

A man and a woman are sitting on a large haystack in a rural setting. The man, wearing a denim shirt and jeans, is leaning towards the woman, who is wearing a light blue dress. They are looking at each other with affection. In the background, there is a wooden fence and a green field.

MILLS & BOON

Vintage *Cherish*

The Cattleman and the Virgin Heiress

JACKIE MERRITT

Mills & Boon Vintage Cherish

Jackie Merritt

**The Cattleman And
The Virgin Heiress**

«HarperCollins»

Merritt J.

The Cattleman And The Virgin Heiress / J. Merritt —
«HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon Vintage Cherish)

«I MAY HAVE FORGOTTEN MY NAME, BUT I REMEMBER WHAT IT IS TO WANT A MAN.»—Hope LeClaire Stockwell on her amnesia
Though Hope LeClaire's memory was in shards, in the arms of her gallant rescuer, Matt McCarlson, she felt entirely whole. Stranded on his ranch, they couldn't summon her past, so they focused on the present...and the sensual awareness sizzling between them. Then a torrent of memories came flooding in...and the «forever» she dreamed of was washed away. For Hope was a Stockwell, an heiress of untold wealth, and Matt was the sworn enemy of all aristocratic women. But Hope would not be denied her one chance at happiness...at becoming this proud rancher's wife....

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If the walls of Stockwell Mansion could talk...

we'd welcome dear Madelyn and Brandon home at long last! To have the Stockwells' mother and uncle back in the family fold after all these years of thinking them dead...well, we're overwhelmed with happiness. Years ago, fueled by an unfounded inferno of jealousy, Caine Stockwell had cast out his own wife and brother—and falsely announced them drowned. Caine's deception lasted for decades, and robbed the Stockwell siblings of their mother's love—and a sister? It seems Madelyn had been pregnant at the time of her exile, and that child, Hope LeClaire, should have arrived in Texas to meet her clan days ago!

What could have detained Hope? We have a very ominous feeling about this, for the newspapers were splashed with her picture and the two-inch headline, Stockwell Heiress Found, making her a target for trouble. We can only hope she's not in harm's way, but nestled in the arms of a strong Texan hero....



Dear Reader,

May marks the celebration of "Get Caught Reading," a national campaign the Association of American Publishers created to promote the sheer joy of reading. "Get Caught Reading" may be a phrase that's familiar to you, but if not, we hope you'll familiarize yourself with it by picking up the wonderful selections that Silhouette Special Edition has to offer....

Former NASA engineer Laurie Paige says that when she was young, she checked out *The Little Engine That Could* from the library fifty times. "I read it every week," Laurie recalls. "I was so astounded that the library would lend books to me for free. I've been an avid reader ever since." Though Laurie Paige hasn't checked out her favorite childhood storybook for a while, she now participates in several local literacy fund-raisers and reads to young children in her community. Laurie is also a prolific writer, with nearly forty published Silhouette titles, including this month's *Something To Talk About*.

Don't miss the fun when a once-burned rancher discovers that the vivacious amnesiac he's helping turns out to be the missing Stockwell heiress in Jackie Merritt's *The Cattleman and the Virgin Heiress*. And be sure to catch all of *THE CALAMITY JANES*, five friends sharing the struggles and celebrations of life, starting with *Do You Take This Rebel?* by Sherryl Woods. And what happens when Willa and Zach learn they both inherited the same ranch? Find out in *The Ties That Bind* by Ginna Gray. Be sure to see who will finish first in Patricia Hagan's *Race to the Altar*. And Judith Lyons pens a highly emotional tale with *Lt. Kent: Lone Wolf*.

So this May, make time for books. Remember how fun it is to browse a bookstore, hold a book in your hands and discover new worlds on the printed page.

Best,

Karen Taylor Richman

Senior Editor

The Cattleman and the Virgin Heiress

Jackie Merritt



www.millsandboon.co.uk

JACKIE MERRITT

is still writing, just not with the speed and constancy of years past. She and hubby are living in southern Nevada again, falling back on old habits of loving the long warm or slightly cool winters and trying almost desperately to head north for the months of July and August, when the fiery sun bakes people and cacti alike. Even Jackie's cat, Tige, doesn't go outside during the summer. Tige is Jackie's pal, her friend, her pet. He's an orange-striped tabby, neutered, of course, and too cute to accurately describe. She loves dogs, as well.

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Chapter One

She was on a road, the only thing she knew for sure in the nearly blinding rainfall. On a road in the black, black night, drenched to the skin and running. Running as hard as she could and still managing to breathe. Her chest ached from the gasping for air she'd undergone for...oh, Lord, how long had she been running? How far away was she from that terrible place?

And was he behind her in the dark? Fear made her take another look over her shoulder. She saw nothing but rain and darkness. Easily he could be toying with her, staying just beyond her scope of vision, knowing that he could reach her with a short sprint whenever he got over his perverted sense of fun.

Panic seized her again, and she forced her exhausted legs to run faster. She needed desperately to stop and rest and catch her breath, but she didn't dare, not for a minute. Would it help her plight if she knew precisely where she was? she wondered as her mind frantically sought salvation from the most horrifying experience of her life. She had a general idea of her location, but this whole area was frighteningly unfamiliar.

If only someone would come along. A police car would be perfect but far too much to hope for when she hadn't seen even one vehicle of any kind since her flight began.

And then, so suddenly that it sent a shock wave of fortifying excitement through her system, she saw a light. It wasn't close and it appeared to be wavering in the torrential rainfall that was nearly drowning her and blurring her eyesight, but she felt confident that it was a light. A yard light, perhaps. Indicating that someone lived out there, someone who might be kind enough to open his or her door to a soggy, scared-to-death stranger and let her warm up, dry off and calm her wildly beating heart.

Without hesitation she headed for the light. In moments she realized that she was running in prickly brush that tore at her clothes and skin. Her chest felt as though it were on fire, her right side was aching badly, her legs screamed with pain and still she didn't dare stop. Added to that list of miseries, she nearly fell down several times, as the ground had turned to slippery mud under her feet.

But the light gave her hope. Shortly she realized that she was crossing a road—a different road than the one she'd been on earlier. Even in the rain and darkness she could tell it was a different road, and gratitude flooded her heart. "Thank you," she whispered as her pulse leapt tumultuously over this additional proof that she was approaching inhabited territory.

But on the other side of that road was a rise in the terrain, and it was muddy and slicker than ice. She couldn't let it defeat her and she started up it. She lost her footing and fell backward. Grasping at anything to break her fall, she inadvertently twisted around, and when she hit the ground her head collided with a fence post.

She knew no more, and the rain mercilessly pelted her limp form and muddy face.

Matt McCarlson had heard the rain all night. At daybreak it was still raining, and Matt grimly got dressed and left the house to see what damage this powerful storm was wreaking. Wearing a yellow slicker and a wide-brimmed hat low on his forehead, he saddled his horse, Dex. Inspecting the ranch on horseback made sense. Storms of this magnitude and duration washed out roads, flooded creeks and created puddles the size of small lakes. Mounting Dex, Matt rode from the barn.

It was as bad as he'd suspected. Where water wasn't actually standing because of runoff to lower ground, it was so dangerously slippery with mud that Matt had to watch every step Dex took. The trees around the house had lost branches and limbs, and the debris was scattered far and wide. Leaving the compound, Matt checked the creeks that wound—normally at a lazy pace—through his land, and just as he'd known in his gut would be the case, every single creek had overflowed its banks. It was a spectacle of flash flooding and nature's formidable power, and it wasn't at its worst yet because it was still raining.

Shaking his head disgustedly, Matt directed Dex for home. There wasn't much he or the men working for him could do today. He'd tell Chuck Crawford, his foreman, to give the crew the day off. They could hang around the bunkhouse or try to get to Hawthorne, the closest town, if they wanted, though Matt doubted that the roads would be passable.

Matt was almost back to the barn when he remembered that he hadn't picked up yesterday's mail from the mailbox at the end of the ranch's driveway. He decided to do that before holing up until the rain at least slowed down some. Yesterday's mail delivery might be the last one for a week, he thought wryly as he approached the end of the driveway and the mailbox. He'd seen this kind of storm before, and if he managed to pull his ranch out of the financial doldrums into which it had descended this past year and he continued his life as a Texas cattle rancher, he would undoubtedly see it again.

Thinking of his financial problems pulled down his mood, which wasn't the best to begin with. There wasn't a place on earth that didn't need regular rainfalls, but storms of this nature were downright depressing.

"Hell," Matt muttered as he rode. Matt was just about to reach into the box for the mail when he spotted something strange. Turning his head, he gasped and mumbled, "What the hell?" He felt bile rise in his throat and an increased pulse rate. He saw a person lying in muddy water, resembling a pile of wet rags.

Was the person breathing? Heaven help him—he could be looking at a dead body.

Matt's stomach turned over. He scanned the area for a car and saw none. Fearful conjecture created horrifying images in Matt's brain. How had this person gotten here? The McCarlson ranch was miles from Hawthorne and almost that far from any other ranch. Was he looking at a victim of foul play?

With a suddenly bone-dry mouth and jangling nerves, Matt urged Dex over to the mud-streaked, soaking-wet, bedraggled creature. Sliding from the saddle to the ground, Matt blinked twice in genuine shock. It was a woman!

He could hardly believe his eyes. A woman! Where had she come from? Her face was unknown to him. Who was she, and what chain of events had delivered her to his doorstep? Was it something as simple as a flat tire or a disabled vehicle on the main road?

Well, he couldn't just stand there and speculate, even though he was almost afraid to find out if she was alive or dead. This sort of thing wasn't his forte, not even close. He was a rancher, not a medic.

And then he caught sight of something that made him grit his teeth and do what had to be done—there was blood in the watery mud next to her head. Obviously she had a head injury, a cut, a gash, some sort of wound that was seeping blood. Matt forced himself to kneel beside her. He removed the glove from his right hand and then took her wrist and felt for a pulse. He found one and breathed an enormous sigh of relief.

"Ma'am? Miss? Can you hear me?" he said, hoping that the sound of his voice would rouse her. At the same time he wondered how he would get her to the house if she didn't come to.

One option was quickly eliminated. Lifting her onto his horse when she was unconscious wouldn't be wise. She could have more than one injury and laying her over the saddle like a sack of potatoes could exacerbate her medical situation.

He hated leaving her alone while he went for one of the four-wheel-drive trucks—the only vehicles on the ranch that might make it through such heavy, clinging mud—but that really was his only choice.

"Miss, I'm going to be gone for a few minutes, but don't be afraid, okay? I'll be back in a flash. I just need to get a truck to—"

Her eyes opened, startling him, but the intensity of his relief momentarily weakened his knees.

"Hello," he said gently. She stared at him and said nothing. "Hold on, maybe I can make you a little more comfortable." Standing, Matt took off his slicker and laid it over her. She couldn't possibly get any wetter than she was, but maybe the slicker would warm her a little. Kneeling again, he leaned

over her and looked into her eyes. They were a beautiful blue color, but so dull and lifeless that he felt another jab of fear.

"Can you hear me?" he asked. "Does your head hurt? Do you feel any pain anywhere else?"

"No," she whispered.

"Your head doesn't hurt?"

"Uh, maybe a little. In back."

He'd never seen such a blank expression in anyone's eyes before, but he had no idea what it meant. "Are you sure you have no pain anywhere else? The reason I'm asking is that I want to get you out of the rain and into the house, and I don't want to make matters worse by moving you if I shouldn't."

"No pain," she whispered, and closed her eyes again. "Please, just let me sleep."

"No! You need to stay awake," Matt said sharply, causing her eyelids to flutter open again. "You have to stay awake until I can get you inside, do you understand?" He didn't have to be a doctor to know that she should not be seeking sleep in this unholy situation; it was just common sense. She was obviously weak and probably chilled to the bone. She needed to get warm, she needed dry clothes and a doctor, and she needed those things now, or as close to "now" as he could manage them.

He made a decision then. The fastest, most efficient method of getting her to the house was for him to carry her there. Him, not Dex, not a truck.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "I'm going to slide my arms under you and pick you up so I can carry you to the house. Please just lie still and let me do the work."

Once again he received a totally blank stare, almost as though she didn't comprehend speech at all, and yet she let him pick her up and slip and slide to his feet in the mud without any sign of objection.

It was slow going. He estimated her weight to be around 110 pounds and thanked the good Lord it wasn't more. By the time he reached the house, however, it felt as though he were carrying a ton. His whole body ached, especially his arms and back. During the entire struggle, she had not uttered one sound, though he'd glanced down every so often to make sure that her eyes remained open.

"We're here," he said, gasping the message because he was out of breath and tired. Even so, he managed to hang on to her and still turn the doorknob.

A minute later, walking down the hallway to the bedroom area of the house, he felt renewed strength; it was almost over. There were three bedrooms, and he entered the first one he came to and strode to the bed. Laying her down on it, he straightened his back and groaned silently. It wasn't that he was physically out of shape—far from it—but carrying another person for a good quarter of a mile wasn't a common occurrence for him. Hell's bells, was it a common occurrence for anyone?

Standing there, looking at her, he realized what a mess he had on his hands. She was injured, soaked through and muddy from head to shoes. Along with her worrisome physical condition, there was her listlessness, and the un-caring tone of her voice the few times she'd spoken. Shock, Matt thought. She had to be in shock. Her head injury was the most probable cause, but how had she gotten hurt in the first place? And way out here, on his ranch, to boot? It didn't add up.

Regardless of so many questions without answers, she was here, in his house, and other than the ranch hands—who were probably wondering why he wasn't at the breakfast table with them—there was no one else to help her. He was it, and he wished to high heaven there was another woman on the place, because someone was going to have to help her get out of those filthy, wet clothes.

"Okay," he said under his breath, dreading that prospect. "Let's take care of first things first. Miss, I'm going to call a doctor, Doc Adam Pickett. He's a good doctor and a good friend, so don't you lie there worrying. Stay put, all right? I won't be long." Matt took his slicker away from her and replaced it with a warm down comforter. "Try to relax, but don't fall asleep." He hurried from the room and headed for the kitchen telephone.

His heart sank when he put the receiver to his ear; there was no dial tone. The phone lines were down and who knew when they would be repaired?

“Damn!” he exclaimed, and tried the wall switch for the ceiling light. It came on, so the electricity was still working. “For how long, though?” Matt muttered as he left the kitchen.

Walking back into the bedroom, he saw that she’d either fallen asleep or passed out. Or died? No! he thought frantically. She hadn’t been hurt that badly, had she?

Hurrying over to the bed, he again felt for a pulse. Surprisingly it was a little stronger than before. Standing straight again, he rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. What should he do now? Check her head wound and hope to God it was something he could take care of with antibiotic cream and a gauze bandage?

The mud in her hair was already beginning to dry and cake. He would have to clean her hair in some way before dressing the injury. Cautiously he pulled back the comforter a little. If she were a man he wouldn’t hesitate for a second to take off those wet clothes, even if he had to cut them off with a pair of scissors or a knife.

Her gender really didn’t matter, did it? She was a person in distress, a human being like himself, and she was alone and injured. Would he care if a strange woman undressed him under similar circumstances?

Of course not. He was being silly. He had to help her the best he could until he could get hold of Doc Pickett.

Matt strode purposefully from the room to get a pan of warm water and some clean towels and washcloths. He would also bring the first-aid kit back with him.

An hour later Matt was in the kitchen, staring broodingly out the window over the sink. He had a stressful knot in his gut, caused by Ms. X in his guest room. Before undressing and bathing her, his thoughts had been strictly impersonal. Certainly he hadn’t considered her an attractive female, and she was. She was young and pretty and her body was...well, it was perfect, that was the only word for it. Ripe, full breasts, a tiny little waist, long legs and a shapely but firm behind.

He hated the way his mind was working now. He had no right to admire that woman’s sensual good looks. She was reasonably clean now, there was medication and a bandage on the gash he’d located in her thick, dark brown hair, and he’d managed to dress her in a freshly laundered sweat suit of his. It was miles too big—he was six feet three inches tall and she couldn’t be more than five-five—but at least she wouldn’t wake up naked, and it would warm her chilled flesh through and through.

“Hell’s bells,” he mumbled and shot the telephone a dirty look. The lines were still down, and God only knew when the ranch would have phone service again.

The questions in his mind regarding his mysterious guest just kept piling up and getting more urgent. Who was she? Where had she come from? How had she gotten to the ranch last night? How long had she been lying out there in the rain? And what about the chafed bruises on her wrists, as though her hands had been tied to something with a rope? Damnation, all he’d heard in the night was the storm. No telling what had occurred on his own land—and not that far from the house—and he’d been completely oblivious to it. Good Lord, was it possible that one of his men had brought her out here with the intention of forcing himself upon her, and she’d gotten away from him? As discomfiting as that idea was—Matt hated thinking that any of the men living at the ranch and working for him were capable of such a heinous crime—it made as much sense as any other conjecture. After all, that woman hadn’t just materialized with the storm, and with those rope burns on her wrists Matt felt pretty certain that she was a victim of some sort.

But if any of that speculation had credibility, wouldn’t she be grateful that he’d rescued her, at least from the elements? Or was she the type to become hysterical when she realized she was in a strange house with a strange man? A man who’d undressed her and washed the mud from her naked body?

Matt sighed heavily. He was out of his league here. Way out.

Still staring out the window, he spotted Chuck heading for the house, wearing a rain slicker and dodging the deepest puddles. He was carrying something, and when he saw Matt at the window, he raised a hand in a casual salutation.

Then he walked in through the kitchen door. "Hell of a morning," he said by way of a greeting.

"Hell of a storm," Matt replied. "Phone's out, and probably the electricity will go next. What've you got there?"

"A woman's purse. Here's the mail and yesterday's newspaper, too."

Chuck laid the mail and paper on the table, but handed the purse to Matt. "Where do you suppose that came from? It's got a whole bunch of stuff in it."

"It does?" Matt opened the purse, saw numerous items and took out a wallet. Flipping it open he found himself looking at a Massachusetts driver's license photo of the lady he'd rescued. "Her name is Hope LeClaire," he said quietly.

"Whose name is Hope LeClaire?" Chuck asked with a curious expression.

Matt returned the wallet to the handbag and set it on the table next to the mail and newspaper. Then he looked at his foreman and told him what had taken place that morning.

Chuck was fifty years old, a lifetime cowboy, fiercely loyal to Matt and a kindly man. But he was an observer of mankind and its foibles, and not too much that passed between heaven and earth surprised him. The only thing that really bothered him about the story he'd just heard was that there were red marks—quite likely rope burns—on Hope LeClaire's wrists.

"This could be serious business, Matt," he said soberly.

"I'm sure it is. Chuck, we can only guess at what happened to her last night, but how in hell did she end up way out here, on foot and during one of the worst storms we've had in years?"

"Have you asked her?"

"The few times she's said anything at all she seemed to be disoriented. I attributed it to shock and didn't press her for any answers."

"Well, you're looking pretty damned gloomy about it, so I think the next time she opens her eyes you should ask those questions." Chuck walked over to the outside door. "The men are hanging at the bunkhouse. Anything you want done?"

"Not in this downpour. Tell them Mother Nature gave them a day off. If they can get to town, which I doubt, they might even enjoy the free time."

Chuck shook his head. "They won't be going anywhere. The road's totally gone in some places and flooded in others."

"You checked it on horseback?"

"Rode as far as that right-angle turn near the dam."

"You didn't happen to see a vehicle that might have broken down last night, did you?"

"No, sure didn't. She's going to have to tell you how she got here, Matt. It might not be a pretty story, but she's the only one who knows it. Among the three of us, at any rate. See you later." Chuck left the house.

Matt wandered restlessly for a while, then looked in on Hope LeClaire. Her eyes were wide-open and she looked back at him.

"Hi." For her benefit he spoke cheerfully. Entering the room, he approached the bed. "How are you feeling?"

She hesitated, as though she really didn't know how she was feeling. "I think I'm all right," she said slowly, "but where am I?"

"I'm Matt McCarlson, and you're at my ranch."

"Which is...where?"

Matt frowned. "In Texas, of course."

"Do we know each other?"

“Considering the fact that I only set eyes on you a few hours ago, I couldn’t say we’re fast friends,” Matt said rather dryly. He was getting a peculiar sensation in his gut, a premonition, actually. “By any chance are you having trouble remembering some things?” Premonition or not, he did not expect what happened next.

Her big blue eyes got teary, and she whispered, “I—I can’t remember anything. Not even my name.”

Matt’s initial reaction was to wonder whether he should believe her. First of all, he was thirty-seven years old, certainly no wide-eyed kid to be taken in by a con game. Second, since the awful experience of his marriage with its tragic demise, he was cautious around the opposite sex. Even enormous blue eyes and a drop-dead body weren’t going to make a sucker out of him.

He remembered the woman’s purse and wallet in the kitchen and knew he had the upper hand. “Hold on a second,” he said a bit smugly, because confronted with such irrefutable evidence of her identity, her con—if that really was what was going on here—would crumble. “I’ve got something you should see. Be right back.”

Hurrying away, he returned in a minute with the purse, which he laid on the blanket near her right hand. “I presume this is yours?”

Hope picked up the purse and looked at it front and back. It was black leather and quite attractive, but it rang no bells. Was it hers? Was there something inside that would tell her who she was?

“Check the wallet inside,” Matt said gruffly.

Hope raised her gaze from the purse to Matt McCarlson. For the first time she really saw him. He was very tall and well-built, a ruggedly handsome man with chestnut hair and brown eyes. If they didn’t know each other, why was she here, in bed at his ranch? Very easily she could panic and fall apart, she knew. She was teetering on the brink of hysteria, terribly frightened and confused because her mind was such a void. But there had to be some answers somewhere, and if she gave in to panic, she might never find them.

What puzzled her, though, was Matt McCarlson’s reluctance to take her seriously. She’d told him that she remembered nothing, not even her name, and he didn’t seem to believe her. Well, pray God there was something in the wallet he’d mentioned that would trigger her memory.

Dropping her eyes to the purse again, she opened it and took out the wallet. She studied the driver’s license, especially the photo, but realized that she had no idea what she looked like.

“Is this a picture of me?” she asked.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Hope could feel her heart harden. What she needed right now was someone who cared that her mind was a terrifying blank.

“If you think I would kid about something so...so ghastly, then you have an extremely warped sense of humor,” she said coldly. Peering under the blankets and sheet, she saw how completely she was clothed, then threw back the covers. “There’s a mirror over there. I’m going to get up and see myself, for myself.”

“Stay put,” Matt growled. “I’ll bring you a hand mirror.”

“Why on earth should I stay put?”

“Because you might fall flat on your face if you got up, that’s why.” He hurried from the room.

Hope frowned. Why was she in bed at all? Well, her head did hurt a little, so maybe she’d already taken a fall. Gingerly she felt the back of her hair and encountered a bandage.

Fear suddenly gripped her, and she put her hand over her mouth as her eyes wildly searched the strange room. She’d only been here a few hours, according to Matt McCarlson. Where had she been before that? The driver’s license was from the state of Massachusetts. What was she doing in Texas, if Massachusetts was home? In particular, how had she ended up on a ranch?

She breathed deeply several times, got her emotions under control and was studying the license photo again when Matt returned and handed her a mirror.

Looking into it, she saw blue eyes and dark hair. It was the face in the photo, though heaven knew that snapshot wasn't a flattering likeness.

"It's me," she said, and bit down on her bottom lip. "I'm Hope LeClaire." She paused, then murmured, "Hopeless would be a more appropriate name."

"Knowing your name doesn't help your memory?" Matt realized he was beginning to believe her, and it didn't make him happy. What did the medical profession do for amnesiacs? As a layman, what could he do? He'd been in prickly, uncomfortable situations before, but none of them compared to this one.

"No," she said quietly, though blood was rushing through her veins at a furious pace. "It doesn't help." What would help? she thought. Certainly this man, this acquaintance of only a few hours, couldn't help. Maybe there was more information in the wallet and purse. She pulled some cards from the wallet. "There are credit cards, and this. It reads, 'In case of emergency, please notify Madelyn LeClaire, mother, and there's a telephone number.'"

"The phone's dead because of the storm."

"There's a storm?"

"It started yesterday and is still going on."

"Then I guess I can't call Madelyn, can I? But if she's my mother and my last name is LeClaire, then I'm not married."

"There could be exceptions to that rule. A career where you prefer using your maiden name, for instance."

"Please don't cite exceptions when I deduce some information about myself," she said sharply. "How would you like to know absolutely nothing about who you are and then when you think you've come up with one tiny piece of data, somebody punches holes in your theory?"

Unaccustomed to chastisement of any kind, Matt felt his spine stiffen defensively. "Forget I said a word. How about something to eat. Are you hungry?"

Hope thought about it. "Yes, I think I am."

"Bowl of soup and a sandwich sound okay?"

"Anything."

"Glass of milk or a cup of coffee or tea?"

"Hot tea, please." She watched Matt McCarlson leave the room, and she sighed, because she felt totally miserable in her ignorance. Truth was, she felt like bawling her eyes out, but what good would it do?

She pulled out the other items in the purse with anxious fingers. Knowing her name was a plus—and her mother's, who would certainly be able to tell her all about herself—but maybe there were other clues in the purse. To her disappointment, all she found was a small assortment of cosmetics, an unopened chocolate bar, a pocket-size book of crossword puzzles and a pen.

Lying back, she stared at the ceiling. I'm Hope LeClaire and I live in Massachusetts. So what in heaven's name am I doing in Texas? And why am I in the bed of a man who, by his own admission, has known me for only a few hours?

That was when the trembling started...and the tears...and the panic she'd been battling so hard.

She could no longer keep a lid on the all-consuming fear that had been threatening her sanity, and she turned to her side, buried her head under a pillow and wept.

Chapter Two

In the kitchen, Matt set the teakettle on the stove to heat water for tea, then started putting together some food for Hope LeClaire. Glancing out the window he could hardly believe it was still raining so hard. He took a moment to try the telephone again, and put down the dead instrument with an impatient grimace.

His gaze fell on the mail and newspaper on the table, and he picked up the paper to check the weather report. But he never got past the front page. In large print the headline read, Newest Stockwell Heiress Missing.

Quickly he read the article and felt his blood pressure rising. The missing heiress's name was Hope LeClaire, and she had allegedly disappeared from the Grandview, Texas, airport after deplaning. Airline personnel were positive she'd used her ticket to get to Grandview, but no one could recall seeing her in the airport after the arrival of her flight. The Stockwell family had announced a fifty thousand dollar reward for information that would lead authorities to Miss LeClaire, and the newspaper would print a photo of the missing heiress in the next edition.

"Well, isn't this just great?" Matt mumbled. "Just what I need, another rich woman mucking up my life."

His attitude was based on his marriage to a woman who had been born and raised to wealth. She'd gotten tired of playing rancher's wife after only a short stab at married life and had wanted to get back into Texas society. She was about to leave Matt for the son of a rich Texas banking family, but she was killed in a freak accident. Matt had been helping her load her car with her worldly possessions, and they'd been arguing. A Jeep had come flying down their private road, and it had been filled with drunken, joyriding kids. Matt had tried to pull his wife out of the way, but one of the kids shot his leg full of buckshot and he'd fallen before he could pull Trisha to safety. The Jeep crashed, the kids had all been killed, and so had Trisha. Matt had never stopped feeling guilty for their argument and breakup. He had learned to live with community censure, but he'd vowed many times to never get involved with a woman again—especially a rich one as Trisha's lifestyle had left a bad taste in his mouth.

But he was involved with one now, wasn't he? She was occupying his guest room, and he was waiting on her hand and foot. And he could only shudder and guess how long they'd be stuck there in his house with the storm still raging and the roads already impassable, plus no phone service.

Not that he couldn't use fifty thousand bucks. Hell, with that much money he could bring his mortgage payments current with the bank and even catch up on his vendor accounts, all of which were past due. The only bills he paid faithfully every month were his utility bills, and it was a scramble most of the time to do that. His present crew, including Chuck, was about half the number of men he used to have on the payroll, and they were mostly working for room, board and loyalty.

The McCarlson ranch had been a successful operation until a fast-moving virus had spread through the area's cattle population only last year, financially crippling at least half of the ranches. The owners of those hard-hit operations were struggling to survive, just as Matt was doing. Times were tough now, make no mistake, and Matt worried almost constantly about how much longer he could hang on.

So yes, he could use that reward, but before he told anyone anything about Hope, he had to uncover what happened to her last night. Right was right, after all, and there were a lot of things he wouldn't do for money. For instance, maybe she didn't want to be found. Maybe her amnesia was a deliberate ploy to avoid the Stockwell family. Maybe she'd slipped out of the Grandview airport, and...

"Aw, hell." He could come up with "maybes" until doomsday and never know the truth until it came from Hope's own lips. But it was possible that her reading this newspaper article and realizing

that everyone in the area—including the Stockwells—were on to her disappearing act would bring about a miraculous recovery.

With a wry little shake of his head Matt folded the paper and laid it on the tray he was preparing for Hope. He quickly made a sandwich and warmed a can of soup. The tray was laden with a good lunch—including the hot tea Hope had requested—when Matt carried it to the bedroom she was using.

He stopped at the threshold. Hope was sobbing so hard her back and shoulders were heaving.

If she was faking amnesia she must have a reason, and if she wasn't, she was in no shape to be reading newspaper articles about herself. He balanced the tray against the wall enough with one hand to remove the paper and drop it in the hall, out of Hope's sight.

Then he walked in and set the tray on the bureau. "Hope?" Obviously she couldn't hear him over such intense sobbing, and he sat on the edge of the bed and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Come on, dry your eyes and face whatever it is that's got you bawling. Not that a good cry doesn't help one's disposition at times. Relieves some of the tension that we humans have been fortunate enough to be blessed with."

Hope felt his big warm hand on her shoulder and found it strangely comforting. She didn't know him—she knew next to nothing about anything, for that matter—but this man, this stranger, was offering comfort, sympathy and even a bit of cynical humor, and the awful loneliness within her became just a little easier to bear.

Turning over, she wiped her eyes and whispered hoarsely, "I'm sorry."

"Do you have something to be sorry for?"

"I'm intruding in your home, aren't I?"

"This bed was just sitting here not doing a thing, and since I'm the only occupant of this house, nothing in it gets much use."

"Hardly a reasonable excuse for your taking in strays," Hope murmured. The corners of her lips tipped slightly in an effort to force a faint smile, because it was apparent that he was trying to ease the weight of her situation and he deserved some sort of appreciative response. "May—may I ask some questions?"

Matt got up for the tray of food. "Stack the pillows behind your back so you can sit up and eat. As for questions, ask away, but don't expect too many answers."

Hope bunched the pillows behind her and sat up. With the tray on her lap, she realized how hungry she was, and she began eating at once.

Matt took a chair and watched her. "A good appetite is a good sign," he told her.

"It's the sign of an empty stomach," she retorted.

He grinned. "Yes, but if you felt lousy otherwise, you probably wouldn't even notice hunger."

"I suppose," she conceded. "You said your name is Matt?"

"Matthew McCarlson. Everyone calls me Matt."

"And this is what, a cattle ranch?" Matt nodded. Hope added, "In Texas. Where, in Texas?"

"The closest large city is Dallas. The nearest town is Hawthorne. Ring any bells?"

"None. You said you've only known me for a few hours. Did I knock on your door?"

"You don't even remember this morning?"

"My very first memory is of waking up in this bed," Hope said, speaking so quietly that a chill went up Matt's spine. He believed her now, though he wasn't sure exactly why he did. Maybe because she had wept so convincingly, or because she seemed so sincerely unconnected with her present reality? Whatever the reason, he felt certain that this was no con. Hope LeClaire was as clueless about her past as he was. In fact, because of that newspaper article he knew far more about her than she did.

"No," he said gently. "You didn't knock on my door. I found you lying in mud near the mailbox this morning. Haven't you noticed the rain? Well, it rained all night and it's still coming down." The shocked expression on her face made Matt feel bad, but he hoped what he was telling her was enough

of a shock to jar her memory. “I carried you to the house and put you to bed. Then I tried to call a doctor, but the phones aren’t working. The storm must have brought down some lines.”

“Uh, wait a minute. You put me to bed? Oh, my! These sweats can’t possibly be my own clothes. Did—did you undress me, or did some woman do it for you?”

“There’s not a woman anywhere on the ranch. Sorry, but your own clothes were soggy tatters, and I felt it was urgent to get you warm and dry. I didn’t have a choice and neither did you, so don’t be embarrassed.”

Hope put down her soup spoon and pressed her fingertips to her temples. Her forehead was deeply furrowed. “This is some kind of nightmare.”

“I’m sure it feels like a nightmare to you,” Matt said softly. “But I told you the truth. You were unconscious, soaked to the bone and lying on the muddy ground. You also have a deep cut on your head, which probably is the cause of your amnesia.”

Hope swallowed hard. “Amnesia?” she whispered.

“That’s what I would call your memory loss, yes. Of course, Doc Pickett might have another diagnosis. When the phone is working again, I’ll call him.”

“Please take the tray away,” Hope said dully.

Matt hesitated a moment, then got up and did as she’d asked. “I’ll take this to the kitchen,” he told her.

“Before you go...do you have any idea how I got here? Did you hear a car in the night? Did you see one this morning? I’m very confused on that point.”

Matt looked at her sorrowfully, unable to conceal his true state of mind on what seemed to be the pivotal question of her dilemma. “So am I, Hope, because, no, I neither heard nor saw a car. I have absolutely no idea how you got to this ranch.” He walked out.

Hope lay there for a few moments, then folded back the covers. Sliding to the edge of the bed, she got to her feet. Her head was swimming and the muscles of her legs and lower back were surprisingly sore, as though she had overexercised after a long period of immobility. “Odd,” she said under her breath, frowning over another barrage of questions without answers.

That wasn’t an accurate summary of the situation, of course. There were answers to everything she wondered about, she just didn’t know what they were. If she could remember, all the answers would fall into place. She was suddenly impatient with herself. Dammit, if you could remember, you wouldn’t have a bunch of questions eating holes in your already damaged brain!

The word damaged caused her to shudder, and, fighting debilitating frustration, she steadied herself for a minute then walked over to the window and pushed the curtain aside. Indeed it was raining, and everything outside looked nearly drowned, but what made her heart almost stop beating was the vast expanse of open country she could vaguely make out through the downpour. Beyond the house and other buildings was...nothing. Nothing but huge, soggy, empty fields and enormous puddles.

“My Lord,” she whispered in a shaky little voice. “How did I get here?” Someone must have driven her to this ranch, then...then...? Hope came close to crying again. Surely someone hadn’t driven her to this isolated ranch and then thrown her out of the car. But why on earth would anyone do something so awful?

But there was another possibly, she realized, one that was reinforced by the soreness of her body—she could have walked!

But walked from where? Maybe Matt would have some ideas, she thought, and closed the curtain. Leaving the bedroom she peered up and down the hall and figured out which direction to go.

When she appeared in the kitchen doorway, Matt looked first surprised then uncertain. “Are you sure you’re strong enough to be out of bed?”

Hope waved her hand, a gesture that indicated she considered that particular question to be trivial. "I'm physically all right," she said. "A slight headache and some sore muscles, but that's about it. May I talk to you?"

Matt went over to her, took her arm and led her to a chair. "You can talk all you want, but you're barefoot and I'm going to get you a pair of socks to wear." When she was seated, he hurried out.

Hope glanced around the kitchen, which was roomy and pleasant. The appliances were white, but the counter-tops, flooring and curtains were an attractive shade of yellow, and the color brightened the atmosphere of this gloomy, gray day. She felt much more at home in the kitchen than she had in the bedroom, which might have made sense if she had any sense, she thought drolly.

In the next instant, however, nothing seemed even remotely amusing, and she had to blink back self-pitying tears, which made her angry. She'd cried enough. Matt McCarlson was her one and only link to the rest of the world and her own past, and maybe he knew something that even he didn't realize.

Matt returned with some warm wool socks. He knelt down in front of her and slid them on her feet before she could voice an objection, so she merely murmured, "Thank you," when he stood up again.

"You're welcome. Would you like another cup of tea or anything?"

"No, thank you. Matt, I was thinking that maybe I know someone around here and was visiting him or her. I can't begin to guess what occurred last night to bring me here, but it's only logical to assume that I'm in Texas for a reason, perhaps a very uncomplicated reason. Do you know any other LeClaires? They could be ranchers, like you, or even live in that little town you mentioned."

Matt shook his head. "Hawthorne."

"Yes, I believe that was what you called it."

He could see the expectation on her face, and thought again of the newspaper article that would at least create a foundation of knowledge that she might build upon. But dealing with an amnesiac was a complete mystery to him, and Hope seemed calmer now than she had before. What if giving her that much information caused her another panic attack? He would much rather keep her calm until he could speak to Doc Pickett.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "There are no LeClaires around here that I know of." It was the truth. He'd honestly never known anyone by that name.

Hope couldn't conceal her disappointment. "And you know most of the area's residents?" she asked, obvious in her hope that he would say, "No, I only know a few."

"At least by name. Hope, I was born and raised on this ranch. This is a rural community, and you don't have to be friends with everyone to know their names."

"Even in Hawthorne?"

"It's a small town."

Hope bit her bottom lip. "I suppose." Her gaze met Matt's. "Do you have any theories about how I came to be lying in your mud this morning? Does Hawthorne have a hotel? Is it any kind of tourist spot? I mean, does the town attract...tourists?" Her voice trailed off, giving Matt the impression that she was grasping at straws and instinctively knew she hadn't visited Hawthorne, Texas, as a tourist.

"It has a couple of motels, and if the phone was working it might even pay to give them a call and ask if you were registered. But the phones aren't working, and there really isn't anything either of us can do about it."

"How about driving to town? I hate being even more of an imposition than I already am, but—"

Matt broke in. "The road has been washed out by the storm. Everyone on the ranch has no choice but to stay on the ranch until the storm passes and things dry out. Even then we'll probably have to do some road repair before it's usable again."

"Everyone on the ranch? There are other people here?"

"The men who work for me...the ranch hands. And the foreman, Chuck Crawford."

“Where are they?”

“At the bunkhouse, which is also where they take their meals.”

“But none of these people are women.”

“No, they’re not.”

Hope fell silent and thought for a few moments. Then she said excitedly, “The clothes I was wearing when you found me—where are they?”

“In the trash. They were tattered and torn, and—”

“Why would they be torn? I want to see them.”

“Hope, I cut them off of you so I wouldn’t have to jostle you more than I had to. I was still uncertain about the extent of your injuries, and—” He saw the determination in her eyes and gave in with a faint sigh. “I’ll go and get them, though all you’ll be examining is a pile of wet rags.”

“Rags! Is it your opinion that my clothes were rags when I put them on?”

She seemed so affronted by that prospect that Matt realized grimly that even with amnesia she knew she wore the best that money could buy. The Stockwells weren’t just comfortably well off, they were superrich. Looking at her pretty face and anxiety-filled eyes, he found himself wishing that she were just a common, ordinary citizen, which was quite an unusual wish for him to be making. He really couldn’t remember the last time that one particular woman stood out in his eyes, and the whole concept was deeply unnerving.

Spinning on his heel, he muttered, “I’ll go dig ’em out. You can figure it out for yourself.”

Hope frowned at the tone of his voice. Why, he’d sounded almost angry. Remorse hit her very hard. She was an intrusion in the man’s life and routine, for heaven’s sake. Why wouldn’t he be irritated over a request that obviously had sent him back out into the rain?

But she couldn’t go back to bed and do nothing, she just couldn’t. In the first place there was no reason for her to act like an invalid. Sore muscles and a bit of headache certainly weren’t anything to cause alarm.

Hope’s eyes narrowed slightly as she pondered that conclusion. Perhaps sore muscles and a headache weren’t cause for alarm, but what if they were clues to last night’s events? And maybe her clothes were also clues. No, she hadn’t been wrong in asking to see her things. If Matt had taken umbrage over it, then he’d either have to get over it, or not. Did it really matter to her how he or anyone else she might meet took anything she did or said when she felt so hopelessly adrift in a completely unfamiliar, even alien world? She had to follow her instincts; they were all she had.

Matt walked in with an armload of dark green fabric, which he placed on the table in front of her. “Have at it,” he said gruffly. “I think I managed to save your shoes. I’ll get them.”

Hope began taking apart the many pieces of fabric. Matt returned with a pair of black leather shoes, and she took them from his hands and frowned.

“They’re very...bruised,” she murmured.

“Scuffed,” Matt said.

She looked up. “Pardon?”

“People get bruised, not shoes. Yours are badly scuffed and the leather is gouged in places. Rough usage, I’d have to say.”

“Like maybe I had walked over some very rough terrain?”

“Yeah, that’d do it, but not if it was only a short walk. Then, too, these could be old shoes. They might have walked many miles before last night.”

Hope had no grounds for disagreement, although she somehow felt that the condition of her shoes was immutably connected to whatever had brought her here in the night.

She began looking through the pieces of wet fabric, and almost immediately noticed something strange. “It’s terribly snagged.”

“I told you it was tattered and torn.”

“Yes, there’s a tear right here. But there are so many snags.”

“Like what?”

“Look at the piece I’m holding. See all those little—uh, bumps, I guess you’d call them, where a thread has been pulled by something?”

Matt bent over for a closer look. “Do those snags mean anything to you?”

“If you’re asking, do I remember how my clothes got so badly snagged, the answer is no, they don’t mean anything to me. But what would cause such devastating wear and tear on one’s clothing?”

Matt shrugged. “Beats me. Unless you fought your way through a bunch of prickly mesquite brush.”

“Is there some of that around here?”

“Lots of it. Also scrub cedar and oak, and both of those can scratch the living daylights out of a person dumb enough to tangle with them.”

She shot him a dirty look. “Other reasons beside stupidity might have caused me to tangle with some prickly plants, you know.”

Her flare of defensive temper surprised him. “I wasn’t even talking about you,” he retorted.

“Who were you talking about then, the man in the moon? Let me ask you this. Wasn’t I wearing underwear or were you too squeamish to bring it back inside with the rest of this mess, which I might add, was mostly caused by your scissors?”

“Women’s underwear does not make me feel squeamish,” he said coldly. “For your information, I took a brassiere and a pair of panties off your wet, shivering body, and once you were bathed, dressed in my sweats and warming up under the best blankets in the house, I rinsed the mud out of your delicacies and hung them in the laundry room to dry.”

Hope’s jaw dropped. “You bathed me?”

“Don’t you dare use that indignant tone on me, lady. You were covered with mud. I suppose I should have put you to bed in that condition?”

Heat suffused Hope’s face. “Bathing someone is just so—so intimate.”

“Under this morning’s conditions, it wasn’t even close to being intimate.” It was a lie but Matt managed to sound totally and innocently sincere.

Hope tried to steer this uncomfortable conversation in another direction. “I knew these huge sweats I’ve got on had to belong to someone very tall.” And very handsome? He was handsome; it was simply a fact of her present limited life. Not that she wanted to expand on that fact. Goodness, she could be married, or engaged, or living with a man she loved madly.

“I rolled up the legs, but I could cut them off, if you prefer,” Matt said.

“I wouldn’t hear of it.”

“Suit yourself, but I can see that you’re swimming in loose material.”

“Which is just fine for now.”

“Are you finished with those pieces of cloth?”

“I guess so. Oh, wait a sec. I see a label.” Hope studied the label of a hunk of fabric, then sighed because it meant absolutely nothing to her. “I was hoping...” she said in a husky little voice.

“Look, I’m going to go down to the bunkhouse and see how the men are making out. I’d feel better about leaving you alone if you were in bed again.”

“Fine,” Hope said dully. Matt was instantly at her side to help her up from the chair, and he held her arm all the way back to the bedroom and the bed. She told herself to forget that he was a tall, deliciously sexy, good-looking man—who seemed to get better looking every time they talked—but his big hand clasped around her arm made that impossible to do. She was glad when she was finally under the covers again and Matt had left the room.

She heaved a long, helpless sigh. This was not a game, and she really must be demented to be noticing a man’s good looks under such trying circumstances.

But then, maybe that was the kind of woman she was. Maybe she slept around. Maybe any sexy guy was fair game. Maybe she was a—a tramp!

Tears rolled down her temples. Matt McCarlson had not only undressed her, he'd given her a bath. Maybe she should be worrying about what kind of person he was. After all, she had been unconscious and entirely at his mercy!

Matt stayed away from the house for a couple of hours. He talked to the men at the bunkhouse and they weren't a bit shy with their complaints.

"Danged if we ain't out here trapped like rats in their hole."

"We can't hardly stand to look at each other anymore, Matt."

"Hell, I'd take backbreaking work over being stuck in this bunkhouse with these yahoos any day of the week."

"Matt, have you been listening to the radio for weather reports? The radio out here ain't working worth a damn. We've been getting mostly static, probably because of the storm."

"It's the same in the house, Joe, but I did manage to catch one weather report and it looks like we're in for more rain."

The grousing went on, and Matt drank a cup of strong bunkhouse coffee and let them vent. They had a right, he felt. Cowboys were used to being outdoors. The bunkhouse probably felt like a prison to them, just as the house would've felt to Matt if his time and thoughts hadn't been so taken up by Hope LeClaire.

It occurred to Matt then that no one had said anything about her. There'd been no teasing comments and no tongue-in-cheek innuendo, which wasn't at all like a bunch of cowhands, particularly cowhands with nothing to do but gripe about the weather.

He caught Chuck's eye and could tell then from the foreman's expression that there'd been no conversation between him and any of the men about the ranch's unexpected guest. Giving his head a slight nod at Chuck, he indicated appreciation of his reticence. Chuck nodded back, and that was the end of it.

The bunkhouse had a kitchen and a bunch of tables and chairs. Most of the men could cook a little—a pot of chili or beef stew, red beans and rice, fried steak and potatoes—plain fare but filling, and there was a big pan simmering on the stove today. Matt rinsed his cup at the sink and noted that the men might be edgy as a hive of bees, but they planned to eat well that evening.

That thought raised the question of what he would feed Hope for dinner. Alone, he would come out here and eat whatever the men had cooked in that big pot, but not today. Like it or not, he had a responsibility in his guest room that he could not ignore.

He was suddenly irritated and exasperated over fate playing such a dirty trick on him as to actually deliver a Stockwell almost to his front door, and to do it in a storm that isolated the ranch and everyone on it from the rest of the world. His hands were tied as far as Hope went. He couldn't even phone someone—the doctor, Hope's mother or any of the Stockwells—and get rid of her through one of those avenues.

He was as stuck as the ranch hands were, he thought disgustedly, only all they had to worry about was being cooped up with each other until the storm passed. His worries could be measured in miles, and that road seemed to be getting longer with each passing day. Wearing a disgruntled expression, he told the men he'd see them later and then braved the rain once again to trudge through the mud for the return trip to the house.

He didn't look in on Hope. Instead, after kicking off his muddy boots, he walked stocking-footed to the living room, plopped down into his favorite old recliner chair and pushed it back. The gray light in the room bothered him almost at once, and he reached out to turn on the lamp next to the chair. The switch clicked, but nothing happened.

Cursing a blue streak, Matt leapt to his feet and tried other lights. None came on, and for a moment Matt felt like tearing out his own hair. Now the ranch was without electricity, and just how long would that inconvenience go on?

“This miserable damn storm,” he muttered as he went to a window and looked out at the bunkhouse. The lights that had been on only minutes ago were no longer burning.

Matt walked back to his chair and sank onto it. The loss of electricity seemed like a final straw. There would be no heat, no cooking, no lights.

Plus he had an amnesiac on his hands. How in hell was he going to deal with it all?

Chapter Three

The room had an inert, pewterlike quality that dulled distinctiveness and distorted perspective. Worse for Hope was its frightening unfamiliarity.

Her heartbeat was so hard and fast that she could hear it. She had just woken up, and not recognizing the bedroom she was in was so terrifying that she felt paralyzed. In the next instant she came fully awake and remembered the hours before she'd fallen asleep, and while the paralysis relaxed its grip on her system, the fear did not.

The house seemed eerily quiet. Where was Matthew McCarlson? Light, she decided as her pulse rate kept time with her pounding heart. Some light in the room might help calm her nerves. Reaching out to the lamp next to the bed, she located and then pushed the switch.

"Oh, no," she whispered when no light came on. Was the bulb burned out? Her hands clenched into fearful fists as she forced her bewildered and disoriented brain to concentrate on the problem. Maybe the lamp wasn't plugged in. Or maybe it was plugged into one of those outlets that required the use of a wall switch.

But she would have to get out of bed to find out. The room seemed to be getting darker by the minute, and she couldn't tell if there were wall switches anywhere.

She could hear rain; it was still coming down. And, obviously, night was falling. She'd slept away the day. She must have been exhausted, or maybe it had simply been easier to sleep than to stay awake and face her situation.

Her situation, she thought with a heavy sigh that was a combination of fearful desperation and incredulity. How could so many awful things happen to one person at the same time? She was in a strange place in a stranger's home and knew nothing about herself except for the little information she'd gotten from a purse—her purse, even if she didn't recognize it.

On top of her amnesia was the storm, which had isolated this ranch to the point of no possible means of communication with the rest of the world. It was all so...so bizarre...so Hollywoodish. More like a plot in a movie than a real-life experience.

Or was it? Hope frowned in the deepening darkness. Since she knew nothing about herself, perhaps this sort of adventure—or misadventure—was the norm for her. She sighed again over such a repugnant prospect, and then felt slightly better because the idea of living on the edge of a precipice was repugnant.

And then she gulped uneasily and wondered if amnesia altered victims' personalities so drastically that they became different people than they'd been. Maybe the way she saw things now wasn't even close to her normal point of view on anything and everything. Moaning in anguish over that horrifying possibility, Hope whispered, "God help me."

After lying in a heap of utter misery for a while, she realized that the more she pondered her plight, the worse she felt. It would be very easy to just let go and scream her throat raw, but would it change anything? Would the telephone suddenly start working—or the lights? That was the problem with her lamp, of course. The storm had wreaked havoc with the area's electricity.

Screaming would accomplish nothing. Neither would crying herself sick. What she needed to do was to get out of this bed.

Wouldn't a shower feel wonderful? Or a long soak in a hot-water bubble bath?

Hope slid off the bed and made her way to the door in the pale shards of daylight still available. But the hallway was much darker than the bedroom, and the house suddenly felt ominously silent. Her nerves began jangling.

Standing with her hand on the frame of the door as though it were some sort of safety line, she called, "Matt?" Almost immediately a light appeared at the end of the hall and began growing in intensity. In a moment she saw the dark silhouette of a man behind the glowing light of a lantern,

both of which were coming toward her. “Matt?” she repeated, because she honestly couldn’t tell if the silhouette was him or someone else.

“I’m here. You had quite a sleep.”

Relieved that it was Matt and not another stranger to deal with, she answered. “Yes. Apparently the electricity is off now, as well as the phone.”

“In a nutshell, yes.”

“I was hoping for a shower or bath. Guess that’s out of the question.”

“Not necessarily. The hot water tank is full, and I’m sure the water in it is still hot. If the power stays off all night it won’t be hot by morning, so someone might as well use it. Are you sure you’re up to it, though?”

“I’m very sure.” She wanted to wash her hair in the worst way—naturally she would be careful about the cut on her head—and soap every inch of her. She didn’t even want to think about Matthew McCarlson bathing the mud from her nude body, so she certainly wasn’t going to question him about the method he’d used to undress and cleanse an unconscious woman. Anyhow, whatever his technique, it hadn’t been all that adequate because she felt more gritty than clean.

“If you’re that certain, then fine. Take this lantern with you. I have others. Leave the bathroom door unlocked, in case you’re not as strong as you think you are and need some help. Don’t let modesty prevent you from calling for me if you get into trouble. When you’re done, you’ll probably want some supper. I’ve already set up my propane camp stove on the back porch and can do a little cooking on it. We’ll decide later what sounds good.”

He was holding out the lantern, and Hope took it from him. So, she thought, he would rush to her rescue again, should she call out from the bathroom. Was he hoping for another peek at her bare skin, or hadn’t her nudity before bothered him? Maybe he’d barely noticed. Maybe her body wasn’t worthy of notice. For some reason that idea stung Hope’s pride. She hadn’t taken inventory of her figure yet, but she would, she decided.

Ignoring his offer of help, she said, “After all you’ve done for me, I shouldn’t have the gall to ask for one more thing. But these sweats I’m wearing are uncomfortably large and I was wondering if you had some old ones that you wouldn’t mind my cutting inches off the legs and arms.”

“As a matter of fact I do. I’ll get them and bring them and the scissors to the bathroom.” He walked off, vanishing in the darkness right before Hope’s eyes.

Her stomach turned over. She didn’t like being alone in the dark in this strange house, even with a lantern in her hand. It threw light, but it also created shadows, and Hope wondered if she’d always been leery of the dark or if this was just another perturbing side effect to amnesia.

Making her way to the bathroom door, she went in and set the lantern on the sink counter. Leaning forward until her nose was only a few inches from the mirror, she peered at her face in the lantern’s glow. She realized after a few moments that she had no base of information on which to judge her own looks. Was she pretty or plain? Her eyes were blue—quite a vivid blue, actually—but she’d noticed that Matt’s eyes were brown, and perhaps brown eyes were considerably more desirable than blue eyes.

Her dark hair might be appealing when shiny clean and curled—or something. How did she ordinarily wear it?

Hope had left the door open, and Matt walked in without preamble. “Here are several things you can cut up,” he said while placing a stack of clothes on the other end of the counter from the lantern. “Sorry I don’t have anything smaller, but I haven’t been your size since I was in the fifth grade.”

“You are...quite tall,” Hope murmured.

“Six foot three.” Matt walked to the door, but didn’t leave immediately. “Remember what I said about calling out if you need any help. In fact, if you’d leave the door ajar an inch or so, I’d feel a lot better about hearing you.”

"I...guess that would be all right." She could detect the hint of an amused grin on his lips in the lantern light and became defensive. "Maybe I'm accustomed to bathing with the bathroom door open, but something inside me rebels at the idea so I can't help doubting it," she said sharply.

Realizing that no part of her predicament was funny to Hope, Matt erased all signs of amusement from his expression and said solemnly, "I doubt it, too. Take your bath and don't worry about me peeking through the crack of the door. In the first place, I wouldn't see anything I haven't already seen, and in the second, I'm not in the habit of preying on healthy women, let alone one who's in such sad shape." He walked out, and pulled the door shut, leaving about a three-inch opening.

Hope's jaw had dropped in painful surprise. Why, he'd practically come right out and said she was a pitiful specimen of womankind! No wonder he'd been able to undress and bathe her without emotion.

Oh, the shame of it, she thought, completely mortified over being so utterly undesirable. She hurried through a bath and a cautious shampoo, and never once really looked at her body. After all, why would she or any other woman want to inventory something so—so pathetic?

Later, Hope and Matt dined on grilled cheese sandwiches—prepared in an iron skillet on his propane camping stove—and small bowls of canned fruit. The lantern light softened Matt's features, Hope noticed, and wondered if it did the same with hers. Not that his features needed softening. In spite of the constant concern gnawing at her over her long list of personal grievances, she admired Matt McCarlson's masculine good looks. It seemed almost insane to be aware of a man's looks under the circumstances, but Hope really couldn't help herself.

Not that she expected or even fantasized anything coming of her admiration. She was, after all, so out of Matt's league in the looks department that even if she was a hundred percent healthy, with a perfect memory and some decent clothes that actually fit, he would be no more affected by her than he would be by a great-grandmother sharing his house and table.

Hope sighed quietly and spooned a bit of canned peach to her mouth. Something flashed through her mind, something about peaches that she couldn't hold on to or read clearly.

"You're very quiet," Matt said. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, and I think I just had a glimmer of a memory."

"You did? What was it?"

"It was nothing earthshaking, so don't get excited. It had something to do with peaches."

Matt sat back. "With peaches? Why in hell would your first memory be about peaches? I doubt there are very many peach trees in Massachusetts."

"Didn't I tell you not to get excited?" she said dryly. "Believe me, if I had any say in the order in which I might recall my past, my first memory would not have been about peaches. Besides, it wasn't even a full memory. I mean, I don't know if I was eating peaches, buying them or picking them off a tree." Hope paused for a short breath and added, "Maybe I was throwing them at someone, possibly an irritating man."

Matt's eyebrows went up. "So you think I'm irritating."

"Did I mention you?"

"Since I'm the only man you know at the present, you didn't have to identify who you'd like to throw peaches at."

"Don't be ridiculous," Hope muttered.

"You're angry. Not only that, you're angry with me. What happened? What'd I do?"

Hope fell silent, did some thinking and realized that he was right. She was hurt and so angry that she would love to throw something at him. Yes, he'd rescued her from the storm—and only the good Lord knew what else—but then he'd found her so unappealing, so unattractive, that she might as well have been a mangy stray dog instead of a woman.

But she could not explain herself on that score, and she resorted to a lie. “Sorry, but you’re dead wrong. I’m not a bit angry with you. Why would I be? You probably saved my life, pathetic as it apparently is.”

Matt frowned. “Why would you think you have a pathetic life?” Should he go and get that newspaper article for her to read? The information in it sure didn’t read to him like Hope LeClaire led a pathetic life. An heiress to millions, possibly billions of dollars? And she was no slouch in the looks department, either. In truth, he’d never seen a more perfect body. Full, rounded breasts with gorgeous rosy nipples that looked as though they’d been created specifically for a man’s mouth. Oh, no, Hope’s assets weren’t all in banks or safes, not by a long shot.

“Have you seen anyone out here looking for me?” she retorted. “Wouldn’t you think your life was pretty pathetic, too, if no one gave a damn about where you were, or what horror might have befallen you?”

“No one can get out here. I told you that. It might be days after the rain stops before the roads are repaired enough to drive on.”

“But if someone I cared about was missing, I wouldn’t leave a stone unturned to find him or her, and I wouldn’t let a storm or washed-out road stop me,” she snapped.

Matt was beginning to hear a note of hysteria in Hope’s voice, and the last thing he needed in the isolation everyone on the ranch must bear until things returned to normal was a hysterical amnesiac. No, he would not show her that article. In fact, he would do anything he could think of to get her thoughts away from her own admittedly wretched situation.

“You didn’t eat much of your sandwich. Would you like something else?” he asked.

“You deliberately changed the subject,” she said, suddenly weary of it herself. “It’s okay, I’m bored with my problems, too. Scared spitless, let me add, but harping on the same old know-nothing theme is nothing but wasted energy. You know, I bet that you’d give anything you own not to have found me today.”

You’ve got that right, baby! “Don’t be silly,” Matt said out loud in a soothing tone of voice. “Tell you what. You sit there while I clear these dishes away, then I’ll walk you back to your bedroom.”

“Fine,” she said listlessly. Could he say or do anything that would take away her blues? Her self-pity? Lord above, what was she even doing in Texas? Was her mother, Madelyn, worried about her, or had Hope left Massachusetts for an extended trip, gotten in this mess somehow, and no one was worried about her?

Watching Matt move from table to sink, it struck Hope that he was all she had. Until she regained her memory—she would regain it, wouldn’t she?—Matt McCarlson was the only person she knew face-to-face in the entire world.

And yet she had snapped at him, admitted anger at him—if only to herself—and pretty much blamed him for this mysterious fiasco. Well, it wasn’t that she blamed him for everything, but one would think a rancher living miles and miles from civilization would be better prepared for a damn storm.

So that’s it, she thought with narrowed eyes. She blamed him for living a lackadaisical lifestyle that didn’t include emergency communication.

“How come you don’t have some way to contact...uh, the town, for instance...in case of an emergency?” she asked.

Matt heard the distinct disapproval in her voice, the judgment, and it raised his hackles. “I’m like a lot of ranchers,” he said flatly. “I’m not particularly fond of people, especially city dwellers, and I’d rather wait out a storm by myself than have a horde of do-gooders descending on my land under the guise of neighborly generosity to rescue me, when I never needed rescuing in the first place.”

“And I suppose the men who work for you feel the same?”

“My men are seasoned ranch hands. They know the table stakes and when they’re dealt a bad hand, they take their lumps without complaint.”

“As you do.”

“Have you heard me complaining? Let me say it like it is, Hope LeClaire. You’re the only person on this ranch who’s done any complaining about being landlocked, so to speak. Now, I have to concede your right to a few complaints, but—”

Hope broke in. “How big of you,” she said with drawling sarcasm. “I wonder what you’d do if you woke up in a strange place with no memory.” She got to her feet. “I’m going back to bed, and I don’t need your help in getting there, so please just let me leave without offering the support of your big, manly arm.”

“Hey, my arm is big and manly, and your sarcasm doesn’t make it any less than it is. Take the lantern so you don’t fall flat on your ungrateful face!”

“Ungrateful? Ungrateful? How would you like me to express my gratitude, by kissing your feet? I’ve said thank you repeatedly, which you’ve either obviously forgotten or were too dense to register at the time.”

“I’m not dense, lady,” Matt growled. “And since you are, I would think that dense is a word you’d try real hard to avoid.”

“You jerk!” she shouted, then turned herself around, plucked the lantern from the table and did her best imitation of royalty sweeping from a room filled with ignorant peasants.

“Yeah, I’m a jerk,” Matt mumbled while lighting another lantern for his use. “And you’re just as spoiled and overbearing as every other pampered princess I’ve known.”

Matt went to bed about an hour later. Lying in the dark he listened to the rain, which had slowed to a barely discernible drizzle. The storm was passing, but at this stage it was hard to forecast its final gasp. It could drizzle and mist like this for days, it could start pouring again at any time, or it could stop completely without a dram of warning.

And when it did stop, the work would begin. Cleaning up after a storm like this one was an enormous job. Washed-out roads, flooded creeks and mud everywhere. Yeah, every rancher in the storm belt and even some townsfolk were in for a lot of backbreaking labor.

Matt was visualizing the ravages to his land and worrying about the cost of restoring everything to its prestorm condition when a bloodcurdling scream made his hair stand on end.

Jumping out of bed, he ran down the hall to Hope’s room. His first thought had been that someone had gotten into the house and was trying to throttle her. But since she’d left the lantern burning on low, he could tell at once that she was only having a dream.

She was thrashing around in bed, not screaming anymore but making almost inhuman sounds that all but curdled Matt’s blood. No one deserves a nightmare that terrifying, Matt thought and hurried over to the bed where he lay down next to her.

“Hope...Hope...” he said as he pulled her into his arms, held her tightly against himself and stopped her from throwing herself around. “It’s only a dream, Hope, just a dream. I’ve got you now. You’re safe.”

She opened her teary eyes and heard Matt’s quiet voice. His arms were around her, and her face was nestled against his bare chest. She felt warm and comforted and, as he’d just told her, safe, and she did nothing to alter their positions.

“I had a nightmare,” she whispered tremulously. “An awful nightmare.”

“I know. I was in my room and you screamed so loudly that I thought a monster was gnawing on your big toe.”

She smiled weakly. “You’re trying to make me feel better.”

“Did it work?”

“Something’s working.”

Something was “working” for him, too, but it wasn’t a corny joke. It was Hope and the fact that she was plastered against him and his body could feel every delicious curve of hers. He shut his eyes and groaned inwardly. It was only natural for a man to become aroused while holding a beautiful

woman, but this particular woman was not one he should be fooling around with. He'd sworn an oath to never again get involved with a woman who had more money than he did, which, at the present time, pretty much eliminated the entire female population of Texas. Thus, it was a rare day—or night—when he so much as paid for a lady's hamburger or movie ticket. In truth, he hadn't done any real dating since Trisha's death, and he'd never felt as though life was passing him by because of it, either.

However, things were starting to look a little different to him. Lying in bed with a luscious lady wrapped around him sort of took the guts out of that well-intentioned oath, which, he realized, should probably make him resent the hell out of Hope. He had enough worries and problems with the ranch without piling on the heartache of an intimate relationship that couldn't possibly go anywhere. Still, regardless of commonsense arguments against any such liaison, he was about to toss that earthshaking oath over the edge of the bed when she said, "The man in my dream had tied me up and he was... he was—"

"He was what?" Matt prompted when she left him hanging and he already had some bad feelings about what that dream had really been about.

"How strange," Hope murmured uneasily. "I don't know if he was trying to seduce me or I was trying to seduce him. Wouldn't you think I'd know the difference?"

"Uh, seduction comes in many disguises." Even the word seduction increased the aching desire Matt was suffering. He had to get out of this bed and back in his own. If he didn't he was going to do something he'd be sorry for when he regained his senses. "Are you okay now? Is it all right if I leave?"

Sudden panic nearly choked Hope, and she lifted her arms and locked her hands behind his head. "Please don't leave me alone...please!"

Matt knew that she was not offering him anything to stay with her; she was only clinging to him because she was panicky and scared out of her wits.

Gritting his teeth, he tore his thoughts away from sex. "I'll stay," he said, "but I need a little more room."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll move over." Hope released her death grip on him and moved over about two inches. "Is that better?"

"That's...fine." Her head was still on his arm and her hand on his chest. He slid his other arm away from her waist and laid it down his side on his own torso. "Let's try to get some sleep now."

"Yes, of course." But after a moment she said, "I think that dream was symbolic of something that really happened."

"Symbolic?" He was trying to get sleepy by pretending he was in his own bed and not lying close enough to Hope to feel the warmth emanating from her body. A state of pretense would be much easier to achieve if she would stop talking.

"I'd hate to think it wasn't just symbolic. I mean, what if some horrible man really did tie me up?" Hope's hands were free now, and she absentmindedly rubbed her wrists. "Matt, my wrists have rope burns! I was tied up!"

He'd seen the marks on her wrists, and wondered about them, but he couldn't add to her horror by telling her about his own misgivings concerning those bruises.

"You shouldn't let your imagination run wild," he said flatly, keeping even compassion out of his voice and telling himself that it was for her own good. Until she recalled everything about herself for herself, speculation on her part and suggestions from him or anyone else who might eventually get wind of this drama would only make her more fearful, and she was scared enough already.

"These sore spots around my wrists are not imagined, Matt. And the man in the dream wasn't conjured up by a troubled mind, either. He's a real-life, flesh-and-blood person who wants to do me harm." Hope paused to ponder her own conclusion. "But why?" she murmured, speaking more to her confused inner self than to Matt.

Her determined logic startled Matt. After all, she hadn't gotten so far off the beaten path all by herself. Someone must have brought her here, or, at least, brought her to a spot within walking

distance. And then what'd that someone do, throw her out of his car? Or had she made a run for freedom and her first opportunity for escaping some warped bastard had happened on McCarlson land? Maybe the guy didn't know the area well and hadn't realized he was on private property.

But the theme of that newspaper article was that Hope was missing. Maybe she'd gone off with a boyfriend and he hadn't been the nice guy she'd thought he was. This whole muddle of facts and guesswork could be nothing more than a romantic tryst getting out of hand. And if Hope hadn't lost her memory for some damned reason then there wouldn't be anything at all mysterious about her delivery to this part of Texas.

"Can you remember what the guy in your dream looked like?" Matt asked, because now he was thinking that if there was a man involved with the fright she'd received last night, she just might know him.

A shudder passed through Hope's body. "No, but I know he was a horrible person."

"How can you be so sure about that, Hope? I'm not trying to be cruel, but without memories to back up your assumptions, can you be certain of anything?"

She hesitated a few moments, then she raised herself to her elbow, looked down at him and said, "I guess I'm relying on basic instinct, which we all have, don't we, memory or no memory?"

Her eyes, even in the soft glow of lantern light, were as blue as Texas bluebonnets. She wasn't just pretty, she was sexy. At least she was making him think of sex again. She had on an old shirt of his, and coincidentally it was almost as blue as her eyes. She was as enticing in that worn-out old shirt, with her head of thick, lustrous dark hair in appealing disarray, as any woman he'd ever seen.

"Instinct is...uh, usually a good barometer to, uh, to go by," he stammered, making a stab at reassurance when his mind was stuck on the ache in his groin. He almost told her about it. He came very close to saying, "Hope, if I stay in this bed for the rest of the night, I'm not going to be able to keep my hands off you. Can you deal with that? Are you having similar ideas about me?"

Hope couldn't read his mind, but there was something in his eyes that made her heart beat faster. You're letting your imagination run wild! If the man thought of you as attractive, you'd have sensed it before now. Good Lord, go to sleep before you make a complete fool of yourself!

She lay down again and turned her back to him. "I'm suddenly very tired. Good night," she said.

Matt heaved a quiet sigh of relief. Things would be better in the morning, he told himself, praying it would be true. Once the phones were working again, he could let the Stockwells know that Hope was safe. She wasn't so sound, true, but with the Stockwells' money they could hire the best specialists the medical profession had to offer to cure her amnesia.

As for him, he'd get over the yen he had for her, that itch he didn't dare scratch. What choice did he have but to get over it?

Hope's eyes simply would not shut. She hadn't deliberately lured Matt into her bed, but that's where he was, and every cell in her body was aware of it. He was, after all, wearing nothing but undershorts, and the sensation of being held in his arms, pressed tightly to so much masculine bare skin, would not leave her. Her skin seemed to tingle every time she thought of it, and, much to her dismay, she kept thinking of it until she could just barely manage to breathe without Matt hearing her. She would be humiliated beyond words if he should catch on that she was lying there pining for...for...

Hope frowned. What, exactly, was she pining for? Some kisses? Being held by strong, manly arms again? For some reason, even with that erotic ache in the pit of her stomach, she couldn't envision herself under a man and making love. Why not, for heaven's sake? She had no trouble recalling ordinary things, such as eating, bathing and dressing. And even kissing.

So how come she couldn't recall the act of lovemaking? Her lips pursed almost angrily. Say it like it is, dodo, how come you can't recall sex? It's not because you're a cold fish, by any means, not when you're lying here sweating and yearning for Matt McCarlson to touch you!

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