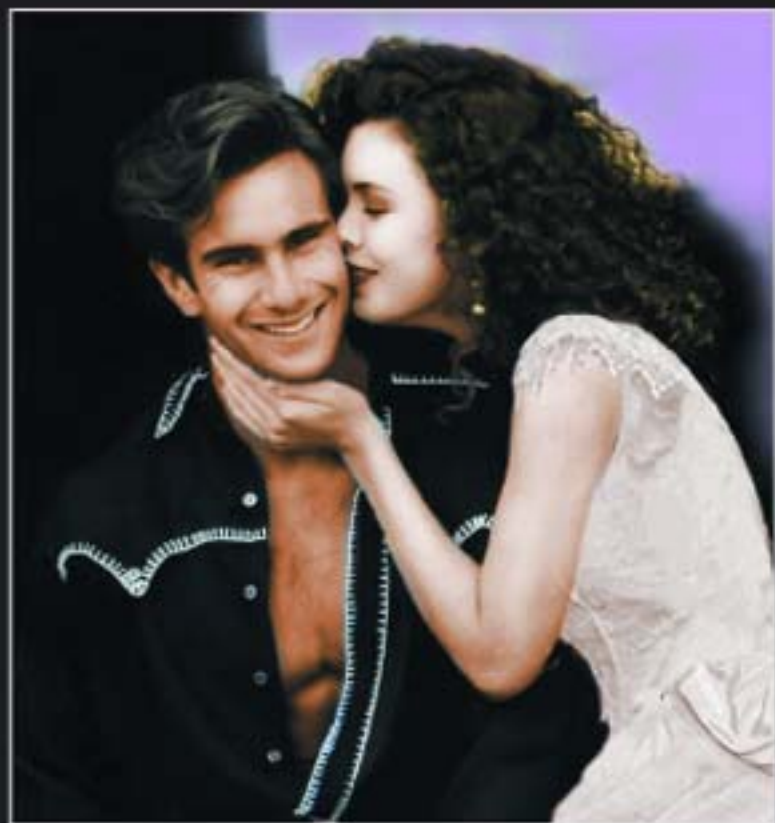




Kiss Me, Kat



Beverly Pironti

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888-546-6478

Email us at admin@LionHearted.com

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Cover design: M.A. Heathman

Cover model: George E. Haber

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ISBN: 1-57343-063-3

Printed in the U.S.A.

To my husband, Rod:
Thanks for always believing in me and for always
romancing me. I love you more every day.

To my children, Josh and Jennifer:
I'm so proud of you. You are God's greatest blessing to me.
I love you, I love you, I love you.

To my mom, Patsy:
I've never known a greater love than yours.
You're my angel, my hero, my heart.

To Beth, my friend of 32 years:
Thanks for all the memories.
You've made my life so much richer. I love you.

To my friend and favorite author Jackie Stephens, who never
doubted I could do it and made me work harder than I some-
times wanted. Thanks for sticking by me and being my friend.
I couldn't have done it without you.

To my darling, handsome Dad, my sister Vicki, my cousin
Jean, my friends, clients, neighbors and family.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy."
Romans 15:13



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Prologue



Marshal, Texas, April 1, 1880

“Cross my fingers? What do you mean? Haven’t you done this kind of thing before?” Conner Malloy sat back on his haunches and swore.

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders and grinned. “I never break no one out of jail before, *Señor*. I think it will work. But then, we only have one chance, no? If this does not blast a hole in the wall, then I think... *aye carramba*. It is hard to say. What do you think?”

Conner pinched his eyes shut and mumbled, “After years of law school, my career has finally dwindled down to this.” Here he was with his client’s cousin crouched in the dark behind Marshal’s town jail ready to light a match and blow his law degree sky high. All to save a horse thief from the gallows.

“*Señor* Conner, shall we add another stick? Better to use too much than not enough, no?”

“Hell, I don’t know. How many you got?” Conner glanced at the pile of dynamite beside them.

“*Uno, dos, tres—*”

He should have won the trial. That’s what lawyers were supposed to do. Plead a good case and collect a fee when the defendant walked away. He was a damn good lawyer. But even

the best legal defenses didn't stand a chance against the power of money. This whole mess had been tainted from the start. Somebody had to pay for the stolen thoroughbred. And Sergio Torres was a Mexican with a track record for thieving—a perfect target. Problem was, this time Sergio was innocent.

Walk away and don't look back—that's what he ought to do. But Conner had never been one to walk away from unfinished business. The man didn't deserve to hang. Besides, they had a reward to collect on a stolen horse.

"Quickly, *compadre*". The sheriff returns."

Conner peered around the side of the building. Sheriff Radford lumbered across the street, his wide girth easy to recognize in the dim glow of a flickering street light. A basket dangled from his hand. Probably dinner. "Shit. We'll have to wait. We can't risk killing him."

The Mexican shoved a matchbox into his hand. "Do it before he sees us, amigo, or we will all swing from a rope." He stuffed another stick of dynamite into the dirt, then crossed himself. "Light them both. We will not get another chance."

Conner followed his lead and crossed himself. "Now I lay me down to sleep. If I should die blowing up this jailhouse, I pray the Lord my soul to take—even if it's in bits and pieces." He bit his lip. "Here goes nothing." He stuck the match against the side of the box. Fire flared and hissed. Sulfur scented the air. With shaking hands Conner touched the flame to the drooping dynamite wicks. Grabbing Sergio's cousin, he scrambled to his feet and dove toward the shelter of shrubs. He hit the dirt rolling and thunder split the sky.

Chapter One



Marshal, Texas, April 8, 1880

“I’m so glad we could reach an understanding.”

At the sound of the sultry drawl, Conner Malloy tossed a peanut shell to the floor, sat up on the dingy cot, and watched Sheriff Radford lead a princess dressed in green velvet through the front door of the town jail. Well, she probably wasn’t a real princess, Conner reasoned, but as far as he could see the only thing missing was a jeweled crown.

“Now, how could I say no to such a pretty little lady?” The sheriff’s deep timbre voice bounced off the walls of the sparsely furnished room.

Conner had to agree with the lawman. *He* sure wouldn’t say no to her. After eight days in a cramped cell—the last two shared with a stinking drunk who snored—this little filly was the best thing he’d seen all week. In fact, ever.

He stood, walked the few paces to the iron bars, and leaned against the cool metal to get a better look. An itchy restlessness ate at him. How much longer did he have to wait for David to get his ass down here from Atlanta and bail him out? Surely his cousin wouldn’t stand him up this time. Granted, his last incarceration was only a contempt of court citation, and he probably deserved those two weeks in the hoosegow, but this

time was serious. Surely David understood that.

With a lusty grin, the sheriff offered the velvet-clad lady a seat.

“Thank you, but I have so little time.” She declined the chair with a slight shake of her head. Thick ringlets of dark mink hair bobbed from side to side with her action.

Conner imagined the feel of it would be as luxurious as it looked. God, she was a sweetheart. Pure beauty. A prime female specimen. If she was a horse, and he wasn’t so damn broke, he’d bid top dollar for her. To hell with whether or not she could race.

“Oh, my...” Her eyes widened as she studied the large boarded hole in the wall of the adjacent cell. “Quite a bit of damage, I see.”

Sheriff Radford grunted. “Damn fool lawyer. Could’a got somebody killed.”

Conner’s mouth twitched with wry amusement as he recalled the sheriff cursing a blue streak while he replaced the crumpled bricks and stone with scrap pieces of lumber. It seemed funny now, but at the time, Conner had been mighty nervous about using the dynamite to blast Sergio Torres from jail. If he hadn’t gone inside after the explosion to check on the lawman, Conner would be a free man right now. Oh well, he couldn’t complain too much. Nobody got hurt, he still had all his fingers, and his client wouldn’t hang.

The woman blinked, shook her head, then glanced back at the sheriff. “If you’ll get the keys, we’ll be on our way.” Her smooth, southern inflection was as thick as molasses on a December morning.

A carnal thought seared Conner’s mind. Irritably, he brushed it away. She was too damn attractive, and he was too damn lonely.

Conner glanced at the snoring drunk sleeping it off on the other cot in the cell. Hard to believe she’d come for a slob like that. The lady was definitely upper crust, and the man, hell, he

looked like your ordinary down-on-his-luck vagrant. Of course, clothes didn't necessarily make the man. Conner had seen that for himself time and time again. For all he knew this old coot could be her father, or worse, her husband.

The sheriff's face colored as he shifted nervously from one foot to the other, then hitched his pants higher on his hips. His belly pushed them back into place the moment he let go.

The woman seemed to notice the lawman's hesitation. She removed a thick envelope from her reticule, laid it on the scarred desk, and pushed it toward the sheriff. He snatched it up and tucked it into his vest pocket.

A money exchange? Interesting. What price would the drunkard bring? The thickness of the envelope made Conner wonder. Too much for fines, and bribes were ordinarily reserved for tougher cases—the ones the reputable attorneys wouldn't touch because they were destined to be defeated. Those were the cases Conner thrived on. They certainly made his life interesting.

The woman drummed her fingers on the desk. Conner wondered about the slender hands hidden beneath her white lacy gloves. He'd never liked gloves on a woman—unless that was all she wore. This little princess wouldn't have calluses. He was sure her touch would feel as smooth as silk. The thought made him smile. Yes, the princess would look good wearing nothing more than a pair of gloves, and maybe some sheer stockings, white, with lacy garters.

Damn, he'd been stuck in this miserable cell long enough to go crazy. He needed a bath, a stiff drink, and a warm, pretty-smelling woman who'd be happy with a few coins, not this fancy filly. She'd no doubt demand a marriage license, bankroll and mansion.

The sheriff grabbed a tarnished ring of keys hanging on the far wall. They jangled in his hand as he lumbered toward the cell. "You sure you know what you're doing, little lady?"

She gave a quick nod. "Of course."

Conner regarded his cellmate quizzically. How the heck she planned to get the bum awake was beyond him.

The woman stepped closer, gave him, then the drunk a cursory glance, and wrinkled her pert nose. "Please tell me he's the one standing."

Conner's stomach clenched, and he straightened. She didn't know? What was going on?

"Yes, ma'am." The sheriff fumbled with the keys. "That's him."

What in blue blazes was she talking about? He didn't know her. He'd never seen her before in his life. She was definitely the kind of woman he'd remember from the courtroom, or the bedroom. Besides, he was waiting for David. Not some princess. So who was she, and what did she want?

She scrutinized him from head to toe, distaste etching her pinched face. "Is there someplace he can get a bath and a shave? We'll be traveling together, and suffice it to say, I'm not accustomed to such a—um, natural smell."

Natural! If that didn't beat the devil! Conner wanted to laugh. He hadn't smelled natural in a week, but by God he didn't smell half as bad as the filthy vagrant snoring on the cot behind him. The man reeked. Dipping his head toward his shirt, Conner took a good sniff and conceded he was about as rank as the drunkard. But stale beer smelled worse than dirt and sweat any day. And what was this about traveling together? He wasn't going anywhere with her. He had to find Sergio.

"Miss Lilly's bathhouse is just around the corner to your right." The sheriff scratched one bushy sideburn. "They'll clean him right up. But take my advice, and don't let him out of your sight. He might not be inclined to stick around when you give him the news."

"I'm doing him a big favor." She avoided Conner's gaze. "He'll stay. I'll see to that."

"Lady," Conner interrupted, irritated that they would

continue to talk about him like he was livestock for sale. “I don’t know who the hell you are, but—”

“I realize that, Mr. Malloy.” Impatience tainted her tone. “David Holloway sent me.”

“He did?” A ray of hope kicked his pulse up a beat. *I’ll be damned.* What a friend! Bail and a woman. David must have forked out a lot of money to buy a fancy lady like this. From the looks of her, she was gonna be well worth the wait.

The sheriff turned the key in the lock, and opened the cell door.

“Follow me, Mr. Malloy.” She sashayed across the room and opened the door. “We’ll take care of some of your more basic needs first.”

A shiver of raw desire curled up Conner’s spine, and anticipation kicked his heart like a mule as he mentally undressed her down to her stockings and gloves. Damn, he wished he had time to take it slow with this little lady. She’d be pure pleasure to explore from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes. But Sergio was waiting, and time was wasting. He’d have to be quick about it, give her just enough to smile about, then be on his way. Hell, it was the thought that counted. He owed David big for this.

With arched brows, she glanced back over her shoulder at him as she walked outside. “Are you coming?”

Nobody ever said Conner Malloy let grass grow under his feet. He hurried from the cell, snatched his hat from a peg near the door, and settled it on his head.

Ahhhh. He felt better already. Give a man a good horse and a comfortable Stetson, and he’ll be content for life. The sheriff removed Conner’s six shooter from a desk drawer and muttered under his breath as he handed it to him. Conner grabbed his holster from the hook on the wall, slipped the firearm into the soft leather, and slung it over his shoulder. “Don’t look so sad, Sheriff. We’ll see each other again. Maybe I’ll send you a subpoena. Adios.” He hurried through the door and found the

little princess waiting for him on the sidewalk. Tilting his face to the warm sunshine, Conner dragged in a deep, gratifying breath of fresh air.

The sheriff marched through the door and shook his finger at him. "Subpoena my ass. You no-account smart-aleck. Don't go thinking this gives you back your attorney license, Malloy. It don't. You keep your nose clean. And tell Sergio to turn himself in. He ain't off the hook."

"When pigs fly." Conner tossed the words over his shoulder as he stepped off the walkway. "Hotel's just down the street, princess. Let's go." With eager strides, he crossed the rutted dirt street, his thoughts already miles from this small, quiet town. As soon as he enjoyed a good cuddle with the fancy lady, he'd hightail it out of here and find Sergio. Together they'd deliver one very high priced stud horse to its rightful owner, and cash in on a hefty reward.

"Mr. Malloy!"

Conner halted, dodged out of the path of a Wells Fargo stagecoach, and turned toward the woman David had sent. Resting fists to her shapely hips, she glowered down at him from the boarded walk.

Several townsfolk paused to stare. Others warily skirted around him. An old codger who sat whittling on a bench in front of the mercantile openly declared him a worthless piece of buzzard bait. Conner couldn't blame them. The explosion, his name, and a really lousy sketch of him had made the headline on the front page of the town gazette. 'Lawyer frees client the hard way,' or something similar to that. He reckoned people were still wagging their tongues over the demolished jail. Anyway, it was a sure bet nobody would offer him a smoke.

A man driving a buckboard loaded with dry goods passed in front of Conner, temporarily blocking his view of the pretty lady. Dust rose up and swirled, thickening the air and adding an extra layer of dirt across his filthy boots.

Conner sauntered back and stepped up to the planked walk. By golly, if the lady wanted an escort across the street, it was the least he could do. After all, she wasn't your average whore. That much was plain to see. He owed this little filly a prize.

Offering her his most persuasive and charming smile, he leaned close. "My apologies, princess. I've been in that cell long enough to lose my manners." He chuckled as she blinked up at him with the prettiest set of green peepers he'd ever seen. "How about you grab hold of my arm, and we'll hurry on over to the hotel and compare belly buttons. I don't really have time to take it slow." Claspng her tiny waist with both hands, he tugged her against him and planted a firm kiss to her startled lips.

She tasted far sweeter than he remembered a woman tasting, and felt soft enough to make him forget about the things he needed to do. When he attempted to deepen the kiss, she clamped her lips tightly closed and shoved at his chest. He released her, and quicker than the snap of a bull-whip, she slapped his face so hard it rattled his teeth.

Straightening, he laid his hand to his stinging cheek, and fixed her with an incredulous stare. "What'd you do that for?"

The old codger in front of the mercantile hooted with laughter, and a passing woman crossed herself, then rushed away.

The princess flushed. "You're even worse than David said."

Conner recoiled. "What's that supposed to mean?" David Holloway wouldn't bad-mouth him. They were friends—cousins—practically brothers. "Who *are* you?"

She brushed off the front of her dress where he'd touched her, squared her shoulders, and glared at him like he was a pair of manure-stained boots. "My name is Katherine Appleton. I'm David's fiancée."

"Fiancée?" He laughed with disbelief, but the determination remained etched in her face. "David never mentioned a fiancée."

"If you stayed in one place long enough to receive letters," she snapped, "he would have."

Conner gritted his teeth, completely annoyed with this lady's snippy remarks and the small crowd that had stopped to openly stare. "David doesn't have time for courting, much less setting up house, and if he did, he would have told me."

The fire in her eyes flamed brighter, and guilt tweaked his conscience. He knew better than most that David's business kept him busy. Unless you had a broken bone to set, grabbing David's time and attention produced a challenge even his closest loved ones seldom conquered. Like now for instance. David hadn't come. Instead, he'd delegated the job to his betrothed. Things just weren't the way they used to be—life wasn't simple for either one of them anymore.

She quickly rallied. "Nevertheless, he managed a few hours out of his schedule for me."

"Congratulations. You're his fiancée." Guess he wouldn't see her belly button after all. *What a shame.* "Tell David I said thanks for bailing me out." He paused just long enough to allow a wagon to pass, then stepped once more into the street.

"Mr. Malloy!" The sound of her heel stomping the walk stopped him flat.

He swung back around. "What? You want me to repay the bail money right now? I don't have it. Tell David I'll send it when I can. He's used to that."

"No." She vehemently shook her head, tossing the rich glossy curls about her shoulders.

He glanced at the gawking townsfolk gathered around them. "Don't you people have something else to do?"

Folks shook their heads, several laughed, but no one showed any signs of moving on. It annoyed the hell out of him, but he maintained his affability if only by a thread.

Conner took a sweeping inventory of David's princess, detected a measure of uncertainty in her expression, and began to doubt her honesty. If there was one thing he'd learned in his profession, it was how to read people. The lady wasn't telling the truth about something. He chuckled. David hadn't pulled a

prank on him in years. “You’re not his intended, right? It’s a joke, isn’t it?”

Her brows drew together.

Conner pressed his hand to his heart. “You really had me going for a minute. I mean, I actually believed....” *What a clever little filly.* He couldn’t wait to see her garters. “Want another kiss?”

She rolled her eyes with obvious exasperation. “It’s not a joke, Mr. Malloy, and I certainly don’t want another kiss. David is indeed my fiancé, and he didn’t bail you out. I did—sort of.”

So much for the garters. He put aside his fantasies while his heart sunk. “What do you mean by sort of?”

She hesitated, then harshly whispered, “I wouldn’t call it bail.”

Conner laughed, then quickly pulled her further down the sidewalk and out of earshot from the crowd. “You bribed the sheriff?” *Great!* He was free and clear. Not much chance Sergio would get off so easily, though. Blowing the back wall off a jail was one thing, stealing a horse was quite another, especially in the west where men placed more value on their horses than their wives.

“I didn’t bribe anybody.” She clenched her fists at her sides. “I paid for the stolen horse.”

He stood there, blank, amazed, and feeling like the Wells Fargo stagecoach had run over him after all. Conner squinted down at her with suspicion. “Paid who? Councilman Amos? That horse wasn’t his to sell or yours to buy.” The crooked politician couldn’t seem to keep his hand out of the money jar. He’d probably told her Sergio stole the horse, which meant she’d been fed a hot pile of manure.

“Did you want to spend the next five years in prison, Mr. Malloy?”

Conner’s stomach tightened with tension. “I’ve been in worse scrapes than this and seen my way clear before. I don’t need your interference or your judgment, so before you go making deals and passing out verdicts, you’d better get your

facts straight, princess. Amos doesn't own that horse. And I sure the hell don't intend to turn it over to you."

She crossed her arms, and bravely stood her ground. "According to the sheriff—"

"The sheriff doesn't know squat. The case was tainted before it ever went to trial. Amos called in a favor with the prosecuting attorney and the circuit judge. Sergio Torres was just their scapegoat."

"But Mr. Torres did steal the horse. He was found guilty."

"Too bad you didn't come to the trial. Then maybe you'd have your facts straight." He reined in his temper, but only marginally. "Look, possession is nine-tenths of the law, honey. Amos never owned the horse, he doesn't have the horse, therefore he can't sell the horse. You've wasted your money."

The corners of her mouth curled up in a smirk. "Hmm. Let me guess. *You* own the horse. Of course. That would explain why you and Sergio Torres were in jail. It all makes perfect sense now."

Strangely enough, he admired her spunk, even though it made him mad as a dirt-dobber. Conner glared at her. "Lady, you've been taken. The horse wasn't for sale, I'm not returning it, and you're not getting it."

"I don't want the horse." Her sharp reply put steam under his hat. "At least not right now," she added. "I want you."

Conner reared back. "What?" Now he was really confused.

She raised her chin to a haughty tilt. "I have a job for you."

Damn. How did David hook up with a feisty gal like this? His cousin always preferred simple girls with quiet dispositions and grits for brains. This pesky little filly was a piece of dynamite with a short fuse. Not David's type at all. "In case you didn't know," he inserted a heavy dose of sarcasm. "I'm not a lawyer anymore."

"It doesn't matter. I don't need a lawyer."

He gawked at her in disbelief. Her small shoulders were straight, her spine stiff with pride. She was a brassy thing. He

liked that. Too bad she was David's girl and had just made a real mess of things by buying that horse. If she thought for one second he intended to hand the thoroughbred over to her instead of collecting the reward money, she was sadly mistaken.

"How much did you give Sheriff Radford?"

She huffed. "A lot."

"How much is a lot?"

"Indecent."

Conner's jaw clenched till it hurt. Repaying bail money was one thing. Paying her back for a prize-winning stud horse was impossible. He needed that reward money to buy a piece of land, and by God, he wasn't about to let anyone snatch his opportunity away.

"Sorry you wasted your time and money, princess. I asked David for bail money. Nothing more." He shrugged with feigned indifference. "Amos is a thief, and the sheriff knows it. I suggest you demand that Radford refund your money, not that I think you'll get it. But understand this. I have no intentions of delivering the horse to you." He backed away. "Tell David to send me a wedding invitation."

"To the same address you expect him to send you letters?" She slapped her reticule against her thigh as the edges of her heart-shaped mouth turned down in a scowl.

Frustrated with her persistence, Conner raked a hand through his shoulder length dirt-crusting hair. "That'd be the one." His neck tingled, and he quickly reached back to scratch it.

"Fleas?" Mockery edged her inquiry.

A flush crept up Conner's face. Aggravated, he ground his teeth. "Probably."

"Miss Lilly's is that way." She pointed behind him, and he glanced over his shoulder to the bathhouse. The itch grew worse, reminding him of how long it'd been since he'd had a bath. He felt more like a damn farm animal with every passing second. When he peered back at her, she held out her hand, a coin dangling from her fingertips.

“I imagine a nice hot soak and a big juicy steak might sound pretty good to a man who’s been in jail for more than a week. Certainly it would seem worth sacrificing a moment of his time for.” She shrugged. “But then again, some people like taking cold baths in watering holes and eating beans and cold jerky over the campfire. In fact, I understand some folks get so accustomed to the fleas, they hardly know they have them. And I’ve been told that if you go long enough without a bath, you’ll actually get used to the smell and not even notice it anymore.”

Damn, but she was mule-headed. And she could talk up a storm. Actually she’d have made a good lawyer. Argumentative. Persuasive. Convincing. But what did she want with him if she didn’t need a lawyer? “All right already. You’ve made your point.”

“Good. Afterwards, we’ll talk.”

Snatching the coin from her grasp, he turned and stalked away. He’d have that bath, by God, and the steak, too. But aside from a wedding gift, he wasn’t promising her anything. After all, he had a horse to reclaim. He didn’t have time for princesses, and he didn’t have time to talk.

Chapter Two



“Miss Appleton! Come quick!” The thin wash woman standing on the porch of the weathered bathhouse frantically waved her arms.

Gripping a brown paper bundle tied with string, Katherine jumped a muddy hole and rushed across the road.

“He’s hollering and swearing cause we took all his clothes.” The woman wrung her hands together. “If you don’t hurry, he’s gonna be out in the street wearing nothing but what the good Lord gave him.”

David had warned her about Conner Malloy. Hotheaded, a rule breaker, a man who lived by instincts and brawn. A man who didn’t like to wait for much of anything. From what she’d seen so far, David had understated the facts. Conner Malloy defined stubborn determination.

Katherine hurried through the front door and into a narrow, musty smelling foyer.

“I want my damn pants!” Conner bellowed from behind the wash room door.

Katherine barged inside and collided against a warm, damp wall of muscle. The scent of spruce pine teased her nostrils. His glistening, broad shoulders and sculpted chest tapered down to a narrow waist. The sight of such raw masculinity sent a curious jolt of excitement rippling through her.

Cursing, he set her away from him. “What’d you do with my clothes?” Conner’s angry exclamation ricocheted around the small, steamy enclosure.

Katherine had seen many things while working for the Ladies Aid Society as a volunteer at David’s hospital over the past year. But nothing prepared her for the sight of Conner Malloy standing before her in all his naked glory, holding his worn, and now somewhat crushed Stetson in front of his privates. Three women in aprons and starched bonnets flanked his back, their expressions a mixture of alarm, amusement, and interest.

Now didn’t seem the time to tell Conner she’d snuck in earlier through the back door and paid the wash ladies extra to insure he didn’t leave. Happy to add a little sport to their day, the women had left Conner with nothing but his gun, his hat, and his dust-coated boots, providing Katherine with enough time to procure new clothing.

Embarrassment scorched her cheeks as she clutched the wrapped bundle tight against her breast. “I—I brought you some new clothes.”

A bead of water ran from Conner’s dark hair down his muscled chest and disappeared behind his hat. Katherine considered closing her eyes, or at least turning her back, but curiosity, an inherited stubborn streak, and desperation to keep the upper hand with this stubborn man persuaded her to stand her ground.

“I didn’t ask you to,” he rumbled.

“True, but your pants could stand in the corner on their own, so I asked these nice ladies to dispose of them.”

“You what?” His voice dropped to a quiet menace, and his gaze narrowed.

Katherine felt her eyes cross as he hunkered close, his nose not more than an inch from hers. “I thought perhaps you would appreciate something a little cleaner.”

He shook his head, splattering her with water. “I don’t. And

now you've gone and crushed my damn hat!"

Katherine bristled as she turned a cold eye to the crumpled crown of his Stetson still gripped before his loins. "You didn't need that much hat to begin with." The instant the words left her mouth, she wished she could draw them back. Her temper often got the best of her, usually leaving her with a pile of regret and embarrassment.

Conner straightened abruptly. His face turned red, and his lips stretched tight over even, white teeth. "Out!"

She'd have sworn thunder rattled the walls. He grabbed the bundle she thrust toward him and turned.

Katherine caught a peek of a firm backside as she scrambled for the door. The other ladies followed in her wake. Someone giggled, then like a plague the laughter spread. Katherine couldn't resist joining in, and she laughed till her sides ached and tears dampened her eyes.

"Where's the drawers!" His roar shook the rafters.

Choking back her mirth, she swallowed. A hush fell about the room. Three sets of eyes widened and gaped at her in stunned silence. Her stomach knotted. The last thing she needed was to make Conner so angry that he'd refuse to help her.

She raised her voice to be heard through the door and confessed, "I knew I forgot something." Preparing for another litany of curses, she clenched her teeth, hunched her shoulders, and squinted. Peels of laughter erupted from the other women. Katherine tried her best to bite back a smile, but failed.

Behind the door, Conner muttered a long string of profanity. "Dang fool woman, takes my drawers away, and doesn't even think to replace them." Something crashed to the floor, then silence fell inside the building.

Katherine rubbed her palms on her skirt and wondered if she'd picked the wrong bull to grab by the horns, but it was too late to turn back now. Moments later, he stormed through the door, a fierce scowl on his clean-shaven face that dared her to speak. The wash women scattered in three different directions,

leaving her abandoned and blatantly aware of his disturbing presence.

Katherine commended herself on the fit of the new denims and starched white shirt. He looked as good in them as he did out. The scandalous thought sluiced hot through her veins. His worn boots were now polished, the pearl handled gun and holster hugged his hip and the salvaged, albeit crumpled hat sat perched where it belonged.

“Feel better?” she asked with a false smile.

The dark hat brim shaded his eyes, and drew her attention to his disgruntled frown. “You ever worn a new pair of jeans without drawers?”

Katherine shook her head and bit her lip.

“How would you feel if I gave away your bloomers?” His uncensored frankness and quiet, rugged voice were as Texan as cowboys, hot sunshine and dust. Atlanta and David suddenly seemed a million miles away.

“Before or after I removed them?”

His jaw clenched, and his voice turned grittier. “You just wanted to make sure I didn’t take off while you went on a little shopping spree.”

“True.”

“Lady, I’ve soaked in that bath long enough to have more wrinkles than an old man, and I don’t appreciate your high-handedness.” He gave her a black scowl that dripped with impatience. “It may work with David, but it won’t work with me.”

Her hackles rose, stirring the small hairs on the back of her neck. “No need to thank me for the clothes, Mr. Malloy. I was happy to buy them for you.”

“You seem to like buying things, don’t you? Horses, clothes, lawyers. Is that what you think? That you can buy me?”

“You should have soaked your head, too.” Katherine turned away, wishing she could wipe the cocky expression off his face. She needed his help, and Heaven help her, if she couldn’t buy him, she’d chain him to the back end of the train and drag

his backside to Fort Worth.

Conner stepped around her, annoyance etched in the strong lines of his face. “You’re as bad as those bed bugs I just washed off. Except I got rid of them with some soap and water. David probably doesn’t know what to do with you.”

“My relationship with David is none of your concern.” Katherine hurried outside with Conner close on her heels. She inhaled a deep breath and bit her tongue against further sparring with him. It would serve no purpose to run the man off. “There’s an eatery just down the road,” she said with quiet restraint. “I’ll buy you that steak I promised, and then we’ll discuss business.”

Scowling, he irritably waved his hand to give her the lead. She hurried down the sidewalk and across the rutted street. The angry bull followed close at her heels.

They stopped outside a cafe with windows covered in red checkered curtains. A carved wooden menu boasting bull fries hung near the door. Katherine cringed. She’d spent her life on a ranch and certainly recognized the blessing of having meat on the table, but the idea of putting that particular part of a cow in her mouth always curbed her appetite. She only hoped Conner wouldn’t order it. He pushed the door open, waited for her to pass, then followed her in.

The smell of fresh baked pies and savory meats thickened the air. The dining room was crowded. Voices, clinking dishes, and sizzling pots rose up in a cacophony of sound.

A serving girl escorted them to a table near the back, handed them menus, then brazenly gave Conner a view of her ample cleavage as she leaned over him to take his order. A ridiculous grin curved his lips and remained on his face as he watched the provocative sway of the woman’s hips when she walked away.

Katherine cleared her throat. “I assume you didn’t notice the ring on her left hand.”

His gaze remained locked on the woman’s backside. “I noticed.”

Katherine sighed with frustration. The man was incorrigible. “David’s worried about you, Mr. Malloy.”

Conner’s smile faded as his gaze slowly drifted back to her. “Tell the good doctor not to worry. I’m as healthy as a stolen horse.”

“It’s not your health that concerns him, it’s the nitroglycerin.”

He winked as he folded his forearms atop the table. “Everybody ought to try it at least once. It’ll pop the wax right out of your ears.”

Did the man not have a single care in the world? Katherine ignored his flippant attitude. “I’m sorry about your attorney’s license. David corresponded on your behalf with the circuit judge, but he wouldn’t reconsider.”

Conner tossed his Stetson to the chair beside him. His suntanned brow furrowed, and Katherine caught a brief glimpse of disappointment in the depths of his brown eyes. Perhaps the man cared more than he wanted people to know.

The waitress returned with steaming black coffee. Katherine stirred in a spoonful of sugar, blew across the top before taking a cautious sip, then settled the cup in its saucer. “I purchased the horse, and covered the repair costs for the jail so Sheriff Radford would withdraw the charges against you. But Sergio Torres is still a wanted man. He must surrender.”

“Won’t happen.” Conner sipped from his cup.

“It must, Mr. Malloy. Sheriff Radford insists Sergio be held accountable for the horse theft. The jury found him guilty. Every bounty hunter in Texas will be looking for him, and the wanted poster reads dead or alive. You did him a disservice by blasting him from jail.”

Conner glowered at her. “My God, you sound like a politician sticking your nose into other peoples’ business. You can probably talk the hide right off a longhorn, too, but you don’t know squat about this.”

Katherine’s ire rose, flaming high in her cheeks. “I know

you'd still be in jail if not for me."

Conner plunked the cup into its saucer, sloshing hot liquid over the sides. "Sergio was sentenced to hang. His chances are definitely better with the bounty hunters. Only a fool would choose a noose around his neck over freedom."

"*You* sound like a lawyer, Mr. Malloy. Guilty only if you get caught."

He laughed, then quickly sobered. "A good lawyer can argue against the law of gravity even though he knows why his feet are on the ground, princess. But even a bad lawyer won't leave a client hanging when the wrong verdict comes in."

Hmmm, a demolitionist with a conscience. "And you're the bad lawyer?"

He grinned. "I'm both."

She believed that, though she suspected he was more rebel than saint. "Regardless of Sergio's future, the horse belongs to me now. It must be returned."

A sly grin curled the corner of his mouth. "Sergio and I will take turns carrying that stud on our backs clear to Mexico before we deliver it to you. And you're wrong about who owns that thoroughbred."

Exasperated, Katherine heaved a sigh. "I don't understand, Mr. Malloy. The man is a horse thief. From what I've learned about the situation, he was caught red-handed. Why would you risk your reputation, tarnished or not, and your career to blast someone like him from jail?"

The muscles tightened along his jaw, and he straightened in his chair. "Seems David didn't explain much."

According to David, his cousin Conner had some unique ideas about the law. Consequently, his clients always loved him, but the judges seldom did, which accounted for the number of days he spent behind bars. Aware of the lawyer's growing impatience, she calmly sat back, rested her hands in her lap, and kept her expression and tone bland. "He told me you lost the defense in court and decided to exact your own justice."

Conner's eyes narrowed as he stood, effectively dismissing her. "I've heard enough. Tell David I said thanks for sending help."

"Sit down, Mr. Malloy. We're not finished yet." Katherine's sharp command garnered the attention of several nearby diners.

Conner glared at her, a mix of anger and surprise written in his volatile expression. "Damn if you don't think you're the big toad in the puddle here."

"For the outrageous amount I've just spent on you, I've earned that position. You owe me the courtesy of hearing what I have to say." Her stomach balled into a knot.

Where was David when she needed him? Of course, she knew the answer. As always, he'd stayed at the hospital. Like a preacher chasing away sin, he never gave up, never slowed down. So much still left to be done. People to hire. Babies to birth. Broken arms to set. David had responsibilities by the dozen and just as many excuses for not spending enough time with her, or deeming it necessary to accompany her to Texas.

Katherine shunned her selfish thoughts. David was such a good man, so sacrificing, so honorable. She admired his compassion, his determination to succeed. But, she needed him. She wanted him to hold her, reassure her everything would work out all right. And he'd been too busy.

She forced herself to maintain a calm facade. She might be desperate, but she refused to show it.

"Mr. Malloy, I need your help."

His brooding expression gnawed away at her confidence, and quickened her pulse. Better get this over with as quickly as possible. Directing a silent prayer for forgiveness heavenward, she forged ahead with the lie. "David assured me, despite appearances, that you would help. And considering your circumstances, he didn't think you'd be too busy to say no."

"He assumed wrong." Defiance sparked in the depths of his dark eyes and in his stiff posture. Seconds ticked by, then finally he sat and rummaged through his shirt pocket. "I don't suppose

you bought me a smoke at the mercantile, did you princess?"

"It was on the same shopping list as the undergarments," she snapped, then sighed with exasperation. "Besides, the town probably considers you a fire hazard. Let me remind you, Mr. Malloy, that my name is Katherine Appleton. You may call me Katherine, but you may not call me princess."

They stared at one another. Neither backed down, and the silence practically hummed between them.

The serving girl brought their food, her presence mitigating a temporary truce. Katherine spread her napkin over her lap, inhaled the smell of the fried steak they both ordered, and waited till they regained their privacy. Conner snatched up his fork and ate with enthusiasm.

"I take it the food in jail isn't much to brag about."

He washed a mouthful down with a sip of coffee. "Jail isn't supposed to be a picnic."

Katherine pushed her food around on the plate and thought about how to present her request to Conner. In her mind, she'd rehearsed this conversation a hundred times since leaving Atlanta nearly a week ago. But now she feared she hadn't adequately prepared for the cocky ex-lawyer from Amarillo. Despite everything David told her, she hadn't expected Conner to be so uncooperative, rough-edged, or startlingly masculine. If only David had believed her or offered his help. Oh well, there was no use thinking about what might have been. Desperate times called for desperate measures. "I need you to accompany me to Fort Worth."

He sliced a piece of steak and dipped it in gravy. "Prin—Katherine, I might be out of a job at the moment, but I'll eat my hat before I'll become your escort. Sounds to me like you needed to wait on David a little longer."

"David is busy with the new hospital. He couldn't leave." She inclined her head, avoiding his scrutiny. Making excuses for her fiancé's absence was fast becoming second nature. So were the lies she spouted. Her words tumbled out on the heels

of frustration. “Besides, I don’t need an escort, Mr. Malloy. I need protection, someone who carries a gun, not a doctor’s bag.”

Slowly, Conner swallowed, then laid the utensil down. He eyed her skeptically, and it took every bit of backbone she possessed not to squirm in her seat.

“David wouldn’t allow you to travel to Fort Worth if he thought you were in any kind of danger. Trains, for the most part, are safe. Granted, you’d have been better off with an escort, but—”

“It’s not the travel that concerns me—us. It’s... the arrival. The stay.” She frowned.

“You’re trying to tell me you’re in danger, but David’s too busy? I don’t buy it.”

“David trusts you. He sent me to your capable hands.”

Pride softened Conner’s expression and touched his mouth with the faint hint of a smile. “What kind of danger are you in?”

“In a week my mother plans to marry a man I don’t trust. I’m going to change her mind, and her intended is bound to get angry.”

Humor danced in his brown gaze. Retrieving his fork, he stuffed another bite of steak in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. “You know, I’ve heard of these kind of things happening before. A child clings to the memory of a lost parent and can’t bear the thought of the living parent falling in love with someone new. There are doctors that can help with this sort of thing. I’ve heard of them. Head doctors. David can find you one.”

“I don’t need a head doctor, Mr. Malloy.” She bit back a sharper reply. It wasn’t the first time someone had told her she was imagining this whole problem, but it still infuriated her. In her heart, she knew this had nothing to do with misplaced anger or jealousy. It was much more serious than that. “I need someone who can help me stop the wedding.”

“Well, now,” he sighed, “I’ve known a few ladies who wanted to get me into a church, but I’ve never had anyone ask me to get a woman out of one.”

She lifted her chin and met his gaze. Under different circumstances, she might have found humor in his comment, but her mind was too cluttered with worry. “This is important.”

“I hate to be the one to bring this up, but maybe your mama’s old enough to decide for herself who she wants to marry.” He scooped up the gravy with a thick piece of bread and popped it into his mouth.

“He’s not in love with my mother.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it’s too convenient.” Katherine gathered up the last remnants of her patience with a deep, controlled breath. How many times had she gone over this—with the sheriff, the marshal, David, anyone who would listen? It didn’t matter. She’d keep on saying it until someone believed her, until someone helped. She had to set things right, and she wouldn’t give up until she did. It was all she could give her Daddy now. “Until his death, my father kept a journal. He wrote about his concerns, said this man would stop at nothing to have what he wanted. Mother is simply a pawn in his twisted game.”

Conner set down his fork, wiped his mouth with a napkin, then pushed back his empty plate. “This is all real interesting, princess, but I don’t have time to take off to Fort Worth, and stop a wedding.”

“It’s a matter of life and death.”

His eyes widened. “A wedding?”

“It might as well be her funeral.”

He leaned back in his chair. “All right. I’m curious. What twisted game? What makes this wedding so dangerous?”

A rush of painful memories crested and washed over Katherine. Pushing aside the grief that swelled within her breast, she briefly closed her eyes. There would be other times, she knew, to drown her sorrows, to remember and grieve. But

not now. Not with this stranger watching. “The man Mama plans to marry murdered my father.”

Conner’s gaze narrowed as he leaned forward in his chair. “Murder’s a hanging offense.”

“So is stealing horses, but you and Sergio are still breathing. As you well know, people don’t always hang for their crimes, Mr. Malloy.”

A wry grin curved his lips. “Point sustained, Miss Appleton.”

Anxiety stiffened her neck and shoulders as she recalled the details of last year. It seemed like only yesterday, the pain still raw. “I didn’t have enough evidence to prove my father’s death wasn’t an accident, but I have no doubts. Just over a year ago, Daddy turned down a substantial offer for our property and cattle. Soon after, one of the ranch hands found him dead, supposedly thrown from his horse. But he was an excellent rider, and the horse was his favorite. I went to the sheriff with my suspicions, but he said Daddy’s journal proved nothing. Mama agreed with him. So, I left to visit my Grandmother in Atlanta. I thought it would help to get away for awhile. But now it’s painfully obvious that leaving Mother alone was a terrible mistake.”

She pressed her fingers to her throbbing temples. “The wedding invitation I received confirms what I should have suspected all along. Gerald Douglas will stop at nothing to get what he wants. He plans to take ownership of the land through marriage.”

“Sounds to me like you need a Pinkerton.”

Katherine shook her head, then pushed away her plate of cold food. “I tried that already. The agent spent very little time on the case, found no quick and convenient proof, then rushed off to stop a band of bank robbers in Houston.”

Conner frowned. “Why me? What makes you think I can help?”

“David told me you have a knack for finding things out.”

He shrugged negligently. “I get lucky sometimes.”

“That’s why I need you.” A little luck would be a welcome change, and frankly, at this point, it was all the hope she had.

Stress lines formed on his brow as he shook his head. “I don’t have time.”

David had insisted his cousin was a man of honor, and in desperation, Katherine crossed her fingers and tossed out the false bait she prayed would hook Conner. “David’s counting on you, Mr. Malloy. He trusts you.” She leaned closer, imploring him with her eyes. “David’s always been there for you. Are you going to let him down?”

Conner squirmed in the chair, obviously stung by her words, then rubbed the back of his neck and groaned. “I feel like I’m cornered in a canyon, princess.”

“Katherine.”

Pensive and quiet, he stared out the window at the street.

“How many times has David asked you for help, Mr. Malloy? He’s asking now, he’s asking for me. What could be more important than that? Certainly not a horse that’s bought and paid for.”

Raking a hand through his hair, he expelled a heavy breath. “That horse is worth a small fortune.”

“This wedding is worth my mother’s life, my father’s land, my inheritance—and my family’s future. I’ll fight for it, with or without your help, regardless of the danger to me. I loved my father, and I love my family’s land. I’m not giving it up for anybody. And I won’t stand by and watch Douglas use and discard my mama. You would do no less. Family means everything, Mr. Malloy. Doesn’t it? Isn’t David family? If David was sitting across from you right now instead of me, would you even hesitate to help? I’m going to be David’s family very soon. And we’re both asking for your help,” she lied. She prayed the end result would justify the means.

He squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth. “Damn it.”

“When the time comes, we’ll figure out what to do about the thoroughbred. For now it must wait,” she said with more

confidence than she felt.

He stared at her. “Fort Worth, huh?”

Relief sluiced over her as she nodded.

“How long will this take?”

Knowing her euphoria might be short lived, she kept her excitement in check, then averted her gaze as she answered.

“Not long. A few days.”

Conner’s mouth quirked with annoyance. “What do I have to do?”

“I want you to take a job at the ranch. I’ll make sure the foreman hires you.”

He laughed. “Look, I know how to rope and ride, but I’m a horseman, not a cowpuncher.”

She crossed her arms and rested them on the table, then forced a congenial smile. “I need you near the house, asking questions, getting to know the hands, finding out what you can. If you’re as good as David says, it shouldn’t take long.”

Silence hovered. Finally, he frowned, snatched up his Stetson, and settled it on his head. “When’s the next train?”

Chapter Three



Katherine swatted a pesky fly away, marched ahead of Conner up the porch steps to the large adobe brick home and rapped the door with her knuckles. The afternoon sun beat on her shoulders, and sweat trickled between her breasts. Her bottom ached from the bouncing endured on the buckboard of the wagon they'd rented after leaving the train in Tyler.

“For the life of me, I cannot understand why on earth we had to come all the way out here to collect your horse. We could be in Dallas by now. Lord only knows if we'll make it back in time to catch the next train.”

“A man gets attached to his mount, princess. Old Lucky's been waiting long enough. It's time to fetch him.”

“Honestly, I did not need this delay.”

The door swung open. “Conner!” A voluptuous Mexican woman darted over the threshold and slammed the door shut behind her. She took one quick look at Conner, and a shadow of concern crossed her face. “Dios, you have more lives than all the saints put together!”

Conner opened his arms and chuckled. “Don't I get a hug, Lucita?”

Katherine backed awkwardly away. The woman offered Conner a hesitant embrace then briskly stepped back. Worry lines furrowed her brow.

“I almost had my neck stretched, Lucita. Have a little sympathy.” He tapped his finger on his cheek.

If Conner didn’t notice her reluctance, Katherine certainly did. It seemed that at least one woman was immune to his charm.

Lucita kissed him lightly on the cheek. She brushed her hands across the vivid red and green of her skirt. “Why are you here, Conner?”

“I told you I’d be back. How’s Lucky?”

She laid a hand to her breast. “Oh, he is fine.” She glanced over her shoulder to the front door. “But such a stud he is, I have to separate him from all my other horses.” Her eyes flitted briefly to Katherine before she offered Conner a coy smile that thinned her plump lips. “I would guess he has not been as lucky as you.”

Conner pulled his hat off his head, scratched his scalp, and grinned. “Lucita, this is Katherine Appleton, my cousin’s betrothed. She’s traveling with me—temporarily.”

“I see.”

Katherine noticed her askance look and heard her smothered innuendo.

Conner apparently noticed it too as he gruffly cleared his throat. “I explained to Katherine here how close me and Lucky are. Why that horse and I are the best of friends, isn’t that right, Lucita? Yes, sir, a man can’t live without his horse. Anyway, she was understanding enough to come with me to fetch him on our way to Fort Worth.”

Lucita’s brow arched. “Close? You and Lucky?”

“Yeah, you know how fond I am of Lucky, and I imagine he’s missing me something fierce by now, so I’ve come to fetch him.”

His next words were spoken in rapid Spanish. Katherine caught a word here and there—horse, please, *señorita*. But her Spanish was limited and his obviously was not.

“Oh, *si*, I understand.” Lucita’s full mouth quirked with

humor, then she looked at her with curious, dark eyes. “*Hola, Señorita* Appleton. I am pleased to make your acquaintance. I would invite you in, but the house is such a mess.” She shrugged. “You forgive me, I am sure. Maria has made tamales. I will pack you a lunch. You can eat them on your trip back.”

Conner arched a brow. “What’s gotten into you, Lucita?”

“Me? *Nada*. I am busy, that is all. You should have told me you were coming. I could have prepared.”

“We don’t wish to inconvenience you, Lucita. In fact, we’ve already eaten and are indeed in a hurry,” Katherine politely refused. “You mustn’t feel the need to entertain us.”

“Well, that’s true enough.” Conner slapped the dust from his pants and glanced toward the barn. “We’ve got a train to catch. I wouldn’t mind a shot of tequila though, if you’ve got it, and a smoke.”

Lucita clapped her hands together and laughed. “I saved the worm just for you. I will bring it to you in the barn. You know the way.” She hurried inside and shut the door behind her.

Conner stared at the thick barrier and shrugged. “Well, don’t that beat all.” He settled his hat back on his head, then descended the porch steps.

“How do you know this woman?” Katherine quizzed him while she rushed to catch up. “Is she a friend of Sergio’s?”

“Nah.” Conner stepped around a small cactus. “I defended her once a year or so back. Murder trial.”

Startled, Katherine stumbled on the uneven sun-baked earth. “Murder? She murdered someone?”

“Her husband. But, I don’t really think she did it.”

Alarm pricked her skin. “Think? You don’t know?”

He shrugged. “Well, she says she didn’t, although there was a lot of evidence against her. She worked at a brothel in town, and this man she married was one of her customers. Lot of folks said she stabbed him in the back for the money. And it did kind of look that way. I mean, they’d only been married four months, and in that short amount of time he’d changed his

will, removing his son as beneficiary and adding Lucita. She got the house, the property, every dime he owned. It was all pretty suspicious.”

Katherine lifted the hem of her skirt and picked her way over the rough terrain. Her slippers weren't cut out for this kind of walking. A rock bruised her heel, and she bit her tongue to keep silent. “Then how'd you prove your case?”

“It wasn't really up to me to prove anything. I just had to place doubt in the jury's mind. The knife was never found, no one witnessed the murder, her husband went to his attorney's home and requested the change to the will. Since Lucita wasn't present, they couldn't say she forced him to add her name to it. And she was obviously grieving. A sprinkle of doubt, a lack of hard evidence, and you've got the ingredients for a good defense. And I'm a damn good lawyer. Plus, she's a woman, and folks don't like to think about hanging women. Besides, the judge was one of her best customers. It was an open and shut case.”

Incredulous, Katherine blinked. “You're saying he threw the case because she—because she—”

“She polished the judge's gavel,” he finished for her, then winked.

Katherine blanched. He opened the barn door, and they entered the cool shade of the dark, earthy scented interior.

“It doesn't matter to you that she might have committed the crime, or that the judge took a bribe?”

He grinned at her. “You don't have much room to talk when it comes to bribes, princess. But the point is I don't get paid to care if my clients are guilty or not. I get paid to defend each person the best way I know how. It's called law, princess. You don't have to like it. You just have to play the game.”

“How ya doing, boy?” Conner approached a stall to his left, and reached out his hand to scratch a beautiful chestnut stallion's nose. It reared back, bared its teeth, and snapped at him. He jerked his hand away with a shudder. “Damn it!

You're as cantankerous as ever, you son-of-a-bitch. One of these days I'm going to fry you up for supper, I swear."

"I thought you loved this horse?"

He pulled his hat from his head and brushed back his dark hair. "It's a love-hate relationship. Probably a lot like you and David."

Katherine scowled at him. "Mr. Malloy, be straight with me. Is this horse the stallion Sergio stole?"

He pulled a well-worn saddle from a hook on the wall. "He looks good enough to be, don't he? Fine lines, powerful legs. He's a beauty, I must admit. This horse here's going to be my start."

"Your start?"

"Conner wants a ranch of his own." Lucita entered the room, a shot glass and cheroot in one hand, a bottle of tequila in the other. "I tried once to tell him he could stay here with me. I have all this land and wanted a smart man to share it with. But he says sorry, he wants his own place." She shrugged, handed him the glass. "He is looking for a different kind of woman I think. Maybe fair skinned like you. Or maybe he is just worried about my knife collection." She laughed.

Katherine flinched, and Conner blushed.

"I'm not looking for a woman at all. At least not permanently." He took the glass offered.

Lucita offered a drink to Katherine. She declined with a quick shake of her head. When Lucita spoke to Conner in Spanish, he chuckled.

Annoyed that they would attempt to talk privately in front of her, Katherine frowned. "My Spanish may be rusty, but it's plain enough that you're keeping something from me."

Lucita laughed. "I was simply saying how beautiful you are, *señorita*."

"Well, I heard *caballo*, not *señorita bonita*, so unless you were comparing me to a horse, I don't think you were talking about me."

Conner paled. “*Habla espanol?*”

“I heard enough to know you’re talking about this stallion. I was raised on a ranch, Conner, and I know enough to see this horse fits the description of the missing thoroughbred.”

His brow furrowed. “You’re too suspicious, princess. Besides, you said yourself that Sergio has the stolen thoroughbred. This horse is mine.”

“And lawyers never lie.”

He shrugged. “No more than doctors’ fiancées.”

A prick of alarm stiffened her spine. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You tell me.”

“You must saddle your horse and go, *por favor*,” Lucita interrupted.

Conner rested his hands to his hips and stared at the woman, his expression baffled and concerned. “Why the rush, Lucita? You hiding something?”

She laid her hand to her chest as her mouth dropped open with surprise. “Me? Hiding? No, of course not. But you have a train to catch, si? You would not want to miss it.”

“That’s true,” Katherine added, anxious to be on her way. “Saddle the beast up and let’s go.”

Conner swallowed his drink in one fiery gulp, expelled a raspy breath, and handed Lucita his glass. He inched his way into the stall, cooing softly to the restless horse.

After a nip to his hat, another to his backside, and several curses later, Lucky was salivating. He fought the bit in his mouth, blew angry hot breaths of air, and stomped at the ground while Conner cinched the saddle tight.

“He’s a little miffed with me right now,” he offered in explanation.

Katherine rolled her eyes. “He hates your guts, Mr. Malloy. It’s obvious that there’s more to this story than you’re sharing.”

Conner opened his mouth to reply but a deep, robust voice barreled outside the barn. “Lucita!”

The woman jumped. “You must go, *compadre*’.”

“Who’s here?” Conner stepped out of the stall, his shoulders stiff with apparent unease.

Lucita nervously shook her dark head. “Nobody. A friend.” She waved her hands. “No one of importance. But you must hurry.”

The barn door swung open, and two bearded men in sombreros swaggered inside. It was difficult to see their faces with the sun to their backs, but Katherine saw enough to realize the danger. They looked like bandits to her.

“Buenos dias, señor. You have come to visit my woman?”

Conner drew still, his hand hovering close to the gun strapped on his hip. “I’m here to collect my horse, Miguel. I thought you and Lucita barely knew each other.”

He scratched his beard and smiled. “Ah well, we have become very good friends since the trial.”

Conner’s eyes narrowed. “Is that so?”

“*Si*,” Miguel nodded. “Lucita, you should have told me we have company.”

The woman wrung her hands. “I didn’t want to disturb your siesta. They were just leaving.” She glanced back at them, her eyes wide with apparent concern and her voice a little breathless. “You were just leaving, right *señor*?”

He slowly nodded. “Yeah. We’ve got a train to catch.”

“Nonsense,” Miguel said with an abrupt shake of his burly head. “You cannot leave now. Maria has made tamales and we must drink until one of us catches the worm, no?”

“Thank you for the kind offer,” Katherine interrupted, her heart racing, “but we really must be going.” And not a moment too soon, she thought.

“You stay until I say go,” the man’s tone sharpened. “Paco, unsaddle *Señor Malloy*’s horse.” The younger man hurried to the stall. “Come. We eat, we drink. You will be our most welcome guest.” He strode confidently through the door, and Lucita rushed after him.

Katherine grabbed Conner's arm. "What's going on here?"

"Stay calm," he whispered. "We eat, we drink, we don't argue."

"Do you know that man?"

Conner frowned. Damn, but they were in a hell-of-a tight spot. "Not really, but he's wanted in seven states. So we're going to eat a couple of tamales, throw back a drink or two, and then we'll leave." Miguel De la Fuente had few friends, and even fewer enemies—live ones anyway. Conner wasn't too sure which category he would eventually fall into.

"But the train—"

Anxious to get this moment behind him, Conner headed for the door. "The train will be there in the morning, Katherine. Trust me on this one. Eat, drink and whatever you do, be quiet."

Katherine followed close at his side. "I can't believe this is happening. He's a criminal. I'm going to eat dinner with a common criminal. And we're going to miss our train. This mess is all your fault." Her voice was laced with irritation and worry.

"It's not a mess, yet," Conner reasoned, hoping like hell he was right. "Hang onto your bustle, princess. A polite drink won't do us any harm."

Conner was beginning to think he'd been wrong about Lucita's innocence. He took Katherine's arm and followed Lucita and Miguel back to the house and inside. They passed through several arched thresholds. Rich mahogany, rattan-cane furnishings, vivid paintings of bullfights or *mariachi* musicians and colorful dancers decorated the rustic home. In the dining room, Conner assisted Katherine into a chair, sat protectively beside her, and removed his hat.

Miguel rubbed his thumb across a row of bullets laced into his thick black leather holster before sitting down at the table. The bandito looked mean as a groundhog with no place to dig. A plump older woman wearing an apron hurried into the room

carrying a plate of steaming food. Cayenne pepper and corn scented the air, and Conner's stomach growled in response.

Lucita poured tequila into each of their glasses.

Miguel held up his drink. "A toast, *Señor* Malloy. To a fine lawyer. If and when I am ever caught, and if they do not kill me first, I will use you as my attorney." He laughed.

Conner tossed the liquor back in a healthy swallow that set his throat on fire. "I'm retired, Miguel."

"No!" Miguel refilled their glasses.

"Lost my license to practice," he confirmed.

Miguel eyed Katherine. "But you have a pretty *señorita* instead, *si*? She will keep you very busy I think."

Katherine opened her troublesome mouth. "I'm not—"

"The *señorita* is my cousin's fiancée," Conner interrupted her. "She's traveling with me on business."

Katherine glanced at Miguel's beady eyes and drew silent.

Miguel laughed, pulled Lucita from her chair and into his lap, then motioned to the food Maria had placed on his plate. "Eat. It is not often we have the opportunity to entertain. You must be well fed and rested before we send you on your way."

Reluctantly, Conner took a bite of his tamale. The pepper discovered inside scorched a ruthless path to his belly while his tongue slowly sizzled. His eyes watered up and he swallowed. "God almighty, that's hot! Are you trying to kill me?" Quickly, he washed it down with a shot of tequila.

Miguel laughed in short, bold hacks of breath. "Lucita would not kill you with a little *chipotle*. She likes to use a knife."

"Son-of-a-bitch." Disgusted, he set his fork down and glared at the woman lounging in Miguel's arms. "You lied to me."

"*Madre de Dios. Stupido!* You did not really think I was innocent?" Lucita's tone was mocking as she rolled her heavily lashed eyes.

"You told me you didn't stab him, Lucita."

She shrugged her shoulders. “I didn’t stab him. He fell on the knife.”

Miguel laughed. “It was very simple, really—”

Conner held up his hand, stopping the outlaw. “Lucita can’t be prosecuted twice for the same crime. You however, can still be tried for murder, Miguel. I’d keep my mouth shut.”

Miguel looked like he’d crunched down on an uncooked kernel of corn. “*Es verdad*. This is true. You are a smart man, *señor*.” He grinned, poured another glass for them, and nodded. “Now let’s see if you can out-drink me.”

Three hours later, Katherine released the break and slapped the reins to the horse’s hindquarters while Conner rested his aching head in his hands. He’d managed to tie Lucky up to the back, but he didn’t dare try to ride him. Lucita and Miguel were so drunk, they were fighting over the last worm when the wagon rolled away. In the end, they decided to share the creepy crawler, and Miguel bit it in two, then passed it to a willing Lucita in a kiss. Conner considered the wiggly exchange pretty disgusting, but at the moment, he was more concerned about the fire in his belly from the tamales, and the urgency to relieve his bladder.

“*Adios, amigo*.” Miguel waved. “You will return to visit us again, *si?*”

Conner tipped his hat. “The very next time I’m in the area. Thank you again for boarding my horse, Lucita. Good luck to you.”

“*Que te vaya bien*,” she said with a broad smile. “*Adios*.”

Katherine’s smile was tight as she waved goodbye, then turned her back on them. “You could have gotten us killed,” she muttered, then prompted the horses into a light gallop. “I can’t believe you’re just going to let those murderers get away with this. They killed her husband.”

Conner glared at her. “Well, what would you like me to do? Tie Miguel up and haul his ass to Fort Worth with us?”

She heaved an exasperated breath. “I suppose not.”

Conner shrugged. “For all Miguel’s bluster, he obviously didn’t want to kill us or we’d be dead. He just wanted to make sure I knew they committed murder once and could do so again.”

“My God,” she said with a slow shake of her hand and a slight shiver. “They actually murdered her poor husband together.”

“The system’s full of corruption, princess.” He didn’t like the way this whole matter settled on his shoulders. Damn it all, but he hated being a lawyer. “It’s a shameful occupation sometimes.”

“What a waste of time this has been. We’ve missed the train.” A growl of pent-up frustration worked its way out of her throat. “This delay has cost us an entire day.”

“Listen,” Conner said on a weary sigh, “You’ve got what you wanted. I’m going to Fort Worth with you. And there was no harm done from the visit. I honestly don’t see what you’ve got to complain about.”

“This horse we’re towing behind us, that’s what,” she snapped at him. “And this horrid afternoon spent in the company of an armed criminal. And you know what I think? I think you’re just as unsavory as they are. This horse is probably stolen. For all I know, it is the thoroughbred. The one I own, may I remind you.”

Conner straightened and glared at her. “You know, you are a mighty suspicious woman. The mule may not love me but he knows where his apples are buttered. I received him as payment from a client I defended. Believe me, you don’t own this animal. He’s mine. But now you’ve got my mind wondering if maybe this Douglas feller your mom’s marrying isn’t such a bad toad after all. Maybe you’ve just got an active imagination. You like to think the worst of people.”

Katherine stiffened with apparent insult. “Don’t be so quick to judge, Mr. Malloy. Gerald Douglas is as guilty as Judas, and with your help, I can prove it.”

His stomach churned, and he clutched it and groaned. “Pull over.”

“Why? Haven’t we wasted enough time already? I’m sure the mercantile is closed by now, and the train leaves early tomorrow. You may never get new drawers.”

Conner grabbed the reins from her hands, pulled the horses to a stop, and scrambled over the side. It was all he could do to make it to the copse of trees before he embarrassed himself. Dancing a jig, he unbuttoned his fly, and shuddered as his bladder emptied out. Katherine was just going to have to wait a while longer. By the churning in his stomach, it was mighty apparent that tequila and tamales were going to be more dangerous than dynamite.

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Since moving to Texas years ago, the rich history and excitement of the Lone Star State has fired her love and imagination for the Old West.

Between her busy career as a Real Estate agent and her writing, she enjoys spending time with her husband of twenty-two years, their two teenage children, friends, family and Daisy, her adorable Maltese dog.



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