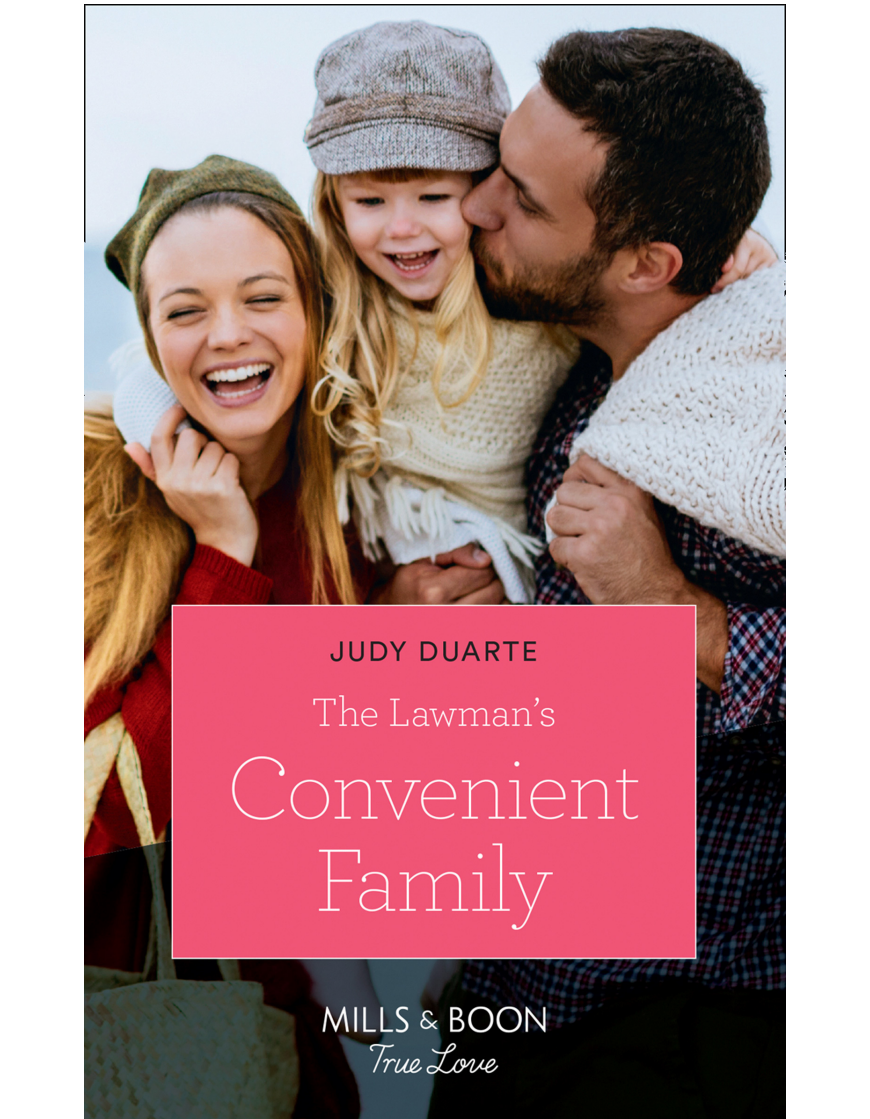


A photograph of a family of three. A woman on the left is smiling broadly, wearing a red sweater and a green knit headband. A young child in the center is also smiling, wearing a grey knit cap and a white knit sweater. A man on the right is kissing the child on the cheek, wearing a plaid shirt and a white knit sweater. The background is a soft, out-of-focus outdoor scene.

JUDY DUARTE

The Lawman's
Convenient
Family

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Judy Duarte
The Lawman's Convenient Family
Серия «Mills & Boon True Love»

Аннотация

"Will you marry me, for a while?" Detective Adam Santiago's always been a lone ranger. But when he teams with therapist Julie Chapman to save two young orphans, pretty soon his heart's a goner, too! Will this marriage of convenience become an affair of the heart?

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“Will you marry me, for a while?”

Adam Santiago's always been a lone ranger. But when the detective teams with music therapist Julie Chapman to save two young orphans, pretty soon *his* heart's a goner, too! Julie's willing to do anything—even become Adam's pretend bride—to keep a brother and sister together. But as she falls head over heels for her polar opposite, will this marriage of convenience become an affair of the heart?

“Judy really has a way with Western romances and handsome cowboys!” —#1 New York Times bestselling author Linda Lael Miller

Since 2002, *USA TODAY* bestselling author JUDY DUARTE has written over forty books for Mills & Boon, earned two RITA® Award nominations, won two Maggie Awards and received a National Readers' Choice Award. When she's not cooped up in her writing cave, she enjoys traveling with her husband and spending quality time with her grandchildren. You can learn more about Judy and her books on her website, judyduarte.com, or at [Facebook.com/judyduartenovelist](https://www.facebook.com/judyduartenovelist).

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The Lawman's Convenient Family

Judy Duarte

MILLS & BOON

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THE LAWMAN'S CONVENIENT FAMILY

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To the amazing women who bore my
precious grandchildren: Bree Colwell,
Myrlett Colwell, Sarah Colwell and Christy Jeffries.
You are the best mothers ever.

Thank you for the beautiful babies and kiddos.

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[Chapter One](#)

Detective Adam Santiago never wore costumes, unless you counted a disguise for use when he went undercover or on a stakeout. Yet here he was, dressed up as Zorro and attending the Autumn Gala, a local charity event.

The guy at the Halloween store had tried to talk him into getting a fake rapier, but Adam had declined. The costume was kitschy enough—he didn't imagine he needed to add any props to complicate things.

He had, of course, gone with the black eye-mask, which was resting on the passenger seat. If he didn't wear the typical Zorro eyewear, people might think he was just wearing a ruffled shirt for no reason. Or maybe that he was a bullfighter.

And speaking of other people, there'd be plenty of local folks inside who'd be surprised to see him here, since his idea of fun parties tended toward the smaller variety, something like having a few beers with a couple of friends at his favorite sports bar. Or better yet, a romantic dinner date that ended with breakfast. But tonight's gala was an exception. Adam had actually gone so far as to pay a hundred dollars to attend the event that would benefit both of his favorite local Brighton Valley charities, the Rocking Chair Ranch and Kidville, a children's home.

When he'd first learned of the gala, he'd planned to make a generous donation and to tell the folks in charge that he had to work tonight. But he'd changed his mind when he'd heard that Lisa Dawson would be here. A mutual friend had shown him a picture of her, although the image was a bit blurry.

Adam didn't need help when it came to meeting women, but his friend Stan had been pretty convincing. *Lisa's perfect for you. She's a flight attendant, house sitter and part-time dog walker, which means she's away from home a lot. So she won't expect you to spend every free moment with her. She's also bright and fun to be around. And like you, she's a big Star Wars fan. More important, her life's goal isn't to get married and to drive around town in a minivan full of kids.* When he still hesitated, Stan added, *She's also a blonde—and I know you're partial to them.*

That was when Adam agreed to meet Lisa. Lately, he'd gotten a little tired of playing the field. He wouldn't mind settling down some, but he wasn't going to make a major commitment to

anyone. He liked his freedom way too much, not to mention his privacy.

But from what he'd gathered, Lisa might actually like the idea of having a one-on-one relationship with some well-defined boundaries. So he'd decided to approach her at tonight's gala. He had no idea what she'd be wearing, but he figured he could find her in the crowd and introduce himself.

Who knew? Maybe they'd hit it off immediately. And if so, they might even cut out early. *Together.*

He parked his classic 1973 Ford Bronco under one of the streetlights and headed to the front entrance, yanking at his shirt, wishing the damn sleeves weren't so poofy. As he approached the main entry to the Wexler Grange Hall, the outside of which had been decked out with bales of straw, scarecrows and the usual Halloween decorations, he slipped on his half mask. Then he stepped inside and scanned the crowd. Even in costumes, he recognized a lot of the townspeople, but he was more interested in seeking out one petite blonde.

And there she was, packing a fake lightsaber on her hip and wearing a skimpy outfit befitting an intergalactic warrior princess. The black strips of fabric that made up her short skirt revealed plenty of skin, including a striking pair of shapely legs. Her hair was swept up in a prim twist, an interesting contrast to that sexy outfit.

She had her back to him, but it had to be Lisa. She was the only petite blonde here. And, apparently, the only Star Wars fan.

Before he could cross the room and lay a little *buenos dias* on her, he spotted Donna Hoffman, who was dressed as Mrs. Claus. Donna and her husband, Jim, were in charge of Kidville, the home for abused and neglected kids between the ages of five and twelve. Adam met the couple when he'd offered to mentor some of the older boys. After he'd given them his résumé and shared his background as well as his reason for wanting to work with the troubled youths, he'd added, *Who better to lead a kid in the right direction than a guy who grew up in a similar situation?*

The Hoffmans had agreed, and he'd been volunteering his time there ever since. It was cool knowing he had something to offer those kids. He just hadn't counted on getting something from them in return.

"Hey, Donna," Adam said, greeting the older woman with a smile. "Or should I call you Mrs. Claus?"

She gave him a warm hug, then took a moment to check out his costume. "Did you lose your sword, Zorro?"

"I don't have a concealed carry permit for it, so I left it at home," he joked. "Besides, this seems like a pretty tame party. I doubt I'll need to use it."

Donna laughed and handed him a candy cane from the white frilly apron she wore over a red flannel skirt. "Jim and I bought our costumes for the Kidville Christmas party. I know they're not very Halloween-y, but rather than invest in something else for tonight, we decided to utilize them twice this year."

"Good idea." Adam's gaze drifted across the room, seeking

Lisa—at least, he thought it was her. Who else could it be?

He spotted her near the buffet table, her back still to him, her hands on her hips. What was she doing? And when was she going to turn around so he could get a glimpse at her face?

The party had barely begun, yet Lisa's appeal and his interest in her were growing steadily. He wondered what she had planned for the rest of the evening.

"Will you be coming out to Kidville again on Monday?" Donna asked, drawing him back to the here and now.

"You bet. I'm making some headway with Tommy."

"We've noticed. And so has his teacher. We all appreciate what you've done for him—the private tour of police headquarters, the ride-along in a patrol car, the visit to the ice cream shop afterward. Tommy's never had anyone take a special interest in him."

"Sometimes, that's all it takes." At least, that's how it had worked for Adam. Stan, his mentor, had been a cop, too. A patrolman who'd found him hanging out in the city park one night after curfew. A guy who'd eventually become his foster dad and his best friend.

Adam again glanced to the buffet table where he'd last seen Lisa, when Donna tugged at his poofy sleeve. "You keep looking across the room. What, or rather who, has caught your eye?"

Donna had been happily married for more than thirty-five years, and she thought everyone ought to take that same route, including Adam.

"I like looking at all the costumes," he lied.

"Aren't most of them great? It's amazing how some people go all out for an event like this."

He agreed, although it was one particular outfit that had caught his eye. He was just about to excuse himself and head for the buffet table when he glanced that way again and realized Lisa was no longer there. He took another scan of the room, including the dance floor, but she seemed to have vanished.

Maybe she'd gone to powder her nose—or whatever it was that sexy space women did.

What the hell? The night was still young. He'd find time to talk to her. And now that he'd seen her outside of her blurry photo, meeting her in person had become a high priority.

The food hadn't been brought out yet, but Julie Chapman didn't like the way the buffet table had been set up in the local Grange Hall. Before changing things around, she returned to the kitchen and asked Ralph Graystone, her boss and the owner of Silver Spoon Catering, if she had his permission to do so.

"Go ahead," Ralph told her as he filled a platter with appetizers. "You did a great job on the decorations at that wedding we catered last weekend, so I trust your judgment."

Julie thanked him, then returned to the party, stopping in the doorway long enough to tug at one of the flimsy black strips that made up her short skirt, the length of which had obviously been altered.

When Ralph asked the crew to wear costumes for tonight's

event, she'd objected at first, explaining that she didn't have anything to wear.

Borrow something, he'd told her. It's a Halloween party. We're all dressing up. I'm going to wear my chef's hat, but I'm painting my face like the Joker. And don't forget it's a charitable event.

And that was the only reason Julie had decided to be a good sport about it, but she wasn't the least bit happy about the *Star Wars* getup Carlene, her coworker, had loaned her this afternoon, saying, *You'll be a space princess. A sexy badass.*

Julie had expected to wear some kind of sci-fi getup, but she had no idea that Carlene had shortened and altered the intergalactic costume to the point that Julie would reveal way too much skin. Unfortunately, she'd waited until the last minute to pick it up, and by the time she tried it on, it was too late to find something else.

Carlene, who was dressed as a bawdy tavern wench, her double Ds practically pouring out of the low-cut bodice, didn't seem the least bit uneasy about the way she was dressed. But unlike Julie, Carlene ran with a wilder crowd.

Still, when she entered the Grange Hall kitchen earlier, she'd told Carlene that she'd brought her Silver Spoon Catering shirt and a pair of black slacks with her and suggested it as a more appropriate option.

Her friend had clucked her tongue. *Don't be a party pooper, Julie. We're all dressing up this evening. Just go with the theme and have fun.*

So here she was, trying to make the best of it. And from the bursts of laughter coming from the people mingling in small groups and from the smiles of those kicking up their heels on the dance floor, everyone in attendance seemed to be having a good time so far. But that didn't make Julie feel better about the way she was dressed.

Still, she had a heart for children, as well as the elderly. In fact, if she hadn't been working at the gala, she would have gladly paid to attend.

As she added the finishing touch to the second of two buffet lines, she scanned the festive Grange Hall, which the gala committee had decorated with wispy ghosts, dangling bats and spiderwebs. Then she double-checked the dinner tables.

Silver Spoon Catering had provided the food at a discount. The generous donation to the cause had actually been her boss's attempt to promote his new business venture and to impress some of the wealthier people in the area.

As Julie noted the smiling attendees, she suspected Ralph's plan just might work. She took a moment to admire their costumes, some of which were pretty cool.

One in particular, a man dressed as Zorro, caught her eye once more. The dark-haired, olive-skinned hunk was wearing black slacks, a crisp white shirt opened at the collar and a half mask. It was a great outfit, especially for a hot guy who appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties.

She'd first noticed him when he'd entered the Grange Hall

with a confident stride, clearly sure of himself. Off and on, she'd studied him surreptitiously, wondering who he was and realizing that he sure seemed to know most of the people here.

There was something vibrant about him, something alluring that drew her attention. So much so, that she continued to steal glances his way every chance she got.

She'd better be careful, though. She had work to do and a job she needed to keep, even if she considered it only temporary.

She'd no more than turned away from the buffet line when she spotted Santa Claus. She recognized him instantly. It was Jim Hoffman, the director of Kidville—and just the guy she'd hoped to meet. Now was her chance. So she approached the heavysset gentleman and said, “Excuse me, Mr. Hoffman. My name is Julie Chapman, and I’m a music therapist. I’d like to make an appointment to speak to you about a job at Kidville.”

He brightened, his eyes twinkling just like jolly ol’ St. Nick’s. “My wife and I would love to incorporate music into our therapy program, but our funding is stretched to the limit right now, so I’m afraid we can’t offer a paid position.”

Julie actually needed a steady paycheck, which was why she'd gone to work for the catering company. But she could also use some experience to add to her resume, not to mention an opportunity to get a foot in the door at Kidville.

“I’d be willing to volunteer for the time being,” she said.

“Now, that’s an interesting proposition. Do you have any experience?”

“I graduated recently and, other than working with children during my internship, I haven’t had a paid position yet. But I majored in music, play several instruments and sing in my church choir.”

“I’d like to discuss this further and hear more about your thoughts on a music therapy program, but this isn’t a good time for either of us. Can you come to Kidville on Monday morning? I’ll give you a tour, and we’ll talk more then.”

“Awesome. I’ll be there bright and early.”

As Mr. Hoffman strode away like Santa on a mission, Julie tugged at her skirt again. Apparently, her outfit hadn’t bothered the man in charge of Kidville, which was a relief. Another potential boss or some of her more conservative church friends might not have been so accepting.

Too bad she hadn’t thought to smear on some clown makeup before getting out of her car this evening. That would have hid her face, especially the flush on her cheeks. Oh, well... She’d just have to keep a low profile.

As she turned toward the kitchen, a tear-streaked redhead wearing a tiara and a long turquoise gown strode toward a pirate and let out a curse that made her sound more like a drunken longshoreman than the princess she was supposed to be.

She lifted her index finger and jabbed it at the pirate’s chest. “I knew you were a big flirt, Derek, but do you have to be on the prowl when you’re with me? I’ve had it with you. It’s over for good this time.” Then she removed her frilly white half mask, as

well as her faux tiara, threw both on the floor and swept toward the entrance in a huff, leaving the frowning pirate in her wake.

Julie assumed he'd hurry after her. Instead, he let out a little chuckle and returned to the party.

You clearly made a wise decision, your majesty. And one you probably should have made sooner. Julie snatched the discarded white half mask from the floor, slipped it on her face and muttered, "Finders, keepers."

The moment she reentered the party, she spotted Zorro again, and her heart made a series of somersaults that would make a young gymnast proud.

She took a moment to appreciate his costume, not to mention his muscular physique and sexy swagger. Her interest, as well as her curiosity, grew by leaps and bounds. Who was he? Did he have a connection to Kidville or to the Rocking Chair Ranch?

She supposed it didn't really matter, so she did her best to shake off her attraction as she crossed the room. Before she reached the kitchen, a hand settled on her shoulder, warming her from the inside out.

She turned to see Zorro, his gaze locked on hers. When he offered her a dazzling smile, her breath caught.

"Lisa," he said, "I'd heard you were going to be here."

He clearly thought she was someone else. She probably ought to say something, but up close, the gorgeous bandito seemed to have stolen both her thoughts and her words.

"It's nice to finally meet you." His voice, whether authentic

or altered to complement his costume, was laced with a slight Hispanic accent that set her senses reeling. “I’ve never really liked blind dates.”

Talk about masquerades and mistaken identities. Before Julie could set him straight, he took her hand in a polished, gentlemanly manner and kissed it. His warm breath lingered on her skin, setting off a bevy of butterflies in her tummy.

“Dance with me,” he said.

Her lips parted, but for the life of her, she still couldn’t speak, couldn’t explain. And she darn sure couldn’t object.

Zorro led her away from the buffet tables and to the dance floor. When he opened his arms, she again had the opportunity to tell him who she really was. But instead, she stepped into his embrace, allowing him to take the lead.

His alluring aftershave, something manly, taunted her. As she savored his scent, as well as the warmth of his muscular arms, her pulse soared. She leaned her head on his shoulder as they swayed to a sensual beat, their movements in perfect accord, as though they’d danced together a hundred times before.

Now would be a good time to tell him she wasn’t Lisa, but she seemed to have fallen under a spell that grew stronger with every beat of the music. The moment turned surreal, like she’d stepped into a fairy tale with a handsome rogue.

Once again, she pondered revealing his mistake and telling him her name, but there’d be time enough to do that after the song ended. Then she’d return to the kitchen, slipping off like

Cinderella. But instead of a glass slipper, she'd leave behind her momentary enchantment.

But several beats later, a cowboy tapped Zorro on the shoulder. "Pancho, I need you to come outside."

Zorro looked at him and frowned. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

The cowboy, whose outfit was so authentic he seemed to be the real deal, rolled his eyes.

Julie wished she could have worn her street clothes. Would now be a good time to admit that she wasn't an actual attendee but here to work at the gala?

"What's up?" Zorro asked.

The cowboy folded his arms across his chest and shifted his weight to one hip. "Someone just broke into my pickup."

Zorro stiffened. "Right now? Where?"

"Here, in the parking lot. I had an envelope filled with cash donations to Kidville under the seat."

At that, Julie's heart thumped, and she clamped her mouth shut. Someone had stolen money meant for the Hoffmans' kids? Who would do such a thing?

"Is the money gone?" Zorro asked the cowboy.

"I don't know yet. I didn't look."

Zorro stiffened. "Any witnesses?"

"A stray dog. But he ain't talking."

"Very funny." Zorro's gaze returned to Julie. "I'm sorry, Lisa. I'm going to have to morph into cop mode."

Now it was Julie's turn to tense. He was actually a police

officer in real life? A slight uneasiness settled over her, an old habit she apparently hadn't outgrown. Not that she had any real reason to fear anyone in law enforcement nowadays.

When Zorro removed his mask, revealing the rest of his face, he was even more handsome than she'd imagined him to be. She stood mesmerized, darn near smitten by a face and persona that were movie-star quality.

The cowboy, who'd been frowning when he'd approached, wasn't bad looking, either. He tipped his hat to Julie. "Would you mind excusing us, ma'am?"

"No, not at all." Julie took a step back and glanced at Zorro.

A smile dimpled his cheeks, and little gold flecks in expressive brown eyes sparkled as he handed his mask to her. "Hold this for me. I'll be back."

She probably should have corrected his mistake then and there, but for the life of her, she couldn't seem to utter a single word.

As Zorro followed the cowboy out the side door, Julie held on to his mask as if it were a glass slipper and studied him from behind. He was both gorgeous and charming. A dashing ladies' man, no doubt. She could tell by his self-assurance and flirtatious manner, both of which were interest-snatching and blood-stirring.

They also set off flashing red warning lights. If there was anything Julie avoided these days, it was suave and flirtatious men who thought they were God's gift to women.

And Zorro, the handsome devil, was too darn sexy to be heaven-sent.

Chapter Two

As Adam followed his old high school friend away from the dance floor, he glanced over his shoulder and took one last look at Lisa, regretting he'd have to put off getting to know her. At least he'd finally had a chance to meet her.

"I'm sorry I interrupted your dance," Matt said as they slipped out a side door and headed toward the parking lot.

"So am I. I've been waiting a long time to meet that woman, and after holding her in my arms and catching a whiff of her citrusy scent... Hell, I need to get back inside before someone else tries to take up where I left off."

"Hopefully, you can get to the bottom of that break-in quickly."

"If I can't, I'll call into headquarters and have someone on duty come out here." Adam needed to get back to that gala. And to Lisa.

The buddies crossed the graveled parking lot, their footsteps crunching on the pulverized granite. Unlike Adam, Matt didn't look any different tonight than he usually did. He was sporting a pair of new Tony Lama boots, though. And he had on a spiffy new Stetson, too. But that wasn't surprising. Costume parties weren't Matt's style.

And normally, they weren't Adam's, either. So he'd planned to cut out early, but after dancing with Lisa, he'd changed his mind.

Damn, she felt good—soft in all the right places. And she smelled amazing, too. Her perfume reminded him of lemon blossoms.

Matt came to a stop and pointed to a shiny black Dodge Ram, the new registration sticker still taped to the passenger side of the windshield. “There’s my truck.”

The driver’s door was open, the window shattered. On the seat, amidst shards of broken glass, sat a good-size rock.

“It would have been easy enough for you to check and see if that envelope was still there,” Adam said. “Why didn’t you?”

“Because I know how fussy you cops can be about disturbing a crime scene. But something else is *definitely* missing, which doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“What’s that?”

“My *food*. I hadn’t eaten since the crack of dawn, so on my way here, I picked up something to tide me over at Bubba’s Burger Barn. The bag was on the passenger seat, and now it’s gone.”

Adam furrowed his brow. “Someone took your leftovers?”

Matt scoffed. “Hell, it wasn’t table scraps. It was a double bacon cheeseburger with large fries, and I didn’t get the chance to take a single bite. I was going to eat it on the way over here, but as soon as I pulled out of the drive-through, my cell phone rang. And by the time the call ended, I’d already arrived at the party. So I decided to check out the fancy, hundred-dollar food first.”

Adam scanned the area. The ground was still damp and a bit muddy from last night’s rain, revealing small shoe prints—two

sets, plus paw prints. All of which were fresh.

“Amateurs,” Adam said. “Kids, most likely. Young ones. You mentioned the dog. It might be theirs.”

“I’m pretty sure it was a stray. It had that scruffy, scrawny look. And it was tricolored—black, brown and what might be white if someone gave it a bath. I saw it when I was parking, and then again when I came back outside to eat my burger, which I figured was going to taste a heck of a lot better than those fancy tidbits they were putting out. That’s when I saw that someone had broken into my truck.”

“Did you notice anyone hanging around or hear anything?”

“No, but if they were anywhere nearby, they would have heard my reaction. I just bought that truck last week. So when I saw the broken glass, I swore loud enough to scare off the mutt. If there were kids anywhere around, they probably hightailed it out of here, too.”

Adam reached beneath the seat, retrieved the yellow manila envelope stuffed with cash and handed it to Matt. “You might want to count it.”

He fingered the thickness. “It feels like it’s all here.” Then he looked inside and counted it.

Apparently the young burglars had only wanted the food. Or else they’d been scared off before they could find anything of value.

Call it a hunch, or the memory of his own personal history, but something told Adam those kids were in some kind of trouble

and that he'd better find them. And not just to put the fear of the law into them.

"Do you have insurance?" he asked.

"Yeah, but with a big deductible." Matt swore under his breath. "Why do you think the damn kids did this?"

"I suspect they were hungry."

Matt seemed to think on that for a couple of beats. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to look for them." And quickly. He wanted to return to the party before Lisa, the sexy intergalactic goddess, decided to leave.

While Matt remained near his truck, picking up the shards of glass and placing them in a burlap sack he'd found behind the driver's seat, Adam tracked the small footprints to a wooded area outside the grange hall and continued along the path they'd taken until he reached what appeared to be an abandoned, rusted-out paneled truck.

He didn't have his gun on him, but his gut told him he wouldn't need it. His steps slowed as he approached the vehicle. When he got close enough, he peered through the grimy driver's-side window and spotted a young boy, a smaller girl and a scruffy mutt sitting in the cab sharing Matt's burger and fries. The kids didn't look much cleaner or better fed than the dirty dog.

As Adam opened the door, the mutt barked, and the children's eyes widened in apprehension. The dark-haired boy, who was about six or seven, slipped a bone-thin arm around his little

blonde companion.

The moment Adam spotted her bruised cheek and her swollen, split lip, she commanded his full attention.

“Hey, guys.” Adam offered his friendliest smile. “What’s going on?”

Neither child uttered a word. The dog, its fur matted, merely cocked its head.

Adam scanned the interior of the dusty, beat-up vehicle. “This is a cool fort you guys have.”

The kids remained silent, eyes leery. Something had them scared, and Adam doubted it was him.

“I know I’m not wearing a uniform,” Adam said, “but I’m a police officer. And I’d like to help you.”

The boy bit down on his bottom lip and studied Adam carefully, then he lifted his chin. “We ain’t going home. And I’m not telling you where we live, either.”

Kids often ran away from good homes, but given the overall undernourished appearance and defensive nature of these two, instinct told Adam that wasn’t the case. And so did the girl’s injury.

“I figure you two have a good reason for being out here.”

When he was met with tight-lipped silence, he continued his questioning, attempting to be kind and gentle as he ferreted out what he already suspected. “Did someone at your house hurt you?”

“Yeah,” the boy said indignantly. “He hurt my sister just

because she peed her pants. It was an accident, and I cleaned it up. But he didn't care. He still spanked her. And he ain't even our dad."

Whether one believed in spanking or not, striking a child in the face was flat-out abuse. And doing so hard enough to leave a mark was criminal.

"Who is *he*?" Adam asked. "Your dad? Stepdad?"

"No, he's just a guy. The one who lived with us before our mama went away and didn't come back. But it's not like he takes care of us anyway."

Adam's gut clenched, and his thoughts took a personal turn as painful memories welled to the surface. He tamped them down the best he could, but his heart went out the poor kids, just as it always did when he came across other abused and neglected children. And he vowed to make sure that, when these two did go home, from now on, it was to a safe place, where a proper guardian would see that they had food to eat, clean clothes to wear and warm beds in which they could sleep.

"What's the guy's name?" Adam asked.

"Brady."

Adam nodded, making a mental note. "And what's your name?"

Again, the boy bit down on his lip, struggling to be strong. Holding on to his secret. Finally, he looked up and frowned. "If I tell you, are you going to promise to leave us alone and not take us back?"

“I *won't* take you back. But I'm not going to leave you alone, either. It's going to get cold—and it might rain again tonight. You'll also be hungry by morning.”

Most law enforcement officers would turn the kids over to child protective services and then go about their way.

Sure, they might sympathize and regret the crappy environment those children had once lived in, but Adam wasn't like the others. Seeing kids who'd been beaten and mistreated hit a little too close to home.

He knew how it felt to be scared and sent to the county receiving home, where kids waited until social services placed them in foster care. Most of the parents were kind and good, but some weren't. So he hated the thought of turning in the brother and sister to the authorities and leaving them to the luck of the draw.

“My name is Adam,” he told them, “although my friends sometimes call me Pancho.”

The boy furrowed his brow. “Why do they call you that?”

“They were just messing with me, I guess. And the nickname stuck.”

The kid seemed to chew on that for a minute, then said, “I'm Eddie. And this is my sister, Cassie. Are you really going to help us?”

“You bet I am.” And this was one of those times he'd do it in his own way, which meant he'd have to pull a few strings.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Adam turned to see

Matt heading toward them.

"I'm glad you're here," Adam told his buddy. "I want you to meet my new friends, Eddie and Cassie."

Matt furrowed his brow, but didn't comment.

"I've got a few calls to make," Adam said, "but I need you to do me a favor. Would you find Jim and Donna Hoffman and bring them out here?"

"Sure. I'll do that, but what am I supposed to tell them?"

Adam was about to say that Eddie and Cassie needed a special place to stay tonight, but he suddenly had a light bulb moment. "I have a better idea. Why don't you bring out Santa and Mrs. Claus. They'll know just what to do. And I think the kids will feel a lot better about going home with them."

Matt nodded, then walked back to the Grange Hall.

Adam took a deep breath, then turned back to the kids.

"Do you really know Santa Claus?" Eddie asked.

"Yeah, I do."

Eddie chuffed. "He doesn't like me or Cassie. He never comes to our house."

Adam reached into the cab and placed a fatherly hand on Eddie's small, bony shoulder. "Actually, he really does like you. It's just that no one told him where you lived."

The kid looked skeptical. "How do you know that?"

"Because he didn't come to my house until I was practically grown up. And so one day, when I met him, I asked him point blank why he'd forgotten me. And that's what he told me."

Eddie seemed to ponder that explanation.

“Do you live far from here?” Adam asked, hoping to get an idea where he could find Brady.

The boy stiffened. “You said you wouldn’t take us back there.”

“I won’t. But I’d like to let Brady know it’s against the law for him to hit people in the face, especially when they’re smaller than he is.”

“Maybe, if we would’ve run away sooner, and you found us before our mama left, she wouldn’t have had to run away and hide from Brady, either.”

Had the mother left her kids with the abuser and run away without them? It didn’t seem likely, but Adam kept his thoughts to himself until he could investigate this case further.

And when he found Brady, they were going to have a little heart-to-heart, which would end up with Brady wearing cuffs and sitting in the back of a patrol car.

Adam sucked in a deep breath, filling his lungs with the crisp evening air. He wanted to tell them that life was going to get a lot better for them from now on, but he knew better than to make a promise he might not be able to keep. “I know of a perfect place for you two to hang out until something better comes along.”

“What about our dog?” Eddie stroked the dirty critter’s matted hair. “He doesn’t have anyone to take care of him.”

“Don’t worry about that.” Adam studied the scrawny, timid mutt. He’d have to call animal control, although it was after hours, and the stray would probably run off before anyone

arrived. “I’ll make sure he gets a bath, a bowl of food and a warm bed—just like you’ll get.”

Eddie’s eyes, while cautious, betrayed hope. “You promise?”

“Cross my heart.” Adam didn’t know exactly how he was going to fulfill that promise, but he’d figure out a way. And once he knew those kids were safe, warm and fed, he’d return to the gala. If he was lucky, he’d be able to spend a little more time with Lisa, the woman he suspected would prove to be his “perfect” match.

Zorro never returned for his mask. In fact, after the cowboy took the Hoffmans outside, they left the party and didn’t come back, either. Julie had no idea what had happened to them or where they’d gone on a Saturday night, but as she’d promised Jim, she drove out to Kidville on Monday morning.

She’d seen pictures on their website. The group home was set up like a small town in the Old West, complete with wooden sidewalks. Various buildings, such as a livery stable, a newspaper office and a hotel, appeared to be authentic in those photos, and she was looking forward to seeing it in person.

While online, she’d also done some research on the Hoffmans. From what she’d gathered, the couple had always dreamed of creating a place in the country where they could provide a safe, loving environment for abused and neglected city kids. After retiring from their county jobs in their mid-fifties, they set their plan in motion, a plan that was nearly two years in the making. Funding had been their biggest stumbling block—and

apparently, at times, it still was. But thanks to the help of the community church, the Wexler Women's Club and the Brighton Valley Rotary, they remodeled the two-story ranch house, got it up to code, painted the barn and set up a playground. Then they added the Old West buildings.

Julie followed the county road about five miles out of town and turned into the drive. When she reached a black wrought iron gate, she used an intercom/phone system to request entrance.

The man who answered her call sounded like Jim Hoffman. "Come on in," he said. "The administration office is located in the Kidville Hotel."

Once the wrought iron gate swung open, granting her access to the property, she drove to a graveled lot and parked. She took her purse from the empty passenger seat, then opened the trunk and withdrew her guitar and a case filled with her musical bag of tricks—colorful scarves, kazoos, maracas, miniature tambourines and other rhythm instruments.

Then she locked the car and walked through an arched entryway made of adobe brick. A wooden overhead sign announced: Welcome to Kidville, Texas. Population 134.

Up ahead, she spotted a red schoolhouse. Behind it was a playground with swings, slides and a colorful climbing structure. To the right and left were grassy areas that provided a volleyball court on one side and a baseball field on the other. Kidville was even more appealing than she'd thought it would be. It was a unique setting, and one Julie hoped to be a part of one day soon.

She made her way to the administration office. Once she opened the door, she spotted Mr. Hoffman. The balding, heavyset man might not be dressed as Santa today, but when he greeted her with an easy smile, he still maintained a jolly demeanor.

“Thanks for coming, Julie.” He paused. “It is Julie, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I’m usually pretty good with names, but I’m afraid things got a little hectic on Saturday night.”

Apparently so. The man and his wife had disappeared about the same time Zorro had, which prompted her to discreetly quiz him about it.

“I was surprised that you left so early,” she said. “I’d planned to introduce myself to your wife, too.”

“We had a little...” He glanced over his shoulder at a closed door, then lowered his voice. “One of our mentors who was attending the gala found a couple of runaways that night. And they were in desperate need of a safe place to live. So my wife and I brought them here. They were pretty frightened and uneasy, so we didn’t want to leave them with our evening staff. So Donna and I stayed with them and helped them get settled.”

Was Zorro the mentor who’d found the kids?

Julie was tempted to ask, but she thought better of getting too specific with her questions and hoped that the head of Kidville would provide her with more information on his own. “It sounds as if you, your wife and that mentor were at the right place and

at the right time, Mr. Hoffman.”

“Please, call me Jim. And you’re right. Those kids had been through a lot. But Adam will get to the bottom of it.”

“Adam?” she asked.

Jim nodded. “Adam Santiago. He’s a police officer with Wexler PD. He found the children and realized they needed to be removed from their home.”

Zorro had indicated he was in law enforcement, but hadn’t the cowboy called him Pancho? From her college Spanish class, she’d learned that Pancho was a nickname for Francisco.

A bit confused, Julie said, “I’m glad to know those kids are here with you now. And that they’re safe.”

“So am I. In fact, my wife is talking to them now.” Jim led the way through the reception area, which looked like a cozy living room filled with overstuffed sofas and chairs upholstered in faux leather. “Have a seat.”

Julie placed her guitar case on the floor and, after sitting on the sofa, leaned the instrument against the arm rest.

Mr. Hoffman took a seat on one of the overstuffed chairs. He again glanced at the closed door, then lowered his voice. “The children seemed to connect with Adam on Saturday night. In fact, they didn’t want him to leave. He stayed with them until nearly ten o’clock, then he promised them he’d be back this morning.”

“Wasn’t he able to come Sunday?” she asked. It was what she would have promised them, had she been the one to find them.

“He wanted to investigate their prior living arrangement, and

while he told *me* that he'd try to stop by then, Adam doesn't make promises he can't keep. At least, not to any of our children."

"I can appreciate that."

"Me, too. Adam was a foster kid himself, so he knows what many of our children have been through and how they feel. He's been mentoring some of the older boys for the past six months."

"How are the two new children doing now?" Julie asked. "Are they adjusting?"

"Cassie—she's the younger one—hasn't spoken a word since she arrived. And she won't let go of her brother's hand. Eddie's pretty protective of her, but he's a little skittish around adults."

"Those poor kids." Julie's heart went out to them, and she hadn't even met them yet.

The door squeaked open, and both Julie and Jim turned and watched a matronly woman walk out. She wore a conservative white blouse, black slacks and a pair of sensible walking shoes. A pair of small black barrettes held the sides of her salt-and-pepper hair in place.

Two children, a small boy with dark hair and a younger blonde girl who clung to his hand, trailed after her, followed by a tall, slender redhead in her late fifties.

She and Jim got to their feet, and he introduced Julie first to his wife Donna, the attractive redhead, then to Lyla Kincaid, the social worker assigned to the children's case.

They shook hands, and Julie said, "It's nice to meet you."

"Same here." Ms. Kincaid smiled, then turned to the children.

“I’ll see you in a few days. In the meantime, I’m glad you feel safe and comfortable here.”

Jim walked the older woman to the door, while Donna introduced Julie to the children—six-year-old Eddie and his five-year-old sister, Cassie.

They looked thin and pale. Cassie bore a bruise on her forehead, as well as a split lip. No wonder Adam had rescued them. Whether he’d been the hottie dressed as Zorro or not, he’d turned out to be a real-life hero.

“Mr. Adam isn’t here yet,” Jim told the children. “But I’m sure he’ll be here soon.”

Donna placed one hand on the boy’s shoulder and the other on his sister’s. “Eddie and Cassie are nervous about going to meet their teacher this morning. So I thought it might be best if we waited for Mr. Adam to get here. They might feel better about going with him to the schoolhouse.”

If Adam was the one who’d found them and rescued them from an abusive situation, they’d probably bonded.

“When is Mr. Adam coming?” Eddie asked. “I want to talk to him. To see if he did what he promised to do.”

“He’ll be here soon,” Donna said. “And I’m sure he did exactly what he told you he’d do. He always keeps his word.”

If Adam and Zorro were one and the same, as Julie had begun to believe, then maybe she’d been wrong to assume he was a ladies’ man and a charmer.

She wasn’t sure what he’d promised the children—or why

Eddie seemed so anxious to talk to him. But maybe, while they waited for him to arrive, she could help.

“If you’ll come over here and sit with me,” Julie told the children, as she took a seat on the sofa, “I have something I’d like to show you.”

Neither child spoke, but they made their way to the sofa and sat beside her, watching intently as she unzipped her guitar case, withdrew the instrument and strummed a few chords.

She’d worn her hair long this morning, so she tucked the strands hanging forward behind her ears. Then she began to strum the chords of a silly song she hoped they’d find appealing.

As she played and sang, lulling the children the way she used to calm her daddy whenever he was stressed or anxious, she did her best to focus on the kids. Yet her eyes continued to drift toward the door, waiting for Adam’s grand entrance. And to see if he was the gorgeous hunk who’d lured her onto the dance floor on Saturday night, then left her both charmed and hoping that he’d return—just as he’d promised.

Adam arrived at the Kidville gate about fifteen minutes later than he’d planned and used the code Jim had given him when he first began volunteering. After parking the Bronco, he headed for the hotel. He liked the Old West vibe of the place, although he preferred to hear the happy sounds of children at play. Apparently, school had already started.

Still, as he neared the admin office, he heard another sound—music. The guitar strums and a soft, melodic voice grew louder

with each step he took.

As he let himself inside, he was stunned by the vision he saw, and his steps stalled. A twenty-something blonde wearing a long, colorful gypsy skirt and a soft green blouse sat on the overstuffed sofa, flanked by Eddie and Cassie. The kids were smiling as she sang a lively tune, her voice soft and melodic, her facial expression animated.

She seemed familiar, but then, Adam had an affinity for blondes.

He remained in the doorway, lulled by the sounds of the stringed instrument and the voice of an angel.

But it was Jim Hoffman's voice that drew him back to earth. "Adam, I'm glad you're here."

Oh. Yeah. He had a purpose, which didn't include being lured by a pretty musician.

"Am I late?" Adam asked.

"No, not really. But the kids have been waiting for you since breakfast. I told them you wouldn't let them down. That is, unless an emergency came along."

He continued to stand in the reception area, watching the kids. They seemed to be so caught up in the song that they didn't know he'd arrived. Neither did the singer.

Adam nodded his head toward the woman with the golden voice. "Who's that?"

"Julie Chapman. She's a new volunteer. She's also a music therapist—and a good one, apparently. The kids are enthralled."

So was Adam. Back in the day, when he'd been in foster care and in trouble more times than not, one of his social workers had placed him in therapy, but he'd been resistant. He'd never warmed up to the shrink, who'd probably been an intern. Either way, he'd refused to play games like Parcheesi with him. And back then he damn sure wasn't going to let anyone into his head, so he'd clammed up until the rookie counselor finally threw in the towel.

But Adam hadn't realized therapy might consist of music—and a pretty blonde guitarist with an amazing voice.

"Julie's going to be a nice addition to our program," Jim said. "Don't you think?"

Adam nodded in agreement. He was certainly impressed by the way she'd enchanted the kids.

"Julie plays several instruments," Jim added, "including the piano. She majored in music while in college, and she's involved in her church choir."

Now, there was a game changer. Adam made a point of avoiding the good-girl type because he'd come to learn that they usually expected far more from him than a good time and a few laughs. But that didn't mean he couldn't watch them from afar. There was something about Julie he found appealing. In fact, she reminded him of Lisa, the sexy flight attendant he'd danced with at the gala. Funny how the two women, who couldn't possibly be more different from each other, struck him as similar.

The office telephone rang, and Jim excused himself. "I need to

get that. Donna is in the back office. She's on hold with someone from tech support, so she's tied up at the moment."

As Jim crossed the room to his desk, Julie looked up and spotted Adam. Her lips parted, as if his arrival—or maybe his appearance—caught her by surprise. So much so, that she missed a couple of strums on the guitar and momentarily stopped singing. But she quickly recovered and turned her attention back to the children.

Adam didn't think anything of it. Women, even those who weren't his type, often found him attractive, which made his dating life easy. It also kept him busy. But from day one, he always made sure he and his dates were on the same page and that they realized he wasn't the kind of man who'd ever settle down.

When the catchy tune ended, Cassie reached out and touched Julie's guitar with her index finger, the first move Adam had seen her make without her brother's prompting. It might not seem like much to anyone else, but he saw it as a sign that the timid little girl wasn't nearly as frightened as she'd been on Saturday night when he and the Hoffmans had brought her here.

When he'd told the kids that he had to leave and that they'd be staying at Kidville, big ol' tears welled in her eyes, and her little lip quivered. Which is why he'd been eager to return this morning and let both kids know that he hadn't abandoned them. Hell, even the dog had gotten spooked and run off before the Hoffmans had showed up.

Adam waited a beat before crossing the room and addressing

the two siblings. “Hey, Eddie. Cassie. I’m back, just like I promised.”

The boy practically jumped up from his seat, his lips parted, his eyes wide. “Cool. But what about your other promise? What happened to my dog? Did you find him?”

“Yes, I did.” Adam glanced first at Jim, then back to Eddie. “She’s a little skittish, but she’s doing okay.”

“She?” Eddie scrunched his brow and frowned. “Are you sure it’s a *girl* dog?”

“Yep. I figured that out when I gave her a bath. That’s not a problem, is it?”

Eddie shrugged a scrawny shoulder. “Only because I named her Spike. Now I have to think up something girly.”

Adam glanced at Cassie, who didn’t offer up a suggestion. In fact, she didn’t utter a word.

“So where is she now?” Eddie asked.

A grin tugged at Adam’s lips, and he slowly shook his head. “She’s at my place temporarily.” He’d actually be tempted to keep her, although he wasn’t home much. “But don’t worry. I’ll find the perfect place for her. And who knows, maybe when you have a house with a yard, you can take her to live with you.”

The little boy tensed, his smile faded and his eyes grew wide in near panic. “Are you going to take us back to Brady?”

“No way.” Adam shook his head definitively. “You’re much better off here. Don’t you think?”

Eddie’s expression softened and he nodded. Then he glanced

at his sister and back to Adam. “Cassie likes it here, too.”

Adam studied the fair-haired girl who’d let her brother do all the talking on Saturday night. Something told him she still hadn’t spoken. But he suspected she was coming around. At least, Julie and her music seemed to have gotten through to her.

And speaking of Julie, he’d better introduce himself. “I’m Adam Santiago. I volunteer here, too.”

“It’s...” She licked her glossed lips, pink and plump. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Before Adam could say anything else, Jim ended his phone call and joined them.

“Why don’t we go for a walk with the kids?” Jim suggested. “We can take them to the schoolhouse and introduce them to their teacher.”

“Can I go, too?” Julie asked.

“By all means,” Jim said. “I’m sure the kids will like that.”

Julie turned to the children. “I saw the school and the playground when I first got here, and it looks like you’ll have a lot of fun during recess. I’d love to see the inside of the classroom.”

Eddie shot a look at Jim, then at Adam, and back to Jim again. “Okay, but can Cassie come with me—and *stay* with me? She doesn’t like to be alone.”

“You bet,” Jim said. “We only have a single classroom and one teacher right now, although we’re planning to expand in the future. So our school is a little different from the one you’re used to.”

“I had a class and a teacher once,” Eddie said, “but it was a long time ago. And Cassie never did.”

That wasn’t surprising. From what Adam had gathered during his investigation of Brady Thatcher, the guy hadn’t played any kind of paternal role with the kids. Hell, he hadn’t even noticed they were gone until Adam showed up at his door and told him.

It was a real shame, too. If the kids had gone to school, a teacher might have picked up on their abuse and neglect sooner.

The telephone rang again, and Jim straightened. “Oh, for Pete’s sake. I’m never going to get these kids to school.”

“Go ahead and take that call,” Adam said. “I’ll walk with them to their classroom and introduce them to their teacher.”

Julie, who’d just put her guitar into its case, looked up and smiled. “I’m ready to go with you.”

As they exited the admin office and walked along the wooden sidewalk toward the school, a light breeze kicked up, stirring the air around them, as well as a few strands of Julie’s long blond hair and a whiff of her scent—something citrusy.

Adam stole another peek at her, but the quick glance turned into a steady gaze. He noted her pretty profile. Long, thick lashes. A light dusting of freckles across a slightly turned up nose. Plump, kissable lips. Once again, he caught her scent and considered her similarity to Lisa, the flight attendant he’d danced with at the gala. Apparently their perfume was the latest fashion craze.

He was so caught up with his assessment of Julie that he damn

near tripped when they stepped off the wooden boardwalk. He'd better shake off his thoughts and interest before she caught him studying her. Or worse, before he did a face-plant in the dirt.

"I used to love school," Julie told Eddie and Cassie. "I didn't have any brothers or sisters, so being on the playground at recess gave me a chance to have a lot of fun with the other kids."

An only child, huh? The apple of her daddy's eye, no doubt. And her mama's pride and joy. Adam had known girls like her, and they'd all steered clear of guys like him, which was just as well. He preferred simple, unencumbered relationships that lasted until one or the other got bored and moved on to someone else.

When they reached the red schoolhouse, he slowed to a stop. "This is it."

He figured the teacher was expecting the kids, so he opened the door, and they stepped inside the large room that smelled like pencil shavings, crayons and paste.

The teacher, Mrs. Wright, a blonde in her mid-thirties, was walking among the children and passing out math worksheets, none of which seemed to be the same level.

When Jesse Cosgrove, the kid Adam had been mentoring, glanced at the doorway, he brightened and waved. "Hey! Mr. Adam, it's not Wednesday."

Adam placed his index finger on his lips, shushing him, then he lifted it in the air and made a circular motion, indicating that the boy should turn around and focus on his work. He followed

the silent chastisement with a wink, letting the kid know they'd talk later.

Jesse seemed to understand because he spun in his seat and faced the front of the class. As he studied the math worksheet on his desk, he scrunched his brow, stuck his pencil in his mouth and bit down on what was left of his eraser. Jesse was the oldest boy at Kidville, but he lagged a couple of years behind academically.

"This is what they call a combination class," Adam told Julie and the kids, repeating what Jim had told him during his first tour of the place. "At this time, they're only licensed to take children up to the third grade. And from what I've heard, Cassie is going to be the only kindergartener."

Mrs. Wright passed out one last worksheet, then strode to the doorway, stooped and greeted Eddie and Cassie by name. "We were excited to hear we'd have two new friends in class. And we've been waiting to meet you. As soon as the other children finish their math, it'll be time for morning snack and recess."

Both Eddie and Cassie seemed nervous, but Mrs. Wright was a champ when it came to putting children at ease. So it wouldn't take long for her to make the two siblings feel welcome. Once she took them to their desks, Adam and Julie left their little charges and headed back the admin office.

Again, Adam caught a hint of her lemon-blossom fragrance.

"Can I ask what perfume you're wearing?" he asked.

Julie's steps slowed, and her lips parted. "Excuse me?"

"Your perfume. It's so familiar to me."

“Thank you. It’s my shampoo, actually.” She picked up her pace, which compelled him to quicken his steps, too.

“Whatever it is,” he said, “It’s nice. It reminds me of...someone I know.” Lisa. His erstwhile dance partner from the gala. The two women had lots of things in common. Their hair color, their petite stature. Of course, Lisa had been dressed in that skimpy space avenger outfit, and Julie wore a long-sleeve blouse and a skirt that was nearly floor length. She didn’t seem to be the kind of woman who’d be comfortable showing that much skin.

For a moment, he wondered if they might be the same woman, then he quickly discarded the notion. He’d been told Lisa was fun-loving. A risk-taker, like he was.

Adam might follow the rules these days, but he still had a rebellious side that didn’t mix well with good girls who sang in the choir and who had very specific ideas about what they wanted in life.

He stole another glance at Julie. She’d certainly dressed the part this morning, but he couldn’t help envisioning her in that sexy costume. A grin tugged at his lips. What was lurking under the surface?

It might be fun to find out, but Adam decided he’d better rein in his imagination. He didn’t date good girls—at least not intentionally. And the smart ones who’d managed to trick him into believing they had a wild side knew better than to go out with him more than once.

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