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The Sheriff of
Horseshoe, Texas

LINDA WARREN

American Romance

Linda Warren

The Sheriff of Horseshoe, Texas

«HarperCollins»

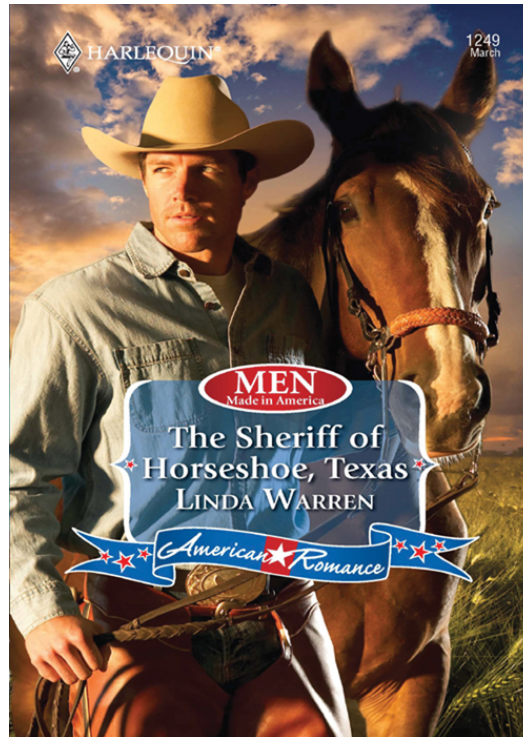
Warren L.

The Sheriff of Horseshoe, Texas / L. Warren — «HarperCollins»,

His friendly, peaceful Texas hometown is the ideal place for Wyatt Carson to raise his young daughter. Until Peyton Ross zooms through Horseshoe and turns his quiet world upside down. Wyatt may think Peyton's just another fun-loving party girl, but she intends to show the straitlaced sheriff what she's really made of. And while she's at it, put some fun back into the widowed lawman's life...With Peyton around, there's never a dull moment. Even Wyatt's eight-year-old is falling under the spell of the irrepressible blonde. But what happens once Peyton leaves his jurisdiction? Is she going to leave his heart in one piece?

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The door opened a crack and she stood there in nothing but a blue towel that made her eyes appear even bluer

Her hair was wet and hung in strands around her face. Soft, silky skin dotted with cream peeped around the towel. Sleepy eyes stared back at him. Raw, primitive and all-male emotions roused his lower abdomen and below.

Wyatt handed her the case. “Here are your things. Your wallet is in the safe at the office. Just thought I’d remove temptation.”

Frowning, Peyton held the towel with one hand while taking the case with the other. Her fingers brushed across his and he felt as if he’d been baptized by fire. Baptized like a teenager who had just been touched by an attractive, sexy woman for the first time.

Dear Reader,

One day my husband and I were returning home and we passed a red convertible sports car pulled over to the side of the road by a highway patrolman. A young blonde was driving, her Hollywood-style sunglasses perched on top of her head. The patrolman’s arm rested on top of the windshield as he leaned in, talking to her. He was smiling. A big this-is-my-lucky-day smile. I told my husband that woman would not be getting a ticket.

From this a story began to emerge about a hard-nosed sheriff, Wyatt Carson, and a feisty socialite, Peyton Ross, who’s never taken responsibility for anything in her life. Not only is Peyton caught speeding, but she offers the sheriff a bribe to let her go. Wyatt is determined to make Peyton pay for her crimes, but she is just as determined to make the high and mighty sheriff regret the day he ever put her in handcuffs.

A small warning—you probably won’t like Peyton when you first meet her, but give her a chance. I promise by the end of the book you will love her. So come along and see who’s the first to bend, the first to have a change of attitude, a change of heart.

I had fun writing this story, and I hope you have as much fun reading it.

With love and thanks,

Linda Warren

P.S. Make my day and let me know (good or bad) what you think of this book. You can e-mail me at Lw1508@aol.com or write me at P.O. Box 5182, Bryan, TX 77805 or visit my Web site at www.lindawarren.net or www.myspace.com/authorlindawarren. Your letters will be answered.

The Sheriff of Horseshoe, Texas

Linda Warren



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Award-winning, bestselling author Linda Warren has written twenty-one books for Harlequin Superromance and Harlequin American Romance. She grew up in the farming and ranching community of Smetana, Texas, the only girl in a family of boys. She loves to write about Texas, and from time to time scenes and characters from her childhood show up in her books. Linda lives in College Station, Texas, not far from her birthplace, with her husband, Billy, and a menagerie of wild animals, from Canada geese to bobcats. Visit her Web site at www.lindawarren.net.

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A big thank-you to Beverly Straub for graciously answering my many questions about fashion and socialites.

And a special thanks to Margie Lawson and her Deep Editing Techniques. I thoroughly enjoyed her workshop and getting to know her. Thank you, Margie, for opening my eyes to the power of words, the power of writing.

Thanks to Dorothy Kissman and Phyllis Fletcher for once again kindly sharing information about their hometown, Austin, Texas.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the community
of Smetana, Texas, where I grew up and learned
about small-town America and bonds and
friendships that last a lifetime.

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Chapter One

Sunday afternoons were made for love.

The scent of lilacs, the taste of strawberry wine and Lori. Sweet Lorelei.

His wife.

A smile tugged at Sheriff Wyatt Carson's mouth. But a second later his daydream was hijacked by the present, and gut-wrenching reality.

Painful memories sliced into his heart. When they were teenagers, Lori would call and say, "It's Sunday afternoon. Where are you?" It had been the same in college. "It's Sunday. I'll meet you in an hour." When they both had gone into law enforcement and worked a beat in Austin, those afternoons had been their special time.

But no more.

His Lori died six years ago.

The weight on his chest pressed down, feeling heavier than a two-thousand-pound bull. No air. No breath. Just pain.

At last he inhaled and he welcomed the rush of air. Yet he cursed it, too. He needed the memories. They kept him going. They kept him strong. Though years had passed, Wyatt still took life one day at a time, but the pain never lessened. It only grew deeper.

Blinking against the bright June sun, he slipped on his sunglasses and strolled to his patrol car at the courthouse. Now his Sunday afternoons were made for fishing—with his eight-year-old daughter, Jody. He'd moved from Austin to his small hometown to raise their child alone, in a safe environment. The way Lori would have wanted.

With a sigh, Wyatt slid into his car. His daughter was waiting.

Backing out, he waved at Delmar Ferguson, who owned the auto-parts store. Delmar was opening up for the afternoon trade.

Horseshoe, Texas, was much the same as it had been when Wyatt was a kid. An old two-story limestone courthouse, yellowing and graying in spots from age, sat in the center of a town square that happened to be in the shape of a horseshoe. Gnarled oaks and blooming red crepe myrtles gave the old structure a touch of beauty.

The weathered brick and mortar storefronts that surrounded the square were still the same, too. Some had been boarded up—the old furniture store, the fabric shop and the Perry Brothers' Five and Dime. The casualties of a changing America.

But new businesses had opened, including Miss Hattie's Tea Room, Flo's Antiques, Betty Jo's Candle Shop and a dollar store. The old Wiznowski family bakery was still on the corner. For five generations it had kept going strong, and probably would for years to come.

Horseshoe was the epitome of small-town America, its citizens upholding strong family values. It was a place where friendly neighbors helped each other. That had been the main reason Wyatt had chosen to come home—to heal while finding a way to live again.

For Jody.

He had to hurry because his daughter was not patient. First he had to go to the bait stand on the highway. As he reached Texas Highway 77, which ran on the outskirts of Horseshoe, a red convertible sports car zoomed by, barely missing Mrs. Harriet Peabody as she crossed the highway from her son's fruit-and-vegetable stand.

Harriet shook her walking cane at the car in vain. Then she saw Wyatt and pointed with her cane in the direction the car had gone.

Wyatt tipped his hat, signaling that he had seen the whole thing. He turned on his siren and roared after the speeder. The first thing he noticed was the blond hair whipping in the wind. The next thing was the woman's failure to respond to the siren. She kept going—faster.

He clocked her going eighty-five in a seventy; through the business area the limit was fifty-five. This lady was in a big hurry. Wyatt stayed on her tail and she still made no move to stop as the siren wailed through the lazy afternoon.

Texas 77 was only two lanes, so he couldn't go around her because cars were coming from the other direction. They were about to reach the county line, so he picked up his radio to alert the highway patrol. Someone had to stop the woman before she caused an accident.

Just then an eighteen-wheeler appeared ahead of them and she had to slow down. Wyatt put down the radio as he waited for oncoming traffic to pass, and then darted into the left lane before she could. He motioned for her to pull over.

Behind her large sunglasses, he couldn't see her eyes, but her pink lips formed an angry pout. Again, she made no effort to stop. He motioned again, this time more forcefully, and he wondered if she was on drugs and not comprehending what was going on around her. No one was that arrogant or stupid to openly defy an officer of the law.

The driver of the eighteen-wheeler slowed to a crawl and the woman finally pulled onto the grassy verge, as did the big truck. Wyatt was relieved. She was boxed in and couldn't speed away once he stepped out of his car.

He turned off the siren, but left his lights blinking to alert traffic to slow down. He made a quick call to his office and asked his deputy, Stuart, to run a check on the license-plate number. Since the woman wouldn't stop, Wyatt thought the car might be stolen.

He retrieved his ticket book from the glove compartment and climbed out of the patrol car. With quick strides, he approached her, his jaw clenched. He was pissed at her disrespect of the law. He was pissed at her disregard for the safety of others. And he was pissed that his Sunday afternoon had been interrupted.

Wyatt removed his sunglasses and hooked them on his shirt pocket. When he reached her car, he stuck his hand in, turned off the engine and removed the keys, shoving them into the pocket of his khaki slacks. Then he motioned for the driver of the truck to move on.

The driver waved out the window and slowly pulled onto the highway in a gust of diesel fumes. Cars whizzed by, occupants rubbernecking for a better view.

The woman removed an earbud from her ear and pushed her glasses to the top of her head. She glared at him. Her icy-blue eyes were clear, so she wasn't on drugs—he knew the drugged look. They were also red and swollen, as if she'd been crying. That wasn't going to sway him. Speeding wasn't allowed in his county—ever. He had his own personal views about speeders, although he tried not to let them cloud his judgment.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” she asked with a get-out-of-my-face attitude. “Give me back my keys.”

“May I see your license and registration, please?”

“What for?” She flipped back her long, tangled hair.

“You were well over the speed limit, in a business area, too, and you made no effort to stop when you heard the siren.”

“Business?” She glanced around at the fields of corn growing on both sides of the highway. “What business?”

He hitched a thumb over his shoulder. “Horseshoe, Texas. You passed the outskirts of town, doing eighty-five, barely missing Mrs. Peabody.”

“I didn't see any town or whoever you're talking about.”

“Your license and insurance, please.” He'd had enough of her attitude.

Jody was waiting.

Tiny lines appeared on her smooth forehead, but she flung a hand to the passenger seat and grabbed a dark tan purse trimmed in red with F's imprinted all over it. Digging through its contents, she found her wallet. It was identical to the purse. Very expensive was his next thought.

Handing it to him, she said, "I'm not taking it out. It was too hard to get into the little slot."

His jaw clenched tighter and he made no move to take the wallet. This lady had a double dose of arrogance. "Remove it, please."

Her eyes narrowed to blue slits as if she was debating the request. Heaving a breath, she struggled with the wallet until the license came out. He noted how careful she was not to break a long, faintly pink fingernail.

He took the license from her, studying the name. Peyton Laine Ross from Austin, Texas. Twenty-eight years old. Old enough to know better. "Your insurance, please."

"Officer." She shifted to face him fully, her eyes twinkling with a light he understood well. She was going to try to soften him up by using every feminine wile in her repertoire.

"Sheriff," he corrected her.

"Sheriff" rolled off her tongue like a sweet-cherry lollipop. He could almost taste it, exactly what she'd intended. "I really don't know anything about the car's registration or insurance. My mother takes care of all that. The car is mine and it's insured, if that's what you're worried about." Beneath her lashes, her eyes cast a warm glow that would have weakened most men, but not him.

"Why don't you try the glove compartment?" he suggested, wanting to get this over with so he could be on his way.

"I'm really in a hurry."

"So am I."

She eyed him for a moment and then slid her tongue over her lower lip in a slow, provocative gesture, turning up the glow in her eyes to the sucker level on her male-radar screen.

"I have to get to Dallas as soon as possible." Her gaze moved slowly across his shoulders and chest. "You're a big, strong man and I know you understand."

"Insurance, please," was his response.

The glow dimmed.

Suddenly she flipped back her hair again and looked down at the wallet in her lap. She pulled out a hundred-dollar bill and waved it at him. "Will this make the problem go away? I didn't see your little stop in the road or hear your siren. I was listening to Bon Jovi. You understand, don't you?"

Shock seared whatever patience he had. A frown worked its way across his face. "Are you bribing me?"

She batted her eyes. "Of course not. It's a compromise. You take the money and I'll be on my way. That will make us both happy."

Damn woman! Why did she have to make this so difficult? His Sunday afternoon was now shot to hell. This lady had one heck of a surprise coming her way. He took the money, stuffed it into his shirt pocket and opened her car door. "Get out of the vehicle, please."

"What?" Her voice screeched like a petulant child's. "You took my money."

"For evidence. You're under arrest for speeding and trying to bribe an officer of the law. Now get out of the car."

"You can't do this." She spat the words, her face set. And she didn't budge.

"Get out of the car." His voice matched his mood. Determined. Angry. And slam-damn out of patience.

Her expression locked in petulant mode, she slid out.

She was pretty, very pretty. As his dad would say, she was put together on a Sunday morning when God was in a good mood and the angels were singing in the background. A natural beauty, for sure—one that was enhanced by high maintenance. Big city, class and style flitted across his mind. Her slim, yet curvy body came up to his shoulders. He wasn't sure why he was noticing those things. She was just another woman, and a very arrogant one at that.

Then he became aware of what she was wearing—a silky silver creation that looked like a bridesmaid's dress. Evidently she was headed to a wedding. He purposely avoided looking at the

tempting cleavage peeping above the bodice. The hem of the dress fluttered around her ankles. Jody would call it a frou-frou dress.

She stomped her foot. “Do you know who my mother is?”

Her defiant words poked through his thoughts. “No. Can’t say that I do.”

“She works for the governor of Texas and she’ll have your badge for this.”

He met her eyes. Five minutes ago, he was inclined to be lenient. Now he didn’t want to hear her excuses. “You have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law. You have the right—”

“You bastard.” The heat of her words stained her cheeks and tightened her perfect features.

He spared her a brief glance and continued her Miranda rights. When he finished, he asked, “Do you understand your rights?”

“Do you understand my mother will have your job?” she fired back.

He swallowed a curse word and tucked his ticket book under one arm. With a gentle nudge, he pointed her toward his squad car.

“What are you doing?” She stumbled trying to see his face.

He pulled his hat lower and opened the door to the back seat. “Get in.”

“I will not.” Her eyes flashed a warning. “Just write me a ticket and I’ll be on my way.”

The roar of the traffic was deafening, but he heard every word. “I might have been prepared to do that if you hadn’t tried to bribe me. That’s a serious offense and I don’t take it lightly. Now get in the car.”

The hot Texas sun caused suffocating waves of heat to roll from the asphalt, yet they stood there eyeing each other like two foes ready to do battle. He’d made up his mind. He wasn’t going to relent. This woman needed a dose of reality.

She stuck out her chin. “I have a right to call my mother, you big, overbearing oaf.”

“When we get to the jail, you may call whomever you wish, but not out here.” Cars continued to whiz by, the exhaust fumes mixed with the heat billowing around them.

“Jail!” The color drained from her face and he saw the first flicker of fear on her face. But it was only fleeting. Anger quickly overshadowed it. “I’m not getting in that car!”

From years of experience, he knew there was only one way to deal with people like Peyton Ross—show her he meant business. He unhooked the handcuffs from his belt.

“You’re not...” She took a step backward.

He reached for her hand and snapped a cuff on her delicate wrist. Her skin was soft and satiny. He hadn’t touched skin like that in a long time. Quickly he dismissed the sensation. He was an expert at masking his emotions. “Yes. I’m cuffing you.”

Before she could react, both wrists were in the cuffs. “As the saying goes, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. Evidently you prefer the hard way.” Taking her arm, he angled her toward the open door.

Eyes blazing, she jerked away from him. “Don’t touch me, you bastard. You lowlife country bumpkin. You’ll pay for this.” Even as she blasted him in a voice hot enough to boil water, she lifted her skirt, revealing slim ankles in high heels, and slid into the car.

He slammed the door on her diatribe, threw his book onto his seat and walked back to her vehicle, where he gathered her purse and iPod, as well as a small overnight bag from the floor.

The interior of the car was white leather, and a delicate scent of gardenias reached his nostrils. Gardenias? Not a scent he would associate with the fiery hellcat. Something more exotic came to mind, like Opium or Chanel.

Now why would he think that? He wasn’t personally interested in the woman.

He searched the vehicle and didn’t find any other valuables, so he headed to his car. He slid into the driver’s seat, placing her things on the passenger’s side.

“You can’t leave my car out here,” she told him through the steel-mesh guard that separated the back seat from the front.

“I don’t plan to,” he replied, picking up his cell and punching out a number. “Bubba, there’s a red Lexus coupe on the northeast highway. Please pick it up—we’re impounding it.”

“Damn, that’s an expensive car. Did you catch a drug dealer?” Bubba asked with his usual overactive curiosity.

Wyatt sighed. “Just take care of the car. I’ll get with you later.”

“Sure thing, Sheriff.”

Bubba was one of the Wiznowski family, and he owned a gas station and wrecker service in Horseshoe. Bubba had tried several times to become a deputy, but he never passed the physical because his six-foot-four-inch body weighed more than three hundred pounds. He spent too much time at his grandmother’s bakery. But he did help out when Wyatt needed someone to watch the office.

Silence filled the cab, and that was fine with Wyatt. He’d had all of her mouth he wanted. Placing his glasses on the dash, he glanced at his watch. He was late. Jody would be calling. Damn, damn!

Damn Peyton Ross for ruining his Sunday.

Chapter Two

Wyatt's office and the jail were next to the courthouse. A covered walkway connected the two buildings, which had been built in the late 1800s. While there had been updates, basically the two structures stood as they had for years.

He parked the car and got out to open the back door. For a moment he thought Ms. Ross wasn't going to budge. Then without a word, she scooted out and he guided her into his office. The fight seemed to have gone out of her. He hoped that meant she realized the seriousness of her situation.

They went through the room and down the hall to the jail. The tap-tap of her high heels on the concrete floor echoed through the quiet space. After removing the cuffs, he opened the cell door and she walked in, the soft rustle of her gown annoying him for some reason. As the steel bars clanged shut, she jumped, and her eyes brimmed with fire.

"You bastard. My mother will have your hide."

"So you keep telling me."

Her cheeks reddened. "I want my phone."

"Hey, fancy lady," Zeke called from the next cell, his bearded face pressed between the bars to get a closer look. "Ya got a fella?"

"Cool it, Zeke," Wyatt said. "And leave the woman alone. She's not interested in you or marriage."

Zeke was in for "drunk and disorderly". He lived alone in the woods along the Brazos River. Every now and then, he came into town, looking for a wife. Zeke wasn't known for his bathing habits and he probably didn't even own a toothbrush. When women saw him, they ran the other way. Then Zeke would drink and become violent, accosting women, and Wyatt always had to lock him up to give the people of Horseshoe some peace.

The Wilson brothers were in the next cell, and they were a rough lot. The two families with eight kids lived in a three-bedroom trailer deep in the woods. Honest work wasn't for them. They'd run a chop shop until Wyatt closed it down, and now they were into growing and selling marijuana. Wyatt had a feeling the judge was going to throw the book at them this time.

"Wyatt, that's not fair," Leonard complained. "We can't see her."

"Yeah, Sheriff, that's discriminatin' or somethin'." Leroy had to make his views known.

"I'll inform your wives of your complaints when they come to make your bail."

"Ah, c'mon, Sheriff. You know Velma's as mean as a wasp."

"Maybe you should remember that, Leroy, before you go gawking at other women," Wyatt replied. "Now settle down." He walked out before he lost all his patience.

Stuart stared at him, bug-eyed. "Sheriff—" he nodded toward the cell "—that's a woman."

"Notice that, did you?" Wyatt sat at his desk, trying to ignore the astonishment on Stuart's face.

"But we don't have facilities for women."

"We do now." He reached for a pen. "What did you find out about the license number?"

"It's on your desk." Stuart pointed to the papers. "I was going to call, but I heard you drive up."

Wyatt scanned the information. The car was registered to Peyton Laine Ross from Austin, Texas. It wasn't stolen and Ms. Ross had no outstanding tickets, warrants or prior convictions. So what had happened today to make Ms. Ross break the law?

Stuart jerked his thumb toward the cell. "Is that Peyton Ross?" His voice was a whisper, as if he didn't want anyone to hear him.

"Yes."

"What did she do?"

As Wyatt filled out the paperwork, he told his deputy what had happened on the highway.

"She tried to bribe you?" Stuart's eyes opened even wider.

“That’s about it.” Wyatt pulled the hundred-dollar bill from his pocket.

“Gosh darn, that’s a lot of money. The last time I saw one of those was when I graduated from high school. My grandpa gave it to me.”

As Wyatt fingered the bill, a slight whiff of gardenias lingered. With a frown, he handed the bill to Stu. “Label it for evidence. The judge will be back from his vacation on Wednesday to decide her fate. In the meantime, I’ll set her bail.”

Since the population of Horseshoe was under two thousand, Wyatt took over setting bail when the judge was out of town.

Stuart slanted his head toward the jail. “But, Sheriff, we have some rough characters back there.”

“I know.” He studied his pen. He didn’t feel right leaving Peyton Ross locked up with Zeke and the Wilson brothers, but what was he to do? She’d broken the law and he couldn’t cut her any slack just because she was a woman. But he needed to do something.

“Get some blankets and see if you can hang them from the bars to give her some privacy. That will keep the guys from gawking at her. But first, please get her case and purse out of my car.” Wyatt leaned back and reached into his pocket for his keys, pulling out Ms. Ross’s keys, too. He threw the squad car keys to Stuart.

Stuart deftly caught them and glanced over his shoulder. “She sure is a looker, isn’t she?” The deputy, like Bubba, had an avid curiosity, and Wyatt wasn’t going to stoke it.

He laid Ms. Ross’s keys aside and continued to fill out the papers.

There was a slight pause, then Stuart asked, “What’s she wearing? It looks like a ball gown or something.”

“Get the items out of my car, please,” Wyatt repeated without looking up.

Stuart was Horseshoe-born and raised, just like Wyatt. At five foot ten, Stuart was thin and wiry and strong, thanks to his workouts every morning at the school gym. He took his job seriously, but he tended to be a gossip and Wyatt tried to discourage that every way he could. In a small town, it was typical, though. There were very few secrets.

Stuart charged toward the front door and soon returned with Ms. Ross’s things. He stood there, fidgeting.

“Blankets, Stu,” Wyatt prompted.

“Oh, sure.” The deputy hurried to the back room.

Wyatt opened Ms. Ross’s case to make sure she didn’t have a weapon. Silky, feminine things beckoned. A daring, tantalizing scent filled his nostrils and he wanted to slam the case shut. It reminded him of Lori. Not the scent, but the clothes. Undergarments that he’d enjoyed removing... He closed his eyes tight to block the memory.

It didn’t help. Lori’s memory was in his heart. And it ached. Ached for her. Ached for them.

Quickly he searched Ms. Ross’s bag and wondered why the woman needed so many cosmetics. Finally, satisfied, he picked up her things and walked to her cell. The other prisoners were lying on their cots. Using his key, he opened the steel bars and stepped in.

She sat on the edge of a cot, her face flushed, her eyes mutinous.

He placed her case and purse beside her. “You can use your cell phone to call whomever you wish. Or you can use our phone.”

“Am I supposed to say thank you?”

His eyes caught the blue fire of hers. “An ‘I’m sorry’ would be nice.”

“For what?”

“Do you not comprehend what happened this afternoon?”

She folded her arms across her breasts. “I’m sure you’re going to enlighten me.”

He sucked in a breath. “For the record, you were speeding and almost struck a pedestrian. You did not acknowledge the siren or stop when I motioned you over. And you tried to bribe a sheriff.

We may be country bumpkins around here, but most of us know how to obey the law. Most of us respect it, too.”

She bent her head and was silent. That shocked him. He expected fireworks. Her demeanor prompted him to ask, “Do you want to tell me why you did those things?”

Her head shot up, her features a mask of seething fury. “Go to hell.”

Now he had the fireworks. This lady did not want help. At least he’d tried. “My deputy is going to put up some blankets so you can have some privacy, in case you want to change your clothes. When you need to use the bathroom, a deputy will escort you to the one down the hall. The judge will be here on Wednesday for your hearing. I’ve set your bail.”

“Wednesday!” Alarm bracketed her eyes. Finally he was getting through to her.

Before he realized it, she’d leaped from the cot and grabbed his arm. “Wednesday! You have to be kidding! You can’t leave me in this hellhole until then. That’s insane. You’re insane!”

Her fingers pressed into his skin and a forgotten longing shot up his arm and through his system. He had to get away from her.

“You bastard. You country-bumpkin bastard. You’ll pay for this. You’ll—”

He opened the cell door, stepped out and slammed it shut, the sound resonating in the confines of the concrete walls like a gunshot. He felt a moment of remorse at the terror in her eyes, a terror shrouded in anger and fear. But he’d tried to talk to her and it hadn’t worked.

She’d broken the law. Now she had to pay.

PEYTON GRABBED her phone and punched her brother’s number. She’d show the high-and-mighty sheriff. He’d regret the day he ever put her in handcuffs.

The weird guy in the cell across the aisle leered at her, his face pressed between the bars. A cold chill scooted across her skin. He reminded her of a bum searching through trash cans on skid road. He licked his lips with a smacking sound. Good grief. She turned away, willing Quinn to pick up.

Pick up, pick up, she silently chanted.

Finally she heard his voice. “Where the hell are you?”

Evidently he’d seen her name on his caller ID. “I need your help.”

“You’re calling the wrong person, Peyton. Since you skipped out on Mom’s wedding, I’m not doing anything for you. Mom was terribly worried and blaming herself for your selfish behavior.”

A twinge of hope pierced her chest. “She didn’t marry him?”

“Oh, so that’s what this little ploy was all about.” She could almost see him nodding his head, the way he did in the courtroom. He was a brilliant defense attorney, and if anyone could get her out of this mess, he could. “You thought Mom would be so distraught over your disappearance that she’d cancel the wedding?”

She took a deep breath. “Quinn, I really tried, but I couldn’t watch her marry another man.”

“Mom has a right to a life. Dad’s been dead five years and it’s time for us all to move on, especially you.”

Peyton bit her lip. Quinn didn’t understand. No one did. Her father had been her hero, her best friend, and losing him had shattered everything she’d believed about love and life. She didn’t understand how Quinn and her mother could move on so easily.

But she did need to apologize to her mother. “I’d like to talk to Mom.”

“No can do.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not letting you upset her, Peyton. She’s happy and getting ready to go on her honeymoon. I will tell her you’re fine, so she won’t worry. And do not, I repeat, do not call her on her cell. Let her be happy.”

Peyton started to argue like she usually would, but she turned and saw that guy leering at her again. It brought her dire situation to the smack-dab middle of her messed-up life. She had to get out of here.

“Quinn, I need your help.”

“You said that before. What’s going on?”

“I’m...I’m in jail.” Remembering how she’d gotten here warmed her cheeks again. Damn that straitlaced sheriff.

“For what?”

“Speeding.”

Her brother sighed. “Peyton, they don’t lock people up for speeding.”

“Well...” She squeezed her eyes closed, hating to admit the next part and not sure how to explain it to her brother. But Quinn knew her better than anyone.

“You know I’ve been upset since Mom started dating Garland Wingate six months ago,” she said.

“That’s no big secret.”

“I couldn’t believe she was serious.” Peyton’s voice wavered and she hoped Quinn understood she didn’t mean to hurt her mother.

“How many times did I tell you she was?”

“I know. I was in denial. No one can take Dad’s place. No one.”

“Then, damn it, why did you agree to be a part of the wedding?”

“I didn’t want to lose my mother but...but I couldn’t go through with it. I sat in my bedroom, decked out in my bridesmaid dress, staring at Dad’s picture. In that moment I knew I couldn’t be a part of the wedding. It would be a dishonor to him, so I bolted for the garage, fresh air and freedom.”

“Very mature, Peyton.”

“I had planned to call Mom.”

“Why didn’t you?”

She winced, knowing what she had to say was going to sound awful. She said it, anyway. “I called Giselle, instead, and she said the sorority sisters were having a big party in Dallas and what I needed was some fun, liquor and sexy guys. It sounded good to me at the time. That way I could forget what Mom was doing.”

“Again, a very mature move.”

“Stop being so sarcastic.” She took a quick breath. “It wasn’t easy. As I drove, the tears started and I couldn’t seem to stop them. I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I couldn’t stop that, either. So I put an earbud in my ear to tune out my conscience.”

“I almost feel sorry for you.”

“Please, Quinn.”

“So what happened?”

She rolled the scene around in her head, searching for the right words. The sheriff of this stop-in-the-road town certainly wasn’t in her plans. She honestly hadn’t heard the siren and when he’d motioned her over, she thought he was after the truck and wanted her out of the way. She’d never realized she was driving so fast, and then his big bad attitude had rubbed her the wrong way.

“Peyton, are you there?”

“Yes,” she mumbled, not believing she’d been so stupid.

“What did you do?”

She dredged up her last morsel of courage. “I tried to give the cop, sheriff or whatever he is, money to let me go.”

“You did what?” Astonishment shot through the phone. She could almost hear the reprimand that was about to erupt.

“Why the hell would you do that?”

“Giselle told me she never gets tickets because she flirts with the cop and shows some cleavage. If that failed, then money always did the trick. Cops barely make minimum wage and need extra cash.”

Oh, why had she even thought of Giselle’s ploys? The sheriff hadn’t even noticed her cleavage. And the sheriff of Nowhere, Texas, turned out to be honest.

“And you listened to that airhead? She’s always getting you in trouble.”

“Stop being so judgmental and get me out of here.”

“Where are you?”

“I don’t know, somewhere between Austin and Dallas.” What had that snotty sheriff called it?

“I need a name, Peyton.” His astonishment turned to irritation. “Weren’t you paying attention? Or do you even care? You just expect me to drop everything and figure out where you are and solve your little problem. Typical Peyton.”

He made her sound selfish and spoiled. Someday soon she might have to admit the truth of that, but not now. “Horse something. Yes, that’s it.”

There was a long pause on the line. “You know what, Peyton, why don’t you get comfy? After what you did to Mom, I’m not running to your rescue. It’s time for you to grow up and start thinking about someone besides yourself for a change. Give me a call when that happens. And you might check out the name of the town in the process.”

“You wouldn’t dare—”

The sudden dead silence on the line told her he would. She had the urge to throw the phone. With restraint, she sank onto the lumpy cot and slowly started to count.

One. Quinn would come.

Two. Quinn wouldn’t leave her in this backwater town, whatever it was called.

Three. She slammed the phone onto the cot.

Pride wouldn’t let her ask the sheriff the name of the town. From her position, she had a very narrow view of the sparse office, but she could see him sitting at his desk writing something. He’d removed his Stetson hat. A wayward lock of dark hair had fallen across his forehead. His khaki shirt stretched across broad shoulders. The sun coming through a window caught his badge and it winked at her like a caution light.

She noticed all that a little too late. He was a no-nonsense, straightforward lawman, a mix between Clint Eastwood and Jimmy Stewart. Some women might find that attractive, but she found him a bore and a bully.

As she scooted back to sit on the bottom of the bunk beds, she wondered if the sheet was clean. The steel bed had a lumpy mattress, pillow and a dirty brown blanket. A roach skittered across the grimy concrete floor. She jerked up her legs, shuddering. She had to get out of here. Fast.

She’d show that cocky sheriff.

He wasn’t keeping her a prisoner.

Quinn would come. He always did.

Chapter Three

Wyatt wasn't sure what to do with Ms. Ross. She'd made her phone call, so why wasn't someone calling to arrange her bail? His plans were to release her if she promised to return on Wednesday for the hearing. But so far he'd heard nothing from her family.

And it was getting late. He had to call Jody.

Before he could punch out the number, his daughter bounded in with Dolittle, her yellow Lab, trotting behind her. She was dressed in her customary jeans, sneakers and a T-shirt, her short blond hair clinging to her head like a frilly cap. She looked so much like Lori that it squeezed another drop of sadness from his heart. Her eyes were like his, though, dark brown with flecks of green.

"Hey, Daddy, what's taking so long?" She rested her elbows on his desk and cupped her face, those big eyes sparkling like the rarest of gems. He'd never thought it possible to love someone so much, so deeply, but he did—the same way he had loved her mother. There was nothing on this earth he wouldn't do for his daughter. He'd give his life for her in a heartbeat. She was everything to him and would be until the day he died.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "I have a situation here at the jail." Glancing outside, he saw her bicycle. "Does Grandma know where you are?" Usually his mother called when Jody was on her way to his office.

Jody shrugged. "Grandma doesn't know where I'm at half the time."

"Really?" He leaned back in his chair.

"Shoot." Jody snapped her fingers. "Ramrod says I'm the sharpest knife in the drawer and sometimes I cut my own self."

Everyone in town knew Jody and she wasn't in any danger. But it was against the rules for Jody to leave the house without permission. His daughter spent too much time at the local barbershop owned by Virgil and Ramrod Crebbs. They were old cowboys who had grown tired of the long hours in the saddle and had moved to town. They opened the one and only barbershop. Jody loved to hear their tales and she'd picked up their lingo.

Disciplining his daughter was hard. She had him wrapped so tight around her little finger that he let her get away with just about everything. He had to be stronger where Jody was concerned.

How many times had he told himself that? Just last week he had been called to the school because Jody had punched a boy in her class. The boy had told her she was a pretty girl. Apparently, those were fighting words. Jody was a tomboy and refused to admit she was a girl. Although the two of them had talked about this often Jody stuck to her stance that she was just Jody, not a girl.

He sucked in the fatherhood department.

Jody was a loner and that bothered him. She didn't have friends her own age—all her friends were adults. He had to address that problem soon, too.

Dolittle came around the desk and nuzzled Wyatt's leg. Wyatt scratched the dog's head. "So you left the house without telling Grandma?"

"Well, Daddy, it was like this." Her brown eyes grew serious and he just wanted to kiss her sweet, pixie face. "Grandma was having her Sunday poker game and she was telling Gladys that she needed to get her cataracts removed because she couldn't see squat. You know how Gladys hates it when Grandma tells her what to do. They were having a loud argument about mind-your-own business types of things when I shouted that I was going to see what was keeping you so long."

"I see." Wyatt realized he had no control over any of the women in his life. His mother played the organ in church on Sunday mornings and then played poker with her friends in the afternoon.

Gambling was illegal in Texas, so he'd told them they couldn't play for money. But the winner bowled free on Tuesdays and also got a free lunch; the others paid, at least that was what his mother

told him. Half the time he didn't know what the ladies were up to, and most of the time he'd rather not know. He'd prefer not to have to lock up his own mother.

Trying to look as stern as possible, he pointed a finger at Jody. "Next time, make sure Grandma hears you."

At the firmness of Wyatt's voice, Dolittle became rigid, on guard. They'd had him since he was a pup, and they realized early that the dog was lazy and did very little, hence the name. But he was protective of Jody and he'd fight a lion for her.

Wyatt rubbed the dog's head, letting him know that no one was hurting Jody.

"Sure. No problem," Jody replied. "Are you ready to go now? Virgil says the catfish are biting today. He says he caught one this big." She stretched out her arms as far as she could.

"Virgil tells a lot of fish stories."

"Uh-uh, Daddy." Jody shook her head vigorously. "Virgil doesn't lie."

Stuart came out of the back room with an armload of blankets. Jody ran to him. "Whatcha doing, Stuart? It's too hot for blankets."

Stuart leaned down and whispered, "We have a female prisoner and I'm fixing her some privacy."

"Oh." Before Wyatt could stop her, Jody darted down the hall to the jail. He was instantly on his feet. But Dolittle was in the way and he almost tripped over him.

Jody stared through the bars at Ms. Ross. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"Stop gawking, little girl," the woman said. "This isn't a sideshow."

Jody's face puckered into a frown. "I'm not a girl. I'm Jody."

"You look like a girl to me."

"You're a girl," Jody said.

"Well, Jody-with-a-gender-issue, go away and leave me the hell alone."

Jody put a hand over her mouth. "Oh, you said a bad word."

"Like I care. Go away, brat."

Jody placed her hands on her hips. "You're not nice and I hope my daddy lets you rot in here."

"Do you not understand the meaning of 'go away'?"

Jody stuck out her tongue. Wyatt pulled her away and led her back into the office. "You know you're not supposed to speak to the prisoners."

"What did she do, Daddy?" Jody pulled free of his hold and looked up into his face.

Wyatt didn't plan on answering that question. Jody didn't need to know. He glanced at the clock. Almost four. Time to get in a little fishing.

"Stuart, my daughter and I are going fishing."

"Yay!" Jody jumped up and down.

"If anyone calls about Ms. Ross, call me on my cell and I'll come back and sort it out."

"You gonna leave me here with her?" Stuart's left eye twitched, which always happened when he was nervous.

Wyatt reached for his hat. "Is that a problem?"

"No...well..." Stuart held his hand over his mouth so Jody couldn't hear. "What if she attacks me when I hang the blankets? I don't want to hit a woman."

Wyatt glanced at his watch. "Lamar's shift starts at five so wait until then. Surely the two of you can handle one woman."

Stuart nodded his head. "Yes, sir."

Wyatt pointed to the bail book. "Leroy's and Leonard's wives are coming in with bail money, so let them go then."

"Sure thing, Sheriff." Stuart winked at Jody. "Catch a big one, little bit." Everyone in town called Jody that.

Wyatt shook his head as he walked out the door. One feisty blonde had his office turned upside down.

Hopefully her powerful mother would show up soon with a lawyer and Ms. Ross would be out of his hair.

For good.

FOR THE FIRST TIME in years, Wyatt wasn't enjoying the fishing. He kept wondering what was going on at the office. And he wondered about Peyton Ross. Why was she so defiant and angry? She seemed to have class and beauty, but on the inside she was like rebellious teenager determined to prove something. He wondered what.

At dusk he drove Jody home and went to check on things at the jail. Jody wanted to go with him, but he wouldn't let her. She spent too much time there, too. Soon he'd have to set rules for his child—and enforce them—or she was going to be the wildest kid in Horseshoe.

Lamar was at the desk when he went in. He immediately jumped to his feet. In his early twenties, Lamar was somewhat overeager. He always tried to please and at times it could be a little tiring. But Lamar was dedicated to his job, and Wyatt trusted him completely.

"How's it going?" Wyatt asked, sinking into his chair.

"Okay, I guess. Leroy and Leonard are gone. Zeke is a pain as usual, demanding to be released."

"And Ms. Ross?"

Lamar scratched his head. "She refused supper. Said she doesn't eat garbage. She had a few choice words to say about you, too. That woman has a bad attitude, but she's real easy on the eyes."

Wyatt ignored that. "Has anyone called about her?"

"Not a soul."

Damn. Where was this powerful mother? He got up and made his way to her cell. Blankets were hung haphazardly from the bars, but none over the door. He could see inside. She sat on the bottom bunk in pink capris, a sparkly tank top and sandals. She'd changed her clothes, but the expression on her face was the same—rebellious.

"Would you like to try your mother again? We haven't heard from anyone." He was as cordial as he knew how to be, just as his parents had taught him.

"Don't worry, you will," she replied with a lift of a finely arched brow. "And you can kiss that shiny badge on your chest goodbye. My mother will have you for breakfast."

He rubbed his jaw, feeling a five-o'clock shadow. Again he wondered what had happened to make her so bitter. "Have you ever heard that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar?"

"Sorry, I'm not up on your little country sayings, but you might try catching some of these roaches in here. I'm sure locking me up in such a dump is breaking several laws, not to mention some health violations."

His cordial attitude went south. Wyatt tipped his hat. "Good night, Ms. Ross."

"Go to hell," she shot back.

THE NIGHT WORE ON and Peyton kept glancing at her watch. Quinn will come. Quinn will come. By ten o'clock she knew he wasn't coming. A tear rolled down her cheek and she quickly slapped it away. She wouldn't cry. That Mayberry sheriff would not make her cry.

The tiny lightbulb cast depressing shadows in the cell. This couldn't be happening to her. She'd planned to drink and party with her sorority sisters until she could no longer see her beautiful mother with that man. Oh, how could she marry Garland Wingate!

He was so different from her scholarly, gentle father. Garland owned an oil company and wore cowboy boots. So uncouth. Much like the sheriff of this one-horse town.

What was she going to do? Quinn would probably let her stew overnight and be here in the morning. But what if he didn't? He was angry with her and had a right to be. She needed to talk to her mother and apologize. Then this terrible nightmare would end.

She still had her phone. The sheriff had forgotten to retrieve it. Ignoring her brother's warning, she punched in her mother's number. It rang once and went to voice mail. Of course. Her mother was on her honeymoon.

Anger flashed through Peyton and she fought it. There was nothing she could do now. Her mother had married Garland. She started to leave a message, but what would she say? How could she excuse her behavior? She couldn't even explain it to herself.

Good manners. Good behavior. She'd left those behind the moment she'd decided to run.

Slowly she placed the phone on the cot and glanced around at her dismal surroundings. Ohmygod! She was in jail—locked up. It suddenly hit her like a slap in the face and it stung. She had to find a way out of here. She wasn't a criminal.

"Hey, fancy lady, ya sleep?" the man named Zeke called.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"Ya got a fella?"

Could she be in any more of a backwater? "Shut up."

"I got a place on the river, even got runnin' water."

Was this idiot for real?

"I wanna marry up and I'd be good to ya, might even put in a bathroom for ya. Whaddaya say, fancy lady?"

"The only thing I want is to get out of this jail."

"I git ya outta here."

That caught her attention. "How?" She immediately wanted to snatch the word back. Had she completely lost her mind?

"I got ways."

"Just leave me alone, okay?" The last thing she wanted was to get involved with this crazy person. She felt something touch her ankle and she jumped, tucking her feet beneath her on the cot. It was probably a roach. Her skin crawled with revulsion. How was she going to survive this night?

"Hey, Lamar," Zeke shouted. "I feel sick."

"Go to sleep, Zeke," The deputy shouted back.

"I'm gonna throw up. The food must a been bad."

"You're trying my patience tonight."

Loud thuds echoed on the concrete. The deputy was coming to the cell.

She got to her feet and peered out to see what was going on. She had a feeling the man wasn't sick. What was he up to?

"I got a fever, too. Feel me."

The deputy stuck in his hand to touch Zeke's forehead. As he did, Zeke's thick arm snapped out and grabbed the deputy around the neck, yanking him up against the bars. The deputy jerked, coughed, sputtered and slid to the floor in a crumpled heap.

Ohmigod! What did the man do? Peyton wondered if Lamar was alive. He was so still. She swallowed back a scream.

Zeke crouched down and through the bars reached for the keys on the deputy's belt. A sly smile crossed his bearded face as he withdrew them. Then he reached for the gun and stuffed it into the waistband of his worn, dirty jeans. Quickly he inserted the key into the lock and opened the door.

He stepped over the deputy's body and, to her horror, unlocked her door. No! No! She took a couple of steps backward and looked for something to use as a weapon. There was nothing but her high heels. As he advanced on her, a glint in his bloodshot eyes, she bent down to pick one up.

Before she could reach it, he grabbed her around the neck and jerked her up against his body. “I told ya, fancy lady, I git ya outta here.”

Her scream wedged in her throat and she couldn’t breathe. The man had a foul body odor and he smacked his lips in glee. His shaggy, grayish beard brushed against her cheek like a Brillo pad, and chills skipped across her skin.

He dragged her toward the door and she realized he was taking her with him. She kicked back with her feet and connected with his shins, but it didn’t even faze him.

“Let me go, you beast!”

“Ya want outta here, so I’m taking ya to my place. Ya belong to me now.”

“What?” Her body grew weak with fright. She wanted out of here, but not like this.

“The sheriff won’t find us, might not even look. He’ll be glad to see the back of ya, fancy lady.”

Her breath came in shallow gasps as he lugged her struggling body to a back door.

Where’s the sheriff? went repeatedly through her mind like a prayer before a disaster. He was her only hope. Just moments ago she never wanted to set eyes on the man again, but now he was the only person she wanted to see.

And she didn’t even know his name.

The door came open easily and Zeke hauled her outside into the sultry summer night. The scent of crepe myrtles wafted on the soft breeze, the delicate fragrance pleasant and embracing, a sharp contrast to the terror that gripped her. She blinked at the bright floodlight that illuminated a parking area. To the left, her car and a rusty old truck were enclosed inside an eight-foot-high chain-link fence.

Zeke dragged her toward the double gates. She tried everything she could to slow him down. She dug in her heels and then bit his arm, but to no avail. His heavy arm around her neck was strong and suffocating.

When they reached the gates, he yanked out the gun and fired at the chain. Her pounding heart jammed against her ribs at the sound and her ears rang. She held on to her composure, though. Barely. Hysterical screams were right there at the edge of her throat. Someone would hear the shot and come, right?

She held on to that thought.

Zeke kicked open the gate and jogged toward the truck, still tugging her along. She realized this was her last chance and she gave full rein to the screams.

He clamped a filthy hand over her mouth while opening a door and lifted her onto the seat as if she weighed no more than a rag doll.

“Let me go, you maniac!”

“Stop it.” He pointed the gun at her. “Or I’ll shoot ya.”

Her throat closed up.

“Git over,” he growled.

In a moment of clarity she realized this really was her last chance. She quickly scooted over torn upholstery to the passenger’s side, intending to open the door and run like hell. The truck was strewn with trash and stank of rotted food and urine. Paper cups, newspapers, dirty clothes littered the floor and the seat.

She held her breath against the stench as she searched for the door handle. There wasn’t one—just a hole where one used to be. No! No! Frantic, she ran her hand over the inside of the door one more time. Nothing.

“Gimme yer hands.”

She twisted around and saw he was in the truck and the door was closed. In his big hands was a small rope. She froze.

“Gimme yer hands,” he said again.

“No.” She backed against the door.

Before she could do anything else, he grabbed her hands and whipped the rope around them with lightning speed. With one movement he jerked the rope so tight it cut into her skin. She had to force herself to take deep breaths.

Fear held her paralyzed as Zeke fiddled with some wires beneath the dash. After a second the truck sputtered to life.

Zeke let out a chilling victory laugh and slammed the stick shift into gear. The truck was backed into a parking spot, so when he hit the gas pedal, they shot through the gate and out into the night.

Panic rose in her anew. She had no idea where he planned to take her. The sheriff would come, she kept telling herself.

She'd told herself that earlier, she realized with annoying insight. She'd thought Quinn would come. And he hadn't.

All her life her father had made sure she never wanted for anything. All she had to do was be his little princess, the light of his life. He took care of all her problems, all her worries. She was loved, pampered, safe and secure.

But now...

For once in her life she was on her own.

WYATT COULDN'T sleep. He didn't feel right leaving Ms. Ross in the jail. Zeke was as obnoxious as a man could get and he'd likely taunt Ms. Ross all night long. Where was Ms. Ross's important mother?

He always trusted his gut instincts and something told him he was needed at the jail. Maybe it was his conscience. He slipped into jeans, boots and grabbed a short-sleeve shirt. Checking the jail one more time would give him some peace of mind and then maybe he could sleep.

His mother, Maezel, known to everyone as Mae, was in the living room, watching an old Elvis movie. She was a fanatic about the man—there was Elvis memorabilia all over the house. Wyatt complained about it so much that she now kept most of it in her room. His mother was eccentric, to say the least. His childhood had been colorful and he knew every song Elvis had ever sung. Wyatt refused to talk about his middle name.

"Mom, what are you doing still up?"

She rose to a sitting position. At sixty-eight, his mother was still in good health, though prone to bouts of depression, when she went silent. Those silent spells got him, so he'd turn up the Elvis music and soon she was back to her old self.

Pushing permed, short gray curls from her forehead, she replied, "I could ask you the same thing."

"I have to go back to the jail."

With her eyes on the TV, she said, "Jody says you have an uppity city lady locked up."

"Yeah. I have to check on her."

"Go. Go." She waved him away. "I don't want to miss this scene with Ann-Margret."

She'd seen the movie a hundred times at least, but that was his mother—living in Elvis Presley's time zone.

"If Jody wakes up, tell her I'll be back as soon as I can."

"She never wakes up," Mae said, her eyes glued to the screen. "Viva Las Vegas."

He placed his hat on his head with a wry grin and headed for the back door.

His father, John Wyatt Carson, had died ten years ago of lung cancer; he'd smoked two packs a day until a month before his passing. He was set in his ways, but he'd been a loving, caring father—although sometimes, especially when Wyatt was a teenager, a little stricter than Wyatt would have liked. His father had been a highway patrolman and believed in rules and discipline, as Wyatt did now. But somehow Wyatt wasn't very good at disciplining his own child.

His mother was very little help in that area. Mae Carson was an easygoing person who lived in the moment. Discipline wasn't high on her list of priorities.

She'd lost a son to meningitis when the boy was just five years old. That was before Wyatt had been born and his father had told him that his mother had never been the same afterward.

For a solid year she'd grieved and no one could reach her, his dad had said, and then one day she started singing "Kentucky Rain" and "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" She'd listened to Elvis's records over and over, and Wyatt's father had let her be. She'd found her solace.

Over the years his mother's eccentricity increased. But these days she was content, and Wyatt was grateful to have her in his life to lean on when things got rough. She looked at the world a little differently, but who was to say what was right and what was wrong?

She was probably the main reason he'd moved back into his childhood home. He needed a little of her kind of insanity in his life, Elvis songs and all. He slid into his car and headed for the jail.

There'd been too much dying in the Carson family. Maybe that was why he was so lenient with Jody. He wanted their days to be happy because life could be snatched away without a moment's notice. And he wanted every memory to be treasured.

When he walked into his office, he heard a faint moan. A flicker of apprehension shot through him. He ran into the jail and saw Lamar lying on the floor. Zeke was gone and so was Ms. Ross. Damn it all to hell!

Kneeling, he felt for a pulse. When he found it, a sigh of relief escaped him. Lamar moaned again and Wyatt helped him sit up.

"Are you okay?"

Lamar rubbed his throat. "That bastard choked me."

"Zeke?"

"Yeah."

With Wyatt's help, Lamar staggered to his feet. They walked into the office and Lamar flopped into a chair.

"What happened?" Wyatt asked.

"Zeke said he was sick and had a fever. I...I fell for it. He had me around the neck before I knew it. I'm...I'm sorry, Wyatt."

"Did he take Ms. Ross?"

Lamar went still. "Is she gone?"

"Yes."

"I heard them talking." Lamar rubbed his throat.

"About what?"

"I...Oh, Sheriff..." Lamar was shaking and his skin was a grayish color.

"Take a deep breath," Wyatt coaxed while reaching for his cell to call Judy Deaver, the nurse. Since Horseshoe didn't have a clinic, they depended on the nurse for minor emergencies.

"Judy, this is Wyatt. I need you at the jail immediately."

"Be right there."

"Keep taking deep breaths," he told Lamar.

Next he called Stuart and didn't waste words. "Get to the jail now." He had a feeling time was of the essence.

Lamar was about to slide out of the chair, so Wyatt urged him to stand, wrapped an arm around his waist and guided him to a cot in the back room.

"Relax and try to breathe normally."

"My throat hurts and...and I can barely breathe."

Judy came through the door with her bag.

"Back here," Wyatt called.

“What happened?” she asked, taking Lamar’s pulse.

“Zeke near choked the life out of him.”

She spared Wyatt a glance. “When are you going to do something about that man?”

“Tonight,” he replied. He’d let Zeke Boggs get away with too much because of his diminished mental capacity, but kidnapping a prisoner was way over the line. Or at least he assumed she’d been kidnapped. Ms. Ross might have talked Zeke into letting her go. Then he’d have two prisoners on the lam. Either way, it wasn’t good for his department.

Stuart charged through the door, still stuffing his shirt into his pants. “What’s happening?”

Wyatt reached for his rifle in the gun cabinet. “Zeke assaulted Lamar and escaped. Ms. Ross is gone, too. I don’t know if they’re together or not, but I will find out.”

“Holy crap! We’ve never had a jailbreak.”

That didn’t sit well with Wyatt, either. “Call Bubba and get him to watch the office. Use your truck with the four-wheel drive and head to Earl Boggs’s place and let him know you’re going through his property to get to Zeke’s place. Tell him I’m going through the back way on horseback. It should be faster. I’ll meet you at Zeke’s.”

“Okay.”

Wyatt handed him a rifle. “Be careful and watch your back.”

The only way to get to Zeke’s quickly was through the Daniels property, which bordered Boggs’s land. As Wyatt spun away from the office, he reached for his cell and poked out Tripp Daniels’s number.

Tripp answered on the second ring.

“This is Wyatt. I hate to bother you at this time of night, but I need a fast horse.”

He and Tripp were friends. They went to school together for a time when the Carsons had moved to nearby Bramble to take care of his mother’s mother. Tripp was a rodeo rider, but he’d retired and settled down with a wife and a family.

“You got it.”

Wyatt liked that about Tripp. No questions. He knew Wyatt wouldn’t ask unless it was important. “See you in about ten minutes.”

Wyatt swerved onto the dirt road that led to the Lady Luck Ranch, hoping his instincts were right and Zeke had hightailed it to his shack and moonshine still on the river. He also hoped he hadn’t taken Peyton Ross with him. That would mean, though, that Ms. Ross had persuaded Zeke to unlock her cell and let her go. She would be an escaped prisoner. A huge knot formed in his gut. And it had a name. Peyton Ross.

He had a feeling he was going to rue the day he’d ever set eyes on the woman.

Chapter Four

Wyatt drove past the large, two-story colonial house to the barn and corrals. A light was on in the barn, so he knew Tripp was there. He grabbed his rifle from the back seat and climbed out.

As he did, Tripp emerged from the barn, leading a brown mare with a blaze of white down her face and one white-stockinged foot. Tightening the saddle cinch, Tripp said, "That didn't take you long. What's the rush?"

"I had a jailbreak tonight."

Tripp lowered a stirrup and turned to face Wyatt. "Damn. So who are you after?"

"Zeke Boggs."

Tripp stepped away from the horse with a frown. "He was in Bramble a couple of weeks ago scaring all the women to death. Horace locked him up and then escorted him out of town."

Wyatt shoved his rifle into the scabbard on the saddle. "We've all been lenient with Zeke, but this time he's crossed a line. He helped a female prisoner escape and I have to find him fast."

"What!"

Wyatt put his left foot in the stirrup and swung into the saddle. "Do you mind if I go through your land to get to his shack?"

"Of course not. Do you need any help?"

"No. I can handle Zeke. Thanks for the use of the horse. I appreciate it."

"Her name is Blaze—she's a workhorse. She won't let you down and she'll carry you right through those brushy areas."

"I owe you."

"You sure do," Tripp said. "I had my arms wrapped around the most gorgeous woman in the county."

"Give Camila my best." Blaze was prancing, ready to run.

Wyatt held her back, glancing at Tripp's leather house shoes.

"Those are really bad for your cowboy image." With that, he shot out of the yard, but not before he saw Tripp's wide grin.

PEYTON WASN'T SURE how long they had been driving, but it seemed like hours. She kept pushing on the door with her body in hopes it would come open. Tumbling out onto the road seemed a good alternative to her current situation. It was probably rusted shut, though. The rope cut into her skin and it burned and hurt like hell.

They were now on nothing more than a dirt track, bumpy and narrow. Her insides were being jostled like something in a blender and she felt nauseous. The truck's one headlight picked out a heavy thicket. Where were they?

In her mind the answer came a little too quickly—somewhere where no one will find you.

She swallowed hard to block her thoughts. The sheriff will come. Although he annoyed her, he appeared competent.

The stench in the truck was getting to her. Could one expire from odors? She'd never thought much about death before her father had become ill. She didn't like the idea of it then and she certainly didn't like it now. How could she get away from this horrible man?

Suddenly the beam of the headlight exposed a clearing with a small dilapidated shack and an attached lean-to. A creek or river flowed nearby. Two rusty trucks were parked to the side and weeds flourished around them. Junk and clutter filled the yard, from an old washing machine to a pile of cans and bottles.

Definitely a place where a body could be buried without anyone ever finding it. A nervous hiccup slid down her throat.

Zeke stopped the truck and reached under the dash to disconnect the wires. The engine sputtered away. And then there was silence.

"This is it," he said proudly. "My home. I need a woman to take care of it."

A bulldozer would take care of it. The words died in her throat. To get away from him, she was going to have to use some of the tactics Giselle had talked about. They hadn't worked on the sheriff, but Zeke was a simpleton and she had a feeling she could work that to her advantage.

She shifted to look at him. "Please let me go. I don't know anything about your ways or how to live in the wild. I'm a city girl." She dropped her voice to a soft pleading. "Please, just let me go."

And if you don't, I'll start screaming and lose what composure I'm managing to maintain.

"No," he replied stubbornly. "You're mine now."

She bit her lip to keep the screams inside her. But she wasn't giving up. She just had to bide her time.

Zeke opened the door and got out, looking back at her. "Git out," he ordered.

She scrambled out, eager for fresh air. The rope cut deeper with each movement, but she was able to stand on her feet, her lungs soaking up the night air untainted by filth.

She held out her hands. "Would you please undo these? The rope hurts."

He shook his head. "No. You'll run away."

"Where would I go?" She glanced around at the thick woods.

He didn't respond, but turned and grabbed her arm, leading her toward the shack. No way was she going inside. Once she did, she knew there would be no escape.

She staggered on purpose. "I feel faint," she murmured, and sank to the ground.

"What's wrong with ya?" He squatted beside her, peering into her face. She forced herself not to recoil from his closeness.

"I don't know. I just need to rest."

And to think.

He waited.

Peyton took a long breath, grateful for this reprieve. Any other time the moonlight would have been breathtaking as it bathed the forest in an effervescent glow. The water rippled pleasantly, crickets serenaded and the place was eerie and peaceful at the same time. But there was nothing peaceful about her situation. How would she get away from him?

"This is all mine," he said again in that proud tone. "My brother's wife and her family live farther west, but this land is mine and they can't take it. If you marry up with me, it'll be yours, too."

Responding would be like talking to the trees, so she didn't waste her energy.

"I make a lot of money selling my moonshine. I got the best still in the county, all copper. You can have the money, too."

The man was off his rocker. Suddenly an idea came to her. She moaned and held her tied hands to her face. "I feel like I have to throw up. Please undo the rope." She had seen him use this little trick and she hoped it worked.

Without a word, he removed the rope and she had to restrain herself from cringing as his thick fingers touched her wrists. She flexed her fingers. "Thank you." The sheriff had said something about using honey instead of vinegar. Well, she was going to honey ol' Zeke to death.

"Are ya better?"

"I could use some water, please."

He pointed to something that looked like a well pump. "There's plenty."

Was he serious? Without a doubt he was. "Would you get some for me, please? I'm so weak."

He grabbed her arm in a viselike grip and hauled her to the well. "Don't try anything. Remember I still got the gun."

Oh, God! Stay calm.

When they reached it, she knelt and her capris soaked up the mud around the well. Zeke pumped the handle and water spurted out. She cupped her hands and pretended to drink, but let the flowing water run through her fingers and onto her clothes.

“See I told ya I got water. Now let’s go inside. Ya can cook us up somethin’ to eat.”

Like hell. She stood and linked her fingers together, making a two-handed fist. It was now or never.

“Let’s go,” he said as he stepped closer.

With every ounce of strength she had, she swung her clenched hands at Zeke’s face. There was a loud pop, skin connecting with skin, and to her surprise Zeke went down. She took off at a run for the woods, not looking back.

THE THICK WOODS and brushy undergrowth impeded Wyatt’s progress. But Blaze was everything Tripp had said—a real workhorse. She picked her way through the thicket easily, never faltering. Luckily there was a full moon to light the way.

The heat was oppressive in the deep woods and every breath of air was a godsend. The mosquitoes were thick and he wished he’d taken the time to put on a long-sleeve shirt. But his only goal now was to reach Zeke’s. He feared for Ms. Ross’s safety.

He finally reached the Brazos and he urged Blaze faster as they followed the riverbank toward Zeke’s property. Reaching the clearing, he dismounted and looped the reins around a drooping tree branch. He pulled the rifle from the scabbard and moved toward the shack.

As he drew closer, he saw Zeke’s truck and stopped. Zeke was here. Was Ms. Ross? An owl hooted, breaking the unending silence. Something rustled in the bushes and Wyatt scanned the perimeter of Zeke’s cluttered yard. Where was he?

He heard a moan. It sounded like a wounded animal. As Wyatt watched, a form rose in the moonlight. Zeke. He rushed forward and pushed Zeke to the ground, holding the rifle on him.

“Sheriff,” Zeke blubbered in surprise, holding a hand to his head.

With a foot on Zeke’s chest, Wyatt asked, “Where’s Ms. Ross?”

“Who’s that?”

“The woman you took from the jail,” Wyatt replied.

“The fancy lady?”

“Yes. Where is she?”

Zeke rubbed his head. “She hit me.”

Wyatt removed his foot, not in the least surprised.

“Where is she now?”

“Don’t know. Don’t want a woman who hits.”

“Why did you take her in the first place?”

“She wanted out of jail and I git her out.”

“Why didn’t you let her go?”

Zeke frowned. “Cause she’s mine.”

Wyatt exhaled deeply. “Zeke...” Just then, headlights darted through the woods. A door slammed and Stuart charged into the clearing with his gun drawn.

“Over here!” Wyatt called, and pulled Zeke to his feet. “Cuff him,” he said to Stuart.

As Stuart snapped handcuffs onto Zeke’s wrists, Wyatt asked again, “Where did the woman go?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care,” Zeke muttered. “She hit me.”

Stuart looked at Wyatt. “What do you think?”

Wyatt glanced toward the woods. “I think she’s out there somewhere.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Take Zeke and lock him up, then get together a posse. We have to find her.”

“Are you staying here?”

“Yes. I’ll start searching.”

Stuart grabbed Zeke’s arm. “What were you thinking? You can’t just take a woman. That’s kidnapping. Now she’s lost out here.”

“Don’t care.”

On the way to the truck Stuart continued to reprimand Zeke, but Zeke stuck to his “don’t care” reply. Ms. Ross had shattered his illusion of what a woman should be. Wyatt thought Ms. Ross was good at shattering illusions.

Wyatt removed his hat and wiped his forehead with his arm. Hot sweat trickled down his back. Why did Ms. Ross have to speed through his town?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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