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PALMER

THE CASE OF THE  
MISSING SECRETARY

Diana Palmer

**The Case of the Missing Secretary**

«HarperCollins»

**Palmer D.**

The Case of the Missing Secretary / D. Palmer — «HarperCollins»,

Logan Deverell has infuriated Kit Morris for the last time. She's had enough of her boss's temper, his ingratitude and, most of all, his complete oblivion to her feelings for him. But she certainly manages to get his attention when she quits and joins the Lassiter Agency as their newest detective. Once he gets over his initial anger, Logan feels lost and miserable without Kit. Realizing what he needs to do, Logan vows to get Kit back...but he'll have to offer a lot more than a job—he'll have to give her his heart.

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Dear Reader,

I really can't express how flattered I am and also how grateful I am to Harlequin Books for releasing this collection of my published works. It came as a great surprise. I never think of myself as writing books that are collectible. In fact, there are days when I forget that writing is work at all. What I do for a living is so much fun that it never seems like a job. And since I reside in a small community, and my daily life is confined to such mundane things as feeding the wild birds and looking after my herb patch in the backyard, I feel rather unconnected from what many would think of as a glamorous profession.

But when I read my email, or when I get letters from readers, or when I go on signing trips to bookstores to meet all of you, I feel truly blessed. Over the past thirty years, I have made lasting friendships with many of you. And quite frankly, most of you are like part of my family. You can't imagine how much you enrich my life. Thank you so much.

I also need to extend thanks to my family (my husband, James, son, Blayne, daughter-in-law, Christina, and granddaughter, Selena Marie), to my best friend, Ann, to my readers, booksellers and the wonderful people at Harlequin Books—from my editor of many years, Tara, to all the other fine and talented people who make up our publishing house. Thanks to all of you for making this job and my private life so worth living.

Thank you for this tribute, Harlequin, and for putting up with me for thirty long years! Love to all of you.

Diana Palmer

## **DIANA PALMER**

The prolific author of more than one hundred books, Diana Palmer got her start as a newspaper reporter. A multi–New York Times bestselling author and one of the top ten romance writers in America, she has a gift for telling the most sensual tales with charm and humor. Diana lives with her family in Cornelia, Georgia.

Visit her website at [www.DianaPalmer.com](http://www.DianaPalmer.com).

# **The Case of the Missing Secretary**

## **Diana Palmer**



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With love to SPC Tracy Adams 4th MMC,  
13th COSCOM—please write!

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## Chapter One

Kit Morris was just barely lucid as she stormed into the Lassiter Detective Agency, her short black hair falling in wet strings around her face, her blue eyes huge and red-rimmed. Her tall, slender figure was clad in a gray suit that had been immaculate just that morning, paired with a soft white blouse and an extravagant silk blue-patterned scarf. Now the whole outfit was a dripping mess—like Kit's nerves.

It was Tess Lassiter's day substituting for her husband Dane's receptionist, so she was the first person Kit saw when she dragged into the office. Kit and Tess had been best friends for years, long before Tess married Dane Lassiter, who'd been Tess's boss at the time. Kit and Tess had a lot in common. Not that Kit had a single bald chance of ever marrying her boss. Her ex-boss, that was. At the moment, Kit would much rather stand him up against a mesquite tree and put a fountain pen through his black heart than walk down the aisle with him.

"What happened to you?" Tess exclaimed. "My goodness, Kit, you look terrible!"

"Of course I look terrible! He put me out of the car on Travis Street!"

"That's five blocks from here," Tess mumbled. "He who?"

"Can't you guess?" Kit wailed. "It was him! My boss! My ex-boss," she corrected furiously, shaking her head to get the hair out of her eyes. "He...he hijacked me from the public safety department where I was getting my driver's license renewed!" she exclaimed.

"He hijacked you?" Tess had to smother a laugh.

"Yes! I didn't want to go with him, but he picked me up and carried me out to the car. And in front of all those people," she groaned. "I didn't even get my license fee paid! I'll have to go back again and stand in line for another hour!"

"Oh, Kit," Tess began sympathetically.

"I resigned two weeks ago, after all! I don't work for him anymore! He can't talk to me like that!"

"Like what?" Tess asked soothingly, trying to calm her best friend.

Kit's eyes blazed like blue flames. "All these years I've slaved for him." She choked. "Taking his dictation, following him around the world, withstanding his disgusting temper...and he has the gall...the gall to say that I'm not worth the salary he used to pay me! As if it was a king's ransom or something. Can you imagine?"

"Mr. Deverell said that?"

"Logan Deverell is a tyrant and a beast." Kit fumed. "The lowest of the low. A worm! No." She caught herself. "Pond scum! That's what he is, only much, much lower...."

"Did you do something?" Tess probed gently.

"Not since I told him about his new conquest, right before I quit," she muttered, trying to hide her feeling of heartbreak. Logan Deverell's new woman was why Kit had quit her job in the first place. "He's serious about her, you know."

"But why did he nab you?"

Kit threw up her graceful hands. "Who knows? Anyway, he tried to coax me into coming back and I told him I wouldn't. He practically jumped down my throat with both feet. He's never used language like that to me, and he said that I was worthless as a secretary and he didn't know why he was willing to hire me again."

Tess wanted to get up and put her arms around the taller woman and coax her to cry. But Kit was stubborn, even in grief. She held her chin high, struggling to maintain her dignity. Tess couldn't undermine her strength.

She could only imagine how her friend was hurting. Kit had been in love with Logan Deverell for years. The silly man never noticed her, except as a piece of office furniture.

“Why was he offering you your old job back?” Tess asked.

“I don’t know. We started arguing before he got around to telling me. He was raging like a madman. I didn’t even think, I just got out of the car and left.”

“He put you out in the rain?” Tess groaned. “How could he!”

“He didn’t put me out as much as I jumped out,” Kit confessed. “The stupid blind man! I love him so!” Kit choked. Her heart felt as if it were something brittle that had just been smacked with a bat. She was coming unglued. “If only I were blonde and stacked!”

“Who is this woman he’s seeing?” Tess asked.

“Betsy Corley,” she said huskily.

“I don’t know her.”

“I do. At least, I know of her. At one time I was good friends with the man in my apartment building that she took for everything he had.” Kit took a steadying breath. “Logan is determined to marry her,” she said and laughed hoarsely.

“Oh, Kit,” Tess groaned sympathetically.

“At least I have a job, thanks to you and Dane,” she said miserably. “I’ve burned all my bridges....”

“Well, in that case, it’s a good thing we’re making a detective out of you,” Dane Lassiter murmured dryly. He joined the two women, slipping an arm around his wife. He smiled at her before his dark eyes went back to Kit. “We’re glad to have you now that Helen’s gone to South America where Harold’s next job is. He’s in the construction business with his father, you remember. And Helen’s brother, Nick, is moving back to Washington so that his new wife can keep her tenure at Thorn College. He’s starting up his own agency. I’ll be two operatives short. That means I’ve still got to hire another agent. I’m glad you haven’t been tempted to go back to your old boss.”

“I’d be more tempted to step into a lion’s mouth than I would to work for Logan Deverell again,” Kit murmured dryly, hiding her pain. “I hope you know how much I appreciate your giving me a chance here.” She pushed back her hair again and brushed at the moisture on her suit. It wasn’t as wet as she’d first thought, and seemed to be drying slowly.

“We both do,” Dane told her, smiling. “But you’ve been quite a surprise, you know. If there are such things as natural born detectives, then I think you’re one of them. You’ve taken to the job like a duck takes to swimming.”

She brightened. “You really think so?”

“I do.”

Kit managed a smile. “Actually I always used to think I’d make a good detective, because I love poking my nose into things that don’t concern me.” She sighed. “You really did save my life by hiring me,” she persisted. “I didn’t have my rent payment. After I stormed out of the office the day I quit, I can’t expect Mr. Deverell to send my severance pay after me. I didn’t even work a week’s notice.”

“I hardly think Logan Deverell will do you out of your severance pay, regardless,” Dane murmured dryly. “He’s not a vindictive man.”

“If you’d seen him ten minutes ago...” Kit muttered.

Dane cocked an eyebrow as he peered past her. “On second thought,” he mused, “perhaps he is—”

Before he got the words out, the door flew open and a tall, big dark man in a gray raincoat stormed in.

“I’ve searched the whole damned city for you,” he grumbled, his deep voice like muted thunder in the office as he glared at Kit. “You little fool, you could have been killed, jumping out of a car in the middle of traffic like that! Where in hell have you been?”

“Don’t you shout at me!” Kit raged back. “You told me to get my nose out of your business, and I did,” she said with painful satisfaction at the grimace on his broad face. “You can find someone else to yell at in your office. Dane says I’m a very good detective!”

Logan Deverell lifted a bushy eyebrow and glanced at Dane. "Did you say that?"

"I'm afraid so," Dane replied. "Under the circumstances, it might be to your advantage not to argue with Kit anymore."

Logan glanced at Kit's face and his lips thinned. He was inclined to agree. She looked shaken. That, and totally out of control emotionally. In all the years she'd worked for him, this was the first time he'd seen her in such a state. She was usually calm and efficient. Except for the day she'd quit, of course, when she'd set new records for abusive verbosity. When he'd followed her into her office, where she was cleaning out her desk, she'd actually thrown a book at him and accused him of mixing her up emotionally with her computer.

It had been the cutting remarks about Betsy being mercenary that had cost Logan his temper today. He still regretted some of the things he'd said. Good secretaries weren't a dime a dozen. He hadn't been able to replace Kit. He missed her madly, though it would be unwise to tell her that, of course. He'd hoped to talk her into coming back, and then she'd mentioned some gossip about Betsy. No way was he going to let any woman tell him what to do in his personal life!

"I won't take back what I said," Logan told her. "You had no business meddling in my private life. But I'll apologize for letting you walk back in the rain."

"There's no need to apologize," Kit returned. "It was my fault for ever getting into a car with you in the first place!"

He looked surprised. "I was only going to ask you to come back to work."

"I don't want to come back to work for you, Mr. Deverell," she said icily. "Here, at least, I'm not part of the office furniture. I'm a real live, breathing person with talent and ability, and if I died, Dane and Tess would miss me."

"We've worked together for three years," he reminded her.

"Three years too long," she said, regaining her lost dignity slowly. "I'm sure you'll have no trouble replacing me."

"None of the temporaries can spell," he said angrily. "They can't file, or project a pleasant personality over the phone. Only one of them has any sense at all, and my mother hired her before I knew it. My brother hates the latest addition to the office. She actually told him to get his own coffee!"

"Your brother should have been getting his own coffee for years," she reminded him.

"And my mother's lost again," he added irritably, glancing at Dane. "You'll have to track her down. She told my brother something about a trip to Venice."

"No problem," Dane said. "Just give me her last known location." He studied Kit. "I might let Kit have this assignment. She knows Tansy."

"My mother missed you, too," Logan told Kit with an angry frown. "That's probably why she vanished."

"Go ahead, blame it on me," Kit invited with a sweep of her hand. "I cause your car not to start on cold mornings, I make your coffeepot stop working, I put dust on the windows and make the chairs in the office creak. I probably cause pond scum, too!"

"Will you stop it," Logan muttered. He jammed his big hands into his pockets. Looking at her disturbed him. That was new, and it made him irritable. "Never mind, if you don't want to come back. I can manage without you. Eventually the temporary agency will find me one secretary who can spell, type and answer the telephone."

"Surely they already have?" she asked sarcastically.

"Of course. I just said so, didn't I? The agency found me two more to go with the one that my mother hired. At least she can type. Of the two new ones, only one can spell. The tallest of the three can answer the telephone but it takes her until the fifth ring to find it."

Kit's eyebrows went up. "Why?"

"The desk is buried in unanswered letters and misplaced files," he said simply. "Don't let that concern you, Miss Morris. I did actually manage before you were first hired. And you might recall," he added icily, "that it was not I who hired you to begin with."

"How very true," she agreed. "It was your mother, who has excellent taste in employees!"

"We can agree to disagree on that point," he said stiffly.

"Should you be getting back to the office, before any more files become...misplaced?" she hinted.

His broad face hardened even more. "Cute," he said. "Very cute. Go ahead and be a detective. That should be right up your alley, the way you mind everyone's business but your own!"

"Somebody needs to mind yours!" she raged. "That dizzy blonde is just out for what she can get from you—"

"She gets plenty," he interrupted hotly. "In bed and out," he added deliberately, his eyes piercing as if he knew how she felt and wanted to sink the knife in as far as possible.

He succeeded. It went straight to the heart. But Kit had years of practice at hiding her deeper feelings from him. She just stared at him without reacting at all, except for the sudden whiteness of her face.

The stare got to him. He felt like a fool. It wasn't a feeling he particularly enjoyed, especially with Dane and Tess standing there trying not to laugh.

"I'll get back to my office, then," he said. "Let me have the bill when you find my mother, Dane," he added as he turned. He didn't look at Kit, either.

Kit stuck her full lower lip out as she glared after his broad back. He was as big as a house, she thought irritably. All muscle and temper. If only he'd trip on his way through the door!

"If looks could kill," Tess murmured dryly.

"You couldn't kill him with a look," Kit said wearily. "It would take a bomb. And even that wouldn't hurt him if it hit him in the head!" she shouted after him.

He didn't react at all, which only made her madder. The door closed behind him with a thump.

"In all the years you and Tess have been friends, I've never seen you lose your temper until Logan fired you," Dane remarked. "I thought you worshiped your boss."

"His feet melted," she grumbled. "What do you want me to do this afternoon, boss?" she asked brightly, changing the subject.

"You heard what I told Logan. Find Tansy."

She groaned. "But Mrs. Deverell disappears without a trace at least two times a month," she protested. "She always turns up."

"Usually in the hospital or in jail," he reminded her, chuckling. "Logan's mother is a dyed-in-the-wool troublemaker with a fatal philosophy of life."

"Yes. 'If it feels good, do it,'" Tess quoted. "The agency stays solvent because of Tansy's wanderlust."

"Last time she was missing, she started a riot in Newport News, Virginia, claiming to have been kidnapped by a flying saucer," Dane recalled. "We bailed her out of a sanitarium." He laughed. "Tansy just likes to start trouble. She's no lunatic."

"Most seventy-year-old women have the good sense to stay home. Tansy is a renegade. And she may not be a lunatic, but she does act like one," Tess said. "Didn't she go sailboarding in Miami year before last and pick up some Middle Eastern potentate who wanted her to join his harem?"

"Yes. And we had to practically kidnap her to get her away from him, to Tansy's dismay. But as they sometimes say, all the wrong people are locked up. Tansy is a breath of fresh air. A totally uninhibited free soul."

"Her son isn't," Kit said.

"Logan's straitlaced. But Christopher Deverell isn't," Dane said. "Chris is as nutty as his mother, and both of them love to get Logan behind the eight ball."

"In other words," Tess said, reading her husband's mind, "this could be a deliberate disappearance. If Tansy knew he'd fired you, this might be her way of getting even. She did like you."

"Always," Kit agreed, smiling as she recalled how well they got along. She suspected Tansy knew how she felt about Logan, too. But remembering it wasn't going to help things, it only made her sad for what her life was like without her temperamental boss.

She missed the silliest things. She missed the way he spilled coffee on his important papers and raised the roof, yelling for her as if she was salvation itself when she came running with a roll of paper towels. She missed evenings when she accompanied him to dinners. It was usually to take notes, and strictly business, but it felt good to wear her prettiest clothes and be in the company of a man who had a mind like a steel trap and still looked devastating in a dinner jacket.

"Kit?"

Tess's query brought her mind back to the present. "Sorry. I was thinking about where to start looking for Tansy."

"Call Chris first," Dane suggested. "Meanwhile, I'm taking Mrs. Lassiter to lunch."

"Actually we're taking lunch to the baby." Tess chuckled. "I'm still breast-feeding. Don't mind if we're a little late. I hate having to leave him at all during the day, even if he is five months old."

"I think I'd feel the same way," Kit said.

They left and she watched them, faintly envious of the way they seemed to belong together. She'd wanted that with Logan Deverell, but he wanted his scheming lady friend. He was going to get taken to the cleaners, did he but know it, and Kit wasn't going to be around to mop him up anymore. If he spilled coffee, or even tears, somebody else would have that chore. She wasn't sorry, she told herself, she wasn't sorry at all.

She went to work at once. Her first call was, as Dane had suggested, to Christopher Deverell.

"Mother's gone again," he said pleasantly. He was only twenty-seven, just two years older than Kit—but eight years younger than Logan. He and Kit and Tansy were like a different generation. Nobody ever told Logan that, of course.

"Yes, I know, that's why I'm calling you," Kit said with a smile in her tone. "I have to find her."

"Logan's office is a mess," he said. "Logan screamed bloody murder for two solid days and refused to hire anybody else."

"I know," she said. "I was due for a change. I was stagnating in that office with the same routine day in and day out—"

"Bull," Chris said. "You were eaten up with jealousy over the delectable Miss Corley. Everybody knows how you feel about Logan, Kit. Everybody except Logan."

She didn't bother to deny it. Chris knew her too well. "He's going to marry her."

"So he says. He'll find her out in time, though. Logan's no fool. Well, most of the time he's no fool."

"She's very pretty."

"So are you."

"I'm just a walking piece of office furniture that he programmed to do his filing and typing," Kit said solemnly. "He doesn't miss me. He's already found a replacement. Three of them, in fact."

"Mother found him the best one. She's a cousin of ours who used to live in San Antonio, and she can type. The other two... Well," he said noncommittally. "Let's just say that they aren't quite what he had in mind. Melody, that's our cousin, is the best of them all, but she can't spell and she's very nervous trying to answer the telephone."

"I would be, too, with a glowering boss peering down his nose at me," Kit muttered. "Don't you have other relatives in San Antonio?" she asked, remembering some veiled references to people Logan didn't ever go and visit there.

"Just Emmett. Don't ever mention Emmett to Logan," he added. "He has nightmares about his last visit there."

"I won't see Logan to mention anybody to him, thank God," she said curtly.

"You hope. Logan isn't coping well without you," he said gently. "He won't admit it, but life without you is like going around in a blindfold."

"I hope he trips over a potted plant and goes out the window."

"Naughty, naughty," he chided. "Don't you feel guilty, leaving him at the mercy of an office you're not in?"

"No. It's time he knew what the real world is like," Kit said.

"From the tidbits I get from Melody, he may try to toss the new receptionist out a window one day soon."

"Then I hope you know a good lawyer to defend him. I'll be a character witness for the woman. Just call me."

"Shame on you!" He laughed.

"I hate your brother. I gave him three of the best years of my life and he never even noticed I was around until I told him his new girlfriend was a miner who'd be digging for gold in his hip pocket."

"You should have told Tansy instead. She'd have handled that."

"No, she wouldn't," Kit argued. "Tansy doesn't believe in interfering. She thinks people should make their own mistakes. She's right, too," she muttered. "When he loses his home, his car and his business to his heartthrob, I'm going to phone him twice a day just to say, 'I told you so!'"

"Before or after you offer to take dictation for free to help him get back on his feet?"

She sighed. Chris knew her too well. "Where do you think Tansy's gone?"

"To Venice," he said. "She was seen boarding a plane bound for there in Miami."

"Okay. Which airline?"

He told her, along with the flight number and time of departure. She thanked him, cutting off the conversation before he could say anything else. She turned her attention to the task at hand. She had no time to wallow in self-pity.

Minutes later, she knew that Tansy Deverell had bought a ticket to Venice. But the woman who boarded the plane wasn't Tansy. Whoever Logan's cunning mother had gotten to take her place had forgotten to limp as she walked down the concourse. Tansy limped just temporarily because of an accident while she was hang gliding.

Kit laughed. She had to be a natural, just as Dane had said. She was getting the hang of this in a big way. She went back to talk to the skip tracers. They were masters at the game of invention to get information, and most of them could find a needle in a haystack within five minutes.

Unfortunately Tansy was harder to find than a needle. They drew a blank.

"I'm sorry," Doris said, shaking her head. "But she's harder to find than a white bear in a snowstorm. If she paid someone to take her place on that flight, she did it with cash. You'll have to find a flight attendant to ask for a description, and even then, it won't be easy. Those flights to Venice are usually full. Individual faces are hard to remember."

Kit could have ground her teeth. "What do I do?" she moaned. "Dane will fire me!"

"Oh, not yet," Doris said, smiling. "He never fires anyone before Friday."

"Thanks a lot."

"I did get you the name of a cabdriver at the airport who remembers an elderly lady with a limp," Doris chuckled, handing her a slip of paper.

"You angel!"

"No kissing," Doris said, warding her off. "You'll give Adams ideas," she added with a covert glance at the burly Adams, who was playing with a penknife two desks in front of her.

"There's not a thing wrong with Adams," Kit said, smiling. "He's a doll."

Adams overheard her and perked up. He got up, straightening his tie, and smiled in Kit's direction.

"He has homing instincts. You'll be sorry," Doris said under her breath.

“How about lunch, Kit?” Adams drawled with a hopeful smile.

“I’d love it, Adams,” she replied, “but I have to go track down a cabdriver. Rain check?”

He brightened. He blushed. No woman in the office had ever offered him a rain check. He lost ten years and his morose expression. Doris studied him with renewed interest.

“Rain check,” he agreed.

Doris toyed with her pen. “I’m not doing anything for lunch,” she said to herself.

Adams thought he might have a heart attack. Two women found him interesting in less than two minutes. Maybe his luck was finally changing. Kit was pretty, and petite Doris was adorable, even with salt-and-pepper hair and glasses. “How about a chicken burger, Doris?” he asked quickly. “I’ll buy!”

Doris beamed at him. “I’d love that!”

Kit eased out the door with relief and delight. Doris and Adams were both middle-aged loners with no family to speak of. Why hadn’t anyone ever thought of tossing them together?

That made her think of salads, and she remembered that she hadn’t had any lunch. Thanks to Logan Deverell, she’d probably starve. If she didn’t die of pneumonia from standing around in wet clothes. First, she was going home to change and eat a sandwich. Then she’d find that cabbie.

## Chapter Two

Kit found the cabdriver without great difficulty. Yes, he did remember an elderly woman with a limp. He'd taken her to the bus station.

With fervent thanks, Kit rushed over to the bus station. One of the ticket agents remembered a silver-haired woman with a limp. She'd taken a bus to San Antonio.

Kit groaned. She shouldn't have taken time to change clothes and eat lunch. By the time she could get to San Antonio, Tansy would be long gone.

She went back to the office, downcast and gloomy, to tell Dane what she'd found out.

"Chris mentioned a relative in San Antonio named Emmett, but I don't know if he's got the same last name as Logan and Chris."

But Dane only grinned. "No problem," he said. "I've got a contact in San Antonio who owes me a favor. This will be a great time to collect."

"Will I need to go out there?" she asked hesitantly.

"Of course not. Logan only wants to know where she is. We won't be obliged to follow her. Not yet, anyway," he added with a knowing smile.

Kit was given a new assignment, one which wasn't quite as interesting as trying to find an elderly needle in a haystack. A man wanted his wife followed to see if she was two-timing him. This was relatively easy for Kit to do, especially since the woman seemed bent on a shopping spree.

Staying a little behind the woman, Kit was just congratulating herself on her stealth when Logan Deverell loomed up in her path and brought her to a standstill.

"Where is the Dawson file?" he demanded. "Some private detective you are, you can't even put things in their proper place!"

Kit could have hit him. The woman she'd been shadowing couldn't possibly have missed hearing her loud ex-boss denouncing her. Sure enough, the woman gave her a startled glance and dived toward the nearest cab.

"There, look what you've done," Kit cried, exasperated. "I'm on a case! I was shadowing a client, for heaven's sake...!"

"I want the Dawson file," he said. "None of those would-be secretaries have any idea how to find it. You've got to come back with me. I'm going to lose my most influential client if you don't."

"I should care?" she burst out.

He glowered down at her. His dark eyes narrowed with irritation. "You're costing me time," he muttered, slamming back the immaculate white cuff of his shirt so that he could see the gold watch embedded in the thick, curling black hair on his muscular wrist.

"I was on a case," she pointed out. "You hijacked me. Speaking of hijacking—"

He was pulling her along as she spoke. "Can't you be quiet for two minutes running?" he asked conversationally. "All you need to do is find a file. What's so difficult about that?"

While she was trying to formulate it in words of one syllable that he might be able to understand, he helped her into his gray Lincoln.

I'm crazy, that's what I am, Kit thought as he got in under the wheel. He's blown an assignment for me, fired me, humiliated me and here I am letting him lead me to his office to work for him on my own time! Well, actually, she admitted it was on Dane's time.

"Have you found my mother yet?" he asked as he pulled away from the curb.

"We're working on it," she said.

He cocked a busy eyebrow. "I thought you were in charge of the case?"

"I am. But I lost her at the bus station."

He chuckled. "My mother wouldn't be caught dead on a bus."



“She would and did, to escape surveillance. Doesn’t she have a relative named Emmett in San Antonio?” she persisted, remembering only then that Chris had warned her never to mention him.

“Oh, yes,” he said with a vicious glare. “Emmett lives in San Antonio, as near as not. But I guarantee she wouldn’t go there. Nobody in the family will go near the place. You’d have to be out of your ever-loving mind to want to go and see Emmett, even if you were hiding out from the police!”

The man must be a holy terror, she thought. He was Logan’s cousin, of course. Probably it ran in the family.

“Where does he live?” she asked, and whipped out a pad and pen.

“I told you, she wouldn’t go there!”

“Humor me.”

He shrugged. “His name is E. G. Deverell.” He gave her the address. She jotted it down and stuck the pad back into her purse. Now she had something concrete to go on. She felt like a real detective.

“You can’t really like following people around for a living,” he said. He glanced at her and back at the road. “I’ve bought a new computer for the office. It’s got a sixty megabyte hard drive and all sorts of software, including a user-friendly word processing program. I bought a laser printer, too,” he added. “And the system does forms.”

She’d been begging for that sort of system for over a year. He’d argued that it wasn’t necessary and he had better ways to spend his money.

“How nice,” she said. “For your new secretary. Secretaries, that is,” she added with a spiteful smile. “Three, isn’t it?”

He made a rough sound under his breath. “I don’t see what your problem is!” he raged. “I’ve lost my temper with you before. You never walked out on me!”

“You never allowed one of your women to treat me like an indentured servant before,” she countered.

He shifted uncomfortably. “She asked for a cup of coffee.”

“Excuse me,” she said. “She demanded a cup of coffee, and then threw it at me because it was too strong. When I suggested that she might like to go to the restaurant on the first floor and get a cup there, she flew into a rage and called me several names that I won’t repeat. Then, the minute she saw you coming, she dissolved into helpless tears.”

“She said you threw the coffee at her,” he returned, narrowing one eye. “And you aren’t the most even-tempered of women.”

“Oh, but I am, as long as I’m not within half a mile of you,” she replied venomously.

He had to stifle a smile at the way she was looking at him. How he’d missed these bouts with Kit. The three women he’d had to hire to replace her were frightened of him. Poor Melody was hopelessly intimidated by spelling and her distant cousin Logan. She could type very quickly, though, and she was efficient.

Harriet, the tallest of the three, could file and do payroll accounts, but she hated everyone in the office and smoked like a chimney.

Then there was Margo, who spelled like a dictionary and wanted nothing more than to seduce him.

Logan, though, had eyes for no one except Betsy, who made his blood run hot and wild through his veins. He didn’t want to get married, but it was the only way he was ever going to possess the delectable Betsy. So he’d given in, against his better judgment, and nothing had gone right in his life since he’d proposed. He was no nearer to coaxing Betsy into his bed and he’d lost Kit. Amazing, he thought, how empty the world was without Kit in it. He had no one to talk to anymore. Betsy hardly listened to him, and certainly paid more attention to where they went and who they saw than what they did.

“Betsy was no threat to your job,” he told her. “I don’t combine my personal relationships with my business ones. I thought you knew that.”

She knew that he was going to marry Betsy, and she couldn’t bear it. Not only was she losing the only man she’d ever loved, but she was losing him to a woman who’d cut his heart out and roast it over a pile of blazing hundred-dollar bills. Betsy would take him for every cent he had. She glanced over at him curiously. How, she wondered, could a man with a brain such as his be so terminally stupid when it came to women?

“You aren’t going to be happy working in a detective agency,” he persisted.

“But I am,” she corrected. She smiled smugly. “I’m treated like a person there. When I do something right, I get praised for it. When I do something wrong,” she added with a meaningful look, “nobody rages at me in disgusting language and threatens to feed me my handbag.”

“How boring.”

She smothered a laugh and looked away.

“You miss me, damn you,” he murmured, smiling at her averted face. “Our daily battles kept you going when nothing else did. You loved trying to get one up on me. Remember the day the Brazilian businessmen came to the office and you spent thirty minutes trying to speak Spanish to them?”

“You told me they spoke it.”

“You should have known that the national language of Brazil is Portuguese. Anyway, you got even.”

“Indeed I did,” she recalled with a grin. “I borrowed one of the girls from the secretarial pool who spoke no English and sent her in to take dictation from you while I took a two-hour lunch break.”

“I almost broke your neck,” he said shortly. “She sat there and nodded and smiled at me for thirty minutes before I realized that she didn’t understand a word I said.”

“The girls in the next office did.” She chuckled. “They said you were very eloquent. In fact, one of them wanted to have you arrested.”

“The good old days,” he said wistfully. He glared at her. “Now I have two helpers who get down on their knees and thank God when I leave the office, and a third who spends her life trying to bend me back over my own desk.”

“Oh, my,” she said.

“You might pretend to be sympathetic. It’s uncomfortable to work in that kind of environment.”

“Now you know how women feel,” she replied.

He glared at her. “I don’t recall ever chasing you around the office or trying to bend you over a desk!”

More’s the pity, she wanted to say. But she only replied, “No, sir, you never did.”

“Do you know, I’ve actually thought about reporting her for harassment?”

“If she makes you that uncomfortable, why not just fire her?”

“Because she can spell, Morris.” He exploded. “She can spell! That’s something neither of the others can do!”

“You could ask the agency to send you someone with good spelling skills.”

“I did,” he replied tersely. “They sent me Margo of the peekaboo bosom.”

She put her face in her hands, but she couldn’t stem the laughter.

“Come back,” he invited roughly. “I’ll give you a raise. You can have a new desk. I’ll fix the damned window that sticks.”

“I’m very tempted,” she said, and meant it. But she’d never be able to stomach Betsy at close range. “But I like my new job too much to quit now.”

“I hope Dane isn’t assigning you anything dangerous.”

“Now, see here,” she began defensively.

“Here we are!” He stopped the car, helped her out and escorted her into the building and up the elevator to his office.

“Now,” he said, opening the door for her. “Find that file!”

She blinked twice before she walked into the luxurious carpeted office. The spot where Betsy had thrown coffee at her three weeks before was still there. No one had come to clean it up. The coffeemaker was standing empty and very dirty. Three desks were piled high with file folders and stacks of correspondence. Diskettes for the computer were lying around, out of their jackets. One of the women had gray hair and was very tall. She was smoking and her ashes were everywhere. Another was talking on the telephone, apparently to someone male. She smiled at Logan and deliberately leaned forward to show her cleavage.

“Hello, Margo,” Kit said sweetly.

“Hi! How did you know my name?” the girl replied, and suddenly went back to the voice on the other end of the line.

“Cute,” Logan muttered.

Kit walked toward the third desk, the only neat one, where a third woman, plain and harassed-looking, was flipping through files.

“Not yet, I’m afraid,” she told Logan in an apprehensive tone. She looked about twenty, a country-looking girl with a patent vulnerability in her face, and Kit felt a surge of sympathy for her.

“Here, let me help,” Kit said kindly. Laying aside her purse, she bent over the stack and in seconds, extricated the one Logan had demanded. “Here.”

He took it and glared at the young woman.

“How could I know that it would be filed under Portfolios?” she asked plaintively. “I’m new...!”

“I’m Kit Morris.” Kit introduced herself.

“I’m Melody Cartman,” came the reply. She glanced toward Logan, who was making a telephone call. “You used to work here, didn’t you? No wonder you left! See Harriet over there? She’d stopped smoking for ten years when she came to work here. Now she’s gone back. She’s smoking three packs a day, and she’s got a bottle of Scotch in her desk!”

“I can understand why,” Kit mused. Logan, buried in his file, hadn’t noticed them discussing him.

“Margo isn’t afraid of him. She likes men. Especially rich ones. He has a girlfriend and she’s terrible. She expects us to stop everything and wait on her. Not to his face, of course,” she muttered. “She’s sweetness and light the minute he walks in the door.”

“Now you know why I don’t work here anymore.”

“He’s my third cousin,” Melody groaned, glancing at him. “He’s just like one other terrible member of the family. If I’d had any idea he was like this, I’d never have let Tansy talk me into this job. But the company I worked for went bust and I just couldn’t bear to go back to San Antonio.” She hesitated. “I’m stuck here!”

“Listen,” Kit said, raising her voice, “we’re short one detective at the agency where I work...”

“Shut up, Morris,” Logan said menacingly as he slammed the telephone receiver back onto the cradle. “You aren’t stealing any of my people.”

He moved away and Melody groaned. “See? We’re slaves. He owns us! I’ll never see my apartment again...!”

“There, there, it will be all right. I’ll take a few minutes and explain my filing system to you. Then you won’t have this problem again.”

Melody dabbed at her brown eyes and pushed back her thick, blond-streaked light brown hair. It was very long, and she had a sweetly rounded face and freckles. Kit liked her at once. “I think Harriet carries one of those electrical weapons in her purse,” Melody told Kit. “Wouldn’t you like to borrow it? You could do him in before you leave. I swear to God, none of us would ever tell on you!”

Kit chuckled. “I believe you, but he’s really not worth the sacrifice. Let’s get to work.”

It only took thirty minutes to teach Melody the basics of the filing system, and then Kit gave Melody her telephone number for future emergencies.

"He doesn't like you to know it," Kit added, "but there's a smokeless ashtray in the closet. Two of them, in fact. He used to smoke cigars."

"He doesn't smoke cigars anymore."

"I know."

"He smokes cigarettes now. Thin brown ones."

"Marijuana?" Kit exclaimed.

Melody laughed. "Oh, no. Those little cigars, what do they call them? Cigarillos, I think!"

"Not in here, I hope?"

"Yes. Between him and Harriet, I'm a stretcher case with my sinuses."

"Use those ashtrays."

Melody brightened. "If I suggest it, maybe he'll fire me!"

"You needn't look so optimistic. Now that you know my filing system, you're worth your weight in rubies."

"Drat!"

"If you can become an ace speller, he'll get rid of Margo," she whispered.

Melody's eyes twinkled. "I'll hire a tutor!"

"Good luck!"

Kit walked into Logan's office as she had for the past three years, without knocking. But she realized at once that she'd made a mistake.

Somehow, Betsy must have gotten into the office while she was occupied with Melody. Betsy was there now, blonde and fragile, in Logan's arms.

The sight of them that way made something delicate inside Kit go brittle and shatter. Logan's dark head bent over that bright one, his enormous body sheltering hers, his arms compelling her against the powerful length of him, his mouth devouring and insistent on the woman's lips.

He lifted his head abruptly and looked at Kit with the desire and physical enslavement still glittering in his dark eyes.

"Well?" he asked huskily.

Kit didn't say a word. She turned and closed the door behind her, trying not to remember the snide look on Betsy's exultant face as she went. That had been a setup. Betsy knew how she felt about Logan. Everyone knew, except Logan himself.

She gathered her purse and said a quick goodbye to Melody, pausing only to wave at Margo and Harriet before she walked to the elevator.

The stupid conveyance would be on the bottom floor, she muttered to herself. She jabbed viciously at the down button and was almost resigned to going down the staircase when Logan and Betsy came along to stand beside her.

"We'll drop you off," Logan said carelessly. "We have a luncheon appointment."

Kit looked from Betsy, immaculate in a gray silk suit and an ermine coat, to Logan in his blue pin-striped suit and handmade silk tie. Yes, they complemented each other. She'd been living in a fool's paradise to imagine a man such as Logan would ever give her a second look. She was a teacher's daughter with no special beauty or talents. He was related to royalty somewhere in his ancestry and had gobs of money. She held Betsy in contempt for coveting his status and wealth, but he'd probably think that Kit was eager for it as well if she'd ever tempted him deliberately as Margo and Betsy had.

Just as well, she thought, that she'd been allowed to get out when she did. Soon, she'd never have to see Logan again. Betsy would make sure of that.

"I do hope you haven't been trying to tell Logan any of that silly gossip about me," Betsy drawled with a cool smile. "I don't chase men for money. I don't have to. I have money of my own."

Certainly she did. Bill Kingsley's money. Kit's blood ran hot every time she thought about the poor, kind old man. He must have been easy pickings indeed for this blonde toad. And here was Logan, waiting in line to be next.

"Some women do chase men for money, though," Kit said quietly. She studied the other woman with cold curiosity. "One of my neighbors was chased after he won a lottery. His name was Bill Kingsley."

Betsy's face whitened. She averted it. "I'm afraid I don't know anyone by that name."

"Well, you wouldn't," Kit said easily. "He used to live in my apartment building, about the time he won the small lottery."

"You said he did live in your building? I suppose he left when he won the money?" Betsy asked with assumed politeness, but an underlying nervousness that was visible.

"He left, all right. The lottery wasn't too much, but it was more than he'd ever had. When he found out, he celebrated by buying drinks for everyone at the bar around the corner. That was where he met a young woman who started being nice to him and let him take her around. She was young and pretty and he was a lonely old man with no family. He fell in love with her. She repaid him for his kindness by taking him for every penny he had. She even managed to cost him his savings. After she left, he couldn't believe he'd been such a fool. He simply couldn't live with it. He committed suicide." Kit shook her head, her eyes never leaving Betsy's paper-white face. "If I were that woman, I'd choke on my own greed. And I'd deserve to."

"None of that has anything to do with Betsy!" Logan said angrily.

"No, of course not," Kit replied, smiling at him. "Did I say that it had?"

"It's all right, Logan," Betsy said, having regained her composure if not her color. "You and I have so much, and poor Kit has nothing. Not even a man's love."

Touché, Kit thought. Betsy gave her a smile that would have curled leather.

"Where can we drop you, dear?" Betsy purred.

"I wouldn't want to take you out of your way. I'll just pop onto a bus downstairs. Do have a lovely lunch. Ta, ta." Kit smiled and waltzed to the staircase.

"Morris, come back here...!"

She ignored the demand and kept going. She was shaking inside with rage at Betsy's blatant playacting. The woman was as guilty as sin and felt no remorse at all. She was going to cut Logan up just the way she'd cut up Kingsley. And how was Kit going to stop her? In Logan's eyes, Betsy could do no wrong. But there had to be a way to stop Betsy and save him in time!

She worried the question all the way back to the office, where she had to explain to Dane what had happened.

"I'm sorry," Dane apologized when he could finally stop laughing. "But that's such a dandy little tale..."

"It's the truth!" Kit threw up her hands. "He's my nemesis, I tell you! And one of his very own employees—his third cousin, in fact!—offered me an electrical device and said she'd swear I was innocent if I'd just bump him off for them!"

"Kit, are you sure you've done the right thing to leave an office like that?" he asked her. "Logan is never going to be the same again."

"Good. I hope Margo gets him pregnant."

"Stop that!" He leaned forward and picked up a notepad, whipping off a sheet. "Well, I can solve your problems for a day or so. Take this."

"What is it?" she murmured, reading a street address.

"Emmett's address. Get on the next flight to San Antonio and follow these directions. They should lead you right to Tansy Deverell."

"Hallelujah! I'll kidnap her and send Logan a ransom note..."

"Not while you're on my payroll, please."

"It was just a thought." She folded the note. "I'm sorry about losing the lady I was trailing for you."

"That was hardly your fault. It's okay."

She shrugged, fingering the note. "I seem to get in deeper all the time. I had a neighbor who Betsy Corley took for everything he had." She looked up. "She'll do that to Logan, you know. He's so besotted he won't believe a bad thing about her. She'll lead him right to the slaughter and make him think he's heaven-bound. Just like she did poor old Bill."

"You don't give Logan credit for having much sense, do you?" he asked gently.

She shrugged. "How can I? After all, he sacrificed three years of loyal, slavish devotion and adoration over a cup of spilled coffee, didn't he?"

"He was an idiot there," Dane had to agree. "I'm sorry you've had such a rough deal. Maybe this job will open new doors for you."

She smiled. "Maybe it will. Do you know any more about this address besides its location?"

"Just that Tansy's nephew is something of a hell-raiser. He and Tansy should get along just fine."

"Another Chris," she said, shaking her head.

"Well...not exactly," he replied slowly. "Never mind, just go out there and find out. And, if you get in trouble or have any problems, any at all, just phone here and I'll demand that you come right home to work on another case. Okay?"

That sounded very much as if he were keeping something from her. She wondered what. Her eyebrows lifted. "Now I'm intrigued."

"You will be. That's a promise." He chuckled. "From what we ferreted out, intrigued is an understatement for what most people think when they meet Emmett."

She put a hand on her hip. "Emmett?"

"Well, most people don't call him that if they want to stay out of emergency rooms. Better make it Mr. Deverell until you know him."

"Should I invest in one of those electrical devices...?"

"Doris will have your ticket."

"Yes, sir." She saluted and walked out. Sure enough, Doris was waving it at her when she approached. Adams was nearby, grinning.

"Don't get involved with the natives," Doris told her. "Those San Antonio men are tornadoes when you get them wound up."

"I'll try to remember that. See you when I can. Goodbye, Adams," she added, waving at him and smiling.

Adams seemed to gain height and masculine beauty as he grinned back.

"Hands off," Doris whispered. "He's all mine."

She said it just loud enough that Adams could hear it, which made his smile even broader. "Good luck," she whispered back to Doris. And with a wave of her hand, she went to get the necessary things out of her desk before she left for her trip.

San Antonio was big. It boasted a million in population and some of the most interesting things to see and do in the country, including the Alamo and the Paseo Del Rio.

Before she went searching for the address and directions in her purse, she checked into the nearest hotel and took time to get a bite of lunch and rest.

Then she got into her rental car and set out for the address Dane had given her.

It was on the southeastern side of town, and not in a subdivision. In fact, the address was something of a ranch, complete with oil wells pumping in the pastures and white fences all around. Red-coated cattle grazed in thickets of mesquite, past flatland that had patches of prickly pear cactus to hallmark it.

She looked at the address a second time to be sure, but there it was. No one had ever said that the Deverells had a cattle-raising relative out here in Texas.

As she drove across the cattle grate and down the long, winding dirt driveway to the elegant two-story Victorian house in the distance, she was suddenly assailed by three war-painted buckskin-clad midgets with bows and arrows and chicken-feather warbonnets.

“Hold it right there, palefacette,” one of them drawled “You’re our captive.”

She shouldn’t have stopped, she supposed, but they’d looked so cute! Now they looked menacing and ferocious—if you could call grammar-school kids dangerous.

They all looked like boys, but one of them turned out to be a girl. They piled into the backseat and commanded Kit to drive.

“We’re the Deverell gang,” the spokesperson said. “I’m Guy. That’s Polk. She’s Amy.”

“Yes, we’re the reason our daddy can’t get married.” Polk piped up. “We’re savages, like our lus...illl...us...”

“Illustrious,” Amy said for him.

“Thanks! Illustrious ancestors, that is,” Polk continued.

“They were Comanches!” Amy whispered.

“One of them, Amy, only one,” Polk muttered, “and she was our three-times great-grandmother. For heaven’s sake...!”

“You said we were Indians,” Amy persisted. “That’s why we’re wearing these silly costumes!”

“It’s Thanksgiving in two days,” came the reply from the spokesman, Guy. “And we’re in a school play tomorrow, which is Monday, so we’re rehearsing.”

“We’re going to kidnap the principal, Mr. Deere, and hold him for ransom!”

I like these kids, Kit thought. They’re my kind of people. I wonder if they know anything about kidnapping financial experts?

“Stop here,” Guy said. “And don’t try anything funny, pilgrim.”

Amy leaned toward him. “Pilgrimette,” she corrected.

As John Wayne impersonations went, it left a lot to be desired, but it wasn’t too bad, considering. Smothering a laugh, Kit got out of the car and raised her hands as three ferocious Native Americans with bows raised herded her toward the porch and the front door.

“Knock!” Guy said.

She did. There was the muffled, quick and heavy sound of footsteps approaching and a deep voice asking some kind of question. The door opened, and Kit looked up, way up, to a muscular jean-clad body into the palest green eyes in the most unwelcoming darkly tanned face she’d ever seen in her life.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he murmured thoughtfully, glancing at his brood. “Another captive! Bring her in, boys, and we’ll build a nice, warm fire.”

The last thing Kit saw before she hit the floor was the surprise that momentarily softened those fierce features.

## Chapter Three

Kit opened her eyes and there was that lean, dark face again. White teeth gleamed in it. Green eyes glittered humorously in it.

“Welcome back,” a deep voice said.

“You can’t burn me at the stake,” Kit said in a rush.

“Beg pardon?”

“Move, Emmett,” an elderly voice said stridently. “Don’t be absurd, Kit,” Tansy Deverell chuckled, “of course he isn’t going to burn you at the stake. I tell you, Emmett, these children are even worse than you were at their ages! You’ve got to do something about them!”

“You want us to go away, don’t you?” Guy asked belligerently. “Well, we won’t! This is our house, and we can stay here if we want. Tell her, Dad.”

“I can’t argue with the boy. Look, he’s armed,” Emmett said reasonably, gesturing toward the bow Guy was holding.

“You’re his father!” Tansy raged.

Emmett frowned and looked at Guy and then at Polk and finally at Amy. “That’s what their mother said.” He sighed. “I guess they do look like me. Lady, are you all right?” he asked, remembering Kit, who was sitting up dizzily.

“Yes, I’m just getting over the shock. It isn’t every day you get captured by a band of Indians and threatened with the stake.”

“Aw, gee, lady, we wouldn’t have burned you,” Polk said. “It’s a lot of work to cut that much wood.”

Kit stared at him blankly.

“Why did you faint?” Tansy asked curtly, her blue eyes somber in a lovely complexion that hadn’t aged, with a frame of beautifully groomed silver hair. “Has my son gotten you in trouble?” she added angrily.

“I’m not pregnant,” Kit muttered. “And if I was, it would make biological history. Your son is much too busy getting himself married to one of the world’s prime gold diggers.”

“Yes, I know,” Tansy said wistfully. “He wouldn’t listen to me, either. I’m sorry he fired you, Kit. He’ll be sorry, too.”

“No, he won’t. He replaced me.” She grinned at Tansy. “It only took him three women to do it. One can do payroll and filing, but she carries an electric weapon and smokes like a furnace. One can spell, but she’s trying to seduce him. And the third one could do all three if she wasn’t scared to death of him. She’s nice.”

“That would be Melody,” Tansy said, and bit her tongue at the quick, almost violent look Emmett gave her.

“Melody?” he asked slowly. “Melody Cartman?”

“Yes, that’s her name,” Kit said, too shaken to notice the undercurrents. “If the smoke doesn’t kill her, she might work out to be his right hand someday.”

“I hate cigarettes,” Tansy said with a pointed look at Emmett.

“Cigarettes are a curse,” he agreed. Then he shrugged off his bad mood, grinned, pulled one out of his pocket and lit it, daring the onlookers to say a word.

“Okay, Dad. You asked for it,” Guy muttered. He whipped around to his back, pulled a water pistol and quickly extinguished the glowing tip.

Emmett stared at it with a forlorn sigh and dropped it. “Damn. That was my last one.”

“And don’t try that again, partner,” Guy said firmly, twirling the water pistol back into his pocket while his siblings applauded loudly. He grinned at Kit. “Hey, lady, want to come hunting rabbits with us?”



“No, thanks, I feel a bit endangered right now.”

“We wouldn’t have a post to tie you to out in the brush,” Polk argued.

“But there’s the brush itself,” Amy mused. “It’s very dry, and I got one of Emmett’s old lighters...”

“Will you stop calling me Emmett?” he muttered at his child. “I’m your father. Show a little respect.”

“Yes, Emmett,” Amy said politely, pulling the lighter out of her pocket.

She flashed it and Emmett grabbed it. “Not anymore, you don’t,” he said. “Scat, you varmints! And don’t bring back any rattlers this time!”

They scampered out, giggling and murmuring among themselves while Kit caught her breath.

“Nobody in the family ever comes here,” Tansy said as she and Emmett helped Kit up. “Can you guess why?” she added with a pointed glare at Emmett.

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