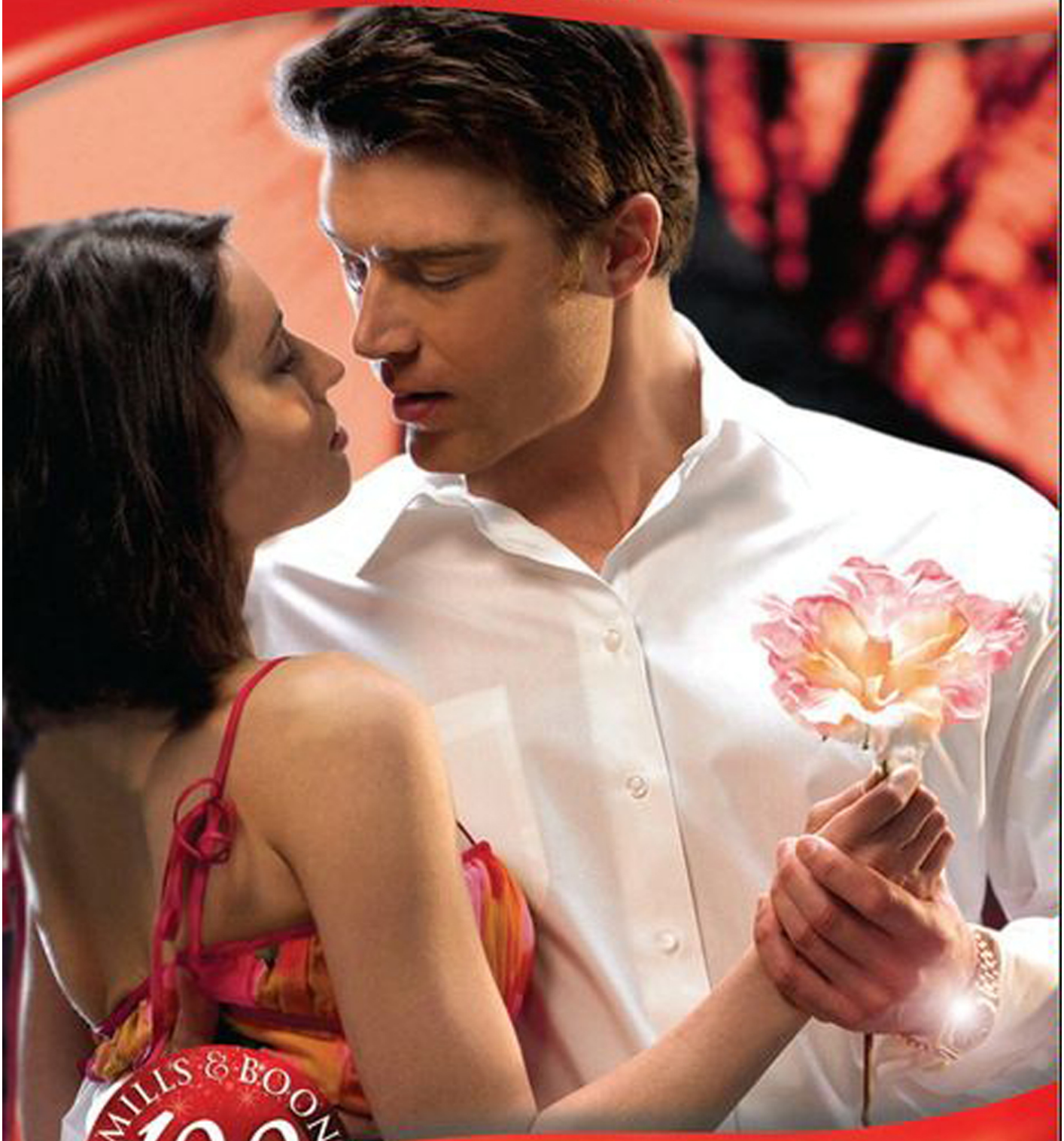
Iron Cowboy
*Diana Palmer*

Seduced by the Rich Man
*Maureen Child*



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Diana Palmer

# Iron Cowboy / Seduced by the Rich Man: Iron Cowboy

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Iron Cowboy / Seduced by the Rich Man: Iron Cowboy / D. Palmer — «HarperCollins»,

Be swept away by passion… with intense drama and compelling plots, these emotionally powerful reads will keep you captivated from beginning to end.Iron Cowboy Diana PalmerHard-hearted Texan rancher Jared Cameron was a mystery to everyone in town…and he liked it that way. Only sweet-natured bookseller Sara dared to intrude on his privacy. Captivated by her audaciousness, Jared pursued the plain-Jane. But their burgeoning relationship soon thrust Sara into Jared's hidden world of intrigue. Now the iron cowboy had the fight of his life on his hands.Seduced by the Rich Man Maureen Child Billionaire Max Striver surprised Janine Shaker by suddenly proposing a fake marriage. Max's need for a temporary wife and his desire for Janine seemed to coincide perfectly. He knew that Janine wasn't in a position to refuse his offer – or his bed. But then their make-believe marriage became more passionate than either anticipated…

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**Iron Cowboy by Diana Palmer**



**No one can resist a book by Diana Palmer!**
“Nobody does it better.”
—*New York Times* bestselling author Linda Howard
“Palmer knows how to make the sparks fly…
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—*Booklist* on *Renegade*
“Sensual and suspenseful.”
—*Booklist* on *Lawless*
“Diana Palmer is a mesmerising storyteller
who captures the essence of what a
romance should be.”
—*Affaire de Coeur*
“Nobody tops Diana Palmer when it comes to
delivering pure, undiluted romance.
I love her stories.”
—*New York Times* bestselling author Jayne Ann Krentz
“The dialogue is charming, the characters
likeable and the sex sizzling.”
—*Publishers Weekly* on *Once in Paris*

**Seduced by the Rich Man by Maureen Child**



*“You’re going to ask me to be your mistress. I swear, rich men are all alike.”*
“What an interesting mind you have,” Max
said. “But no. That is not the plan.”
He had looked surprised when she levelled her
accusation, so she’d apparently been wrong
about what he was up to. She couldn’t imagine
anything else, though, that he would need to
pay her money for.
“Then what?” Janine asked.
“Why, I want to hire you to be my wife.”

# Iron Cowboy

DIANA PALMER

# Seduced by the Rich Man

MAUREEN CHILD




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# IRON COWBOY

by

Diana Palmer

*DIANA PALMER*

has a gift for telling the most sensual tales with charm and humour. With over forty million copies of her books in print, Diana Palmer is one of North America's most beloved authors and considered one of the top ten romance authors in the US.

Diana's hobbies include gardening, archaeology, anthropology, iguanas, astronomy and music. She has been married to James Kyle for over twenty-five years, and they have one son.

Dear Reader,

I still don't know where this book came from. It was all very mysterious, and I think Tony the Dancer (you'll meet him inside the book) had something to do with it.

I laughed a lot when I saw it unfolding on my computer screen, and I also cried a little along the way. It's not a melancholy book, but, like life itself, it has some heartbreak in it. The hero and heroine are both a bit mysterious. Both have secrets. Both have tragedies in their pasts. As usual, in my eccentric way, I have built false trails, so nothing is quite what it seems at the beginning. I do like surprises, as long as they're nice ones. These are. Trust me.

I hope you enjoy reading *Iron Cowboy* as much as I enjoyed writing it for you.

Love to my fans.

As always, I am your biggest fan,

*Diana Palmer*

To Ann Painter in Massachusetts with love

One

It was a lovely spring day, the sort of day that makes gentle, green, budding trees and white blossoms look like a spring fantasy has been painted. Sara Dobbs stared out the bookstore's side window wistfully, wishing she could get to the tiny flower bed full of jonquils and buttercups to pick a bouquet for the counter. The flowers were blooming on the street that ran beside the Jacobsville Book Nook, where she worked as assistant manager to Dee Harrison, the owner.

Dee was middle-aged, a small, thin, witty woman who made friends wherever she went. She'd been looking for someone to help her manage the store, and Sara had just lost her bookkeeping position at the small print shop that was going out of business. It was a match made in heaven. Sara spent a good portion of her meager salary on books. She loved to read. Living with her grandfather, a retired college professor, had predisposed her to education. She'd had plenty of time to read when she was with her parents, in one of the most dangerous places on earth.

Sara's father, with her maternal grandfather's assistance, had talked her mother into the overseas work. Her father had died violently. Her mother changed, lost her faith, turned to alcohol. She brought Sara to Jacobsville and moved in with her father. She then launched herself into one scandal after another, using her behavior to punish her father without caring about the cost to her only child. Sara and Grandad had suffered for her blatant immorality. It wasn't until Sara had come home in tears, with bruises all over her, that her mother faced the consequences of what she'd done. The children of one of her mother's lovers had caught her alone in the gym and beaten her bloody. Their father had divorced their mother, who was now facing eviction from their home and the loss of every penny they had; their father had spent it on jewels for Sara's mother.

That had led to worse tragedy. Her mother stopped drinking and seemed to reform. She even went back to church. She seemed very happy, until Sara found her one morning, a few days later…

The sound of a vehicle pulling up in the parking lot just in front of the bookstore stopped her painful reveries. At least, she thought, she had a good job and made enough to keep a roof over her head.

Her grandfather's little two-bedroom house outside of town had been left to Sara, along with a small savings account. But there was a mortgage on the house.

She missed the old man. Despite his age, he was young in mind and heart, and adventurous. It was lonely without him, especially since she had no other living family. She had no siblings, no aunts or uncles, or even cousins that she knew about. She had nobody.

The ringing of the electronic bell over the door caught her attention. A tall, grim-looking man came into the small bookstore. He glowered at Sara. He was dressed in an expensive-looking three-piece gray suit and wore hand-tooled black boots and a creamy Stetson. Under the hat was straight, thick, conventionally cut black hair. He had the sort of physique that usually was only seen in motion pictures. But he was no movie star. He looked like a businessman. She glanced out the door and saw a big, black pickup truck with a white horse in a white circle on the truck's door. She knew about the White Horse Ranch outside town. This newcomer, Jared Cameron, had bought it from its previous owner, lock, stock, manager and resident cowboys. Someone said he'd been in town several months earlier for a funeral of some sort, but nobody knew who he was related to that had died. So many old people had out-of-town relatives these days, even in Jacobsville, Texas, a town of less than two thousand inhabitants.

Standing outside next to the driver's side of the black pickup was a tall, husky man with wavy black hair in a ponytail and an olive complexion, wearing a dark suit and sunglasses. He looked like a professional wrestler. He was probably a sort of bodyguard. Maybe his employer had enemies. She wondered why.

The man in the gray suit was glaring at the magazine counter with both hands deep in his pockets, muttering to himself.

Sara wondered what he was looking for. He hadn't asked for assistance, or even looked her way. But the muttering was getting darker by the minute. She couldn't afford to turn away a potential customer. No small town business was that secure.

"May I help you?" she asked with a smile.

He gave her a cold look from pale green eyes in a tanned face that seemed to be all hard lines and angles. His eyes narrowed on her short, straight blond hair, moved over her wide forehead, down over her own green eyes and straight nose and high cheekbones, to her pretty mouth and rounded chin. He made a sound, as if she didn't live up to his specifications. She didn't dare make a comment, but she was really tempted to tell him that if he was shopping for pretty women, a designer boutique in a big city would be a better place to look than a small bookstore.

"You don't carry financial magazines." He made it sound like a hanging offense.

"Nobody around here reads them much," she defended.

His eyes narrowed. "I read them."

She did occasionally have to bite her tongue to save her job. This looked like one of those times. "I'm very sorry. We could order them for you, if you like."

"Forget it. I can subscribe." He glanced toward the mystery paperbacks and scowled again. "I hate paperbacks. Why don't you carry hardcover novels?"

Her tongue was stinging. She cleared her throat. "Well, most of our clientele are working people and they can't afford them."

Both thick black eyebrows arched. "I don't buy paperbacks."

"We can special order any sort of hardcover you want," she said. The smile was wavering, and she was trying hard not to offend him.

He glanced toward the counter at the computer. "Do you have Internet access?"

"Of course." He must think he'd landed in Borneo. She frowned. They probably even had computers in the jungles these days. He seemed to consider Jacobsville, Texas, a holdover from the last century.

"I like mystery novels," he said. "Biographies. I like first-person adventure novels and anything factual on the North African campaign of World War II."

Her heart jumped at the subject he'd mentioned. She cleared her throat. "Would you like all of them at once, then?"

One eyebrow went up. "The customer is always right," he said shortly, as if he thought she was making fun of him.

"Of course he is," she agreed. Her teeth hurt from being clenched in that smile.

"Get me a sheet of paper and a pen. I'll make you a list."

She wouldn't kick him, she wouldn't kick him, she wouldn't kick him… She found paper and pencil and handed them to him, still smiling.

He made a list while she answered a phone call. She hung up, and he handed her the list.

She frowned as she read it.

"Now what's wrong?" he asked impatiently.

"I don't read Sanskrit," she began.

He muttered something, took the list back and made minor modifications before handing it back. "It's the twenty-first century. Nobody handwrites anything," he said defensively. "I've got two computers and a PDA and an MP3 player." He gave her a curious look. "Do you know what an MP3 player is?" he asked, just to irritate her.

She reached in her jeans pocket, produced a small iPod Shuffle and earphones. The look that accompanied the action could kill.

"How soon can you get those books here?" he asked.

She could, at least, make out most of the titles with his so-called handwriting corrections. "We order on Mondays," she said. "You'll have as many of these as are in stock at the distributors by next Thursday or Friday."

"The mail doesn't come by horse anymore," he began.

She took a deep breath. "If you don't like small towns, maybe you could go back to wherever you came from. If you can get there by conventional means, that is," with an edge to the smile that accompanied the words.

The insinuation wasn't lost on him. "I'm not the devil."

"Are you sure?" she queried, all wide-eyed.

One eye narrowed. "I'd like these books delivered. I'm usually too busy to make a special trip into town."

"You could send your bodyguard."

He glanced out the door at the big man who was leaning back against the driver's door of the pickup with his arms folded. "Tony the Dancer doesn't run errands."

Her eyes widened more. "Tony the Dancer? Are you in the mob?"

"No, I'm not in the mob!" he growled. "Tony's last name is Danzetta. Tony the Dancer. Get it?"

"Well, he looks like a hit man to me," she returned.

"Known a few of them, have you?" he asked sarcastically.

"If I did, you'd be double-checking your locks tonight," she said under her breath.

"Can you deliver the books?"

"Yes, but it will cost you ten dollars. Gas is expensive."

"What do you drive?" he asked. "A Greyhound bus?"

"I have a VW, thank you very much, but your place is six miles out of town."

"You can tell me the amount when you call to say the books are here. I'll have my accountant cut the check. You can pick it up when you deliver the books."

"All right."

"I'd better give you the number. It's unlisted."

She turned over the sheet of paper with his list of titles on it and copied down the number he gave her.

"I'd also like to get two financial magazines," he added, naming them.

"I'll see if our distributor carries them. He might not."

"Serves me right for moving to Outer Cowpasture," he muttered aloud.

"Well, excuse us for not having malls on every street!" she shot back.

He glowered. "You're the rudest clerk I've seen yet."

"Get your bodyguard to loan you his shades and you won't have to see me at all."

He pursed his lips. "You might get yourself a book on manners."

She smiled sarcastically. "I'll see if I can find one on ogres for you."

His pale eyes swept over her with calculation. "Just the ones I listed, if you please. I'll expect to hear from you late next week."

"Yes, sir."

He cocked his head. "Your boss must have been pretty desperate to leave you in charge of his sole means of support."

"It's a she, not a he. And my boss likes me very much."

"Good thing someone does, I guess." He turned to leave, pausing at the door. "You're wearing two different shades of hose under those slacks, and your earrings don't match."

She had problems with symmetry. Most people knew her background and were kind enough not to mention her lapses. "I'm no slave to popular fashion," she informed him with mock hauteur.

"Yes. I noticed."

He left before she came up with a suitable reply. Lucky for him there wasn't anything expendable that she could have thrown after him.

Dee Harrison rolled in the aisles laughing when she heard Sara's biting description of their new customer.

"It wasn't funny," Sara protested. "He called Jacobsville 'Outer Cowpasture,'" she grumbled.

"Obviously the man has no taste." Dee grinned. "But he did want us to order a lot of books for him, so your sacrifice wasn't in vain, dear."

"But I have to deliver the books to him," she wailed. "He's probably got people-eating dogs and machine guns out there. You should have seen the guy driving him! He looked like a hit man!"

"He's probably just eccentric," Dee said calmingly. "Like old man Dorsey."

She gave her employer a narrow glance. "Old man Dorsey lets his German shepherd sit at the table and eat with him. This guy would probably eat the dog!"

Dee just smiled. A new customer was just what she needed, especially one with expensive tastes in reading. "If he orders a lot of books, you might get a raise," Dee ventured.

Sara just shook her head. Dee didn't understand the situation. If Sara had to be around that particular customer very often, she'd probably end up doing time for assault and battery.

She went home to her small house. Morris met her at the door. He was an old, battle-scarred yellow tabby cat. Part of his tail was missing, and he had slits in his ears from fights. He'd been a stray who came crying to Sara's back door in a thunderstorm. She'd let him in. That had been eight years ago. Her grandfather had commented that he looked like trouble. Sara defended him.

She never agreed with her grandfather, even after she had to replace a chair and a throw rug that Morris had ripped to shreds. She bought the old cat a scratching post and herself a water pistol. Morris hated water. When he did something he wasn't supposed to, she let him have it. Over the years, he'd calmed down and stopped clawing furniture. Now, he just ate and sprawled in the sun. Occasionally he sat in Sara's lap while she watched her small color television. But he wasn't a cuddling cat, and you couldn't pick him up. He bit.

She stroked him while they watched the latest episode of her favorite forensic show. “I guess it’s just as well that we’re not overrun with visitors, Morris,” she mused softly. “You’re definitely an antisocial personality.” She pursed her lips as she looked down at him. “I know a guy you’d like,” she added on a chuckle. “I must attract animals and people with bad attitudes.”

The end of the next week came all too soon. Dee had placed Jared Cameron’s order on Monday. Sara was hoping the ogre’s order wouldn’t come in, allowing her a reprieve to work on her social skills. But all the books in the order arrived like clockwork on Friday.

She phoned the number Jared Cameron had given her.

“Cameron ranch,” came a gruff reply.

“Mr. Cameron?” she asked hesitantly, because this didn’t sound like the man who’d come into the store earlier.

“He’s not here,” a gravelly deep voice replied.

She pictured the face that would have gone with that voice, and figured it must be the hit man. “Mr.…Danzetta?”

There was a shocked pause. “Yeah. How’d you know?”

“I read minds,” she lied.

“No kidding?” He sounded as if he actually believed her.

“Mr. Cameron ordered a lot of books…”

“Yeah, he said they were due today. He said for you to bring them out tomorrow about ten. He’ll be here.”

Tomorrow was Saturday, and she didn’t work Saturdays.

“Couldn’t I leave them with you, and he can send us the check?”

“Tomorrow at ten, he said. He’ll be here.”

There was no arguing with stone walls. She sighed. “Okay. I’ll see him tomorrow.”

“Good.”

The line went dead. The voice had a decidedly Southern accent. Not a Texas accent. A Georgia one, if she were guessing. She had an ear for accents. Her grandfather had taught students from all over the country and around the world at the Jacobsville Community College, and he often brought them home. Sara had learned a lot about other places.

She put the phone down belatedly. If the bodyguard was part of the mob, it must be the Southern branch. She chuckled. But now she didn’t know what to do. Should she call him tomorrow before she started out, to let him know how much he owed? Surely his bookkeeper didn’t work weekends.

“You look unsettled,” Dee remarked as she started for the front door. “What’s wrong?”

“I have to take the ogre’s order out to him tomorrow morning.”

“On your day off.” Dee smiled. “You can have a half day next Wednesday to make up for it. I’ll come in at noon and work until closing time.”

“You will?” Sara asked, beaming.

“I know how you look forward to your drawing time,” Dee replied. “I just know you’re going to sell that children’s book you’re working on. Call Lisa Parks and tell her you’ll come next Wednesday to draw her new puppies instead of tomorrow. They’ll make a gorgeous page in your story,” she added.

Sara grinned. “They’re the cutest puppies I’ve ever seen. Their father was one of the puppies Tom Walker’s dog Moose fathered, and their mother is Cy Parks’s collie, Bob.”

“Bob is a girl dog?” Dee exclaimed.

“Yes. The puppies look like both their parents. Tom asked for one of them. He lost Moose just last month,” she added sadly. “They have another dog a little younger than Moose, but Tom loved that old dog. He had him cremated and put in an urn. He’s still grieving, though. Lisa e-mailed a picture of the puppies to Tom and said he could have one. He and his oldest daughter went over to pick it out. They’ll be ready to go to new homes in a week or so. They’re just precious at this age. I’m going to draw them in a big Easter basket.”

"You could sell drawings," Dee said.

"I guess so. But I'd never make a living at it," she replied, smiling. "I want to sell books."

"I think you're going to be selling your own books pretty soon," Dee told her. "You have a wonderful talent."

Sara beamed. "Thanks. It's the only thing I inherited from my father. He loved the work he did, but he could draw beautiful portraits." She grimaced. "It was hard, losing him like that."

"Wars are terrible," Dee agreed. "But at least you had your grandfather. He was your biggest fan. He was always bragging about you, to anybody who'd listen."

"I still get letters from Grandad's former students," Sara said. "He taught military history. I guess he had every book ever written on World War II. Especially the campaign in North Africa." She frowned. "Funny, that's what the ogre likes to read about."

"Maybe the ogre is like that lion who got a thorn in his paw, and when the mouse pulled it out, they were friends for life."

Sara glowered at her boss. "No mouse in his right mind would go near that man," she said.

"Except you," came the amused reply.

"Well, I don't have a choice. What do we do about the check?" she asked Dee. "Do I call him before I go over there, or…"

Dee picked up the slip of paper with his phone number on it. "I'll call him in the morning. You can put the books in a bag and take them home with you tonight. That way you won't have to come in to town."

"You're sweet, Dee."

The older woman smiled. "So are you." She checked her watch. "I've got to pick Mama up at the beauty parlor and take her home, then I'm going to do paperwork. You know my cell phone number. Call me if you need me."

"I won't, but thanks all the same."

Dee looked uneasy. "You need to have a cell phone, Sara. You can get a prepaid one for next to nothing. I don't like you having to drive home after dark on that dirt road."

"Most of the drug traffickers are in prison now," she reminded her boss.

"That isn't what Cash Grier says," Dee replied. "They locked up the Dominguez woman, and her successor, but there's a man in charge now, and he killed two Mexican policemen at a border crossing, as well as a Border Patrol agent and even a reporter. They say he killed a whole family over near Nuevo Laredo for ratting on him."

"Surely he wouldn't come here," Sara began.

"Drug dealers like it here," Dee returned. "We don't have federal agents—well, except for the DEA agent, Cobb, who works out of Houston and has a ranch here. Our police and sheriff's departments are underfunded and understaffed. That's why that man Lopez tried to set up a distribution network here. They say this new drug lord has property around town that he bought with holding companies, so nobody would know who really owned the land. A farm or ranch way out in the country would be a perfect place to transport drugs to."

"Like they tried once, behind Cy Parks's place and at the old Johnson place."

Dee sighed. "It makes me uneasy, that's all."

"You worry too much," Sara said gently. "Besides, I'm only a mile out of town and I lock all my doors." She looked at the clock on the wall opposite. "You'd better get moving,

or your mother's going to be worried about you!"

Dee chuckled. "I guess so. Well, if you need me…"

"I'll call."

Dee went out with a wave, leaving Sara alone.

Later in the afternoon, Harley Fowler came in, dusty and sweaty and half out of humor. He pushed his hat back over wet hair.

"What in the world happened to you?" Sara exclaimed. "You look like you've been dragged down a dirt road behind a horse!"

He glowered. "I have."

"Ouch," she sympathized.

"I need a book on Spanish slang. Ranch Spanish slang, if you've got one."

"We have every Spanish dictionary ever published, including slang ones. I'll show you."

She pointed out a rack with dozens of paperback dictionaries, including specific books just on verbs.

"Just the thing," Harley murmured, reading titles. "Mr. Parks still has an account, doesn't he?"

"He and Lisa both do."

"Well, you can put these on his tab." He picked out four and handed them to her.

"Would it be safe to ask why you want them?" she mused as she went behind the counter to the cash register.

"Why not?" he sighed. "I thought I was telling Lanita, Juan's wife, that it was hot outside. She blushed, Juan jumped me, and we rolled around in the dirt until I finally convinced him that I was just talking about the weather. We got up and shook hands, and then he told me what I'd actually said to her. I was just sick." He groaned. "I speak a little Spanish, but I learned it in high school, and I've forgotten how *not* to say embarrassing things." He groaned. "Juan and the rest of the workers speak English, but I thought I might get along better with them if I spoke a little Spanish. And this happens!"

She pursed her lips. "If you want to remark on the weather, in Spanish you say 'there is heat,' not 'I am hot.' Especially in front of a woman."

"Thanks, I do know that now," he replied, soothing his jaw. "That Juan hits like a mule kicking."

"So I've heard."

She totaled the books on the cash register and wrote down the tally in a book of accounts that Dee kept. "We'll bill Mr. Parks."

"Thanks." He took the bag with the books. "If Mr. Parks wants to argue about me buying them, I'll tell him to go talk to Juan."

She grinned. "Good idea."

He smiled back, and hesitated, as if he wanted to say something more. Just then, the phone rang, and it was one of her long-winded customers. She shrugged and waved at Harley. He waved back as he left. She wondered later what he'd been about to say.

He was handsome and well-known in the community for being a hardworking cowboy. He'd actually gone on a mission with three of the town's ex-mercenaries to help stop Manuel Lopez's drug-smuggling operation. He'd earned a lot of respect for his part in it. Sara liked him a lot, but he didn't date much. Rumor was that he'd had a real case on a local girl who'd made fun of his interest in her and threw him over. But he didn't look like a man with a broken heart.

Sara knew about broken hearts. She'd been sweet on a boy in the community college she attended to learn accounting. So had Marie, her best friend. The boy had dated both of them, but finally started going steady with Marie. A good loser, Sara had been maid of honor at their wedding. Marie and her new husband had moved to Michigan to be near his parents. Sara still wrote to Marie. She was too kindhearted to hold a grudge. Probably, she realized, the boy had only dated her because she was best friends with Marie. She recalled that he spent most of their time together asking her questions about Marie.

She was old-fashioned. Her grandfather had firm opinions about the morality deprived state of modern society. He and Sara went to church regularly and she began to share his views. She wasn't the sort of girl who got invited to wild parties, because she didn't drink or smoke or do drugs. Everyone knew that her grandfather was good friends with one of Police Chief Cash Grier's older patrol officers, too. Her law enforcement connections made the party crowd cautious. It also got around that Sara didn't "give out" on dates. There were too many girls who had no such hang-ups.

So Sara and Morris spent most of their Friday and Saturday nights together with Sara's grandfather, watching movies on television.

She wondered where the ogre had gone, and why Tony the Dancer hadn't gone with him. Maybe he was off on a hot date somewhere. She wondered about the sort of woman who might appeal to a man with his gloomy outlook. But then she remembered that he'd been wearing an expensive suit, and driving a new truck, and he owned one of the bigger ranches in the county. Some women wouldn't mind how gloomy and antisocial he was, as long as he had lots of money to spend on them.

He did look like a cold fish. But maybe he was different around people he liked. He'd made it obvious that he didn't like Sara. The feeling was mutual. She hated having to give up her Saturday to his whim.

She phoned Lisa to tell her that she wouldn't be able to come until the following Wednesday.

"That's okay," Lisa replied. "Cy and I wanted to take the baby to the mall in San Antonio on Saturday, but I was going to stay home and wait for you. There's lots of sales on baby clothes and toys."

Like Lisa needed sales, when her husband owned one of the most productive ranches in Texas, she thought, but she didn't say it. "You're always buying that baby clothes," Sara teased. "He's going to be the best-dressed little boy in town."

"We go overboard, I know," Lisa replied, "but we're so happy to have him. Cy and I took a long time to get over losing our first one."

"I remember," Sara said softly. "But birth defects turn up sometimes in the healthiest families, you know. I read about it in one of the medical books we sell. This little boy is going to grow up and be a rancher, just like his parents."

Lisa laughed softly. "Thanks, Sara," she said gently. "You make me feel better every time I talk to you."

"I'll call you Wednesday, okay? Dee's giving me a half-day, so I'll have the afternoon off."

"That will work out fine," Lisa said.

"Thanks."

"You're very welcome."

Sara hung up. Poor Lisa. Her first husband had been killed not long after their wedding. He'd been an undercover DEA agent, whom one of the drug dealer, Lopez's, men had killed. Cy had taken her under his wing and protected her while she waited for the birth of her child. Harley said the baby she was carrying wasn't her husband's, because he had a vasectomy, but she'd thought she was pregnant. Only weeks after marrying Cy, she really was pregnant. But the baby was born with birth defects that were beyond a physician's ability to cure. He'd died when he was only a week old, leaving two devastated parents to grieve. They hadn't rushed into another pregnancy. But this one had worked out without any health issues at all. Their little boy, Gil, was a toddler, and very active.

Sara wondered if she'd ever get married and have a family, but it wasn't something she dwelled on. She was young and the world would have been wide-open for her, except for her one small secret that she wasn't anxious to share with anyone. Still, she was optimistic about the future. Well, except for the ogre.

She sighed. Every life had to have a few little irritations, she decided. And who knew? The ogre might turn out to be a handsome prince inside.

Two

It was pouring rain when Sara reluctantly crawled out of bed the next morning. She looked out the window and sighed.

"Boy, I'd love to go back under the covers and sleep, Morris," she mused as she fed the old cat.

He rubbed up against her pajama-clad legs and purred.

She yawned as she made a pot of coffee and some buttered toast to go with it. Her grandfather had insisted on a balanced breakfast, but Sara couldn't manage a lot of food early in the morning.

She nibbled toast and watched the rain bounce down over the camellia bush next to the window. She was going to get wet.

She dressed in jeans and a cotton blouse and threw her ancient tan raincoat over her clothes. It was embarrassing to wear such a tacky coat to a rich man's house, but it was all she had. Her salary didn't cover many new things. Mostly she shopped at thrift stores. The coat had a stained neck and two or three tears where Sara—never the world's most graceful woman—had tripped over garden stakes or steps or her own feet and brushed against nails and a barbed-wire fence. She looked down and noticed that she was wearing socks that didn't match. Well, it was something she just had to learn to live with. The doctor told her she'd cope. She hoped he was right. She was nineteen, and sometimes she felt fifty when she tried to force her mind to comprehend matching colors.

Groaning, she checked her watch. It was fifteen to ten, and it would take her almost all that time to get to the White Horse Ranch. Well, the ogre would just have to make fun of her. She didn't have time to unload her sock drawer and find mates. They were hidden under her jeans, anyway, and maybe he wouldn't notice.

She stepped right into a hole filled with muddy water getting to her car. Her sneakers and her socks were immediately soaked. She groaned again as she unlocked the little car and quickly climbed in. The seats were leather, thank goodness, and they'd shed water. Her VW was seven years old, but the mechanics at Turkey Sanders's used car lot kept it in good repair. Despite his reputation for bad car sales, Turkey prided himself on his mechanics.

She patted its cracked dash. The VW had been wrecked, so she got it very cheaply. Probably it would fall apart if she tried to drive it as far as San Antonio. But she never left the Jacobsville area, and it was dependable transportation.

It started on the first go, making that lovely race car sound that made her think of luxury racers as she gunned the engine. If she closed her eyes and did that, sometimes it sounded just like a Formula 1 challenge car.

"In my dreams," she laughed to herself. She wouldn't earn enough in her lifetime to make six months of payments on one of those fancy sports cars. But it was just as well. The little black VW suited her very well.

She pulled out of her driveway onto the dirt road that led out to the state highway. It had been recently scraped and a little new gravel had been laid down, but it was still slippery in the rain. She gritted her teeth as she felt the car slide around in the wet mud. At least it was flat land, and even if she did go into a ditch, it wouldn't be a deep one. All the same, she didn't look forward to walking for help in that molasses-thick mud. She remembered a long walk in similar red mud, overseas, with the sound of guns echoing… She drew her mind back to the present. Dwelling on the past solved nothing.

By downshifting, not hitting the brakes and going slowly, she managed to get to the paved highway. But she was going to be late getting to the ogre's house. She grimaced. Well, it couldn't be helped. She'd just have to tell him the truth and hope he was understanding about it.

"I specifically said ten o'clock," he shot at her when he opened the front door.

He was wearing jeans and a chambray shirt and working boots—you could tell by the misshapen contours of them that many soakings had caused—and a ratty black Stetson pulled low over his forehead. Even in working garb, he managed to look elegant. He looked like a cowboy, but they could have used him as a model for one made of metal. An iron cowboy.

She had to fight a laugh at the comparison.

"And you're dripping wet all over," he muttered, glaring at her clothes. "What the hell did you do, swim through mud holes on your way here?"

"I stepped in a mud puddle on the way to my car," she began, clutching a plastic bag that held his books.

He looked past her. "I don't know what the hell that thing is, but I wouldn't dignify it by calling it a car."

Her eyes began to glitter. “Here,” she said, thrusting the books at him.

“And your manners could use some work,” he added bitingly.

“‘Cast not your pearls before swine!’” she quoted angrily.

Both eyebrows went up under the hat. “If that raincoat is any indication of your finances, you’d be lucky to be able to toss a cultured pearl at a pig. Which I am not one of,” he added firmly.

“My boss said she’d call you…”

“She did.” He took a folded check out of his shirt pocket and handed it to her. “Next time I order books, I’ll expect you at the stated time. I’m too busy to sit in the house waiting for people to show up.”

“The road I live on is six inches thick in wet mud,” she began.

“You could have phoned on the way and told me that,” he retorted.

“With what, smoke signals?” she asked sourly. “I don’t have a cell phone.”

“Why am I not surprised?” he asked with pure sarcasm.

“And my finances are none of your business!”

He glanced down. “If they were, I’d quit. No accountant is going to work for a woman who can’t afford two matching socks.”

“I have another pair just like this one at home!”

He frowned. He leaned closer. “What in the world is *that?”* he asked, indicating her left sleeve.

She looked down. “Aahhhhhh!” she screamed, jumping from one leg to the other. “Get it off, get it off! Aaaahhhh!”

The large man in the house came out onto the porch, frowning. When he followed his employer’s pointed finger, he spotted the source of the uproar. “Oh,” he said.

He walked forward, caught Sara’s arm with a big hand, picked up the yellow hornet on her sleeve, slammed it to the porch and stepped on it with a shoe the size of a shoebox.

“It’s just a hornet,” Mr. Danzetta said gently.

Sara stared down at the smashed insect and drew in a deep breath. “It’s a yellow hornet. I got stung by one of them once, on my neck. It swelled up and I had to be taken to the emergency room. I’ve been scared of them ever since.” She smiled up at him. “Thank you.” Odd, she thought, how familiar he looked. But she was almost certain she’d never seen him before. Her condition made it difficult for her to remember the past.

The ogre glared at his employee, who was smiling at Sara and watching her with something like recognition. He noted the glare, cleared his throat and went back into the house.

“Don’t start flirting with the hired help,” he told her firmly after the front door had closed behind Tony.

“I said thank you! How can you call that flirting?” she asked, aghast.

“I’ll call the store when I need a new supply of books,” he replied, ignoring her question.

She read quickly herself, but he had eight books there. But he might not be reading them, she thought wickedly. He might be using them for other purposes: as doorstops, maybe.

“You brought the books. I gave you a check. Was there something else?” he asked with a cold smile. “If you’re lonely and need companionship, there are services that advertise on television late at night,” he added helpfully.

She drew herself up to her full height. “If I were lonely, this is the last place in the world that I’d look for relief!” she informed him.

“Then why are you still here?”

She wouldn’t kick him, she wouldn’t kick him…

“And don’t spin out going down my driveway,” he called after her. “That’s new gravel!”

She hoped he was watching her the whole way. She dislodged enough gravel to cover a flower bed on her way down the driveway.

It was a long, wet weekend. She knew that nobody around Jacobs County would be complaining about the rain. It was a dry, unusually hot spring. She read in the market bulletins online that ranchers were going to pay high prices for corn. Floods in the Midwest and Great Plains were killing the corn there, and drought was getting it in the South and Southwest. Considering the vast amounts of the grain that were being used as biofuel, and the correspondingly higher prices it was commanding, it looked as if some small ranchers and farmers might go broke because they couldn't afford to feed it to their cattle. Not to mention the expense of running farm machinery, which mostly burned gasoline.

She was glad she wasn't a farmer or rancher. She did feel sorry for the handful of small ranchers around town. One day, she thought, there would be no more family agriculture in the country. Everything would be owned by international corporations, using patented seed and genetically enhanced produce. It was a good thing that some small farmers were holding on to genetically pure seeds, raising organic crops. O ne day, the agricultural community might be grateful, if there was ever a wholesale dying out of the genetically modified plants.

"Well, you're deep in thought, aren't you?" Dee teased as she walked in the door the following Wednesday, just before noon.

Sara blinked, startled by her boss's appearance. "Sorry," she said, laughing. "I was thinking about corn."

Dee stared at her. "OOOOOkay," she drawled.

"No, I'm not going mad," Sara chuckled. "I read an article in this farm life magazine." She showed it to the older woman. "It's about the high prices corn is going to get this year."

Dee shook her head. "I don't know what the smaller ranchers are going to do," she said. "Gas prices are so high that it's hard to afford enough fuel to run tractors and trucks, and now they'll have to hope the hay crop is good or they'll have to sell off cattle before winter rather than having to feed them stored corn." She sighed. "I expect even the Ballengers will be feeling a pinch, with their feedlot."

"It must be tough, having your livelihood depend on the weather," she remarked.

"Yes, it is. I grew up on a little truck farm north of here," Dee told her. "One year, we had a drought so bad that everything we grew died. Dad had to borrow on the next year's profits to buy seed and fertilizer." She shook her head. "Finally he couldn't deal with the uncertainty anymore. He got a job fixing engines at one of the car dealerships."

"It's so bad, you know—floods in the Midwest and drought here and in the Southeast. Too much water or not enough. They need to build aqueducts like the Romans did and share that water with places that need it."

"Not a bad idea, but who'd pay for it?"

Sara laughed. "I don't guess anybody could. But it was a nice thought."

Dee checked her watch. "You'd better get a move on, before we get swamped with customers and you're late leaving."

"I'll do that. Thanks, Dee."

The older woman smiled. "Good luck with those drawings."

Lisa Parks had blond hair and a sweet smile. She was carrying Gil, her eighteen-month-old toddler, when she came to the door to let Sara in. The baby had brownish colored hair and his eyes were green, like his father's. He was wearing a two-piece sailor suit.

"Doesn't he look cute!" Sara enthused over the little boy, while Lisa beamed.

"Our pride and joy," Lisa murmured, kissing the child on his soft nose. "Come in."

Sara stepped into the cool confines of the house. It had been a bachelor house for years, but Lisa's feminine touches made it into a home.

"Want coffee before you start?" Lisa asked, shifting Gil on her hip while he chanted happy noises.

"After, if you don't mind," came the smiling reply. "I always try to avoid work if it's at all possible."

"Don't we all? I've got the puppies out in the barn." She led the way down the back steps, pausing at the sound of a horse approaching. Gil was still making happy baby sounds, cradled on his mother's hip.

Harley Fowler was just riding into the yard. He spotted Sara with Lisa and smiled hugely. "Hi, Sara."

"Hello, Harley. How's the Spanish coming along?"

He glanced at Lisa, who grinned at him. He shrugged. "Well, I guess I'm learning some. But Juan is a better teacher than any book."

"How's your jaw?" Sara asked with twinkling eyes.

He fingered it. "Much better." He smiled back.

"Uh oh, Mama," Gil said, frowning. "Uh oh." He squirmed.

"Uh oh means somebody needs a diaper change," Lisa laughed. She glanced at Harley and, sensing something, concealed a smile. "Harley, if you've got a minute, would you mind showing Sara the pups while I change Gil? We're working on potty training, but it's early days yet," she added on a laugh.

Harley beamed. "I'd be happy to!" He climbed down gracefully out of the saddle and held the reins, waiting for Sara. "Are you going to adopt one of the puppies?"

She blinked. "Well, I hadn't thought about that. I have a cat, you know, and he really doesn't like dogs much. I think one tried to eat him when he was younger. He's got scars everywhere and even dogs barking on television upsets him."

He frowned. "But you came to see the puppies…?"

She showed him her drawing pad. "I came to sketch the puppies," she corrected, "for the children's book I'm writing."

"Someday she's going to be famous, and we can all say we knew her back when," Lisa teased. "I'll have coffee ready when you're done, Sara. I made a pound cake, too."

"Thanks," Sara called after her.

Lisa waved as she took the baby back into the house.

Harley tied his horse to the corral fence and walked into the dim confines of the barn with Sara. In a stall filled with fresh hay were five puppies and Bob the Collie. She was nursing the babies. In the stall beside hers was Puppy Dog, Lisa's dog, no longer a puppy. He looked exactly like Tom Walker's dog, Moose.

"A girl dog named Bob," Sara mused.

"Boss said if Johnny Cash could have a boy named 'Sue,' he could have a girl dog named Bob."

"She's so pretty," Sara said. "And the puppies are just precious!"

"Three males, two females," he said. "Tom's got first choice, since they're Moose's grandkids." He shook his head. "He's taking Moose's loss hard. He loved that old dog, even though he was a disaster in the house."

"Moose saved Tom's daughter from a rattler," Sara reminded him. "He was a real hero."

"You want a chair?" he asked.

"This old stool will do fine. Thanks anyway." She pulled up the rickety stool, opened her pad and took her pencils out of her hip pocket.

"Will it make you nervous if I watch?"

She grinned up at him. "Of course not."

He lolled against the stall wall and folded his arms, concentrating on the way her hand flew over the page, the pencil quickly bringing the puppies to life on the off-white sheet. "You're really good," he said, surprised.

"Only thing I was ever good at in school," she murmured while she drew. She was also noting the pattern of colors on the pups and shading her drawing to match. Then she wrote down the colors, so she wouldn't forget them when she started doing the illustrations for her book in pastels.

"I can fix anything mechanical," he said, "but I can't draw a straight line."

"We all have our talents, Harley," she said. "It wouldn't do for all of us to be good at the same thing."

"No, it wouldn't, I guess."

She sketched some more in a personable silence.

"I wanted to ask you in the bookstore, but we got interrupted," he began. "There's going to be a concert at the high school this Saturday. They're hosting a performance by the San Antonio Symphony Orchestra. I wondered if, well, if you'd like to go. With me," he added.

She looked up, her soft eyes smiling. "Well, yes, I would," she said. "I'd thought about it, because they're doing Debussy, and he's my favorite composer. But I didn't have the nerve to go by myself."

He chuckled, encouraged. "Then it's a date. We could leave earlier and have supper at the Chinese place. If you like Chinese?"

"I love it. Thanks."

"Then I'll pick you up about five on Saturday. Okay?"

She smiled at him. He was really nice. "Okay."

He glanced out of the barn at his horse, which was getting restless. "I'd better get back out to the pasture. We're dipping cattle and the vet's checking them over. I'll see you Saturday."

"Thanks, Harley."

"Thank *you*."

She watched him walk away. He was good-looking, local and pleasant to be around. What a difference from that complaining, bad-tempered rancher who hadn't even sympathized with her when she'd almost drowned delivering his stupid books!

Now why had she thought about Jared Cameron? She forced herself to concentrate on the puppies.

Harley picked her up at five on Saturday in his aged, but clean, red pickup truck. He was wearing a suit, and he looked pretty good. Sara wore a simple black dress with her mother's pearls and scuffed black high-heeled shoes that she hoped wouldn't be noticed. She draped a lacy black mantilla around her shoulders.

"You look very nice," Harley said. "I figure there will be people there in jeans and shorts, but I always feel you should dress up to go to a fancy concert."

"So do I," she agreed. "At least it isn't raining," she added.

"I wish it would," he replied. "That nice shower we got last Saturday is long gone, and the crops are suffering. We're still in drought conditions."

"Don't mention that shower," she muttered. "I was out in it, sliding all over Jeff Bridges Road in my VW, bogged up to my knees in mud, just to deliver Jared Cameron's books!"

He glanced at her. "Why didn't he go to the store and get them himself?"

"He's very busy."

He burst out laughing. "Hell! Everyone's very busy. He could spare thirty minutes to drive into town. God knows, he's got half a dozen cars. That big fella who works for him is something of a mechanic in his spare time. He keeps the fleet on the road."

"What sort of cars?" she asked curiously.

"There's a sixties Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow, a thirties Studebaker and several assorted sports cars, mostly classics. He collects old cars and refurbishes them."

"He arrived at our store in a truck," she said flatly.

"From time to time that big fella wearing fancy suits drives him around."

"Do you know where he came from?"

Harley shook his head. "Somebody said he was from Montana, but I'm not sure. He came here for a funeral about eight months ago. Nobody can remember whose."

"A relative, you think?"

He shrugged. “It was at one of the old country churches. Mount Hebron Baptist, I think.”

“That’s where I go to church,” she said, frowning. “Grandad’s buried there. But I don’t remember reading about any funeral in the bulletin for out-of-town people.”

“It was a private service, they said. Just ashes, not even a coffin.”

She pursed her lips and whistled softly. “I wouldn’t like to be burned.”

“I would,” he said, grinning at her. “A true Viking’s funeral. Nothing wrong with that. Then they can put you in a nice-looking urn and set you on the mantel above the fireplace. Nice and neat. No upkeep.”

She laughed. “Harley, you’re terrible!”

“Yes, but I do have saving graces. I can whistle and carry a tune. Oh, and I can gather eggs. Just ask the boss’s wife!”

* * *

They had a nice meal at the local Chinese restaurant and then Harley drove them to the high school. There were a lot of people on hand for the rare big city musical talent. Both Ballengers and their wives and teenaged kids, and a few of the Tremaynes and two Hart brothers and their families.

Harley caught Sara’s arm gently to help her up onto the sidewalk from the parking lot, and then let his fingers accidentally catch in hers. She didn’t object. She’d always liked Harley. It was nice, to have a man find her attractive, even if it was just in a friendly way.

He was smiling down at her when they almost collided with a man in line. The man, nicely dressed in a suit and a wide-brimmed top-of-the-line John B. Stetson cowboy hat, turned his head back toward them and green eyes glared belligerently.

“Sorry, Mr. Cameron,” Harley said at once.

Jared Cameron gave them both a speaking glance and turned his attention back to the line, which was rapidly moving inside. When he was out of earshot, Sara muttered, “He ran into us. You didn’t have to apologize.”

He chuckled. “It isn’t the place for a skirmish, you know,” he teased.

She grimaced. “Sorry, Harley. I don’t like him, that’s all. He’s too full of himself.”

“He’s just bought that huge ranch,” he reminded her. “He must live on a higher level than most of us. I guess he thinks he’s above normal courtesies.”

She only nodded. She hadn’t liked the antagonism in the tall man’s eyes when he’d looked at Harley.

They got their tickets and found seats as far away from Jared Cameron as Sara could possibly manage. Then she lost herself in the beautiful musical landscapes created by the themes of Claude Debussy. Harley seemed to enjoy the concert as much as she did. It was nice to have something in common.

On the way out, they noticed Jared Cameron speaking earnestly with Police Chief Cash Grier, who’d shown up just after the concert began and stood at the back of the room. Sara wondered what they were talking about. But it was none of her business.

It was ten o’clock when Harley dropped her off at her home. She smiled up at him. “Thanks, Harley. I had a really nice time.”

“So did I. Want to go to a movie next Friday?”

Her heart jumped pleasantly. He liked her! She beamed. “Yes. I would.”

He chuckled. “That’s great!”

He hesitated. So did she. Her experience of men was extremely limited. Her upbringing had been strict and unrelenting on the issue of morals. Her past wasn’t widely known around Jacobsville, but her reputation was rock-solid. It was why she hadn’t dated much. Harley knew that. But it didn’t seem to bother him overmuch. After a minute’s deliberation, he bent and brushed his mouth briefly, softly over hers. “Good night, Sara.”

She smiled. “Good night, Harley.”

He jumped back into the truck, waved and took off down the driveway,

She watched the truck disappear into the distance, frowning as she considered that brief kiss. It hadn't touched her. She liked Harley. She'd have loved having a steady boyfriend, just for the novelty of the thing. But she hadn't felt anything when he kissed her. Maybe you just had to work up to those feelings, she told herself as she unlocked her door and went inside. It was early days in their relationship. They had plenty of time to experiment.

* * *

It was the week after the concert before her nemesis placed another order. This time he did it on the telephone, and to Dee, who got to the telephone first early Monday morning.

"What a selection," Dee exclaimed when she hung up. She read down the list, shaking her head. "Greek and Roman writers of the classics, some science fiction, two books on drug interdiction and two on South American politics. Oh, and one on independent contractors. Mercenaries."

"Maybe he's thinking of starting a war," Sara offered. "In some other country, of course." She pursed her lips and her eyes twinkled. "Maybe he's anxious to skip town because he's so fascinated by me!"

Dee looked at her over her glasses. "Excuse me?"

"It's just a theory I'm working on," she said facetiously. "I mean, I'm growing into a femme fatale. Harley Fowler can't resist me. What if my fatal charm has worked its magic on Mr. Cameron and he's running scared? He might feel a need to escape before he gets addicted to me!"

"Sara, do you feel all right?"

Sara just grinned. "I never felt better."

"If you say so. I'll get these ordered." She glanced at Sara. "He wants you to take them out to him on Saturday."

Sara grimaced. "He just likes ruining my weekends."

"He hardly knows you, dear. I'm sure it's not that."

Sara didn't answer her.

On Thursday, Harley phoned with bad news. "I have to fly to Denver on business for the boss, and I'll be gone a week or more," he said miserably. "So we can't go to the movies on Friday."

"That's all right, Harley," she assured him. "There will be a movie left when you get back that we can go see. Honest."

He laughed. "You make everything so easy, Sara."

"You have a safe trip."

"I'll do my best. Take care."

"You, too."

She hung up and wondered idly why Harley had to go out of town just before they went on another date. It was as if fate was working against her. She'd looked forward to it, too. Now all she had to anticipate was delivering books to the ogre. It wasn't a happy thought. Not at all.

Well, she told herself, it could always be worse. She could be dating HIM—the ogre.

Three

Sara took the ogre's books home with her on Friday, just as she had the last time, so that she didn't have to go to town. At least it wasn't pouring rain when she went out to her car early Saturday morning to make the drive to the White Horse Ranch.

This time, he was waiting for her on the porch. He was leaning against one of the posts with his hands in his jean pockets. Like last time, he was wearing working garb. Same disreputable boots and hat, same unpleasant expression. Sara tried not to notice what an incredible physique he had, or how handsome he was. It wouldn't do to let him know how attractive she found him.

He looked pointedly at his watch as she came up the steps. "Five minutes late," he remarked.

Her eyebrows arched. "I am not," she shot back. "My watch says ten, exactly."

"My watch is better than yours," he countered.

"I guess so, if you judge it by the amount of gold on the band instead of the mechanics inside it," she retorted.

"You're testy for a concert goer," he returned. He smiled, and it wasn't sarcastic. "You like Debussy, do you?"

"Yes."

"Who else?"

She was taken aback by the question. "I like Resphigi, Rachmaninoff, Haydn and some modern composers like the late Basil Poledouris and Jerry Goldsmith. I also like James Horner, Danny Elfman, Harry Gregson-Williams and James Newton Howard."

He eyed her curiously. "I thought a country girl like you would prefer fiddles to violins."

"Well, even here in Outer Cowpasture, we know what culture is," she countered.

He chuckled deeply. "I stand corrected. What came in?" he asked, nodding toward the books she was carrying.

She handed the bag to him. He looked over the titles, nodding and pulled a check out of his pocket, handing it to her.

"Is it serious?" he asked abruptly.

She just stared at him. "Is what serious?"

"You and the cowboy at the concert. What's his name, Fowler?"

"Harley Fowler. We're friends."

"Just friends?"

"Listen, I've already been asked that question nine times this week. Just because I go out with a man, it doesn't mean I'm ready to have his children."

Something touched his eyes and made them cold. His faintly friendly air went into eclipse. "Thanks for bringing the books out," he said abruptly. He turned and went in the house without another word, closing the door firmly behind him.

Sara went back to her car, dumbfounded. She couldn't imagine what she'd said to make him turn off like a blown lightbulb.

The next day she went to church and then treated herself to a nice lunch at Barbara's Café in town. The ogre's odd behavior had disturbed her. She couldn't understand what she'd said to put that look on his lean face. She was upset because she didn't understand. She wasn't a woman who went around trying to hurt other people, even when they deserved it.

After lunch, on an impulse she drove back to her church, parked her car and walked out into the cemetery. She wanted to see her grandfather's grave and make sure the silk flowers she'd put there for Father's Day—today—were still in place. Sometimes the wind blew them around. She liked talking to him as well; catching him up on all the latest news around town. It would probably look as if she were crazy if anyone overheard her. But she didn't care. If she wanted to think her grandfather could hear her at his grave, that was nobody else's business.

She paused at his headstone and stooped down to remove a weed that was trying to grow just beside the tombstone. Her grandmother was buried beside him, but Sara had never known her. She'd been a very small child when she died.

She patted the tombstone. "Hello, Grandad," she said softly. "I hope you're in a happy place with Granny. I sure do miss you. Especially in the summer. Remember how much fun we had going fishing together? You caught that big bass the last time, and fell in the river trying to get him reeled in." She laughed softly. "You said he was the tastiest fish you'd ever eaten."

She tugged at another weed. "There's this new guy in town. You'd like him. He loves to read and he owns a big ranch. He's sort of like an ogre, though. Very antisocial. He thinks I look like a bag lady…"

She stopped talking when she realized she wasn't alone in the cemetery. Toward the far corner, a familiar figure was tugging weeds away from a tombstone, patting it with his hand. Talking to it. She hadn't even heard him drive up.

Without thinking of the consequences, she went toward him. Here, among the tombstones, there was no thought of causing trouble. It was a place people came to remember, to honor their dead.

She stopped just behind him and read the tombstone. "Ellen Marist Cameron," it said. She would have been nine years old, today.

He felt her there and turned. His eyes were cold, full of pain, full of hurt.

"Your daughter," she guessed softly.

"Killed in a wreck," he replied tonelessly. "She'd gone to the zoo with a girlfriend and her parents. On the way back, a drunk driver crossed the median and t-boned them on the side my daughter was occupying. She died instantly."

"I'm sorry."

He cocked his head. "Why are you here?"

"I come to talk to my grandad," she confessed, avoiding his eyes. "He died recently of a massive coronary. He was all the family I had left."

He nodded slowly. "She—" he indicated the tombstone "—was all the family I had left. My parents are long dead. My wife died of a drug overdose a week after Ellen was killed." He looked out across the crop of tombstones with blank eyes. "My grandfather used to live here. I thought it was a good place to put her, next to him."

So that was the funeral he'd come here to attend. His child. No wonder he was bitter. "What was she like?" she asked.

He looked down at her curiously. "Most people try to avoid the subject. They know it's painful, so they say nothing."

"It hurts more not to talk about them," she said simply. "I miss my grandfather every day. He was my best friend. He taught history at the local college. We went fishing together on weekends."

"She liked to swim," he said, indicating the tombstone. "She was on a swim team at her elementary school. She was a whiz at computers," he added, laughing softly. "I'd be floundering around trying to find a Web site, and she'd make two keystrokes and bring it up on the screen. She was…a child…of great promise." His voice broke.

Without counting the cost, Sara stepped right up against him and put her arms around him. She held on tight.

She felt the shock run through him. He hesitated, but only for a minute. His own arms slid around her. He held her close while the wind blew around them, through the tall trees that lined the country cemetery. It was like being alone in the world. Tony Danzetta was out of sight watching, of course, even if he couldn't be seen. Jared couldn't be out of his sight, even at a time like this.

He let out a long breath, and some of the tension seemed to drain out of him. "I couldn't talk about her. There's a hole in my life so deep that nothing fills it. She was my world, and while she was growing up, I was working myself to death making money. I never had time to go to those swim meets, or take her places on holidays. I wasn't even there last Christmas, because I was working a deal in South America and I had to fly to Argentina to close it. She was supposed to spend Christmas with me. She had Thanksgiving with her mother." He drew in a ragged breath and his arms involuntarily contracted around Sara's slim figure. "She never complained. She was happy with whatever time I could spare for her. I wish I'd done more. I never thought we'd run out of time. Not this soon."

"Nobody is ever ready for death," Sara said, eyes closed as she listened to the steady, reassuring heartbeat under her ear. "I knew Grandad was getting old, but I didn't want to see it. So I pretended everything was fine. I lost my parents years ago. Grandad and I were the only family left."

She felt him nodding.

"Did she look like you?" she asked.

"She had my coloring. But she had her mother's hair. She wasn't pretty, but she made people feel good just being around her. She thought she was ugly. I was always trying to explain to her that beauty isn't as important as character and personality."

There was a long, quiet, warm silence.

"Why did you decide to live here?" she asked suddenly.

He hesitated. "It was a business decision," he replied, withdrawing into himself. "I thought new surroundings might help."

She pulled back and his arms fell away from her. She felt oddly chilled. "Does it help?"

He searched her eyes quietly. After a minute, the intensity of the look brought a flaming blush to her cheeks and she looked down abruptly.

He laughed softly at her embarrassment. "You're bashful."

"I am not. It's just hot," she protested, putting a little more distance between them. Her heart was racing and she felt oddly hot. That wouldn't do at all. She didn't dare show weakness to the enemy.

"It wasn't an insult," he said after a minute. "There's nothing wrong with being shy." His eyes narrowed. "Who looks after you, if you get sick? Your boss?"

"Dee's wonderful, but she's not responsible for me. I look out for myself." She glanced at him. "How about you?"

He shrugged. "If it looked like I was dying, Tony the Dancer would probably call somebody if he was around—if he wasn't on holiday or having days off. My lawyer might send a doctor out, if it was serious and somebody called."

"But would they take care of you?" she persisted.

"That's not their job."

She drew in a long breath. "I know you don't like me. But maybe we could look out for each other."

His dark eyebrows lifted. "Be each other's family, in other words."

"No ties," she said at once. "We'd just be there if one of us was sick."

He seemed to be seriously considering it. "I had flu and almost died last winter," he said quietly. "It was just after I lost my daughter. If Tony hadn't come back early from Christmas holidays, I guess I'd have died. It went into pneumonia and I was too sick and weak to get help."

"Something like that happened to me this year," she said. "I got sick and I had this horrible pain in my stomach. I stayed in bed for days until I could get up and go back to work. It was probably just the stomach bug that was going around, but I thought, what if it was something serious? I couldn't even get to the phone."

He nodded. "I've had the same thoughts. Okay. Suppose we do that?"

She smiled. "It's not such a bad idea, is it?"

"Not bad at all."

"I would be more amenable to the plan if you'd stop treating me like a bag lady," she added.

"Stop dressing like one," he suggested.

She glowered up at him. "I am not dressed like a bag lady."

"Your socks never match. Your jeans look like they've been worn by a grizzly bear. Your T-shirts all have pictures or writing on them."

"When you're working, you don't look all that tidy yourself," she countered, not comfortable with telling him the truth about her odd apparel, "and I wouldn't dare ask what you got on your boots to make them smell so bad."

His eyes began to twinkle. "Want to know? It was," and he gave her the vernacular for it so wickedly that she blushed.

"You're a bad man."

He studied her closely. "If you want to be my family, you have to stop saying unkind things to me. Give a dog a bad name," he said suggestively.

"I'd have to work on that," she replied.

He drew in a long breath as he glanced back at the small grave. "Why did you come out here today?"

She smiled sadly. "Today is Father's Day. I put some new silk flowers on Grandad's grave. Sometimes the wind blows them away. I wanted to make sure they were still there."

"I meant to call one of the local florists and get them to come out and put a fresh bouquet on her grave. But I've had some business problems lately," he added without specifying what they were. "I write myself notes about things like that." He smiled wryly. "Then I misplace the notes."

"I do that all the time," she confessed.

He cocked his head, staring at her. "Why can't you wear things that match?" he asked, noting that she had on mismatched earrings.

She grimaced. It was much too early in their ambiguous relationship to tell him the real reason. She lied instead. "I'm always in a hurry. I just put on whatever comes to hand. Around town, people know I do it and nobody makes fun of me." She hesitated. "That's not quite true. When I came here to live with Grandad, some of the local kids made it hard on me."

"Why?"

"Well, my mother wasn't exactly pure as the driven snow," she confessed. "She had affairs with three or four local men, and broke up marriages. The children of those divorces couldn't get to her, but I was handy."

She said it matter-of-factly, without blame. He scowled. "You should sound bitter, shouldn't you?" he queried.

She smiled up at him. "Giving back what you get sounds good, but these days you can end up in jail for fighting at school. I didn't want to cause Grandad any more pain than Mom already had. You see, he was a college professor, very conservative. What she did embarrassed and humiliated him. One of her lovers was his department head at college. She did it deliberately. She hated Grandad."

His eyes narrowed. "Can I ask why?"

That was another question she didn't feel comfortable answering. Her eyes lowered to his tie. "I'm not really sure," she prevaricated.

He knew she was holding something back. Her body language was blatant. He wondered if she realized it.

Another question presented itself. He frowned. "Just how old are you?"

She looked up, grinning. "I'm not telling."

He pursed his lips, considering. "You haven't lost your illusions about life, yet," he mused, noting the odd flicker of her eyelids when he said it. "I'd say you haven't hit your mid-twenties yet, but you're close."

He'd missed it, but she didn't let on. "You're not bad," she lied.

He stuck his hands in the pockets of his slacks and looked at the sky. "No rain yet. Probably none for another week, the meteorologists say," he remarked. "We need it badly."

"I know. We used to have this old guy, Elmer Randall, who worked at the newspaper office helping to run the presses. He was part Comanche. Every time we had a drought, he'd get into his tribal clothes and go out and do ceremonies outside town."

"Did it work?" he asked with real interest.

She laughed. "One time after he did it, we had a flood. It almost always rained. Nobody could figure it out. He said his grandfather had been a powerful shaman and rode with Quanah Parker." She shrugged. "People believe what they want to, but I thought he might really have a gift. Certainly, nobody told him to stop."

"Whatever works," he agreed. He checked his watch. "I'd better get home. I'm expecting a phone call from Japan."

"Do you speak the language?"

He laughed. “I try to. But the company I’m merging with has plenty of translators.”

“I’ll bet Japan is an interesting place,” she said with dreamy eyes. “I’ve never been to Asia in my whole life.”

He looked surprised. “I thought everybody traveled these days.”

“We never had the money,” she said simply. “Grandad’s idea of international travel was to buy Fodor’s Guides to the countries that interested him. He spent his spare cash on books, hundreds of books.”

“He taught history, you said. What was his period?”

She hesitated as she looked up at his lean, handsome face. Wouldn’t it sound too pat and coincidental to tell him the truth?

He frowned. “Well?”

She grimaced. “World War II,” she confessed. “The North African theater of war.”

His intake of breath was audible. “You didn’t mention that when I ordered books on the subject.”

“I thought it would sound odd,” she said. “I mean, here you were, a total stranger looking for books on that subject, and my grandfather taught it. It seems like some weird coincidence.”

“Yes, but they do happen.” He moved restlessly. “Did he have autobiographies?”

“Yes, all sorts of first person accounts on both sides of the battle. His favorite subjects were German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and General George Patton, but he liked the point of view of the 9th Australian Division, as well as British General Bernard Montgomery’s memoirs.”

“I asked the high school age son of one of my vice presidents which of the generals he liked to read about when he was studying history. He said they hadn’t taught him about any individual officers. He didn’t even know who Rommel was.”

The allusion to vice presidents went right by her. She smiled sheepishly. She’d only graduated from high school two years before, and he didn’t know that. “I didn’t, either, from high school courses,” she confessed. “But Grandad was good for a two-hour lecture on any subject I mentioned.”

He pursed his lips, really interested. “Who was the last commander of the British Eighth Army before Montgomery in North Africa?”

She chuckled. “You don’t think I know, do you? It was Auchinleck—Sir Claude. He was a big, redheaded man, and his wife was from America.”

His eyebrows arched. “You’re good. What was Rommel’s wife called?”

“Her name was Lucie, but he called her Lu. They had a son, Manfred, who eventually became Lord Mayor of Stuttgart, Germany.” She wiggled her eyebrows at him. “Want to know what sort of anti-tank field artillery Rommel used that confounded the British generals? It was the 88 millimeter antiaircraft gun. He camouflaged them and then lured the British tanks within firing range. They thought it was some sort of super weapon, but they were just regular antiaircraft weapons. One captured officer told Rommel that it wasn’t fair to use them against tanks. But it was war.”

“It was.” He was looking at her in a totally different way than he had before. “Do you ever loan books?”

She frowned. “Well, I never have before. But I might make an exception for you. Grandad would have loved talking with you about North Africa.”

“I would have enjoyed it, too.” He glanced again at his watch. “Lord, I’m late!”

“I have to get back home, too.” She looked down at the tombstone. “I’m sorry about your daughter.”

He sobered. “I’m sorry about your grandfather. Holidays are the worst times, aren’t they? I stayed drunk for two days last Christmas. It was my first without her.”

“I don’t drink,” she replied. “But my heart wasn’t in celebrating. I spent Christmas day at one of the senior citizen homes, reading to a lady who didn’t get any company.”

He reached out unexpectedly and touched her hair. “I wouldn’t have guessed you had so many soft spots. Sara. Isn’t it?”

She nodded, thrilled by the faint caress. “Sara Dobbs.”

He smiled tenderly. “I’ll be in touch.”

She smiled back, her eyes twinkling with emotion. “See you.”

He drove off in a fancy red sports car like ones she’d seen on televised auto shows. She smiled as she considered his interest in her because of Grandad’s favorite subject. First Harley, now the iron cowboy. She felt better than she had in years.

But she wondered if her ogre would still be interested if he found out how young she was. She’d just keep that to herself, she decided, like her past. There was no need for him to know anything about either subject yet. And by the time there was…well, maybe it wouldn’t matter anymore.

* * *

On Thursday, when she got home from work, she sorted out Grandad’s books, carefully pairing subject matter with time period, in case Jared Cameron wanted to borrow one. She knew her grandfather wouldn’t have minded. He enjoyed teaching students about the amazing contradictions of the North African theater, where what many called a “gentleman’s war” was fought. Rommel had actually called a truce during one bloody battle and sent his men to help move Allied wounded off the battlefield.

Patton had entered the campaign too late to face off against Rommel, but he had read Rommel’s book about the strategy and tactics of World War I. The general was known for his own lightning strike sort of attack; he said that fewer soldiers were lost when battles were won quickly. Both soldiers led from the front, and both were respected by not only their own men, but by the enemy as well.

Her hands touched a book by a missionary who’d worked in Africa and stilled. This had been one of Grandad’s favorite biographies, although it had nothing to do with World War II. The author of the book was a physician. He’d gone to Africa, sanctioned as a missionary, and remained there for many years treating natives. The book had inspired Grandad to missionary work, but he’d chosen to become a college educator instead. He’d regretted his decision later in life and had sold the idea wholesale to his daughter’s husband.

Sara put the book aside, shoving it into a bookcase with undue savagery. If only he’d realized what the consequences of his fervor for mission work would be…

She stacked the books she was through sorting and got up. Morris was crying to be fed.

As she moved into the kitchen, she felt suddenly nauseous, and that pain in her stomach came back full force. She managed to get the sack of dry cat food and poured some of it into his bowl. Then she sat down and groaned. She was so sick she could barely move. It hurt to move, anyway.

She rested her forehead on her forearm, draped across the scarred little kitchen table where she and Grandad always had meals. She was sweating. It wasn’t that hot in the house. She had a window air conditioner, and it was running full tilt.

These sick spells were getting closer together. Could she be having the same virus week after week? she wondered. Or could it be something else?

Her grandmother had suffered from gallbladder disease. She remembered, barely, the old lady being taken to the hospital when Sara was about four years old to have an operation. Doctors had removed it. She recalled that old Mrs. Franklin had complained of terrible pain in her stomach and feeling nauseous.

But gallbladder problems were in the upper right area of the abdomen. This felt like it was dead-center. Could she possibly have an ulcer?

It would pass, she told herself. She’d just sit very still and not move around and it would go away, like it always did.

But it didn’t go away. An hour later, it hurt to walk and nausea washed over her unexpectedly. She barely made it to the bathroom in time to lose her breakfast. The pain was horrible. She’d never felt anything like it. She felt feverish as well. Something was wrong. Something bad.

She crawled to the phone in the living room and pulled it down on the floor with her. She pressed in 911.

When the dispatcher answered, she gave her symptoms and then her name and address. The lady told her to stay on the line while she sent the paramedics out.

Sara leaned back against the wall, so sick she couldn't bear the thought of being moved. The pain was in her side, her right side. It was so bad that even the lightest touch of her fingers caused her to jump.

Morris, sensing that something was wrong, came into the living room and rubbed against her, purring. She petted him, but she couldn't let him get into her lap.

Fortunately she hadn't locked up for the night. She'd managed to reach up and turn on the porch light. When the paramedics knocked, she shouted for them to come in.

One of them was a girl she'd gone to high school with, a brunette with short hair who'd been kind to her when other students hadn't been.

"Hi, Lucy," Sara managed as the woman bent over her with a stethoscope.

"Hi, Sara. Where does it hurt?"

Sara showed her. When Lucy pressed her fingers against it, Sara came up off the floor, groaning.

The three paramedics looked at each other.

Lucy put the thermometer into Sara's ear. "A hundred and two," she remarked. "Any nausea?"

"Yes," Sara groaned.

"Okay, we're taking you in to the hospital. What do you need us to do?"

"Get my purse on the sofa and make sure I've turned off everything and then lock the door with the key that's in this side of the dead bolt," she said weakly.

"Will do. Curt, can you check the appliances and turn off the lights?"

"Sure. What about the cat?"

"He can stay here, he's been fed and he has a litter box. I'll get my boss to run out and feed him tomorrow…" She sat back with a sigh. "My goodness, it stopped hurting," she said, smiling at Lucy. "I may not need to go to the hospital…"

"Get her loaded, stat!" Lucy said at once, and moved away to speak into the microphone on her shoulder so that Sara couldn't hear. She nodded as the reply came back. When she turned, Sara was on her way into the ambulance, arguing all the way. She wouldn't know until hours later that the cessation of pain had been a signal that her appendix had perforated. If she'd argued successfully to stay home, she'd have been dead by morning.

Four

It was all a blur to Sara. She was surprised that they'd prepped her for surgery and had her sign a consent form only minutes after she arrived at the hospital.

Dr. "Copper" Coltrain, the redheaded local surgeon, was already masked and gowned when they wheeled her in.

"Hi, Dr. Coltrain," Sara said, her voice drowsy from the preop meds. "Are you going to carve me up?"

"Only your appendix, Sara," he replied with a chuckle. "You won't even miss it, I promise."

"But it feels fine now."

"I imagine so. That's a very bad sign. It means it's perforated."

"What's that?" she asked, while a capped, gowned and masked woman beside her put something in a syringe into the drip that led down to the needle in her arm.

"It's something to make you comfortable," came the reply. "Count backward from a hundred for me, will you?"

Sara smiled, sleepy. "Sure. One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety…"

She came to in the recovery room, dazed and completely confused. She wanted to ask them what they'd done to her, but her lips wouldn't work.

A nurse came in and checked her. "Awake, are we?" she asked pleasantly. "Good!"

"Did Dr. Coltrain take out my appendix?"

"Yes, dear," the nurse replied.

Sara closed her eyes again and went back to sleep.

One of the great unsolved mysteries of small town life is how quickly word gets around if someone local is injured or killed. The process seems to consist largely of word of mouth. Someone who works at the hospital is related to someone who owns a small business, and phone traffic increases exponentially. Soon after the incident, it's an open secret.

Exactly how Jared Cameron found out that Sara's appendix had gone ballistic was never known. But he showed up about the time they'd moved Sara into a semiprivate room.

Tony Danzetta came with him and stood quietly outside the hospital room while Jared walked into it. The nurse who was making Sara comfortable and checking her vitals did a double take when she saw him and his companion.

"Don't mind Tony," Jared told her. "He goes everywhere with me."

Sara peered at him past the nurse. "Don't worry about it," she told the nurse in a still-drowsy tone. "He's not the only man who carries protection around with him."

The nurse burst out laughing. So did Jared.

Sara closed her eyes and drifted off again.

* * *

The second time she awoke, it was to find Jared lounging in the chair beside her bed. He was wearing working clothes. He looked really good in denim, she considered through a mixture of drugs and pain. He was very handsome. She didn't realize she'd said it out loud until he raised both eyebrows.

"Sorry," she apologized.

He smiled. "How do you feel?"

"I'm not sure how to put it into words." She looked past him at Tony, still standing patiently outside her room. "I seem to have lost my appendix. Do you suppose you could send Tony the Dancer out to look for it?"

"It's long gone by now. You'll improve. While you're improving, I'm taking you home with me."

She blinked. "That will cause gossip."

"It won't matter to your friends and what your enemies think doesn't matter to you. Or it shouldn't."

"Put that way," she agreed, "I guess you're right."

"You can't stay at your house alone, in this condition."

"What about Morris?"

"Tony the Dancer drove over to your house and fed him on his way here," he said carelessly. "He'll look after your cat until you're able to go home."

She was too groggy to wonder how Tony had gotten inside her house. The EMTs had locked it. She moved and grimaced. "I didn't realize that an appendix could kill you."

"It can if it perforates. Those stomach pains you were having were probably a symptom of chronic appendicitis," he said.

"I guess so. I never thought it might be dangerous. How long have you been here?"

"Since they took you in to surgery," he said surprisingly. "Tony and I went out to supper until you were in recovery, then we sat in the waiting room until they put you in a room."

Her eyelids felt heavy. "It was nice of you to come."

"We're each other's family, remember?" he asked, and he didn't smile. "I take responsibilities seriously."

"Thanks," she said weakly.

"Not necessary. Try to go back to sleep. The more rest you get, the faster you'll heal."

She stared at him a little drowsily. "Will you be here, when I wake up?"

"Yes," he said quietly.

She tried to smile, but she wasn't able to get her lips to move. She fell back into the comfortable softness of sleep.

It hurt to move. She tried to turn over, and it felt as if her stomach was going to come apart. She groaned.

The big man who went around with the ogre came and stood over her. He had large dark eyes, and heavy black eyebrows. His dark, wavy hair was in a ponytail. He had an olive complexion. He was frowning.

"Do you need something for pain?" he asked in a voice like rumbling thunder.

Her eyes managed to focus. He looked foreign. But he had that Georgia drawl. Maybe he was of Italian heritage and raised in the South.

He grinned, showing perfect white teeth. "I'm not Italian. I'm Cherokee."

She hadn't realized that she'd spoken her thoughts aloud. The painkilling drugs seemed to be affecting her in odd ways. "You're Mr. Danzetta," she said. "I thought you were a hit man."

He laughed out loud. "I prevent hits," he replied. "I'm Tony. Nobody calls me Mr. Danzetta." The frown was back. "It hurts, huh?"

"It does," she managed weakly.

He touched the call button. A voice came over it. "May I help you?"

"This young lady could use something for pain," he replied.

"I'll be right there."

Minutes later, a nurse came into the room, smiling. "Dr. Coltrain left orders so that you could have something for pain."

"It feels like my body's been cut in half," Sara confessed.

"This will help you feel better," she said, adding some thing to the drip that was feeding her fluids. "It will be automatic now."

"Thanks," Sara said, grimacing. "I sure never thought losing a tiny little thing like an appendix would hurt so much."

"You were in bad shape when you came in," she replied. She glanced at Tony the Dancer curiously. "Are you a relative?"

"Who, me? No. I work for Mr. Cameron."

The nurse was confused. "Is he related to Miss Dobbs?"

Tony hesitated. "Sort of."

"No, he's not," Sara murmured, smiling. "But Mr. Cameron doesn't have any family left, and neither do I. So we said we'd take care of each other if one of us got sick."

"The boss said that?" Tony asked, his dark eyebrows arching.

The nurse frowned. "How can you be deaf with ears like that?" she wondered.

Tony glared at her. "I am not deaf."

"I should think not," she agreed, paying deliberate attention to his large ears.

"Listen, I may have big ears, but you've got a big mouth," he shot right back.

The pert little brunette gave him a gimlet stare. "The better to bite you with, my dear," she drawled. "You've been warned."

She wiggled her eyebrows at him before she turned back to Sara. "If you need me, just call. I'm on until midnight."

"Thanks," Sara told her.

She winked, gave the bodyguard a glance and waltzed out of the room.

Tony made a rough sound in his throat. "My ears are not big," he muttered.

Sara wouldn't have dared disagree.

He glowered. “People are supposed to be nice to you in hospitals.”

“Only when you’re sick,” Sara told him, smiling. “Thanks, Tony,” she said as the pain began to diminish, just a little.

“No problem.”

“Where’s Mr. Cameron?”

“He had a phone call to return,” he said, and looked worried.

“Do you go everywhere with him?”

“Well, not everywhere,” he replied. “He gets antsy if I follow him into the restroom.”

“I never knew anybody who had a bodyguard,” she told him. She moved drowsily. “In fact, I never knew a bodyguard.”

“First time for everything,” he said, and he smiled.

She smiled back. He’d looked frightening the first time she saw him, standing beside Jared’s truck outside the bookstore. But now he was starting to resemble a big teddy bear. She closed her eyes and went to sleep, but not before she heard a soft, deep chuckle. She’d said it aloud.

Jared walked in with a scowl, pausing to stare at Sara, who was fast asleep. “Did they give her something for pain?” he asked Tony.

The big man nodded. He wasn’t smiling now. He looked both intelligent and dangerous. “Is something going on?” Jared looked toward the door, paused to push it shut and put his cell phone away. “Max thinks they may have tracked me here.”

“That isn’t good,” Tony replied.

“We expected it,” Jared reminded him. “We’ll have to be extravigilant is all. I told the foreman to put a man with a rifle at the front gate and keep him there, even if he has to have catered meals.” He cursed under his breath. “I hate hiding out,” he said harshly. “If they’d let me do what I please, we could have handled this on our own, and more efficiently. They’re going to protect me to death!”

“Not here,” Tony said slowly. “You know they’re doing the best they can. Meanwhile, this is the best place to be.”

Jared let out a long breath. “It’s the waiting.”

Tony nodded. He glanced toward the bed. “What about her?” he asked. “She isn’t going to be in the line of fire, is she?”

The other man stuck his hands in his pockets and looked stern. “She hasn’t got anybody else.”

“Yes, but she has no idea what’s going on. She could become a target.”

Jared glared at him. “Then you’ll just have to call in a marker and get some backup, won’t you?”

Tony sighed. “I gave up a hot tub and HD TV to come down here.”

The glare got worse. “Don’t blame me. I was willing to come alone. Your *boss* decided I needed baby-sitting,” Jared said irritably.

“My boss was right,” Tony replied. He shrugged. “I guess I can live without the hot tub for a few weeks.”

Jared put a hand on his shoulder. “Sure you can. You need to reread Sun Tzu.”

“I can quote it verbatim,” Tony told him. “This isn’t my first job.”

Jared chuckled. “No. Of course it’s not.” He stared back at Sara. “We can’t let them hurt her.”

“We won’t,” Tony replied. “I promise.”

Jared relaxed a little. But just a little.

Sara woke up and it was dark again. She’d slept for a long time. She looked around curiously. She was alone, but there was a cowboy hat occupying the seat beside her bed. It looked familiar.

The door opened, and Harley Fowler walked in, carrying a foam cup of coffee. “You’re awake,” he exclaimed, smiling.

“Hi, Harley,” she replied, returning the smile. “Nice of you to come check up on me.”

“I had tonight free.”

“No date?” she asked with mock surprise as he moved his hat and sat down.

He chuckled. “Not tonight.”

“No exciting missions, either?” she teased, recalling that he’d helped some of the local mercs shut down a drug dealer two years before.

“Interesting that you should mention that,” he replied, his eyes twinkling. “We’ve had word that the drug cartel has reorganized again and been taken over by a new group. We don’t know who they are. But there’s some buzz that we may have trouble here before long.”

“That’s not encouraging,” she said.

“I know.” He sipped coffee. He looked somber. “Two DEA agents bought it on the border this week. Execution-style. Cobb’s fuming. My boss is calling in contacts for a confab.” His boss was Cy Parks, one of the small town’s retired professional soldiers.

Cobb was Alexander Cobb, a senior Houston DEA agent who lived in Jacobsville with his wife and sister.

“Does anybody know who the new people are?”

He shook his head. “We can’t find out anything. We think somebody’s gone undercover in the organization, but we can’t verify it. It’s unsettling to have drug dealers who’ll pop a cap on cops. They killed a reporter, too, and a member of the Border Patrol.”

She whistled softly. “They’re arrogant.”

He nodded. “Dangerous,” he said. “There’s something worse. They’re kidnapping rich Americans for ransom, to increase their cash flow reserves. They got an heiress last week. Her people are scrambling to meet the deadline, without knowing for sure if they’ll return her even so.”

She moved restlessly on the pillow. She was sore, but the pain was better. “Aren’t most kidnap victims killed in the first twenty-four hours?”

“I don’t know, honestly,” he said. “Cash Grier is working with the FBI, trying to get informants who might know something about the heiress.”

“Our police chief?” she asked

He grinned. “Like a lot of our local citizens, he’s not quite what he seems.”

“Oh.”

He stretched. “Mr. Parks had me working on our tractor all day. I’m stiff. I guess I’m getting old.”

She laughed. “No, you aren’t, Harley.”

He leaned forward with the cup in both hands. “I heard you had a close call,” he said.

“I didn’t know I had an appendix until yesterday,” she said wistfully. “They brought me in by ambulance.”

“What about Morris?”

“Mr. Danzetta fed him for me,” she said complacently.

“Cameron’s bodyguard?” He looked strange.

“What is it?” she asked curiously.

“One of our cowboys was driving past your house last night and saw lights on inside. He knew you were here, so he called the sheriff’s department.”

“And?”

“When they got there, the lights were off, the doors were all locked and there was nobody around.”

She pursed her lips, wondering.

“Did you give the bodyguard a key?” he persisted.

She hesitated. “Well…”

Before she could speak, the door opened and Jared walked in. He stopped when he saw Harley and his eyes began to glitter.

Harley had great reflexes. He exercised them by getting out of the chair, wishing Sara well, promising to check on her later. He walked out with a nod to Cameron. He passed by Tony, who didn't say a word.

"You had company," Jared said quietly.

She wondered what he was thinking. His face gave little away. "Harley came to tell me about my house."

He frowned. "What about your house?"

"He said one of the Parks cowboys saw lights on inside and knew I wasn't there, so he called the sheriff," she began. "But when the deputy got there, all the lights were out and nobody was anywhere around."

He managed to look innocent. "How odd."

He looked too innocent. She frowned. "I didn't give Mr. Danzetta a key to my house, so how did he get in to feed Morris?"

He sat down in the chair beside the bed, looking thoughtful for a minute. "Tony has some, shall we say, unexpected skills."

"Like breaking and entering?" she probed with a grin.

"This is a conversation we shouldn't have right now," he replied with a quiet smile.

Her eyebrows lifted. "Is he wanted by the law?" she asked, keeping her voice low so that Tony wouldn't overhear her.

"Only in two countries," he said absently. "Or was it three?"

She looked shocked.

He scowled at her. "I'm kidding!"

She relaxed. "Okay," she said. "That's a relief."

Outside the door, a tall, dark-eyed man was chuckling silently.

"I talked to Dr. Coltrain," Jared said. "He told me if you're still improving like this, you can be released Monday."

She grimaced. "I'll miss work." Her eyes widened. "Oh, gosh. Dee! I didn't even phone her…!"

"I did," Jared said lazily. "She's coming to see you tonight."

"Thanks," she told him.

"She already knew, of course," he added ruefully. "It's amazing how gossip gets around here."

"We're a very small town," she reminded him.

"You're a very large family," he contradicted. "I've never lived in a place where people knew so much about each other."

She smiled. "I know. I love it here. I can't imagine living anywhere else."

"Well, you'll be living with me for a few days," he replied, crossing his long legs. "My attorney's coming down Monday, so we'll be chaperoned. Less gossip."

"Does your attorney come to stay?"

"Only when I have legal matters to discuss," he said easily. "I've had the same attorney for two years."

She was picturing a tall lawyer like Blake Kemp. Jared must be very well-to-do if he could get a live-in attorney, she was thinking.

"Don't mention anything about Tony feeding your cat, okay?" he asked abruptly. "I don't want the police asking any embarrassing questions. I need Tony."

"Of course I won't," she agreed, but she couldn't help wondering what all the secrecy was about.

"I can't stay long tonight," he said apologetically. "I'm trying to do business by phone, fax and modem, and it's damned hard."

Her eyes were curious. "Where do you live when you're not here?"

He smiled. "That's need-to-know. You don't."

"Well!" she exclaimed. "What a lot of cloak-and-dagger stuff!"

"You have no idea," he replied absently.

The door opened. Tony came in, flipping his phone shut. "Max needs to talk to you again. It's going to take a while."

"We'll go home." He got up, pausing to smile down at Sara. "Get better. I'll be back in the morning."

"Thanks," she said.

He shrugged. "We're family."

He went out with Tony and closed the door behind him.

Max was not happy to learn that Jared was keeping company with some sick girl in the little hick town.

"You need your head read," she muttered on the phone. "You've got enough problems without adding a penniless, clinging cowgirl to them."

"She's not a cowgirl," he replied. "She sells books."

"An egghead isn't much better," she scoffed. "They want you to come back out here and let them give you around-the-clock security."

"We'll never catch the perpetrators if we hide in a fortress," he said. "And we've had this damned argument before!"

"Somebody's getting testy," she purred. "No pillow talk down there, I guess?"

"What do you want?" he interrupted.

She hesitated. "I wanted to tell you that they've tracked three men as far as San Antonio. We're not sure if they're connected to the other, or not, but they're the right nationality."

"What's their cover?"

"How should I know?" she muttered.

"I pay you to know everything," he countered.

"Oh, all right, I'll ask questions. Honestly, Jared, you're getting to be a grouch. What's this girl doing to you?"

"Nothing," he said tersely. "She's just a friend."

"You're spending a lot of time at the hospital."

"Neither of us has family," he said absently. "We decided we'd look after each other if we got sick."

The pause was heated. "You know I'd take care of you if you got sick! I'd have doctors and nurses all over the place."

Of course she would, he thought. She'd hire people to care for him, but she wouldn't do it herself. Max hated illness.

"I'm tired and I've got a lot of work to do."

"I'm flying down there Monday," she told him. "I'll bring some contracts for you to look over. Need anything from the big city?"

"Nothing at all. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay. Sleep well."

"Sure." He hung up. Max was possessive of him. He hadn't noticed it before, and he didn't like it. She was sleek, elegant, aggressive and intelligent. But she did nothing for him physically. He did have occasional liaisons, but never with Max. He hoped she wasn't going to come down to Texas and upset things. He knew that she wasn't going to like Sara. Not at all.

Monday morning, Sara was on the mend. Dee had come twice, on Friday night and Sunday afternoon, bearing baskets of flowers and magazines for Sara to read. She absolutely forbade her to come back to work until the end of the next week. That made Sara feel a little better. She knew Dee was shorthanded when she wasn't there.

Jared had been back to visit, staying for a few minutes at a time, with Tony always in the background. She wondered why he needed a full-time bodyguard. He changed the subject every time she asked.

Dr. Coltrain released her after lunch. She was wheeled out to the hospital entrance, where Jared was waiting in the big black pickup truck. He bent and lifted her like a sack of flour, putting her gently into the passenger seat and belting her in.

She didn't expect the sudden rush of breath that escaped her lips when he paused in the act of fastening the seat belt and looked straight into her eyes at point-blank range. She felt the world shift ten degrees. His eyes narrowed and dropped to her blouse.

It didn't take an expert to realize that he saw her heartbeat shaking the fabric and knew that she was attracted to him.

"Well, well," he murmured in a deep, sultry tone. And he smiled.

Five

Jared's green eyes burned into Sara's, probing and testing. They dropped to her full mouth and lingered there until she caught her breath audibly. He only chuckled. It had a vaguely predatory sound.

He went around to his own side of the truck, climbed in, fastened his seat belt and started the engine. He was still smiling when he pulled out of the hospital parking lot.

Sara had liked the White Horse Ranch from her first close-up look at it, the first time she'd delivered Jared's books to him. She admired the sprawling white ranch house with its hanging baskets of flowers and the white wooden fences that surrounded a well-manicured pasture. Jared ran purebred Santa Gertrudis cattle here, not horses. Sara enjoyed watching the calves. Pastures were full of them in spring, just in time for the lush new grass to pop up. Or, at least, that would have been the case if the drought hadn't hit this part of Texas so hard.

"How do you have green grass in a drought?" she asked suddenly.

He smiled. "I sank wells and filled up tanks in every pasture," he replied, using the Texas term for small ponds.

"Not bad," she remarked. "Do those windmills pump it?" she added, nodding toward two of them—one near the barn and another far out on the horizon.

He glanced at her amusedly. "Yes. It may be an old-fashioned idea, but it was good enough for the pioneers who settled this country."

"Your grandfather, was he born here?"

He shook his head. "One of his distant cousins inherited a piece of property and left it to him. He ranched for a while, until his health got bad." His face seemed to harden. "He took a hard fall from a bucking horse and hit his head on a fence. He was never quite right afterward. He put a manager in charge of the ranch and moved up to Houston with his wife. One summer day, he shot my grandmother with a double-barreled shotgun and then turned it on himself."

Her gasp was audible.

He noted her surprise. "My father brought him down here to be buried, although nobody knew how he died. None of the family ever came back here after that," he said. "I guess we all have something in the past that haunts us. I shouldn't have been so blunt about it," he added, when he realized that she was upset. "I forget that you grew up in a small town, sheltered from violence."

Obviously he considered her a lightweight, she mused. But it was too soon for some discussions. "It's all right."

He pulled up in front of the house, cut the engine and went around to pick Sara up in his strong arms and carry her up the three wide steps to the front porch. He grinned at her surprise.

"Coltrain's nurse said to keep you off your feet for another day," he mused, looking down into her wide, soft green eyes.

"So you're becoming public transportation?" she teased, and her smile made her whole face radiant.

It made her look beautiful. He was captivated by the feel of her soft, warm little body in his arms, pressed close to his chest. He loved that smile that reminded him of a warm fire in winter. He liked the surge of excitement that ran through his hard body at the proximity. His eyes narrowed and the smile faded as he held her attention.

"Listen, don't you get any odd ideas," she cautioned with breathless humor. "He didn't do that buttonhole surgery, he split me open at least six inches and sewed me back up with those stitches that you don't have to take out later. We wouldn't want my guts to spill out all over your nice clean floor, now, would we?"

The comment, so unexpected, caused him to burst out laughing.

"Good God!" he chuckled. He bent and brushed his hard mouth over her lips in a whisper of sensation that caused her entire body to clench. It was a rush of sensation so overwhelming that she felt her breath catch in her throat.

His eyebrows arched at her response. He pursed his lips and his green eyes twinkled. "What a reaction," he murmured deeply. "And I barely touched you." The twinkle faded. "Suppose we try that again…?"

She started to give him ten good reasons why he shouldn't, but it was already too late.

His hard mouth crushed down onto her soft lips, parting them in a sensuous, insistent way that took her breath away. Her eyes closed helplessly. Her cold hands slid farther around his neck as his arm contracted and flattened her soft breasts against the wall of his chest. The kiss grew demanding.

"Open your mouth," he bit off against her bruised lips.

She tried to answer that audacious command, but it gave him the opening he was looking for, and he took it. His tongue moved deep into her mouth, accompanied by a groan that sounded agonized.

He felt her shiver in his arms. His mouth roughened for an instant until he realized that she was just out of the hospital, and her side hadn't healed. He lifted his head. His eyes were blazing. His face was set, solemn, his gaze intent on her flushed skin.

"Wh…why?" she faltered, all eyes.

An odd expression crept over his face. "When you smile, the emptiness goes away," he said in a rough whisper.

She didn't know how to answer that. But she didn't have to. The door opened suddenly, revealing a tall, very attractive brunette in a blue business suit with a short skirt that stopped halfway between her knees and her panty line.

The brunette raised an eyebrow at the sight of Jared with Sara in his arms, and she didn't smile. "Didn't you expect me, darling?" she asked Jared in a honey-smooth tone.

Jared was still collecting his senses. "Max, this is Sara Dobbs. Sara, Max Carlton, my attorney."

Sara had never seen an attorney who looked like that. The woman could have posed for a fashion magazine. She was sophisticated, beautiful and world-wise. Sara felt like a small child trying to play with adults.

"I have to get Sara to bed. Where's Tony?"

Max shrugged. "I haven't seen him. We have several contracts to go over."

"We'll get to them later," Jared said, with an edge to his tone.

"Suit yourself, it's only money. I like the house."

The lawyer had yet to say one word to Sara. Jared noticed, and his irritation was obvious.

"Sara, you said?" Max asked, smiling at the woman in his arms. "Is something wrong with your leg?"

"She just had an emergency appendectomy and there's nobody at her house to look after her while she heals," Jared said shortly, turning toward one of the downstairs guest bedrooms.

"I see. Well, I'm sure you'll feel better soon," she told Sara as Jared carried her down the hall.

Jared ignored her. He turned into a pretty blue-themed bedroom with its own private bathroom and eased Sara down on the quilted coverlet.

He leaned over her, his big hands on either side of her head, and looked straight into her eyes. “Max is my lawyer. That’s all she’s ever been.”

“She likes you,” Sara replied.

His green eyes narrowed. “She likes my money.”

“She’s pretty.”

He bent and brushed his mouth softly over her lips, smiling as they parted for him now. “So are you,” he whispered, standing up straight. “I have to sign some contracts for Max. I’ll be back in a few minutes. TV control’s on the bedside table,” he indicated. “We have pay-per-view. Help yourself. I’ll have Mrs. Lewis bring you something to eat in a little while.”

“Mrs. Lewis? I thought she worked for the Hart brothers.”

“She did, but she had to retire just recently from doing heavy housework. Her arthritis got steadily worse and she had to leave them. But her doctor found a new drug that works. She still can’t do heavy work, but she cooks for me three days a week.”

She studied him curiously. “What do you do the other four days?”

He grinned. “I eat Italian.”

“We don’t have an Italian restaurant,” she began.

“Tony the Dancer can cook,” he told her. “He makes the best lasagna I’ve ever eaten.”

She laughed. “He doesn’t look like a cook.”

“He doesn’t look like a lot of things. Amuse yourself until I get Max out of here. I’ll be back soon.”

“Okay.”

He winked at her and closed the door on his way out.

“Are you out of your mind?” Max raged. “The girl’s poor! She’s just after your money!”

He slid his hands deep into his pockets and glared back at her. “And you discovered that after exchanging two sentences with her, did you?”

Her lips tautened. “You can’t get involved with the locals, Jared. You know that, and you know why.”

He cocked his head and stared at her intently. “Why are you here?” he asked abruptly. “I can sign contracts at your office in Oklahoma City if I have to. I can’t think of a single good reason for you to be underfoot.”

Her eyes avoided his. “You’re vulnerable right now. You might get involved with someone you’d walk away from if things were normal.”

“I pay you a king’s ransom of a retainer to look out for my business interests,” he said, emphasizing the business. “You start poking your nose into my private life and I’ll replace you with a man. After,” he added deliberately, “I send a letter of explanation to the Oklahoma Bar Association.”

Her anger was gone at once. She pulled herself together. “You’re right, I was out of line.”

“What contracts are we discussing, then?”

She seemed oddly disoriented. One hand went to her temple and she frowned. “You know, I can’t remember.”

“Then why don’t you go back to your office and think about it?” he suggested.

She sighed. “Okay. But it’s still not good sense to trust people you don’t know too far,” she added.

He didn’t reply.

She went into the living room and picked up her attaché case. She laughed self-consciously. “I really just wanted to see how you were,” she confessed.

“I’m fine.”

“Take care of yourself.”

He didn't answer that statement, either. He just stared at her with dark, brooding eyes until she went toward the front door.

"You'll call, if you need anything?" she asked at the door.

"If I need legal advice," he emphasized, "I will."

She grimaced. The door closed firmly behind her.

Jared stared into space as he wondered how he'd missed that possessiveness in Max. Had it been there all along, or was it just starting? She knew he didn't want involvement. He'd said so. Why had she come? Had she been checking up on him and found out about Sara?

He turned toward his study, still deep in thought. She did have a point, about Sara. He knew almost nothing about her.

Tony the Dancer came in with a bag of groceries. He paused at the open study door.

"I met a stretch limo on my way back," he told Jared. "Was it Max?"

He nodded.

"What was she doing here?" he asked.

"God knows," Jared replied curtly. "Warning me off Sara, I guess."

"I thought it would come to that," Tony mused. "Max likes to live high, and she doesn't make quite enough to suit her tastes."

"Obviously. Her office had better be paying for that limo," he added. "I'm not picking up the tab."

"You should tell Arthur," the other man advised, naming the elderly accountant who lived in and took care of the accounts.

"I will. You cooking?"

"Unless you want to try again," Tony said warily. "I'm still trying to scrape the scrambled eggs off that iron skillet."

"You didn't say I had to grease it first," he growled.

Tony just shook his head. "How's the kid?" he asked, nodding toward the hall.

"She's a grown woman," Jared countered. "She's fine."

Grown woman? Tony wondered if his employer really thought that innocent in his spare bed was fair game. She put on a good front with Jared, but Tony could see through the camouflage, and he knew things that his boss didn't. He wondered if he should mention what he knew to the other man, but the phone rang and Jared picked up the receiver. Tony thought it must be fate, and he went off into the kitchen to cook.

Sara fussed when Mrs. Lewis had to come all that way to serve her a bowl of soup and a salad.

"I can walk, honestly," she protested gently. "You don't have to wait on me."

Mrs. Lewis just grinned as she slid the tray onto Sara's lap. "It isn't any trouble, dear. Tony will pick this up. I have to get back home. My sister's coming over to visit." She chuckled. "Tony's making supper for you and the boss tonight. He walked in with enough Italian sausage and tomato sauce to float a battleship."

Now Sara remembered that Tony cooked Italian dishes for his boss. The big man didn't look like anybody's idea of a chef. She said as much to the older woman.

Mrs. Lewis raised an eyebrow. "Mr. Danzetta is in a class of his own as a cook. I can do basic meals, but he has a flair for improvising. He saved me a plate of spaghetti just after I came to work here. It was the best I ever tasted."

"I never thought of a bodyguard as being a cook," Sara commented.

The older woman glanced at the open door and moved a little closer. "He wears an automatic pistol under his jacket," she said softly. "I watched out the kitchen window while he was practicing with it. He stuck pennies in clothespins and strung the clothespins on an old wire that was used for a clothesline years ago. And in a heartbeat," she added, "he'd picked off the pennies without touching the clothespins."

Sara's eyes grew wide. "I'm going to make sure that I never tick him off," she murmured aloud.

"He's pretty handy with martial arts, too," Mrs. Lewis added. "He spars with Mr. Cameron."

She hesitated with the soup halfway to her mouth in a spoon. "Mr. Cameron does martial arts?"

Mrs. Lewis nodded. "Tony said he'd never met a man he couldn't throw until he started working here."

"And here I thought Mr. Cameron hired Tony because he didn't want to get his hands dirty."

"Tony isn't quite what he seems," the older woman said quietly. "And neither is his boss. They're both very secretive. And they know Cy Parks and Eb Scott."

That was interesting, because Cy and Eb were part of a group of professional soldiers who'd fought all over the world. Several of the old group lived either in Jacobs County or in Houston and San Antonio.

"Well, that sounds very mysterious, doesn't it?" Sara murmured as she sipped the hot liquid. "This is wonderful soup, Mrs. Lewis. I can't make potato soup, but I love to eat it."

The older woman beamed. "I'm glad you like it."

Sara paused, thinking. "Mr. Cameron was in a huddle with Chief Grier at the symphony concert," she recalled. "They looked very solemn."

"Gossip says that a new group is trying to establish a drug smuggling network through here again."

"That might explain the serious faces," Sara replied. "Our police chief has solved a lot of drug cases, and made a lot of enemies to go with them."

"Good for him," Mrs. Lewis responded. "I hope they lock them all up."

Sara grinned. "Me, too." She shifted and groaned, touching her stomach under the floppy blouse she was wearing with jeans. "How can a little thing like an appendix cause so much trouble?" she wondered.

"You're lucky you were able to get to a phone," the older woman said gently. "People have died of appendicitis."

Sara nodded. She looked around the pretty blue room. "Mr. Cameron and I agreed that we'd be each others'families when we got sick, but I never expected to take him up on the offer this soon."

"He's a surprising person, isn't he?" she asked. "He seems so cold and distant when you meet him. But he's not like that at all when you get to know him. You wouldn't believe what he did to Mr. Danzetta…"

"And you can stop right there while you still have work," Jared said from the doorway. He sounded stern, but his eyes were twinkling.

Mrs. Lewis made a face at him. "I was only humanizing you for Sara, so she wouldn't think you were really an ogre…" She stopped and clapped a hand over her mouth and blushed.

"It's all right," Sara assured her between mouthfuls of soup. "I did used to call him an ogre, but he improves on closer acquaintance." She grinned at Jared.

He pursed his lips and looked pointedly at her mouth. She almost dropped her spoon, and he laughed softly.

"Well, if you don't need me for anything else, I'm going home," Mrs. Lewis told him. "Mr. Danzetta's got stuff to make supper."

"I saw the sack full of tomatoes and tomato sauce," Jared replied. "He's planted tomatoes out behind the house in what used to be a kitchen garden. Tomatoes, oregano, chives, sage and about twenty other spices I never heard of."

"He doesn't look like a gardener," Sara commented.

Jared didn't answer her. She didn't need to know about Tony just yet.

"He planted poppies in the flower garden," Mrs. Lewis said with obvious concern.

"He likes flowers," Jared began.

"You don't understand," Mrs. Lewis persisted. "He didn't plant California poppies. He planted the other kind."

He frowned. "What's your point?"

"We're barely inside the city limits," she said, "but the fact is, we are inside them. When they begin to bloom, Chief Grier will send one of his officers out here to pull them up."

Jared didn't mention that he'd like to see anyone do that with Tony watching. "Why?"

"They're opium poppies," Mrs. Lewis emphasized.

He whistled. "I'll bet Tony didn't realize it."

"Better tell him," Mrs. Lewis replied. "Before he gets in trouble with the law."

He was going to say that it was way too late for that, but he didn't dare. "I'll talk to him," he said.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then. Get better, dear," Mrs. Lewis added with a smile for Sara.

"I heal fast," Sara replied, grinning. "Thanks."

Jared went out to make some phone calls and Sara finished her soup and dozed off. When she opened her eyes again, it was getting dark outside. She hadn't thought about nightclothes, but it was obvious now that she'd arrived with only her purse and the clothes she'd had on when they transported her to the hospital. She didn't have anything to sleep in.

There was a wonderful smell of spices drifting down the hall. Seconds later, Tony stuck his head in the door.

"You like spaghetti?" he asked.

"I love it," she replied, smiling.

He smiled back. "I'm just about to take up the pasta," he said. "It fell off the wall when I threw it there, so it's got about two minutes left before it's al dente."

"Al who?" she asked.

He glowered at her. "Al dente," he repeated. "Just right for the teeth. When you throw it at the wall and it sticks, it's just right to…"

"What the hell have you done to my kitchen wall?" came a roar from down the hall.

"I have to check that the pasta's ready!" Tony called to him.

Jared stomped down the hall, glaring at his bodyguard. "You've got streaks all over the damned paint!"

"They wipe off, boss," Tony assured him. "Honest."

"You couldn't just stick a strand of it in your mouth and chew it to see if it's ready?" Jared grumbled.

Tony's eyebrows arched. "Who bit you?" he asked.

Jared's face was like iron. He looked furious. "The bread's burning."

Tony rushed back down the hall without another word.

Jared glared at Sara. "Harley Fowler's in the living room. He stopped by to see about you."

"That's nice of him."

"Nice." His green eyes were glaring. "I don't have time to run a hospital complete with visiting hours," he muttered.

She flushed with embarrassment. She hadn't expected Harley to come looking for her.

Jared backstepped at her expression. She'd just had surgery and he was acting like a jealous boyfriend. He caught himself and tried to relax. It didn't work. Harley was poaching on his preserves. "I'll send him in. Don't encourage him to stay long or drop in unexpectedly again without calling first."

"I won't," she began, but he was already halfway down the hall before she got the words out. She felt terrible. She was imposing on him. She should never have suggested that they take care of each other when they got sick. It was apparent that Jared already regretted agreeing to it.

Harley didn't look much better than Sara did. His lips were compressed and he was carrying his wide-brimmed Western straw hat.

"How're you doing?" he asked.

She sighed. “I’m feeling much better,” she said.

“You don’t look it. Why don’t I phone Lisa and see if you can stay with her and Cy until you’re back on your feet?” he suggested.

“I really don’t need looking after,” she replied. She felt uneasy. “Harley, do you think you could drive me to my house?” she added in a low voice.

He scowled. “You’re not well enough to look after yourself, Sara. You won’t even be able to lift a gallon of milk until that incision heals.”

“I don’t drink milk and I want to go home.” She pulled herself off the bed, grimacing because it hurt. Jared had her pain capsules, but she’d be damned if she was going to ask him for them. It was clear that he didn’t want her here.

She moved to the foot of the bed. She’d forgotten that Jared had carried her down the hall. Walking it was going to be an ordeal, and she didn’t dare ask Harley to carry her, although she knew he would if she asked.

Harley’s arm shot out and caught her as she began to weave. “Here, you’re not able to do this, Sara,” he said firmly.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Jared walked right around Harley, picked Sara up and put her back in the bed. “Stay there,” he said shortly.

She flushed again. “I will not! I just asked Harley to drive me home.”

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