder to another couple circling the dance floor. So far this evening, she'd not spotted the horse trainer taking a turn to the music. She'd already decided the man wasn't into dancing, but it looked as if she was wrong.

Alice Woodson, an old classmate of Mercedes's, was snuggled up to him, looking as though she was enjoying every second of being in his arms. She would, Mercedes thought with a measure of sarcasm. The woman was man-crazy and had been since junior high.

"Yoo-hoo, sis! The song is over. Want to go another round?"

Realizing the music and her brother's feet had both stopped, Mercedes looked up at him and hoped her wandering thoughts didn't show. "I think I'll sit this one out, Lex. I'm ready to get something to drink."

Looping his arm around her waist, Lex ushered Mercedes off the dance floor. As the two of them walked to the nearest galvanized tub of iced drinks, Mercedes couldn't help but ask, "Do you know why Mother invited Alice?"

Lex frowned. "She's one of your old classmates, isn't she?"

"Yes. But I never cared for her," Mercedes muttered. "Although it seems that someone around here does."

Lex followed Mercedes's gaze as she watched Gabe escort Alice off the dance floor and over to a nearby table.

"Gabe and Alice?" Lex laughed. "He's just being gentlemanly. I don't think Gabe is much into women."

Mercedes frowned as she reached down and plucked a diet soda from among the assortment of drinks. "What do you mean?"

Lex shrugged as though he didn't much want to elaborate, which only made Mercedes even more curious.

Lex finally said, "I think he's had a bad experience and doesn't care to repeat it."

Mercedes could certainly understand that. She'd spent the past eight years dodging men, telling herself that being alone was much better than having her heart ripped out, her trust shattered again.

Popping open the can, she took a sip as she covertly studied the horseman out of the corner of her eye. He was a tall devil, shaped like a wedge with strong broad shoulders and narrow hips. His jeans and Western shirt were probably pieces of clothing that

he wore to work every day. Yet he wore the casual garments with so much class that he made all the other men seem ridiculously overdressed.

Mercedes's lips pressed together as she watched Alice place a hand on Gabe's arm. "Then he'd better stay away from Alice. She'll try to devour him."

Lex chuckled. "If you're so worried about the man, why don't you go to the rescue and ask him for a dance?"

Mercedes stared in thoughtful surprise at her brother. Back in high school, she'd been bold enough to ask a guy for a dance, or even a date. But once she'd grown older, once she'd loved and lost, her courage with men had faltered. Then later, when she'd learned the hard way that trusting a man was equal to rolling a dice, her desire to be close to one in any circumstance had dwindled down to nothing.

"Me?" she asked. "No. I'm not the type to ask a man to do anything."

"Getting a little haughty, are we?"

Haughty? If she told her brother how insecure she really felt, he'd be shocked. But she didn't want him to know that his once fearless sister had changed to a cautious soul, that she saw men as things that could hurt her rather than give her pleasure and companionship. "No," she said curtly. "More like getting smart."

With a roll of his eyes, Lex shook his head at her. "Coward."

Why was it that her brother had always known exactly how to push her buttons? He could have said anything else and it

would have rolled off her back. But being home on the ranch reminded her that being a Saddler meant facing a challenge head on. Mercedes wanted her brother to see she was still worthy of the family name.

With a toss of her head, she gave Lex a cunning smile and then started off in Gabriel Trevino's direction. After all, the worst the man could do was turn her down. And even if he did, it was only a little dance. She wouldn't let it bother her.

Alice saw her coming first and Mercedes watched a plastic smile form on the other woman's face.

"Mercedes, have I told you tonight how fabulous you look?" Alice asked as Mercedes edged up to the table where the pair were sitting in folding metal chairs. "The Air Force must be getting lax, 'cause you look as if you've spent the past month in a spa. 'Course, it wasn't as if you were toting a gun through the jungle or anything."

Mercedes merely looked at the woman, and Alice, sensing she'd just chewed on her own foot, began to giggle nervously.

"It's great to see you, Alice. I'm glad you could make it tonight," Mercedes said politely, then turned a questioning gaze on Gabe. "Would you care to dance with me, Mr. Trevino? When the band starts playing Bob Wills, I can't keep my feet still and Lex is all tuckered out."

"Yeah, Lex looks plumb beat," Alice said mockingly.

Ignoring the other woman's jab, Mercedes watched Gabe's gray eyes flicker with surprise, but then slowly he rose to his feet

and reached for her arm.

He said, "Excuse me," to Alice, and the woman made some sort of reply, but Mercedes didn't hear it. Her ears were roaring with her own heartbeat as the two of them walked toward the elevated dance floor.

"What was that all about?" he asked once they were a few steps away from Alice. "You have a grudge against that woman?"

"Not really. I just thought you ought to know she's a maneater. She's already been through two husbands and she hasn't celebrated her thirtieth birthday yet."

To her surprise, he chuckled.

"Do I look like a man who can't take care of himself?"

He looked like a man who could take care of anything. But she'd only just met the man; she was hardly ready to give him a gushing compliment.

"I don't know. Can you?"

"I've survived thirty-five years," he said curtly. "I'm doing okay."

By the time they reached the dance floor, the western swing number had finished and the lead singer began to sing a slow ballad about lost love. It wasn't the sort of dance she'd intended to have with Gabe Trevino, but there wasn't much she could do about it now except step into his arms and move to the music.

"Why did you ask me to dance?" he asked bluntly as his hand settled at the back of her waist.

His arms were rock-hard and though she tried to keep space

between the front of her body and his, her breasts brushed against his chest and her thigh slid between his. In spite of their slow pace, she felt a desperate need for oxygen as her body began to hum with excitement.

“Actually, Lex challenged me to ask you,” she said honestly. “You see, I was worried about you and Alice. He thought I ought to rescue you. So did I.”

“I don’t know whether to feel flattered or insulted.”

And she didn’t know why, after several years of celibacy, this stranger had woken her sleeping libido. “I wouldn’t bother with either,” she said as casually as she could. “It’s just a dance.”

Even though her head was turned to one side, she knew he was looking down at her. She could feel his gaze examining the side of her face, then dropping to the V neckline of her dress. At the same time, the hand at the back of her waist slid upward until his fingers splayed against her bare back.

From somewhere deep inside her, a flame unexpectedly flickered, then burst into an all-out inferno. Dismayed that she was reacting to him so strongly, she could only thank God that it was dark and he couldn’t see the droplets of sweat collecting on her upper lip.

“I thought maybe you were just feeling generous,” he said close to her ear. “Wanting to give the hired help a dance with royalty.”

Easing her head back, she glowered at him. “Look, just so you know, I don’t think of myself as a princess or you as hired help.

You have a chip on your shoulder or something?”

Gabe had never felt sorry for himself or his position in life. He was proud of who and what he was. Maybe he needed to make that clear to her. “I just don’t need for you to feel sorry for me, Ms. Saddler. I like myself.”

She surprised him by laughing. Not just one short sound of amusement, but a long laugh filled with joy. Yet instead of feeling annoyed with her, the infectious sound put a grin on his face.

“Please, call me Mercedes. And just to set your mind at ease, Gabe, you’re the last person I would think needs sympathy.”

She felt like a dream in his arms, he thought. A soft warm dream where one pleasure seeped into another and every spot he touched thrilled him just that much more.

He struggled to control himself. Hell, just because it had been a long time since he’d had a woman didn’t mean this one was supposed to turn him into a randy buck, he thought with self-disgust. So what if she was as sexy as sin? That didn’t mean he needed her any closer than she already was. No, sir, he’d already learned the hard way the price he’d have to pay for a woman like her.

“I heard Alice say something about the Air Force. Is that why you’ve been away from the ranch? Because you were in the Air Force?”

“Eight years,” she answered. “My job was intelligence gathering.”

It just didn't fit, Gabe pondered. A woman like her didn't need to work, much less go into the strict, disciplined life of the military. He had to admit that he admired her ambition. Even more, he had to admit that he wanted to know what was really behind those deep blue eyes staring back at him.

"What made you decide to enter the military?"

One of her shoulders lifted and fell with nonchalance, but he noticed that her gaze deliberately swung away from his.

"You and I are more alike than you think, Gabe. I like a challenge, too."

He didn't figure she was giving him the complete reason. But then he hadn't expected her to spill her life's story through one slow dance.

"What about you?" she asked. "How did you come to be here on the Sandbur?"

"I met Cordero at a horse seminar over in Louisiana. He liked my work and asked me if I'd be interested in settling here."

"And you were," she stated the obvious.

"Here I am."

She seemed on the verge of asking him more when the song suddenly ended.

"Want to go another round?" he asked.

She smiled. "I really shouldn't ignore the other guests who've come to see me tonight."

"Then thank you very much for the dance." He lifted the back of her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss on the soft skin.

Wide-eyed, she asked, “Did you give one of those to Alice, too?”

A faint grin curved the corner of his mouth. “No. She didn’t dance nearly as well as you.”

She studied him for several long, awkward moments and then smiled impishly. “Oh. Well, I won’t wipe it off, then,” she said brightly. Before he could make any sort of reply, she pulled out of his embrace and hurried off the dance floor.

Gabe stared after her and wondered why he felt as though he’d just taken a hard tumble from the saddle.

Chapter Two

Once the party finally ended, Mercedes didn't get into bed until the wee hours of the morning. Though she was exhausted, her sleep ended abruptly when she woke up long before daylight, her body drenched in sweat, her senses disoriented.

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she pressed a hand to her damp face.

You're okay, Mercedes. You're in your old bedroom on the Sandbur. The bedroom where you played as a child, had sleepovers with friends.

Dropping her hand from her bleary eyes, she gazed around at the shadows shrouding the walls and furniture while she waited for the axis of her brain to spin in the right direction.

She'd been dreaming, she realized, but not of something pleasant or peaceful. The dream had involved a man and a horse inside a corral. She'd been watching from the fence, calling out to him, trying to warn him that he was about to be hurt. The horse had charged, knocked the man down, then reared and viciously brought his front hoofs down on the man's back.

Gabe! She'd been dreaming about Gabe Trevino. The realization stunned her almost as much as the vivid dream had shocked her senses. She'd not gone to bed thinking of the man much. Well, maybe that tiny kiss on the back of her hand *had* fluttered through her thoughts right before she'd gone to

sleep, she corrected herself. But her mind certainly hadn't been consumed by the man.

With a rough sigh, she rose from the bed and stumbled into the bathroom. She might as well shower and start the day, because there was no way she could go back to sleep now.

A few minutes later, Mercedes, dressed in jeans, boots and a cool summer shirt, walked through the quiet house. In the kitchen, she realized that she'd even beaten Cook out of bed. The room was still dark.

For a brief moment, she considered making a pot of coffee, then decided she'd wait until the rest of the family was up to enjoy it with her.

Instead, she let herself out of the house through a back exit and made her way through the dark early morning to the horse barn. Across the way, she could see a faint light glowing in the bunkhouse. The wranglers would be stirring soon, catching their mounts and saddling them up for the day's work ahead.

Mourning doves were cooing and mockingbirds were beginning to flutter to life among the live oaks. There was a peaceful beauty to the ranch that Mercedes had always loved. Even when the ranch yard bustled with life, it was a poetry of sights and sounds. The hammer of the farrier, the bawl of a calf, the nicker of a horse, the sun coming up and the moon going down.

From generation to generation and year after year, her family had worked and carved this ranch from prickly pear patches and

endless stretches of mesquite trees. As for Mercedes, she'd been born here in her parents' bedroom.

Yes, she'd been rooted here. But eight long years ago, she'd pulled up those roots and run as fast and hard as she could. Now she wondered if she'd made a mistake by coming back, trying to make this her home once again, trying to pretend that she could fall back into the life she'd led before her college life and John's big deception, before her stint at Peterson AFB and the humiliating mistake she carried from there.

Trying to shake away the nagging questions, she walked on to the barn and climbed up on a board fence that corralled a small herd of yearling horses. From a lofty seat on the top rail, she watched the colts and fillies play in the cool morning air until she heard a footfall behind her.

Glancing over her shoulder, she was more than surprised to see the man of her disturbing dream propping his shoulder against the board fence. He was dressed in a dark blue denim shirt with pearl snaps, the standard fare that cowboys had worn for decades. Funny how the shirt looked tailored just for him. Some men tried to play the part, while others were naturals. She realized that Gabe was one of those naturals, the epitome of all things Western right down to the square toes of his brown cowboy boots.

"You're up very early," he remarked.

"So are you. Today is Saturday," she pointed out. "Don't tell me that you start your workday this early on a Saturday."

Even though he had no way of knowing that she'd dreamed about him, the fact that he'd shouldered his way into her subconscious thoughts was enough to put a sting of embarrassment on her cheeks.

He jerked his head toward the pen full of horses. "They don't know it's a weekend."

He was right. Nothing stopped on the ranch. At the least, livestock had to be fed and cared for every day of the week.

She drew in a long breath and let it out as she guided her gaze back to the pen of horses. "Are all of these broken to the halter?" she asked.

"Yes."

"What are you doing with them now?"

"Getting them used to blankets and saddles on their backs. When they get closer to two, I'll put someone lightweight like you on them. Ever ride a green horse?"

Even though he was standing on the ground and a good foot away from her, his presence was a huge thing, crowding toward her, making her completely aware of her femininity.

She answered, "I've ridden a few outlaws before. But as for green horses, only once. Daddy forbade us to climb on anything that wasn't completely broken to ride, but I didn't always do what I was told."

"Imagine that."

Even though she didn't glance at him, she could hear a smile in his voice, and the sound warmed her, drew her to him.

“Yeah. I got bucked off and broke my arm. I missed the whole softball season at school that year. I learned about green horses the hard way.”

Apparently she'd always been an outdoors person, Gabe thought. The notion surprised him, although it shouldn't have. She'd been in the military, after all. She'd had to go through rigorous physical preparation to graduate basic training. Still, she seemed so womanly, so soft, that he couldn't imagine her in camouflaged fatigues or wearing a pair of spurs and chaps.

“Don't feel badly, we've all been dumped,” he told her.

She remained quiet and after a few moments, Gabe glanced up to see her wiping her hands down her thighs as she rose from her seat on the fence. She was wearing a blue and white patterned shirt with short sleeves. A white scarf was twisted and tied around her thick hair. Once she was standing on the ground, he could see her face was void of makeup, yet it held as much color and beauty as the sun breaking over the treetops.

Smiling faintly, she said, “I'd better get back to the house. I haven't had any coffee yet, or breakfast.”

“I can't do anything about the breakfast, but I've just made a pot of fresh coffee. Would you care to join me for a cup?”

She glanced questioningly around her. “Here?”

He jerked his head toward the barn. “I've got an office inside the barn.”

Surprise arched her brows. “I thought Cordero's office was over by the cattle barn.”

“It’s still there. But I like it here—keeps me closer to the foaling mares. And your mother kindly supplied me with a few things to make it comfortable.”

She gestured toward the building situated several yards behind him. “I’d like to see this new office of yours,” she agreed. “And I’d especially like the coffee.”

Built when the Sandbur had first become a full-fledged ranch in 1900, the barn was one of the few original structures that had weathered more than a century of the extreme climate of South Texas. Because the building was made of heavy lumber, it stayed cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter than some of the newer barns that were built from corrugated iron. It had always been one of Mercedes’s favorite spots on the ranch.

As the two of them stepped inside the cavernous building, Gabe took Mercedes by the arm and guided her down a long, wide alleyway to a closed door. Gabe opened it and gestured for her to enter.

The moment she stepped into the room, she was immediately impressed with the large teacher’s desk and office chair, the computer, fax and copier, telephone, refrigerator and small cooking element. “Why, this used to be a tack room,” she said with amazement. “How did you make such a transformation?”

“Me and some of the hands partitioned off part of the feed room and moved all the riding equipment in there.” He gestured for her to take a seat on the long couch running against one wood-paneled wall. “Sit down. You might recognize that couch. It came

from the den in the big house. Your mother said she needed a new one anyway. I think she was just being generous. During foaling season, I need a place to stretch out from time to time.”

While she made herself comfortable on the couch, Gabe poured coffee into two foam cups.

“Cream or sugar? Or both?” he asked.

“Cream. Just a splash. But I can do it.”

She started to rise from her seat, but he motioned her back down. “I can manage.”

Back at the couch, Gabe handed her the steaming coffee and then took a seat on the cushion next to her. Other than Geraldine Saddler, no woman had set foot in his private domain until now. It seemed strange and even more distracting for Mercedes to be sitting only inches away from him.

“Mmm. Thank you,” she murmured as she lifted the steaming drink to her lips.

As he sipped from his own cup, he realized he shouldn't have invited her in here. In fact, he shouldn't have danced with her last night. Because even now he was assaulted with the memories of her curvy body brushing temptingly against his, the scent of her skin, the softness of her sigh as it skittered against the side of his neck. He couldn't remember a time that any woman had left such an indelible impression on him, and that could only mean trouble. Mercedes was rich, strong and independent—just like the woman who'd married him, then smashed him into useless pieces.

“So you’re home now,” he said. “What do you plan to do with your time?”

She stared into her cup rather than at him. “I—I’m not sure yet. For starters, I’m going to give myself a few days to adjust to civilian life.”

She could afford to do that, Gabe thought. In fact, she could afford to do anything she wanted to do. He couldn’t imagine having *that* much financial security. Sherleen had been rich, before and after they’d married. Not nearly as rich as Mercedes or her family, but wealthy enough. As her husband, Gabe had never considered his wife’s money as his, too. In fact, he’d never wanted it and had done his best to pay his own way throughout their short years together. A man of any stock didn’t want to be labeled as being kept by his wife. And to Gabe, riches weren’t measured by the balance in a bank account. Unfortunately, his ex-wife had thought differently. Now he found himself attracted to another rich woman. What the hell was the matter with him, anyway? He’d learned the hard way that he and wealthy women didn’t mix.

He said, “I guess that was a stupid question on my part, anyway.”

Her eyes were full of questions as they roamed his face and Gabe realized he needed to be more careful or his personal feelings would show.

“Why do you say that?”

What the hell, he thought. He wasn’t going to tiptoe around

this woman as though she were royalty. “Nothing. Just that—well, it’s not like you have to go out and find a job.”

Disgust turned the corners of her lips downward as she rose from her seat to amble around the tiny room. “I can’t read your mind, Gabe. So I don’t have any idea what sort of impressions you have about me. But I can assure you that I don’t plan to sit on my hands.”

“I wouldn’t think so,” he drawled with a bit of sarcasm. “It might flatten them.”

She shot him a droll look and then chuckled. “Smart mouth. I’ll bet as a teenager you gave your mother fits.”

A dark cloud suddenly shadowed his thoughts. Though he reminded himself that this woman was teasing, that she couldn’t know about Jenna Trevino’s death, it still hurt to think of growing up without his mother and the horrible way she’d left this world.

“No. I didn’t give her fits,” he said curtly. “She was in her grave.”

Mercedes couldn’t have felt more awful. She wanted to walk behind the desk and crawl inside the knee hole, but hiding would hardly help her now. “Oh, boy, I messed up there, didn’t I?” she murmured more to herself than to him. Glancing regretfully at the man, she tried again, “Gabe, I—You’re a young man. I just assumed that your mother was still alive. Forgive me.”

She watched him draw in a long breath, then release it, and from the strained expression on his face, she got the notion that he felt more awkward than even she did.

“Forget it, Mercedes. You didn’t know.”

Afraid she’d worsen her foot-in-mouth disease with any sort of reply, she waited for him to say more, anything that would explain how his mother died. But after several more clumsy moments passed in silence, she decided it best to change the subject completely.

Resting a hip on the corner of the desk, she said, “So. What do you use the computer for? Keeping track of sales?”

“Yes. And I also keep a file for every horse on the Sandbur. It’s a big help in keeping track of their breeding, farrier visits, vaccinations, injuries, progress in their training. You get the picture.”

Mercedes was very impressed. Her cousin Cordero was a good horse trainer, but he’d never been that meticulous about keeping data. “You sound like a doctor keeping updates on his patients’ charts.”

“Exactly. I’ll show you.”

Leaving the couch, he walked past her and went to stand behind the desk. Mercedes swiveled around to see him switching on the computer. While the machine whirred to life, she used the time to study him from beneath a pair of lowered lashes.

Apparently he’d not taken the time to shave this morning. A black stubble of beard covered his jaws, upper lip and chin. His hair, what she could see of it beneath the brim of his hat, curled damply against the back of his neck, as though it hadn’t been long since he’d stepped out of the shower. The scent of soap and

musk and man all swirled together and drifted across the small space between them.

Stirred in spite of herself, she looked away and made a steeple of her hands. For the past eight years, she'd worked around men on a daily basis. Some of them had been goodlooking, even sexy. A few had become buddies. And one—Well, she'd thought Drew was a very special friend until he'd proved not to be a friend at all. But even before his betrayal, she'd never found his flirtatious smile and rumbling laugh this distracting. He'd never had her thinking of hot nights, sweaty sheets or even a slow, wet kiss the way this man was doing now.

Mercedes believed the sexual side of her had died along with her dreams of finding love. Yet for some reason she couldn't understand, Gabe Trevino seemed to be shaking her back to life.

“Okay,” he said, breaking into her thoughts. “Here's a chart on He's A Peppy Charge. Take a look.”

Attempting to shake away the sensual fog settling over her, Mercedes placed her coffee mug on the desk then walked around to stand next to him. With every ounce of strength in her, she forced herself to focus on the monitor screen rather than him.

“Everything is here,” she observed. “His birthday, family tree, color and markings, vet visits, blood tests.” She scanned the data until she reached Gabe's personal comments and then she read aloud, “Deceptive charmer. Tries to buck if not completely warmed up. Great speed and athleticism. Needs experienced cowboy on his back.”

A provocative smile curved her lips as she turned her head to look at him. “Does that mean you?”

The moment she saw his eyes narrow, Mercedes knew she’d struck a nerve and nudged him over the invisible line that had been acting as a polite barrier between them.

As he moved closer, she sucked in a bracing breath.

“Just what are you doing here, anyway, Ms. Saddler?”

Gabe had never intended to let this woman provoke him. From the moment he’d spotted her on the fence, he’d planned to appear cool and collected, even if his insides felt like a boiler on the verge of exploding. But now the teasing glint in her sexy blue eyes made him forget all about his earlier determination. Now his focus refused to go beyond the moist pout of her lips, the idea of how she would taste and feel.

“Uh—what do you mean?” she asked hoarsely.

Before Gabe could stop himself, he wrapped his hand around her forearm and tugged her against him. As her breast flattened against his chest, he could feel her heart flutter, and his own begin to pound.

“I mean, here,” he clipped out. “At the horse barn. Where you knew you would find me.”

Gabe hated the way her soft curves aroused him, yet at the same time, he couldn’t deny the excitement rushing through his veins.

Scowling at him, she said, “I walked down to the horse pen because it’s a nice, cool morning and I wanted to get out of the

house. This is the last place I thought you would be.”

Her lame excuse filled his snort with a mix of humor and sarcasm. “Really? This is where I work. Where did you think I’d be?”

“In bed. Where everyone else is right now!”

Her nostrils flared like a filly being circled by a stallion, and Gabe felt a hot, feral flame flicker deep inside him.

“Everyone is in bed—but you and me,” he pointed out lowly.

Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips and it was all Gabe could do to keep from closing the last bit of space between their faces. “If you think—”

“I think a whole lot of things,” he bluntly interrupted, “but I know we’re both thinking about this.”

Mercedes wasn’t sure if he tugged her forward or if she simply wilted against him, but the next thing she knew his mouth was hot and heavy on hers, his arms were wrapped around her shoulders, anchoring her upper body against his.

The intimate connection was such a shock to Mercedes’s senses that the thought of resisting didn’t have time to enter her mind. And then as his lips began to search and plunder her mouth, she realized that she didn’t want to resist. She didn’t want to do anything but stand in the circle of his arms and drink in the heady taste of him.

Somewhere outside, she heard a rooster crow, a horse snort, another squeal. Inside the room a clock was *tick, tick, ticking*. Or was that the sound of her heart beating in her ears? She couldn’t

tell anymore. Her senses were beginning to melt into a useless puddle.

A keening moan gurgled in the back of her throat as her hands searched for some sort of support. It came in the way of his hard shoulders, and her fingers were about to latch over them when he suddenly jerked back from her.

The abrupt separation of their bodies tilted Mercedes's footing and left her snatching a steadying hold on the edge of the desk. As she stared at him in stunned fascination, she felt her lips burning, her lungs dragging in long ragged breaths.

After several hard swallows, she finally managed to ask, "What—what was that all about?"

His jaw hardened as his gray gaze swept over her flushed face. "To let you know that I don't play games, Mercedes. Not with you. Not with any woman. Try it again and I promise you—you'll get burned."

Straightening her shoulders, she lifted her chin. "Pompous ass," she snarled at him. "Do you think every woman that gets within speaking distance of you wants to crawl into your bed?"

Without warning, his hand shot out and cuffed around her upper arm. Mercedes glanced down at his fingers biting into her flesh and then she saw them—tough welts of jagged scars on top of his wrist and disappearing beneath the cuff of his shirt.

Somewhere, somehow he'd been terribly injured. The visual evidence, even the mere thought, shocked Mercedes almost as much as his kiss had, and for long moments she couldn't tear her

eyes away from his brown skin.

“Gabe, your—”

Before she could say more, he jerked his hand away and quickly stepped back from her.

“Get out of here, Mercedes,” he gritted. “Go find some other man to amuse you.”

She couldn't believe that only seconds before sympathy for the man had swept through her. Right now, she'd love to slap his jaw.

“In case you've forgotten, the Sandbur is my home. I'm not going to tiptoe around you as though you're something special. If I want to come here to the horse barn or anywhere else on the ranch where you just happened to be, I will! And if you don't like it, you can just—go!”

Not about to wait for any sort of reply from the man, Mercedes stomped out of the little office and marched down the alleyway of the barn. By now, sunlight was slanting through the door of the cavernous building, shedding light on the stalls lined against both walls. Several horses were sticking their heads over gates, watching her movements. Under normal circumstances, she would have stopped and greeted every animal. As it was, her lips were on fire, her eyes stinging with tears, and she couldn't get out of the barn fast enough.

Back in the tiny office, Gabe switched off the computer and slumped into the desk chair, then immediately jumped back up and grabbed his coffee cup. As he splashed more hot liquid over the portion that had cooled, he muttered several choice curse

words at himself. He didn't know what in hell had come over him or possessed him to grab the woman, much less kiss her.

She'd done nothing more than tease him. And she'd done it gently, at that. Nothing she'd said or done had warranted his behavior. Even if she had come down to the barn purposely to see him, even if she *was* using him to amuse herself, that didn't mean he should have taken the bait. He liked to think he was older and wiser than to let his head be turned by a pretty face.

But the moment she'd stood next to him, her face only inches away, her scent drifting over him, tantalizing every cell in his body, his common sense had crawled out the door. Now just the memory of her lips beneath his, the feel of her hands moving against his chest was enough to leave him hard and frustrated.

So what are you going to do now, Gabe?

Remind himself that he was nothing more than a hired hand and get to work.

Chapter Three

Later that morning, Mercedes was in her bedroom, trying to motivate herself to finish unpacking the boxes that were stacked in one corner. So far, she'd done little more than hang a few garments in the armoire.

What was she really doing here on the ranch, anyway? she asked herself for the umpteenth time. Was she really home to stay, or was she simply using the ranch as a launching pad to some other job at some other place?

Sighing wistfully, she dropped the slinky blouse back to the open box lying upon the bed and walked over to a huge arched window. Since her upstairs bedroom was on the west end of the house, the window was partially shaded by the enormous limbs of a live oak, yet through the break in the leaves she could see a part of the ranch yard and a small portion of the horse barn. Just looking at the old barn and recalling her encounter with Gabe Trevino was enough to make her blush.

Unwittingly, her fingertips lifted to her lips. She'd never been kissed like that before, as though she were a piece of meat and he a starving animal. It was embarrassing to think how much the kiss had excited her, had shaken the very core of her womanhood.

She'd thought John had been an adept lover. She'd believed that she would never meet another man whose touch would sweep her senses into such a mushy state of bliss. But Gabe had done

that and more. Those few moments in his arms had left her feeling like a hungry tigress. She'd wanted to tear at his clothes and her own. She'd wanted to surrender to him completely. It was frightening to think how he'd woken her sleeping sexuality and turned it into a sizzling libido.

“Darling, you haven't even gotten started with these boxes. Would you like for Alida to come up and help you?”

At the sound of her mother's voice, Mercedes turned away from the window to see that Geraldine had walked into the room. Concern was on her face as her gaze flicked from her daughter to the still packed boxes.

“Mother, I didn't have a maid in the Air Force. I hardly need one now.”

Geraldine scowled. “No need to get huffy. I was just offering. Or would you rather I help you?”

“No. I can manage,” she insisted. Spotting the faint look of hurt on her mother's face, she crossed the space between them and pecked a kiss on her smooth cheek. “I don't mean to sound sharp, Mother. I'm tired, that's all. This past week has been a little hectic. I don't think I've caught up from the jet lag yet.”

Mercedes didn't go on to say that having a maid in the house made her feel guilty and overly pampered, especially after some of the pitiful sights she'd endured while on rescue missions in America and abroad. Floods, fires, earthquakes. The U.S. military stepped in to help when natural catastrophes shredded people's lives and left them homeless and frightened. In those

cases, having necessities was the difference between living or dying. The word *maid* didn't exist in that reality.

Geraldine turned a sympathetic smile on her daughter. "And the party last night went on forever," she conceded. "I guess I should have waited to throw it. But everyone has been so excited about you coming home. I didn't want to wait."

Nodding that she understood, Mercedes went over to the queen-size bed and sat on the edge of the mattress. "I'm glad you didn't wait. I enjoyed seeing everyone again."

Geraldine walked over to a nearby armchair and sank into it. As she crossed her long legs, Mercedes couldn't help thinking that her mother had hardly aged the past eight years. She was quite slim and shapely for a woman of sixty-four. Her complexion was tanned and smooth, while her silver hair sparkled with life. This past year, she'd started to date again, a widowed Texas senator. Mercedes admired her courage and was especially glad that she'd never given up on life after her husband had died.

The way you've given up on men? Maybe she had given up on men, she told herself, but she had good reason—they weren't to be trusted.

"Darling, we've not done anything to this room since you left for the Air Force," Geraldine commented as she looked around the room. "Maybe you'd like a change. New paint? Drapes? Furniture?"

The walls of the room were a soft, textured pink and the

furniture was antique heavy oak that had been here since her grandparents' heyday. She didn't want to change a thing about the room. It was *herself* that Mercedes needed to change. But she didn't have a clue how to start. How did a person forget pain and betrayal? How could she ever have a family of her own if she couldn't trust a man to take out the garbage on time, much less take care of her heart?

Mercedes's gaze joined her mother's as it traveled around the walls that were crowded with photos and paintings, then down to the Spanish tile scattered with thick looped throw rugs. "There's nothing wrong with this room, Mother. I don't want it changed."

Seeming not to hear her, Geraldine went on, "Well, since Nicci's moved out, you could take over her room if you like it better."

Now that Nicci had married Ridge and given birth to a new daughter, Sara Rose, her sister's bedroom was empty. As empty as Mercedes's heart.

"No," Mercedes said flatly. "I'm happy here."

Geraldine's lips pursed together. "You hardly look as if you're happy, Mercedes. And I don't mean to push you, but frankly, I'm worried about you, honey. I thought—" She paused and shook her head with frustration. "Well, let's just say that I hoped coming home would make you feel differently about things."

Mercedes plucked at the knobby bedspread. "What things?"

"Well, dammit, I'm not going to beat around the bush with you. I never have, so I don't guess I should start now. I'm talking

about that bastard—John. And don't tell me that you're still not moping about him. I would have thought that after eight years, you would have gotten the man out of your system. But no, I still catch you staring off into space with that my-world-has-ended look. Frankly, Mercedes, I'm sick of seeing it."

Geraldine's angry words snapped Mercedes's head up. "That's not true! I'm not moping about John Layton. Good Lord, Mother, it's like you just said, that was more than eight years ago!"

"But you haven't forgotten."

How could she forget the most humiliating, heartbreaking experience of her life? John had been her history professor at the University of Texas. He'd been a quiet, serious man, highly intellectual and handsome to boot. When he'd first shown a romantic interest in Mercedes, she'd been completely bowled over by his charm. Later, as their relationship had progressed into a full-blown affair, she'd truly believed that he loved her and wanted to marry her. She'd thought that the two of them together could conquer the world. God, she'd looked at him and the world through rosecolored glasses.

Sighing, she tried to explain. "Look, Mother, I believed John was the love of my life. I thought he was going to be my husband. The father of my children!"

"Instead, you learned in an offhanded way that he already had a wife with a child on the way. Believe me, Mercedes, that would have been enough to wipe all memories of love or anything else from my mind. Apparently, you're different from me. I guess

I'm just too hard-hearted to let some noaccount, playboy college professor ruin my life."

It was just like her mother to lay the whole affair out in such blunt terms. She didn't play favorites with her children. She treated them all with the same tough love.

"I don't still care for the man, if that's what you're thinking, Mother. In fact, I couldn't care less what has happened to him. It's just that the whole thing with John made me see how easy it is to be duped by a man. I'm not sure that I'll ever be able to trust another one."

Mercedes didn't go on to explain to her mother that John's deception was only a part of her reluctance to enter another relationship with a man. Three years ago, she'd been terribly betrayed by Airman Drew Downy. Because of him, her security status had been lowered and she'd been reprimanded severely for her lapse in judgment. It had taken months of hard work for her to regain the trust of her superior officers. All because she'd trusted a man. Because she'd believed he was a good friend and had truly cared for her. But instead of being loyal, Drew had blown the whistle on her for sharing classified secrets that *he* had prompted her to disclose. The memory still made her cringe with humiliation and hurt.

Even though Drew hadn't been her lover, Mercedes had believed their relationship might grow and blossom into something lasting. When she finally figured out that he was only using her to show himself in a positive light, she'd been crushed

and shocked that she'd once again so misjudged a man. After that, she'd gone numb and so guarded that she was reluctant to even share the time of day with a male counterpart in a social context.

“God help you,” Geraldine murmured.

Trying to swallow away the ball of bitterness in her throat, Mercedes thrust a hand through her thick hair. “Mother, I have other things on my mind. And they hardly revolve around finding a man.”

Looking extremely disgusted now, Geraldine tapped her fingers against the arm of the chair. “Okay. So you want to put sex and love and marriage last on your to-do list. What's first?”

Mercedes quickly glanced away from her mother as this morning's encounter with Gabe danced through her thoughts. Sex had hardly been the last thing on her mind when he'd planted that sizzling lock on her lips. But pure sex was all it had been, she told herself. And she wasn't planning on letting it happen again. Not if she could help it.

Trying to shake the memory away, she said firmly, “I want to be productive, Mother. Useful. I want to feel as though I'm where I'm supposed to be.”

Clearly concerned with her daughter's attitude, Geraldine left the chair and came to stand in front of Mercedes. “Honey, I know with your training in intelligence you could easily get a job most anywhere you wanted. You'd be making good money—not that you need it, but you'd have it to fall back on if, God forbid, the ranch ever slid into a losing hole. But I'm not all that sure that

throwing yourself into a government job is what you really need at this time in your life.”

Not bothering to hide her unsettled thoughts, Mercedes held her palms up in a helpless gesture. “I’m not sure it’s what I need, either. But what am I supposed to do, Mother? I’m not the idle type. And I can’t simply chase cows from morning ’til night.”

And she sure as heck wasn’t going to work with the horses and face Gabe Trevino every day, Mercedes thought. Her peace of mind would be torn to shreds.

“There’s more to do around here than chase cows! Ask your brother. Ask your cousin Matt. They work themselves to the ground every day to keep this place in the black. Maybe it’s time someone else in the family offered to step up to the plate and do their part!”

Mercedes was cut to the quick by her mother’s retort, and she couldn’t utter one word in reply. Instead, she rose from the bed and brushed past Geraldine. At one end of the room, rows of wide wooden shelves held souvenirs and mementos from her past. A 4-H trophy for best heifer at the state fair. Another for horsemanship. A rhinestone tiara from when she’d won Miss Junior Rodeo for Goliad County. A pair of scarred ballet slippers. A sheet of music she’d played in a piano recital. A dried rose taken from her father’s coffin.

There were many more bits and pieces of her life scattered across the shelves and as she gazed at them, she tried to rein in her exploding emotions. Her parents had given her a wonderful

childhood and opened doors to any path she'd wanted to take. These years she'd been away, she'd not stopped to think that her family might be expecting her to eventually give back to the ranch. Instead, she'd been selfishly focused on her own career.

"If you're trying to make me feel guilty, Mother, then you've certainly succeeded," she murmured hoarsely.

Mercedes had hardly gotten the words out when she felt her mother's hands on her shoulders, gently pulling her around.

"Mercedes!" she scolded softly. "I'm not trying to make you feel guilty. I'm sorry if I did. But I *am* trying to jar you. To wake you up out of this foggy sleep you've been in ever since you left the Sandbur."

Pressing her lips to a firm line, Mercedes swung her head back and forth. Eight years ago, shortly after she'd learned the truth about John, she'd met an Air Force recruiter on campus. He'd made the idea of serving her country and acquiring a new career sound exciting and challenging, just what she'd needed to take her mind off the miserable mistakes she'd made. Initially, she supposed she had used the military as a way to get away from campus and the Sandbur. She'd had her fill of her family watching her with sympathy and treating her as though she had an illness instead of a broken heart. But once she'd gotten through basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, her whole attitude toward her enlistment had taken on a different meaning. Now, her service as an airman was important to her and was something she was definitely proud of. The past eight years had shaped

and strengthened her. She wanted her mother and the rest of her family to see that she could bear up under any pressure.

“I’ve hardly been living in a coma,” she muttered.

Geraldine rolled her eyes. “Okay, maybe I should have said you’ve been hiding in your job. You loved being on Diego Garcia because the tiny island was totally away from the rest of the world. Away from the rest of us regular folks doing the mundane task of living. I actually think if you’d been given the choice, you would have stayed there forever.”

Her mother’s mistaken assumptions fueled Mercedes’s temper. If she’d wanted to stay, as her mother had so bluntly suggested, she could have reenlisted. More than that, she could have easily continued to make the Air Force her career. But her heart had been crying out to come home. It had been longing for more than simply going through each day carrying out her duties as an airman. She’d thought her mother understood, but apparently she didn’t. Mercedes couldn’t stop herself from raising her voice, “And what the hell do you think I was doing there? Drinking margaritas and strumming a guitar beneath a palm tree?”

Temper sparked in Geraldine’s eyes. “Your job. While conveniently forgetting the rest of your life.”

Mercedes stared at her, aghast that their conversation had escalated into such a verbal war. Over the years, the two of them had argued before, but this time Geraldine’s barbed words stung her worse than ever.

Mercedes was wondering what to say, or if she should even make any sort of retort, when her mother solved the problem by turning and walking out of the room.

Her eyes stinging with tears, Mercedes went over to the closet and pulled out her favorite pair of old cowboy boots. She had to get out of the house. She needed to see the ranch and remember why it had pulled her back to Texas in the first place.

Later that afternoon, Gabe stepped out of the horse barn carrying a saddle on his shoulder when the sound of cantering hoofbeats caught his attention. He looked around to see Mercedes and her mount flying toward the ranch yard. Dust boiled behind the blue roan as she steered him toward a nearby corral, then skidded the animal to a stop a nose-length away from the board fence.

His jaw slack, Gabe watched her leap from the saddle and land on the ground like an agile cat. Coming from a ranching background, he'd expected Mercedes to be able to ride, but not like Annie Oakley! Was there anything the woman couldn't do?

He walked over to one of the wranglers working in the yearling pen. "Hey, James, is that Mouse that Ms. Saddler is riding?" he asked.

The young cowboy glanced up from the rope halter he was trying to untangle and stared across the pen to where Mercedes was now slowly leading the horse around in a large circle.

"Yep, that's him. She took off on him this mornin' sometime before lunch."

Gabe silently cursed. The horse was definitely a beauty, with a blue roan coat and flax mane and tail. Part Thoroughbred, he was long and tall, as well as fast, nervous and totally unpredictable. Mouse still needed hours more training to be trustworthy for any rider, including himself.

“Did you catch him for her?”

“Nope.” Glancing around at Gabe, the cowboy shook his head with a bit of admiration. “She picked him out of the *remuda* we’d rounded up for today’s work and roped him herself.”

Gabe stared at the ranch hand. Plenty of Texas women knew their way around a horse, but not many he knew could handle a rope, especially a loop that was tossed backward to keep the line from tightening and choking the animal. “She roped Mouse?”

“That’s what I said. She threw one of the prettiest houlihans I’d ever seen before. Surprised the heck out of me. I mean, she’s the boss’s daughter, but she looks so delicate. I figured she’d always had her mounts saddled for her. And I dang sure never seen a girl throw a houlihan before. But she did. Then saddled him herself and took off toward the river. After that, I didn’t worry about Mouse being too much horse for her. She handled him better than I could.”

Gabe’s gaze left the cowboy to settle on Mercedes, who was continuing to carefully cool down the horse. Since the moment he’d met her, she’d surprised him, amazed him, even worried him and now he had to admit that she wasn’t the spoiled princess he’d expected her to be. Yet she *was* trouble. He could feel it stirring

in his gut, whispering in his ear.

“I guess I could have tried to stop her from riding Mouse,” James went on. “But she didn’t look like she was in any mood to take advice from me. I warned her that he was high-strung. That’s about all I could do.”

Gabe dropped an understanding hand on James’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it,” he told the cowboy, then walked over to the fence. After he unloaded the saddle on the top rail, he headed straight to Mercedes.

By the time he reached her, she had tied Mouse to a hitching post and was working loose the back cinch from beneath the animal’s underbelly. As Gabe came to a stop a few feet from where she was standing, she tossed him a stoic glance.

“Good evening,” she greeted.

He inclined his head politely toward her. “Evenin’,” he replied as his eyes slid over the curves hidden behind her white shirt and dark blue jeans. It was hard to believe that he’d had that perfect body crushed against his, that he’d tasted the sweet wine of her lips.

Not bothering to say more, she continued to unsaddle the horse. Gabe studied her for long moments and wondered why he couldn’t stay away from her. He didn’t like to think of himself as weak willed, but she definitely made him feel out of control.

After a bit, he stated the obvious. “I see you’ve been riding Mouse.”

“Is that his name?”

“Nickname.”

“Not a very good one,” she said. “Because he’s not afraid of anything.”

Apparently she wasn’t, either, Gabe thought. Stepping closer, he said, “Did he give you any problems?”

She glanced at him as though she found his question surprising. “None at all. He’s a honey horse. I really like him.”

As though to emphasize her words, she stroked the animal’s sweaty neck. As Gabe’s gaze followed the movement of her small hand, he couldn’t help but remember the way it had touched him, the way it had tasted when he’d kissed the back of it.

“Then Mouse must like you better than he likes the cowboys here on the ranch. He’s usually a devil. A few weeks ago, he tossed one of the hands and broke the guy’s collarbone.”

She hefted the saddle from the horse’s back and lifted it onto the top rail of the fence. It wasn’t like Gabe to stand still and allow a woman to do such manual labor, but he instinctively understood that she didn’t want or require his help. She was just the sort of independent woman that enjoyed showing a man she didn’t need him. The same way Sherleen had taken pleasure in reminding him how easily she could get along without him, he thought sourly.

“Mouse knew that I trusted him,” Mercedes said. “And that’s all he needed to trust me back.”

Gabe would have never expected this woman to understand a horse’s psyche. The fact that she did impressed him, in spite

of himself.

Clearing his throat, he said, “Uh, Mercedes, I’m glad I saw you ride up. I think—I want to apologize to you.”

Twisting her head, she peered skeptically at him. “You *think* you want to apologize? Or you *know* that you want to apologize?”

He moved closer, until the scent of horse and woman mingled and swirled beneath his nostrils.

With a rueful grimace, he said, “I want to apologize. I was out of line this morning. I had no right or reason to—uh—grab you the way I did in the office. You were only teasing and I should have took it as such.”

He watched her blue eyes widen with surprise. Her whole body turned to face him.

“Do you really mean that?” she asked softly.

Gabe could feel his heart jerk, then take off in a hard gallop. God, but this was crazy. No woman, including his ex-wife, had ever affected him this much. He’d thought about her all day. All day.

“I really mean it,” he said.

She let out a long breath, smiled briefly, then quickly dropped her head. A few moments passed before Gabe realized she was crying. Seeing her in such a vulnerable state stunned him, tore him like the tip of a lashing whip.

“Mercedes?” he asked softly, then carefully placed a hand on her shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

Blinking back her tears, she lifted her eyes to his face.

“Forgive me, Gabe. I—I don’t normally behave as though I’m having an emotional breakdown.”

His fingers tightened and unconsciously began kneading her shoulder. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. Forget what I said this morning.”

She sucked in a deep breath. “It’s not you. Although I’m glad we’re not at war with each other. It would be pretty awful for the two of us to circle each other like mad dogs every time we crossed paths.”

“Yeah. Someone might have wanted to shoot the both of us,” he teased.

She tried to smile, but fresh tears spilled from her eyes. The urge to pull her into his arms and kiss those tears away rushed over him like a sudden, unexpected rainstorm. The strange reaction dazed him, making him feel worse than gullible. Hell, he’d never felt the urge to console anybody. Except maybe as a very young boy when he’d found his mother crying over the empty cupboards and unpaid bills. Yeah, he’d hugged his mother tightly and told her how much he loved her. *As if love would fix anything*, he thought bitterly. He’d tried to comfort Sherleen when she’d been upset, but she’d never been the tearful sort. She’d been a screamer and his attempts to placate her had been shunned.

Shoving that unwanted thought aside, Gabe watched Mercedes dash the tears away with the back of her hand. “I got into a quarrel of sorts with Mother this morning. I’ve been riding

out over the range this afternoon thinking about her and the ranch and—a lot of things.”

His gaze touched the sweet lines of her face. “Coming home isn’t as easy as it sounds.”

Mercedes realized his simple statement completely summed up the emotional turmoil inside her, and she looked at him with new regard. “Sometimes I think I’ve been gone too long, Gabe. Maybe I’ve forgotten how to be a part of this ranch.”

“You haven’t forgotten.”

His gaze was piercing, unsettling, forcing her to look away from him and swallow.

“Mother expects me to make my home—my life—here now.”

“And what do you want, Mercedes?”

She could feel his fingers cease their movement on her shoulder, as though every part of him was waiting for her answer. Could it really matter to him whether she stayed on the ranch or left for parts unknown?

“I rode Mouse all the way to the river,” she said quietly. “And by the time I got back here to the ranch yard, I realized how much I still love this place.”

“Enough to stay?”

A wry smile touched her lips. She’d already made up her mind that the Sandbur was her home now, but she wasn’t comfortable sharing that information with Gabe just yet. It was hard enough for her to have a simple conversation with him. “You’ll have to ask me that later, Gabe. Right now I’d better go make peace with

my mother.”

She turned to untie the reins from the hitching post, but Gabe’s hand suddenly swept hers away.

“You go find Geraldine. Let me take care of Mouse for you.”

She hesitated, feeling both awkward and touched that he was being so thoughtful. Maybe he had truly put their cross words of this morning behind him. She hoped so. The sexual tension between them was more than enough to handle without adding hostility to it.

“He needs a bath,” she said of the horse.

His grin was droll. “I know how to give him one.”

The playful look on his face filled Mercedes with relief and a lightheartedness she’d not felt in a long, long time.

Laughing, she rose on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on his cheek. “Yes, I guess you do. Thanks, Gabe!”

As she turned and hurried away, Gabe stared after her and, like a fool, wondered how long it would be before he watched her walk away from the Sandbur. From him.

Chapter Four

An hour later, freshly showered and dressed in shorts and a tank top, Mercedes came downstairs to find her mother sitting on the front porch, talking on a cell phone. Near her armchair, on a low wicker table, sat a small pitcher filled with what looked to be margaritas. Next to it was an insulated ice bucket, along with empty glasses.

Mercedes helped herself to one of the drinks, then eased down in a rocker angled to her mother's right. By the time she'd swallowed the first sip of the icy lime and tequila concoction, Geraldine had folded the phone shut and tossed it onto the table.

"That was Mrs. Richman, scolding me for not being present for the library fund-raiser last week," she said. "I was trying to explain that my daughter had just come home from a job that has kept her halfway around the world for two years, but that didn't faze the woman. I guess the five thousand dollars I contributed wasn't enough to suit her."

Geraldine sighed with frustration and Mercedes tossed her an understanding smile.

"Sounds as if things haven't changed a bit around here. Everyone is always wanting more and more from you. If not your money, then your time. I honestly don't know how you do it, Mother."

Geraldine reached up to push a hand through her hair and,

not for the first time since she'd been home, Mercedes noticed that her mother no longer wore the wide gold wedding band on her left hand. Her father had been dead for eleven years and Mercedes was glad to see that her mother had moved on, but it still affected Mercedes to see the empty ring finger. To her, it signified the end of a beautiful union that had produced her and her two siblings. It also said that relationships, even the best of them, sometimes ended in tragedy. Something she was definitely acquainted with.

“You just deal with things one at a time, honey. Otherwise, I would have been be carted off to the psychiatric ward a long time ago.” Turning her head, she leveled a look on Mercedes. “I’m glad to see you’re in a better frame of mind than you were this morning.”

Shamefaced, Mercedes dropped her gaze to the drink in her hand. As she swirled around the milky green liquid, she said, “I want to apologize for my behavior this morning, Mother. I was acting like a shrew—or a spoiled brat—or something that I shouldn’t have been. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Geraldine’s soft laugh drifted on the muggy breeze and Mercedes lifted her head to look at her.

“You never have to ask for my forgiveness, kitten. You know that. Besides, I said some pretty harsh things to you.”

“You were only trying to shake me up,” Mercedes reasoned. The faint grin on Geraldine’s face faded. “Did I succeed?”

Mercedes absently plucked at the hem of her shorts. “Well,

it made me realize how much I love this place and still think of it as home.”

Her mother reached across the space separating their chairs to pat Mercedes’s forearm.

“I always knew that, darling. But it’s very nice to hear you say it.” She studied her daughter’s serious face. “Does this mean you’ve definitely decided to stay on the ranch?”

Mercedes gave her a brief nod. “It does. But only if I can be useful. I’m not a hanger-on, Mother. You know that. I never was, and I don’t intend to start now. I guess—well, I’ve done a lot of growing up since I’ve been away from the ranch and this morning—I’m ashamed that you had to remind me of my responsibility as a Saddler.”

Geraldine’s slender fingers gently rubbed the top of Mercedes’s hand. “Mercedes, if you think I was implying that you’ve neglected your family while you were away—well, I couldn’t be sorrier. I’m proud of all that you’ve accomplished. The whole family is proud of you. I was only—”

“Being your blunt self,” Mercedes said with a soft chuckle. “Forget it, Mother. I have. The only thing I want to hear is what I can do around here to be truly helpful—other than get in Lex’s way,” she added teasingly.

Leaning back in her chair, Geraldine took a long sip of her drink before she gave Mercedes a smug smile. “I have the perfect job for you, dear. We need someone to help with the marketing for the ranch. Cordero used to do some of it, but as you know,

he's over in Louisiana now getting the horse farm going. And Lex doesn't have time for it. Now with us using the Internet and television to reach buyers, it's a huge job to take care of these issues. Matt is already getting ready for the second annual televised cattle auction in September and now he and Lex are making noises about doing another one with the horses. I don't know when they'll find the time, but if you pitch in, maybe they can swing it."

Mercedes's interest was more than piqued and she scooted excitedly to the edge of her seat. "That sounds great, Mother! And I'm surprised. I didn't have any idea the ranch was getting that deeply into advertising and marketing. I thought it was still just ring up a buyer on the phone and they'd show up sooner or later with a few cattle trucks to haul off what they bought."

Geraldine chuckled. "Sorry, Mercedes, but the U.S. military aren't the only ones to use high-tech devices. Your grandparents wouldn't believe how far the Sandbur has come since their heyday."

"Hmm. It sounds interesting and challenging and it's something I would love to do." But would it mean she'd have to deal with Gabe on a fairly regular basis? That might be tricky. Still, she wasn't a coward. If she had to deal with Gabe, she would.

Geraldine's grin was a bit wry. "Well, it wouldn't be like gathering information for the military. But it would be a challenge, I grant you that. Think you want to tackle it?"

Mercedes left her chair and sat on the floor next to her mother's knees. "Of course I want to tackle it." She reached for Geraldine's hands and squeezed them tightly. "And I want to thank you for not trying to manufacture some sort of job for me just as a way to make me feel needed or useful. I—I couldn't stand that."

Geraldine made a noise of disapproval. "Mercedes, you know I'm too direct to try to dance around or spin the issue. Lay things out as they really are—that's the best way to handle a problem."

Her mother's frankness when dealing with people had always been something Mercedes counted on and respected. Sometimes her brutal honesty hurt, but painful or not, it was usually right. Geraldine hadn't been exactly on the mark when she'd accused Mercedes of wanting to stay in Diego Garcia as a way to avoid civilian life, but she'd been right that Mercedes had used her job to help push away personal disappointments.

Sighing, she rested her cheek on her mother's knee and gazed out at the front lawn of the ranch house. For the first time since she'd arrived home, she felt a sense of peace, of belonging.

Was that because of the job her mother had just offered her, a job that would truly be beneficial to the ranch and her family? Or was she feeling this spurt of happiness because of Gabe?

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