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The Nanny And The Reluctant Rancher

Barbara McCauley



Vintage 90s

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Reluctant Rancher**

«HarperCollins»

McCauley B.

The Nanny And The Reluctant Rancher / B. McCauley —
«HarperCollins»,

THE BACHELOR AND THE NANNY From the first moment Kat Delaney walked through his door, single dad Logan Kincaid knew his life was about to be turned upside down. There was something decidedly unsettling about his daughter's new nanny, but he vowed to ignore her smoldering good looks - even if it took every ounce of willpower the cowboy had. Taking off to Texas to play nanny to a nine-year-old girl was the perfect escape for Kat - until she laid eyes on the motherless little girl and her sexy dad. It didn't take long for her to fall hard for the most confirmed bachelor in Texas, but did she dare risk her heart when it was impossible to tell the truth?

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“I Need You To Tell Me.”

Her voice was no more than a throaty whisper.

“Lord, woman,” he said roughly, “does everything have to be difficult with you?”

“Tell me, Logan.”

“What, that I want you? That I’ve thought of you every damn minute of every damn day since you got here?” His voice grew husky and deep. “Do you want me to tell you what those thoughts were, too? They might shock you, Kat. You might turn tail and run.”

His words excited her. She stared at him, thankful she’d left the light off. The darkness gave her courage, a boldness she would normally not have felt.

“I won’t run.”

Dear Reader,


A sexy fire fighter, a crazy cat and a dynamite heroine—that’s what you’ll find in Lucy and the Loner, Elizabeth Bevarly’s wonderful MAN OF THE MONTH. It’s the next in her installment of THE FAMILY McCORMICK series, and it’s also a MAN OF THE MONTH book you’ll never forget—warm, humorous and very sexy!

A story from Lass Small is always a delight, and Chancy’s Cowboy is Lass at her most marvelous. Don’t miss out as Chancy decides to take some lessons in love from a handsome hunk of a cowboy!

Eileen Wilks’s latest, The Wrong Wife, is chock-full with the sizzling tension and compelling reading that you’ve come to expect from this rising Desire star. And so many of you know and love Barbara McCauley that she needs no introduction, but this month’s The Nanny and the Reluctant Rancher is sure to both please her current fans...and win her new readers!

Suzannah Davis is another new author that we’re excited about, and Dr. Holt and the Texan may just be her best book to date! And the month is completed with a delightful romp from Susan Carroll, Parker and the Gypsy.

There’s something for everyone. So come and relish the romantic variety you’ve come to expect from Silhouette Desire!



Lucia Macro

And the Editors at Silhouette Desire

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Barbara McCauley

The Nanny And The Reluctant Rancher



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BARBARA McCAULEY

was born and raised in California and has spent a good portion of her life exploring the mountains, beaches and deserts so abundant there. The youngest of five children, she grew up in a small house, and her only chance for a moment alone was to sneak into the backyard with a book and quietly hide away.

With two children of her own now and a busy household, she still finds herself slipping away to enjoy a good novel. A daydreamer and incurable romantic, she says writing has fulfilled her most incredible dream of all: breathing life into the people in her mind and making them real. She has one loud and demanding Amazon parrot named Fred and a German shepherd named Max. When she can manage the time, she loves to sink her hands into fresh-turned soil and make things grow.

For Jennifer Diermendjian.

Thanks, Jen, for all your help and for being who you are.

One

There were three key ingredients to a successful escape: champagne, Oliver and a big hat.

In honor of Katrina Delaney's final performance before her world tour in three months, the first essential element already flowed freely in the spacious New York Marriott Hotel suite. A few extra dollars slipped covertly to the caterer by the guest of honor herself ensured that certain glasses at the elegant party would not be left empty long.

Dressed in a long, black crepe gown—a Larisa Delaney original designed by her mother—Katrina stood on the edge of the buzzing crowd and struggled to tune out the chatter surrounding her. Excitement coursed through her, not because of the party, but because of what would happen when it was over. Her pulse raced and her stomach cartwheeled, but her own glass of bubbly remained untouched. Tonight she needed steady nerves and a clear head. She forced herself to concentrate on the distant sound of Brahms and the scent of roses that filled the suite.

"Katrina, darling, there you are!"

Katrina drew in a fortifying breath at the sound of the familiar voice, then watched Sydney Joyce push her way through a tight circle of people. It wasn't that Katrina didn't like the gossip columnist, in fact, she actually enjoyed the outrageous style of the older woman. But the platinum blond reporter was part bloodhound, and her nose was constantly to the ground, sniffing for a story to delight the fans of celebrity scandal. So far, Sydney had romantically linked the name Katrina Natalya Delaney to Brad Pitt, Richard Gere and Keanu Reeves.

Katrina had met Brad and Richard once at a charity ball, that was it. And as far as Keanu went, they'd merely been at the same party, about as close a relationship as Katrina had had with any man since her one brief, and rather disappointing affair with an English teacher her senior year in college. So much for the exciting social life of a violin virtuoso.

"Katrina, my darling," Sydney purred as she moved in for the kill, "you look absolutely radiant tonight. I refuse to budge until you tell me who the lucky man is."

Katrina sighed. Sydney's words were not a threat, but a promise. If she suspected even the tiniest deception, she'd clamp down like a bulldog and never let go until she got something. Tonight was one night Katrina could not afford to humor the woman.

With the ears of an elephant, Max Straub, Katrina's business manager, quickly moved in. Publicity was the man's job, and every move his clients made, especially Katrina, was carefully orchestrated. Tomorrow, when he found out what she'd done, Katrina knew that Max was not going to be a happy camper.

"What lucky man?" Max looked at Katrina and lowered his dark bushy eyebrows in disapproval.

Katrina hadn't time to respond before her mother and father suddenly joined the growing circle around her. Married in Russia thirty-six years ago, Larisa and Nicolai had immigrated to the States one year before she was born. Katrina had the same amber brown hair as her mother, and though the older Delaney woman was nearly fifty-five, heads still turned when she walked into a room. Katrina's father, darkly handsome and terribly protective of not only his wife, but his only child, as well, scowled constantly at every one of those heads that turned toward wife or daughter.

"A man?" her father asked gruffly. "What's his name?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out." Sydney cut Katrina off before she could speak.

"Don't be ridiculous." Katrina's mother smiled. "Katrina hasn't time right now for that. Do you, dear?"

"Of course, she doesn't," Max answered. "Which reminds me, Katrina, you have a two o'clock tomorrow with Warner Records, a five o'clock with a reporter from the New York Times and a six o'clock with a photographer from Classical Weekly. I'll pick you up at noon and we'll have lunch to go over the rest of the week's schedule."

Katrina simply nodded, but then, when Max started in on scheduling, there was little to say. He wasn't listening; he was planning.

"I thought you were spending the day with me tomorrow," Katrina's mother said.

"She promised me an interview." Sydney pouted.

"She's practicing tomorrow," her father stated with authority.

They all started to argue then. Katrina sighed, then glanced at the head waiter, who nodded, then promptly refilled everyone's glass standing around her. A hand on her elbow gently tugged her away from the heated discussion surrounding her.

Oliver. Thank God. The second essential ingredient had arrived at last.

"You're late," she said quietly.

"Sorry." He kissed her cheek, then brought his lips close to her ear. "That's one hell of a sexy number you've got on, Kat. Sure you don't want to run away and have an adventure with me instead of some bowlegged cowboy?"

Katrina smiled at Oliver's foolishness. They'd met in high school and gone through college together. He was her best friend, but she knew that his shameless flirting and devilish good looks were going to get the sandy-haired cello player in trouble one day.

"I'm not running away," she whispered. "I'm taking a little vacation by myself, that's all."

Oliver gave a snort of laughter. "Katrina, my love, most people wouldn't call working on a Texas ranch as a nanny to a nine-year-old a vacation."

Katrina watched Max argue with her father over the next day's schedule. "It is to me," she said wistfully.

"You're Katrina Natalya Delaney," Oliver insisted. "Violin virtuoso, the toast of the symphony circuit. A villa in Spain or a town house in France is much more the image."

"I don't give a damn about image." Katrina noticed the conductor of the evening's performance glance over at her. She smiled at him, and he raised his glass to her, then continued his conversation with a music critic from Entertainment Weekly.

"Oliver—" she lowered her voice "—I'm twenty-four years old. Music has always been my life. I've never done anything else, been anywhere by myself. In three months I'll be traveling and performing for two years straight, surrounded by people, never a moment to think, let alone be by myself. If I'm going to do this, it has to be now."

“But working on a ranch, Katrina.” A waiter carrying a tray of stuffed mushrooms passed by. Oliver reached for one. “Why not a dude ranch or whatever those things are called?” he said when they were alone again. “You could put on some jeans, a cowboy hat and sit on a horse for a couple of days.”

“It’s not the same,” she said emphatically. “Ollie, tell me there isn’t something you’ve wanted to do all your life, something completely different than you’ve ever done, something wild and crazy and romantic.”

He grinned. “Yeah. Swim naked with you in the Thames.”

She sighed with exasperation. “I want to experience a real, honest-to-goodness working ranch, with real, honest-to-goodness cowboys, a world completely opposite of my own, where no one will know who I am. The second I saw the ad in that magazine you gave me, and saw that the name of the town was Harmony, it was like a neon sign. I had to apply.”

“It’s all my fault,” Oliver groaned. “I know how crazy you are over that cowboy stuff, and when I saw a copy of Western Roundup I thought you’d get a kick out of it. I never dreamed you’d start sending out résumés to be a nanny.”

“I could hardly apply for ranch foreman,” she said, then waved to Sharon Westphal, a shy flutist who Katrina knew had a crush on Oliver. Katrina had been trying to get Oliver to ask her out, but he’d come up with every excuse he could think of to avoid her. He looked at her now and his eyes took on a strange glint before he quickly turned away and took Katrina’s elbow.

“You’ve never been around kids,” Oliver protested, “let alone be a nanny. This guy—what’s his name—he’ll spot you for a phony in a minute.”

“His name is Logan Kincaid, and I’m not a phony. I’m perfectly qualified. You know I minored in English in school and I have a teaching credential. And if that’s not enough, I believe that the fact I had three nannies of my own gives me an edge of experience the average nanny wouldn’t have.”

Oliver laughed. “An average nanny you definitely are not. For that matter, my sweet, there is nothing average about you.”

She knew he meant it as a compliment, but somehow Oliver’s statement disturbed her. She’d hoped that he might understand that was exactly the reason she’d taken this job, because she wanted, if only for a little while, to be like the “average” person. But Oliver had always loved being in the spotlight and performing. It was hard for him to understand that everyone else didn’t feel that way. As much as she loved to play, performing in public always made her stomach queasy.

“It’s only for two months,” she said, feeling the need to defend herself. “I can certainly handle that.”

“Oh, sure you can.” Oliver reached for a glass of champagne on a passing tray. “And just how do you know this Kincaid guy is not a lecherous old man who’ll corral you in the barn and seduce you?”

Katrina laughed. “You should have been a writer instead of a cellist, Ollie. Your imagination is outrageous.”

Offended, Oliver lifted his chin. “Are you criticizing my talents as a cellist?”

Poor Oliver. He was as sensitive as he was concerned. “Of course not. You’re the best, and you know it, so don’t go fishing for compliments. And just to set your active mind at ease, I did have a friend of mine in the police department check out Mr. Kincaid. He’s not old, he’s thirty-four, he’s widowed and he has no criminal record.”

“Yet.” Oliver frowned. “If your parents or Max find out I know where you are, I’m a dead man.”

Katrina slipped an arm through Oliver’s and started to lead him toward Sharon. She felt him stiffen immediately. “They don’t need to know where I am. I’ve left letters for them, explaining that it’s time I learn to make my own decisions, schedule my own life for a change. Everyone has taken care of me for too long,” she said gently, “including you. It might be the coward’s way out, but you know there’ll be a scene and I’m not going to take any chances I’ll weaken. If there’s an emergency, you can contact me and I’ll call or come home. I’m counting on you, Ollie.”

With a sigh of resignation, Oliver slipped an arm around Katrina. “What time is the getaway?”

“Midnight. Everyone will be gone and my parents will be sound asleep in their own room, thanks to all the champagne they’ve had. We were checking out tomorrow anyway and going home, so my mother didn’t think it odd when she noticed I’ve already packed. I’ll be waiting for you outside the front entrance.”

“Someone’s going to see you,” he said, shaking his head.

“Let me handle that,” she whispered in his ear, then steered him toward the flutist. “You just show up on time.”

Two hours, twenty-six minutes later, Katrina picked up her suitcases and violin, then crept quietly down the hall and got on the elevator with three other people. She passed at least a dozen more guests in the lobby, then walked by the front desk, the doorman and valet.

Not one person spoke to her or recognized her, but later, the doorman did remember a woman wearing a rather large gray felt hat.

The woman was late.

Swearing under his breath, Logan stood at the large picture window in his living room and stared out at the endless Texas landscape. Heat shimmered off the dry ground and a hawk made lazy circles overhead. Pale gray clouds in the distance suggested rain, but didn’t promise. But then, Logan thought with a frown, he’d teamed long ago never to trust a promise.

The deep, resonant bong of the grandfather clock in the entry marked eleven o’clock. Logan swore again. The woman should have been here an hour ago.

“She’s not coming, is she?”

He turned at the sound of his daughter’s soft voice behind him. He never would have shown his impatience if he’d realized she’d been in the room. But it had been after midnight before he’d gotten to bed last night, and he’d been up since five a.m. feeding the livestock and mending fence on the south quarter. He still had a water pump to repair in the west feeding pens, and a missing heifer somewhere in the east section. He was tired as hell and as irritable as a hornet in a jelly jar.

“Of course, she’s coming,” Logan reassured Anna. Though his daughter rarely complained, he’d sensed her anxiety over meeting Mrs. Lacey’s summer replacement. His daughter was a sensitive, quiet child with dove gray eyes that turned his heart to mush every time he looked at her. She’d seen too much disappointment in her young life and he’d die before he’d let anyone hurt her again.

“It’s almost a three-hour drive from Dallas to Harmony,” he said, moving beside her and tucking one blond curl behind her ear, “then it’s another thirty minutes from town to here. Her plane may have come in late, or she may have had to wait to rent a car, but she’ll be here, honey, don’t worry.”

He hated lying to Anna, but he knew he’d only add to her nervousness if he told her that the plane had come in on time. He’d called the airlines three hours ago when he’d come in to have breakfast with his daughter, and the plane had arrived not only on time, but ten minutes early. It was certainly possible that she’d changed her mind. Her application had come in over the fax machine in his office, and he’d wondered why a woman from New York City would even consider working on a remote cattle ranch. Normally he wouldn’t have even considered her for the job, but he’d only received three responses, and he’d liked hers the best.

Miss Delaney’s references from an Oliver Grant had been glowing. Her educational background was more extensive than the other two applicants, though he had to admit he wasn’t overly impressed with her degree in music. Still, she also had a degree in English, a course of study certainly appropriate for Anna’s education. At fifty-four, she was also older than the other two and able to start right away, while the other women weren’t available for several days. Mrs. Lacey had already been gone for two weeks, and while Sophia, the housekeeper, was shopping and helping out with Anna, she was only able to work part-time and was a terrible cook. Anna was barely eating, and he’d lost a few pounds himself. Though cooking had not been in the job description for Anna’s nanny, he was hoping a few extra dollars would correct that oversight. If it didn’t, he and Anna might starve.

He looked down at his daughter and in spite of his irritation, couldn't help the feeling of tenderness that came over him. If only Anna's mother could have seen her daughter for the wonderful, beautiful little girl she was, perhaps she'd still be here and Anna would have the mother she deserved instead of live-in teachers.

Logan had never understood, nor would he ever understand, how a life on the road, singing in one dive after another, could have been more important to JoAnn than her own daughter. He didn't give a damn for himself that she was gone. The last two years of their marriage had been a living hell, anyway. If anything, he'd been relieved. But to leave Anna, to walk out on her own child, that was something he could never forgive.

"Don't you have some lessons Mrs. Lacey left for you?" he asked his daughter, hoping to distract her.

"I did them already."

"What about the math? I know you were having trouble with division, I can—"

"Daddy, it's summer. Other kids don't have lessons in summer, why do I have to?"

He caught himself before he could say that she wasn't like other kids. She was going to need every advantage that life had to offer, and an education would be her strongest asset. There was nothing he wouldn't do to make sure she had every academic opportunity available to her. He was about to launch into his speech that she'd already heard dozens of times, when the sound of a car horn stopped him.

It was about damn time.

He moved to the window and frowned at the sight of Punch Wilkins's pickup bouncing up the dirt road from the main highway. What the hell was the gas station attendant from Harmony doing here?

Of course. The Delaney woman's rental car must have broken down. He should have considered that. Dust billowed behind Punch's truck as he pulled off the dirt road onto the circular driveway in front of Logan's house. Logan watched Punch hop out of the cab of his truck and reach into the back bed. He pulled out a suitcase and garment bag and another small case. The passenger door of the cab opened, but he couldn't see the woman when she stepped out.

Logan turned to his daughter. "See, honey, I told you—"

But Anna had disappeared. It was no surprise. He knew how difficult it was for her to meet strangers. He'd coax her out later, after he'd spoken to and finalized everything with the new nanny.

He moved to the front door and opened it. Punch stood there, his fist in the air, ready to knock. His large frame blocked Logan's view of the woman standing behind him.

"Howdy," Punch said with a silly grin on his face. "Brought your new nanny to ya."

"Thanks." Logan reached for the suitcase and stepped aside. Punch moved into the entry past Logan and headed for the living room.

A tall, slender, distinctly feminine figure wearing a large gray hat stepped in front of him. Oh, no, he groaned silently when he noticed the violin case she held in front of her. Anything but that.

Slowly she tipped her head back. When her smoky green eyes met his, his throat went as dry as the dust still swirling outside from Punch's truck.

Who the hell was this woman?

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said with a touch of breathlessness to her voice. "Transportation here was much more difficult than I'd anticipated. I'm Kat Delaney."

She held out one delicate, finely sculptured hand. In a daze, Logan took it. He had the distinct sensation of silk against sandpaper. Her fingers were long and tapered, her skin smooth and incredibly soft, like nothing he'd ever felt before.

Kat Delaney? This couldn't be the woman he'd hired.

She shifted uncomfortably when he said nothing. "You, ah, must be Logan Kincaid."

He had to think for a moment. "There must be some mistake."

She frowned. "You aren't Mr. Kincaid?"

"That's not what I mean." He narrowed his eyes. "I'm talking about you."

"Me?" she said hesitantly, then slipped her hand from his when he didn't let go.

"The woman I hired is supposed to be fifty-four," he said impatiently. "You're not, I mean you aren't—"

"Fifty-four?" She raised one finely arched brow. "I'm twenty-four, Mr. Kincaid. That's what I put on the application."

Twenty-four? Logan tried to remember the application. The fax had come in a little fuzzy, but still, how could he have made a mistake like that? He never would have hired a younger woman to take care of Anna. Maturity and experience were a necessary and important element of caring for his daughter. What could a twenty-four-year-old know about raising children?

He stared down at her. She was taller than most women, maybe around five-foot-eight, but still a good eight inches shorter than him. She wore no makeup, but her dark, thick lashes outlined wide, slightly slanted eyes. Her high cheeks glowed with color, though he assumed the heat was responsible for the flush on her skin.

"Hey, Logan," Punch called from the living room, "got a cold one?"

"It's eleven o'clock in the morning, Punch," Logan said with more annoyance than he intended. "There's ice tea in the fridge." He looked at Kat. "Can I, uh, get you something?"

"In a minute, thank you." She swept off her hat. "The ride here with Mr. Wilkins was a bit overwhelming. I just need a minute or two to catch my breath."

So do I, Logan thought as he watched the woman shake her long golden brown curls away from her face. She wore white, the color no more practical on a Texas ranch than her high heels or slim-fitting skirt and tank top. She'd pushed the sleeves of her matching cardigan up to her elbows, revealing long, graceful arms. He would have offered to take her sweater, but since she wasn't staying, he didn't bother.

She might belong on the cover of a fashion magazine, but she sure as hell didn't belong on his ranch.

"Hey, Logan," Punch yelled from the kitchen, "you gonna eat these tamales in here?"

Anyone other than Punch, Logan would have strongly warned against Sophia's cooking. But considering the mood he was in, he needed to vent on someone. "Help yourself," he called back.

He closed the front door, then turned back to the woman standing in front of him, her hat in one hand and a violin case in the other. Damn, but this was awkward.

"Miss Delaney—"

"Kat."

"Kat, I—"

"Hey, Logan, how do you work this here microwave?"

He was going to murder the man. No, better yet, he'd give him the leftover enchiladas to go with the tamales. He looked at Kat and frowned. "I'll be back in a minute."

Kat let loose of the breath she'd been holding when Logan disappeared around the corner. Her insides were shaking and her palms were sweating. She'd given countless performances in front of thousands of people, but never had she been more nervous than she was right now. Her training had taught her to hide her fear, but nothing had ever prepared her for Logan Kincaid.

His height had been the first thing that had taken her aback. He was tall, probably around six-foot-four, with broad shoulders and thickly muscled arms. He wore a denim work shirt, with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, and snug, faded jeans over long, powerfully built legs. His hair was black, his eyes darker than any eyes she'd ever seen. When he'd first looked at her, she'd felt as if she were made of glass, and she might shatter under his piercing gaze.

But the fact that he was handsome wasn't what had knocked the sense out of her. She met handsome men all the time. Not one had ever left her weak-kneed or light-headed. No, Mr. Kincaid

was just so... male. At the most basic, the most primitive level, the man exuded virility. He was a masculine feast for the feminine senses: the rough, electric texture of his hands, the deep rugged sound of his voice, the faint, strangely pleasant smell of dust and dirt and leather. Just looking at him had made her pulse rate increase, and when he'd held her hand in his, pleasure had rippled through her entire body.

Had he noticed the color rise to her cheeks? she wondered. Something told her there was very little that Logan Kincaid missed with those eyes of his. Had Oliver been right? Could Mr. Kincaid know just by looking at her that she really wasn't a nanny?

Of course he couldn't. She was just tense. After all, she'd flown the red-eye, waited three hours for the first bus out of Dallas to Harmony—which was a four-hour ride—an hour trying to find someone to drive her here from the town, and at least thirty minutes bouncing in a truck. She was also in a completely new environment, meeting a strange man about a new job.

She had good reason to be high-strung, and that would certainly explain her physical reaction to Mr. Kincaid, she told herself. She was just tired and on edge. A good night's sleep and she'd be fit as a fiddle.

Smiling at her own pun, Kat moved into the living room. She'd immediately liked the house when Mr. Wilkins had driven up. It was single story, a redbrick ranch-style structure with a wide, cement circular driveway and gently sloping gray tile entry. The living room was spacious, with a high, vaulted ceiling, hardwood floors and a floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace. The furniture was large and masculine, like the man himself, and the few pieces of art were a blend of American Indian and the Old West. It was a warm, comfortable room, not like the man himself.

A movement from a doorway across the room caught Katrina's attention. "Hello?"

There was no answer. With her violin and hat still in her hand, Kat moved toward the doorway. "Hello?" she called again. "Is someone there?"

Again, no answer, but there was a sound, a soft, swooshing sound. Kat stopped, then watched as a young, blond child in a wheelchair appeared in the doorway. She was a beautiful little girl with pale, smooth skin and enormous gray eyes. In her plain brown jumper and white blouse, the child almost blended in with the room.

"Hello." Kat smiled. "I'm Kat."

The child said nothing, just stared at the violin case and hat in Kat's hand.

"What's your name?" Kat moved in front of the little girl and knelt down.

"Anna," she answered quietly.

"Nice to meet you, Anna." Kat put her hand out Anna stared at it, then slowly put her small hand in Kat's.

"I'm your new nanny," Kat said. "But I'd rather you just thought of me as one of your friends, if that's okay."

"I don't have very many friends," Anna said softly.

Anna's statement didn't surprise Kat. A disabled child living on a ranch outside a small town raised by nannies probably didn't get to meet a lot of other children. Neither did a child prodigy living in New York with well-meaning, but ambitious parents.

"I don't have very many friends, either," Kat said warmly. "But we each have one new one, starting right now."

Anna smiled shyly. "You don't look like a nanny."

Kat laughed. "Thanks, I think."

"Is that a violin?" Anna stared at the case in Kat's hand.

"Why, yes it is, would you like to—"

"Miss Delaney."

Kat jumped up at the sound of Logan's voice behind her. She had no idea why he would be, but she could have sworn he sounded angry.

Logan's tight expression softened when he looked at his daughter. "Anna, I've asked Sophia to make you some lunch. Why don't you go on in the kitchen and say hello to Punch while I speak with Miss Delaney."

Anna looked from her father to Kat, then nodded reluctantly and left the room. When Logan turned to her and frowned, Kat felt a tremor of apprehension low in her stomach.

"You have a beautiful daughter, Mr. Kincaid."

"Thanks." Logan sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Look, Miss Delaney—"

He'd called her by her formal name three times in the past two minutes. Something was wrong, she realized. Very wrong.

"—I know you came a great distance to get here. It's not an easy drive to Harmony, and riding with Punch was no picnic, either, I'm sure."

Something told her he wasn't about to discuss the discomfort of her transportation here. She drew in a slow, deep breath to steady herself, certain she wasn't going to like whatever it was he was going to say. "Why don't you just get to the point, Mr. Kincaid."

"I'm afraid you aren't going to work out, after all."

Her heart sank. He knew. That had to be it. He knew she'd never been a nanny, maybe even figured out somehow what she really did do, and that while she hadn't lied on her application about anything, she had withheld information about herself that he might consider important.

She struggled to keep her voice even and her shoulders straight. "And may I ask why?"

"It's my fault completely," Logan said with obvious difficulty. "There were some streaks in the fax transmission you sent, and I misread the application. I thought you were older."

He was letting her go because she was too young, not because he knew who she was? Relief washed through her, then disbelief.

"Let me get this straight," she said, struggling to keep her voice even. "I fly hundreds of miles, wait three hours for a bus that I ride on for almost four hours, then hire Wildman Wilkins to drive me here, and you're telling me you've changed your mind because I'm too young?"

"Look, Miss Delaney, I'm sorry about this. I'll pay for any expenses you've incurred, and give you a week's salary. That should take care of any inconvenience I've caused you."

She couldn't believe this. After all she'd gone through to get here, everything she'd planned, he was firing her? "You're sorry?" she repeated. "A week's salary?"

His eyes narrowed. "All right, then, two weeks'."

She had to choke back the hysterical laughter bubbling in her throat. "Are you saying you'd rather pay me off, than give me a chance?"

"I've admitted I made a mistake," he said stiffly. "Anna needs someone older, with more experience."

Of all the stubborn—Katrina took a calming breath and leveled her gaze with his. "Was there anything else you misread on my application or credentials? Something that you find objection to?"

He hesitated. "No."

"Do you have someone else for this job?"

A muscle jumped in his jaw. "Not at the moment."

"Then who's going to take care of Anna until you find someone?"

Logan had already been asking himself that very question. He did need someone. Now, not next week or the week after. But he had no intention of hiring someone as young as Kat Delaney, and certainly not someone as pretty.

He surprised himself by that thought. It wasn't as if he didn't know that he could control his baser instincts...he could. But he'd been busy with the ranch and Anna, and he'd been without female companionship for a long time. A woman who looked like Kat might be a distraction. A distraction he didn't want, and he sure as hell didn't need.

He could hardly tell her that, though. Gee, Miss Delaney, I can't hire you because I'd like to drag you to my bed.

"I have a part-time housekeeper. We'll manage until I find someone else." They might starve to death, he thought, but somehow he would manage. "I'll have Punch drive you back to town," he said evenly. "I can give you a check now or send it to the address on your application."

Her green eyes darkened as she lifted her chin. "Don't bother. I don't want your money, and I have no intention of going home. I came here to Harmony to work for the summer and that's what I intend to do. I'm sure I'll find something else."

Logan shook his head. "You can't be serious. Harmony is a small town. There won't be much use for a violin-toting nanny."

"I'm a hard worker, Mr. Kincaid. Reliable and trustworthy. Qualities that most people admire."

Logan frowned. She'd emphasized the word trustworthy, the implication being that he wasn't. She was wrong for the job, dammit. That didn't make him dishonest or unscrupulous. "Maybe I should drive you back to town. I could—"

"No, thank you." She jammed her hat on her head and struggled to pick up both of her suitcases. "Please tell Mr. Wilkins I'll wait for him in the truck. Good day to you."

He would have offered to carry her luggage for her, but something told him if he tried, he just might have a violin crammed down his throat.

She stopped at the door, and without turning around, said quietly, "Would you object to my visiting Anna while I'm in Harmony? Maybe just for an occasional afternoon, or sometime when you come into town?"

Her question caught him off guard, then settled over him like a net of guilt. "You can come here anytime you want."

She nodded, then wrestled with her suitcases while she opened the front door and closed it behind her. Logan started after her, then stopped and swore heatedly. He'd already admitted to her he'd made a mistake, he had no intention of going after the woman and trying to explain further.

Why the hell should he feel guilty? He'd offered compensation, hadn't he? And he certainly didn't believe she would actually stay in Harmony. She was a city girl. One day in a sleepy little town like Harmony and the woman would be on her way.

Whatever she did, it didn't matter to him. He had no time to think about a curvy, green-eyed brunette with incredible legs. There were more important things to worry about right now, such as finding an appropriate nanny for Anna.

With a heavy sigh, Logan went to the kitchen to get Punch, wondering where in the hell he was going to find the perfect woman.

Two

She wasn't going home.

Suitcases at her feet, Kat sat on a wooden bench in front of the Harmony Hay and Feed and Hardware Store. A few of the townspeople had passed by and given her odd looks, several had even asked if she needed help. She'd wanted to tell them it wasn't she who needed help, it was a pigheaded rancher named Logan Kincaid.

Damn the man! He needed someone for Anna, that was obvious. With a ranch and house his size, how could he possibly manage? A part-time housekeeper wasn't enough, he wouldn't have advertised for a nanny if it were.

If she hadn't met Anna, Kat might not have taken Logan's rejection so hard. But in the few minutes she'd spoken with the child, Kat had felt a connection she couldn't explain, and wasn't sure she understood. It was something in Anna's soft gray eyes, a need, or a loneliness. Maybe Kat even saw herself. Whatever it was, she'd nearly cried when Logan had told her he didn't want her.

But she hadn't cried, and even if Mr. Logan Kincaid had drastically altered her plans, she was determined to go through with her stay in Harmony. Everything was just as she'd imagined it. Wide,

open spaces, deep blue sky. The people were friendly and no one seemed to be in much of a hurry—except Punch Wilkins. The man drove like a New York City cabdriver. Her fingers were still clenched from holding on to the truck door.

In spite of Logan Kincaid, Kat was glad she'd come here. So it was impetuous, and maybe even a little reckless. For once in her life, just once, she wanted to be unpredictable, have a little excitement. No schedules, no meetings, no practices. No one had a piece of her here. She answered only to herself, made her own choices, good or bad.

She wouldn't go home! She couldn't! How could she face her parents, or Max or Oliver, if she gave up now? She had to take charge of her own life, make her own decisions, even if they were bad ones.

Sighing, Kat sat back on the hard wooden bench and looked around. Punch had dropped her off here, next to the bus depot because Logan had told him to. Obviously the man hadn't believed she really would stay. But he was wrong. She could be just as stubborn as he was. She noticed a small motel at the end of the street, the Harmony Motel. Right next door was the Harmony Café. A large sign in the window of the café caught her attention: Waitress Wanted.

Smiling, Kat picked up her bags and crossed the street.

Anna wouldn't eat. She hadn't said a word in two days, and for that matter, she hadn't even looked at him. She'd stayed in her room, even refusing his offer to take her with him to town today for ice cream. Logan had been tempted to make her come with him; he knew she wouldn't have argued if he'd insisted. But he hadn't wanted to force her, so he'd driven into Harmony for a load of grain by himself, trying his damndest to think of a way to cheer his daughter up, other than to give her what he knew she really wanted, which was Kat Delaney.

He'd been surprised when he'd seen Anna talking to the woman two days ago. Anna rarely spoke to people she didn't know, and for that matter, hardly spoke to people she did know. He'd seen the disappointment in her eyes when he'd told her that Miss Delaney wouldn't be staying. When Anna had asked if it was something she'd said that had made Miss Delaney leave, or if the woman hadn't liked her, Logan had spent the next hour trying to explain that of course it wasn't anything she'd said, and of course Miss Delaney liked her. He'd then tried to explain, though awkwardly, that he'd decided the woman just wasn't the right nanny, right for her. He'd told her that he called another nanny and she'd be coming in a few days, but from that moment on, Anna had retreated to her room, and she'd only picked at the food he'd insisted she eat.

He flipped on the truck radio to a country and western station, then tipped his hat back with a sigh. As hard as it was to admit it, he felt like a heel sending the Delaney woman away, in spite of her being too young. He'd seen the disappointment in her eyes and her forced attempt at bravado when he'd fired her. She'd come a long way, and she'd certainly seemed eager. He could have kept her on, at least given her a chance. But his initial response to her had been so strong he hadn't thought logically. His firing her had been more like a knee-jerk reaction than a rational decision.

No, he'd made the right decision, dammit. He was only human, for God's sake. A woman who looked like Kat Delaney under his roof would be too big a distraction. Since he could hardly explain that to Anna, she was just going to have to accept his decision.

Logan swung off the main road and headed into town. It was ridiculous, but as he drove past the bus depot he found himself looking for a slender brunette with a big gray hat, as if she'd still be sitting on the bench there. He shook his head at his foolishness. She might have told him that she'd be staying in Harmony, but he hadn't believed her. Once she realized there were no jobs for her, and she didn't fit in here, that bus ride back to the Dallas airport would be looking mighty good. He figured she'd come to that decision about fifteen minutes after Punch had dropped her off.

He forced the woman from his mind and turned his thoughts back to his daughter. As soon as he loaded the truck, he'd make a trip over to Johnson's Department Store and pick something out for

her, maybe a new game for her computer, or that jewelry-making kit she had her eye on last trip into town. Hell, he'd buy them both. He'd do anything to bring a smile to her face.

As he pulled into town, Logan passed Marge Baker, Harmony's librarian, and waved at her. She stopped in the middle of her sweeping, put a fist on her ample hip and frowned at him.

"What's her problem?" Logan wondered aloud, but knowing how crabby the woman was anyway, paid no attention. He had some books at the house, maybe they were overdue. He'd better check when he got home, or she might send the sheriff after him.

At the hay and feed, though, Mike Carson hardly said a word to him, and his son, Jessie, had ignored him when he'd helped load the truck. Maybe it was just his own bad mood reflecting off everyone else, he decided.

The smell of hamburgers drifted to him from the café across the street and his stomach growled in response. After Sophia's cooking, one of Stubbs Parson's big juicy burgers was like a gourmet meal. He'd grab a little lunch for himself, order something for Anna, then make a quick stop at the department store before heading home. Between the food and presents, he'd have his daughter smiling before the sun went down.

The bell tinkled overhead as Logan entered the café. The lunch crowd had filled most of the tables, but Logan found a spot at the counter and slid onto a stool. He turned the coffee cup already sitting in front of him right side up, then picked up a menu and studied it, trying to figure out what Anna would like.

Coffee magically appeared in his cup, and a soft, silky voice asked, "What can I get for you, Mr. Kincaid?"

Logan went still, then slowly lowered the menu and stared into eyes the color of spring sage.

Well, I'll be damned.

Kat Delaney.

She wore a blue waitress uniform, much shorter than he thought appropriate, though he never recalled having that thought with Ellen, the usual waitress. But, of course, he'd never interviewed Ellen to be Anna's nanny, either.

He couldn't believe she was still here.

She'd pulled her hair back into a ponytail, emphasizing her large green eyes and thick lashes. The color rising on her cheeks matched the pink of her lips. He had to make a conscious effort not to stare at those lips.

He tipped his hat to her and forced his voice to be even. "Miss Delaney."

"Oh, you can call me Kat," she said cheerfully, pointing to her name tag. "Everyone else here does."

His eyes went to the name tag pinned neatly to her snug-fitting uniform, directly over her full breasts. He ground his back teeth together.

"Hey, Katie, darlin', my cup's empty," Rusty Burke called from a booth. "How 'bout a refill?"

"Be right back." She grinned at Logan and with her coffeepot in hand, sauntered over to the obnoxious man.

He watched her smile at Rusty and felt the heat rise under his collar. What the hell was a woman like her doing here, talking to guys like that? Was she too damn innocent to know what men like Rusty wanted? It sure wasn't a cup of coffee.

His hand closed tightly around his own coffee cup. Who knew better than him? he thought angrily. He'd certainly wanted a hell of a lot more than coffee himself. But at least he knew he wouldn't do anything about it. The same was not true of Rusty, or a dozen other local cowboys. She had no idea what she was getting herself into, waiting on these men and smiling at them the way she was.

She came back and pulled a pencil and pad from her pocket. "What can I get for you?"

Logan nearly groaned. If she asked that question all day long to this group, she was in for trouble.

"Hey, Katie," another man called from a table. "You got any honey?"

Logan turned on the man and growled. "Get it yourself. She's helping me."

Kat raised one eyebrow, but said nothing, waiting with her pencil poised.

"I'll have a hamburger," he said sourly.

"Would you like it cooked?" she asked sweetly, "or shall I just toss it through the bars?"

He frowned at her, but when she turned away, he reached across the counter for her arm and gently pulled her back. She was right, he was being surly. She didn't deserve it now any more than she'd deserved being fired two days ago.

"I wasn't expecting to see you here." He wished they were anywhere but the middle of a crowded café.

She smiled slowly, and the soft upward curve of her lips made his pulse jump. "I admit, I'm a little surprised myself. If it wasn't for Mr. Parson, I might have given up. He's been wonderful to me."

And I haven't, Logan thought with a frown. Her skin was soft and smooth where he held her arm. He knew he should let go, but he couldn't seem to break the contact between them.

"Look, Miss Delaney—Kat," he said as quietly as he could over the clatter of dishes and people talking. "About the other day. I didn't mean to be rude or unreasonable. I just...well, you weren't what I was expecting."

She looked at him for a long moment, then sighed softly and relaxed her shoulders. "How's Anna?"

"Logan Kincaid, get your hands off my waitress!"

Stubbs Parson came around from behind the grill waving a spatula, his bulldog face scowling.

"Don't think you can come in here and steal this gem away from me, especially after the way you've treated her, Mr. Flimflam man. Word has it from Punch Wilkins you brought her all the way from New York, then fired her faster than he could microwave a tamale."

Logan and Stubbs had been friends for years, and Logan, like everyone else in town, had always tolerated and been amused by the ornery old café owner. At the moment, however, Logan definitely didn't feel very tolerant, and he sure as hell didn't feel amused. He ignored Stubbs and looked directly at Kat. Her face was bright red and it was obvious that everyone in town knew he'd fired her. No wonder people had been treating him like a pariah. With that innocent face of hers, and that sweet smile, Logan Kincaid would look like the devil incarnate. Logan decided he was going to strangle Punch.

He also decided he wanted Kat Delaney back.

For Anna, of course.

"How much is he paying you?" Logan asked Kat.

Flustered, Kat looked at Stubbs. "Well, I—"

"Oh, no, you don't." Stubbs waved his spatula at Logan. "To quote Punch, you said that you needed someone older. Well, mister, she might be too young for you, but she's not for me."

"I'm not too young for you, sweetie," Stella Jones, the town beautician said from the booth behind him. Stella had to be at least sixty, with brassy red hair and a cosmetics-counter face. Logan's collar was burning now, and the heat moved like wildfire up his neck. He decided he wasn't going to strangle Punch. That would be too quick. He was going to kill him slowly and painfully.

"How much is he paying you?" Logan asked Kat again.

"The tips have been very generous," Kat said carefully.

"I'll bet they have." Logan looked around the café and saw several of the men staring at Kat. She was probably making twice what he'd offered her.

Crow was a hard dish to swallow, but for Anna, he'd swallow the whole damn bird, beak and all. His daughter wanted Kat, and he'd bring her back come hell or high water.

He held Kat's gaze. "Name your price."

Kat started to open her mouth, but Stubbs cut her off with a wave of his spatula. "Man's gotta pay for his own stupidity, Katie. You wanna go with him, it's okay, but you let me handle this."

Kat was too stunned to say a word when Stubbs handed her a coffeepot and told her to go refill some cups. She wanted to protest, but he was her boss, after all. At least, she thought he was. She watched Logan and Stubbs arguing, but they'd lowered their voices and she couldn't hear what they were saying. She knew Logan was angry from the twitch in his temple and the tight set of his jaw. Stubbs, on the other hand, seemed to be having a good time giving Logan a bad time.

The café owner had been good to her these past two days. After she'd checked into the motel next door, she'd applied for the job as waitress. She'd told Stubbs that she'd had no experience, but he hadn't cared and had hired her on the spot. He was a gruff old man with a rough face and a kind heart. He'd slapped the hands of every cowboy and male customer who'd teased her or made even the slightest sexual innuendo. In spite of their flirtations, the cowboys had been gentlemen, and the locals had all been very accepting of a gal from New York City. Everyone was friendly and warm and liked to talk, something New Yorkers hadn't the time for.

And while working in a restaurant hadn't exactly been her dream of coming west and working on a ranch, it had still been interesting to experience a different type of job, one that she'd never really considered. It was a hard, on-your-feet-never-stop job that required physical strength, tremendous patience and a good memory. From now on, she'd definitely have nothing but the utmost regard for all restaurant workers.

But in spite of the fact that she'd enjoyed her two days at the café, she missed Anna. She'd been planning on a visit her next day off, but transportation was still a problem. The thought of riding with Punch made her teeth ache, but to see Anna, she'd tolerate even Wildman's driving.

And now Logan was here. Her knees had started shaking when she'd watched him walk into the diner. The look on his face when he'd seen her had been priceless, but the look he'd given her a moment later, a look that consumed her, had turned her shaking knees to water. She was scared she was going to beg him to hire her again, then suddenly he was actually asking her to come back. She would have said yes in a second. She didn't want more money, she would pay him to let her come back and be with Anna, but out of loyalty to Stubbs and the kindness he'd shown her, she was willing to go along with whatever game he was playing.

Logan's voice grew louder and several heads turned in his direction. He scowled at everyone, then tossed a couple of bills down and stormed out of the café.

Kat's heart sank. He'd changed his mind again. She felt moisture burning in her eyes, but quickly blinked it back. Two rejections in three days from the man was almost enough to have her packing her bags. But she wouldn't. Not because of Mr. Logan Kincaid.

Stubbs picked up the money Logan had thrown down and walked over to where she was clearing a booth. Shaking his head, he looked at her and sighed. "Sorry, Katie. I was shooting for double pay, and only got you half again as much."

It took a moment for his words to sink in. Her heart started pounding. "You mean, he, that I—"

He grinned. "Yep. Looks like you're working for Logan again. We're gonna miss you here, honey, but you and I both know that's not why you came to Harmony, and you don't belong in here waiting tables."

Kat couldn't believe it. She was really going back to the ranch, to Anna. Her head was spinning. "I'll just finish up here today and—"

"Fraid not. He's waiting outside, and unless I want that crazy man coming back in here and bothering my customers again, you better hightail it out of here." He tucked the bills Logan had thrown down on the counter into her pocket. "Here's your tip, darlin'. If he so much as looks cross-eyed at you, you got a job here anytime."

"Hey, how 'bout some coffee here, Katie?" a man yelled from a booth.

Kat started for the coffeepot, but Stubbs stopped her and yelled back at the man. "Hold yer horses, McDermott. Katie doesn't work here anymore. You're gonna have to put up with my mug for a while."

A chorus of groans shot through the café. Kat laughed and hugged Stubbs. “I don’t know how to thank you. You’re a true gentleman.”

“Dang,” he said with a lopsided grin, “I been called a lot things, but never a gentleman.”

“You’re gonna be called a lot more things if you don’t get me my food,” a ranch hand called out.

“Go somewhere else if you don’t like the service,” Stubbs hollered. Since there was nowhere else in town to go for lunch, the man tucked his hat low on his head and hunkered down in his seat, grumbling under his breath.

Kat’s hands were shaking as she moved behind the counter and untied her apron. “I’ll bring your uniform back before I leave.”

Stubbs shrugged. “Next time you come into town is fine. The way Logan is champing at the bit, you better just get packed. Oh, by the way, Katie, there’s one thing Logan wanted he wouldn’t budge on. Since he’s paying you more, it didn’t seem too unreasonable.”

“What’s that?” She tossed her apron on a hook under the counter.

“He wants you to cook.”

“Cook?” She swallowed hard. “You mean, as in prepare the meals?”

Stubbs ignored Rusty, who was lifting up his coffee cup for a refill. “You don’t like to cook?”

“Of course I like to cook,” she said quickly. “I love to cook. I, ah, just don’t know what to make, that’s all.”

“The usual. Meat and potatoes, same thing most men like,” he said offhandedly, then cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “You come back and visit us, you hear?”

Kat kissed Stubbs on both cheeks. He turned bright red, then turned and scowled at the round of catcalls that went through the café.

She grabbed her purse and forced herself to walk slowly and calmly out the front door when she really felt like running. Logan turned when she came out, and his expression was tight. No doubt he hated admitting he’d been wrong, and even more, hated asking her to come back at a higher salary. She didn’t want the raise, of course, and if he hadn’t looked as if he’d bite her head off, she might have told him so. She’d tell him later, when his pride wasn’t so sore.

“I’ll just be a few minutes,” she told him. “I need to pack.”

He nodded. “I’m going to the department store. I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.”

Fifteen minutes? She couldn’t pack that fast. “Fine.”

He was back in fourteen minutes and she was waiting in front of the motel, wondering what was taking him so long.

They were quiet on the ride back to the ranch. Eyes glued straight ahead, Logan held the steering wheel as if it might come off, and Kat kept her attention on the passing scenery, struggling to control her excitement that he was actually bringing her back. Cows and horses grazed along the barbed-wire fence separating the highway from the land, and wisps of white clouds streaked the blue sky. The weather was pleasantly warm, and Logan drove with his window down. A breeze whipped at Kat’s hair, and in spite of her nervousness, she felt a sense of exhilaration. She knew it was silly, but she almost felt as if she were coming home.

“I’ll reimburse you for your stay in town,” Logan said unexpectedly, breaking the silence after several minutes.

She glanced sideways at him, but he kept his eyes on the road. “That’s not necessary.”

“If I ever want to check out another library book, buy a hamburger for myself or grain for my stock, it is necessary. The entire town thinks I’m some kind of a blackguard, lower than a tick on a dog’s—” he stopped himself “—behind.”

Startled. Kat turned to look at him. “Because of me?”

He turned off the main highway, onto the road that led to his ranch. “I never expected you to stay in Harmony. When you did, I suddenly became Simon Legree, throwing a damsel in distress into the street.”

“Is that why you rehired me?” Kat hated how small her voice sounded. “Because of the town?”

“No.” He pulled up in front of the house and cut the engine. “We’ll tell Anna you’re here, then I’ll get you settled in your room.”

In her hurry to leave town, Kat hadn’t changed out of her uniform, and only now, as Logan opened the cab door for her, did she realize how short her skirt was. She pulled it down, but not before she saw Logan’s frown as his gaze moved over her legs. When he offered his hand, she quickly slid out of the truck.

“I didn’t have time to change,” she said weakly, tugging on the skirt.

He simply shrugged and moved around to get her luggage from the bed of the truck. Terrific, she thought with a silent groan. If it wasn’t enough she’d made a bad first impression by being younger than he’d expected, her second impression as a floozy wasn’t looking so good, either.

“Hey, Logan! You get lost?”

Kat turned as a man approached the truck. He was almost as tall as Logan and about the same age, with dark features and long black hair pulled into a ponytail at the base of his neck. He moved beside the truck and stared at her curiously.

“This is my foreman, Tom Whitefeather,” Logan said as he pulled her luggage out of the truck. “Tom, this is Kat Delaney, Anna’s nanny for the summer.”

Tom seemed momentarily surprised, then smiled at her and touched the brim of his white cowboy hat. “How do, ma’am.”

Kat offered her hand to Tom. “A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Whitefeather.”

Tom hesitated, then slowly covered her small hand with his large one. “Just Tom will do, Miss Delaney.”

She smiled. “And I’m Kat.”

“You think we might move this along anytime soon?” Logan drawled, his arms loaded with Kat’s luggage.

“You need some help with that, boss?”

“I think I can manage,” he said sarcastically, then turned and headed for the house. “But the truck needs unloading. I’ll meet you in the barn in a few minutes.”

Tom nodded to her, then hopped in the truck and drove off. Kat threw her hat on her head and hurried after Logan.

The scent of floor cleaner and furniture polish filled the house, along with the sound of a woman singing in Spanish. Logan disappeared through the doorway where Anna had first appeared, and Kat followed. Still holding her luggage, Logan nodded to the end door, which was ajar. The woman’s voice was coming from that room.

Nervous, but excited, Kat knocked lightly on the door.

“Come in, Señor Logan,” Logan’s housekeeper called. “I make la señorita Anna muy bonita.”

Kat opened the door and entered. Sophia, an older, heavy-boned woman with short, salt-and-pepper hair, stood with her back to the door, combing Anna’s hair into a ponytail. Anna sat in her wheelchair beside her pink-and-white canopy bed.

“Anna,” Logan said from behind Kat, “I’ve brought someone with me I thought you might like to say hello to.”

With an obvious lack of real interest, Anna turned. When her gaze fell on Kat, the child’s eyes lighted. She looked quickly at her father, her expression hopeful, but questioning.

“Miss Delaney is going to stay for the summer,” Logan said, his voice softening.

Anna looked at Kat again and smiled slowly. Kat smiled back. “Anna and I are friends, she can call me Kat. And you must be Sophia.” Kat looked at the housekeeper.

Sophia nodded, holding onto the ponytail she was assembling. “Welcome to la casa Kincaid.”

Kat nodded. “Thank you.”

“Anna—” Logan smiled at his daughter and Kat realized it was the first time she’d actually seen him do anything but frown “—I’m going to show Miss Delaney her room right now. She’ll be back as soon as she gets settled.”

Anna nodded, and the ponytail Sophia held fell apart. Anna looked contrite, but Sophia simply shook her head and started over.

Kat followed Logan to the opposite end of the hall. Her bedroom was large and sunny, the hardwood floor polished to a soft shine. Navajo print rugs lay beside, and at the foot of, the king-size bed. She nearly gasped as she looked out the French door slider and saw a private patio with a builtin spa.

Kat had been surrounded her entire life with swank and elegance, and while she’d lived in upscale New York apartments her entire life, none of the rooms had ever been this big, let alone the bedroom. She moved closer to the French doors and stared out onto the patio. And a spa!

She turned to Logan who was hanging her garment bag in the closet. “Good heavens,” she said a little breathlessly, “if this is the servant’s quarters, I can’t wait to see your bedroom.”

The second the words were out, Kat wanted them back. He glanced at her, and she could have sworn the corner of his mouth twitched. She felt the rush of heat over her cheeks. “I mean, everything here’s just so big...just like they say...” Her voice trailed off.

“Mrs. Lacey, Anna’s regular nanny, has the guest room on the other side of the house. Rather than disturb her things, I put you in here.” The humor left his eyes. “This used to be my bedroom. I moved out after my wife was killed.”

“I’m sorry,” Kat said quietly. “It must be very painful for you and Anna.”

He moved to the French doors and opened them, then stood there and stared out onto the patio. “My wife left Anna and me long before she died. Anna barely remembers her, and as far as I go, I don’t much give a damn.”

His voice was cold and empty and when he turned, there was no expression on his face. “I put the spa in for Anna, it helps to exercise her legs. Feel free to use it anytime you like, also. I’ll show you how to run it later.”

He stood there for a moment, his gaze skimming over her. She’d been on display enough years to understand and accept that look. With any other man she would have casually accepted the male approval she saw in his eyes and shrugged it off.

But he wasn’t any other man, and she faltered under the heat of his stare. Her breathing felt shallow and her pulse quickened. The waitress uniform she wore suddenly felt not only too short, but too tight. Her skin felt too tight. And when he brought his dark gaze back to hers, her heart skipped a beat.

He shook his head and frowned. “You don’t look like a nanny.”

Anna had said the same thing to her, she realized. But there was no softness to Logan’s words and she realized he wasn’t giving her a compliment. “I’ll do a good job.”

He nodded, then moved toward the door. “I’ll get back in around six. I’d like dinner ready by six-thirty.”

“Mr. Kincaid?”

He stopped and turned to look at her. A smile touched one corner of his mouth. “Why don’t you just call me Logan? Everyone else here does.”

She couldn’t help but smile, too, as she remembered that was what she’d said to him in the cafe. He started to leave again when she stopped him again.

“Logan,” she said quietly, “you never answered my question earlier. Why did you change your mind and bring me back here?”

He held her gaze, then said, “Anna wasn’t happy.”

For a moment, she almost thought he was going to say something else. Instead he turned and walked out the door.

Kat let loose of the breath she'd been holding. He didn't want her here. He'd certainly made that clear. With a heavy sigh, she opened her suitcase and started to unpack.

It didn't matter, she told herself. She wasn't here for Logan Kincaid, she was here for Anna, and to experience life from a different perspective, to try new things.

And speaking of new things...she glanced at her watch.

She had approximately four hours to learn how to cook.

Three

Logan came in at five that afternoon. He was dirty, tired and more than a little tense. He and three of his men had moved half of the herd to another pasture, and one stubborn steer had broken away, leading Logan on a merry chase through a steep gully and heavy brush. He'd used every epithet in his rather extensive cow cutter's vocabulary twice before he finally escorted the wayward animal back to its bellowing companions, but the fun and games had cost his gelding a shoe and forced Logan to ride back early.

Closing the stall door behind him, he tossed his horse a fleck of hay, then made his way to the house.

It was hard to admit, but Logan knew he was the only one to blame for his troubles. It had been his lack of focus on his work, not a runaway steer that had caused his problems. His mind had been on a curvy green-eyed gal from New York, a woman with long sleek legs that were made for a man to wrap around his waist. When he'd caught sight of those legs earlier as he'd helped her out of the truck, it had taken every ounce of willpower not to openly stare. He'd wanted to take her back to town right then and there. He'd wanted to take her to bed.

But he'd done neither, of course. And he wouldn't. He would endure a little masculine torture if it made Anna happy. The smile on his daughter's face this afternoon when she'd seen Kat had made every uncomfortable moment worthwhile. He was determined to make it through the summer, even if it cost him a few sleepless nights and several cold showers.

He still couldn't believe she'd stayed in Harmony. Obviously Kat Delaney was a determined woman. While he didn't understand it, he couldn't help but admire her tenacity. He hadn't taken her seriously, and his reputation with the town was smarting from his mistake. Mistakes, he corrected himself. His first one had been bringing her here in the first place.

He caught the delicious scent of roast beef and heard laughter when he came in the service entrance off the kitchen. Normally, after a day's work, he would clean up and take off his boots before he went to his room to shower. Today, he stopped, listening to the cheerful sounds coming from the kitchen. Quietly he went to the door and opened it a crack.

He saw Anna first, her face and arms covered with flour, sitting at the kitchen table in a regular chair instead of her wheelchair. Bottom lip between her teeth, she methodically worked a large ball of dough. Bowls and measuring cups surrounded her, as did shortening, salt and an assortment of other baking supplies. It looked as if a bag of flour had exploded.

"Knead about ten times—" Logan heard Kat say "—biscuit dough should feel light and soft, but not sticky..."

Logan turned his attention to Kat and his stomach went into a skid. Dressed in snug-fitting jeans and a white T-shirt, she stood at the kitchen sink, reading from a cookbook while she peeled potatoes. The strings of an apron lay in a neat bow on her flour-dusted backside. His throat felt as dry as the flour as he stared at her well-rounded derriere and long legs encased in tight denim.

"Seven...eight..." he heard his daughter slowly counting as she kneaded the dough.

They were cooking together, he realized in amazement. To the best of his knowledge, Anna had never done anything more in the kitchen than help Sophia set the table. And here she was with Kat—making biscuits?

A feeling he couldn't identify tightened Logan's chest as he watched Anna and Kat. There was a brightness in Anna's eyes, a pinkness in her cheeks that he hadn't seen in a long time. It had never

dawned on him that helping in the kitchen might be something she would enjoy. Obviously it had never dawned on anyone else, either. He made a mental note to discuss it with Mrs. Lacey when she came back.

“Is this good?” Anna asked.

Still unobserved, Logan watched Kat set down the potato she’d been peeling, wipe her hands on her apron, then pick up the cookbook and walk over to Anna.

Kat poked at the dough. “You tell me. You’re the expert biscuit maker.”

“But I’ve never cooked anything before,” Anna said, her brow furrowed.

“Me, either.” Kat blew a long strand of hair from her forehead, then reached for a rolling pin on the table and handed it to Anna. “That’s how we learn new things. We just do it. Now roll.”

Kat had never cooked before? Confused, Logan watched as she read to Anna and the two of them discussed the recipe instructions. She didn’t know how to cook, he realized. But then, why did she agree to cook for him? Of course, now that he thought about it, he’d never given her a chance to say no. He’d assumed she knew how. After all, even people in New York had to eat.

But then, hadn’t he learned by now that any assumption regarding a woman was bound to get a man into trouble?

So she didn’t know how to cook. She was here to teach Anna, that was most important. As long as the woman focused on educating his daughter, he’d put up with indigestion for a few weeks.

And cold showers, he thought when Kat set the cookbook down and rubbed her fists against the small of her back. He had to force back a groan as her full breasts pressed tightly against her T-shirt.

It was going to be a long, painful summer.

With a sigh, he quietly backed away before Anna or Kat spotted him. As he closed the door behind him, he heard them singing, “Roll, roll, roll your dough...”

Kat held her breath as Logan took a bite of the roast she’d cooked. She knew it was silly, that it should matter so much. She’d been to dinners with politicians and celebrities and even royalty, but no dinner had ever made her so nervous, or been so important, as this one. Her first roast, she thought with excitement, watching him chew. And chew.

And chew.

Disappointed, she sank back in her chair. She’d been praying he liked his meat well-done, as in very well-done. Rather than torture the man, she should have just told him the truth about her culinary skills. She could see the headlines now: Katrina Delaney, World-Famous Violinist, Poisons Texas Rancher.

“Logan—” she sat straight and stared at her own plate “—I should have—”

“How ’bout another slice of meat?” He popped a bite of beef in his mouth, then scooped up some mashed potatoes and gravy that Kat knew had more lumps than a sugar bowl.

She waited for him to choke, then watched as he simply scooped up another big bite.

Stunned, she handed him the meat platter. He speared a piece of meat, then waved his fork at the bread basket. “And a couple more biscuits, too, please. It’s odd, Grandma Betty used to make biscuits as flaky as these, but she said only the women in my family had the knack.”

Anna, who had been sitting on the edge of her seat also, looked at Kat and smiled.

“Anna made them,” Kat said, grinning back at Anna.

Kat could have sworn she saw the devil dance in Logan’s eyes as he raised his eyebrows with surprise.

“No.” He picked up a biscuit and looked at it. “My Anna made biscuits?”

Eyes wide, Anna nodded.

Kat watched Logan with his daughter and she wondered if the man sitting across from her had a brother, an evil identical twin who had fired her two days ago, then irritably rehired and brought her back here today.

He winked at Anna and Kat felt her own insides do a flip. Though she hardly knew him, Kat suspected that this side of Logan Kincaid—the teasing, smiling charmer—was a side that few saw, a side that emerged only for Anna. Kat knew that for Anna—only Anna—Logan had swallowed his pride and brought her back here. Anna wasn't happy, Logan had told her. He'd made it plain that he didn't feel she was right for the job and that he didn't want her here.

And yet, sometimes, Kat thought there was something in Logan's eyes, a look that she felt more than actually saw, a look that she understood more on an instinctual, rather than conscious level; a look of sheer masculine hunger that made every feminine receptor within her scream out a warning. She'd come to Texas for adventure and romance, but romance of a spiritual nature, not in a physical, sexual sense. And when it came to Logan, Kat had no doubt that's all there would be, the physical. The man radiated sex, and while she couldn't deny she was attracted, she also couldn't deny he terrified her.

To Anna's delight, Logan made a great show of eating three more biscuits, then after dinner insisted on clearing the table and doing the dishes while Kat helped Anna into the bathtub. After she'd bathed and dried off, Kat dusted Anna with scented powder she'd brought from New York. Anna was still smiling when Kat helped her into bed.

"Do you really know how to play the violin?" Anna asked when Kat tucked the pink comforter around her.

Kat smiled. "Yes."

"Miss Carver, my nanny when I was six, before Mrs. Lacey came, she played the violin, too, but she was so bad that Daddy wouldn't let her play when he was home. The screeching gave him a headache."

One more reason for Logan to resent her being here, Kat thought with a silent sigh. "Thanks for the warning. I'll be very careful not to screech when your daddy's around."

"Miss Carver taught me to play a little, too," Anna said shyly. "And Miss Goodhouse, the music teacher at Harmony Elementary said I was very good."

Harmony Elementary? Kat had assumed that Anna had always had home tutoring. "When did you go to school in Harmony?" Kat asked.

"She went for one semester in the third grade."

Kat turned at the sound of Logan's voice. He stood in the doorway, his shoulders stiff, the smile he'd had earlier gone. So the evil twin was back, she thought with a quiet sigh.

"We'll go over Anna's lessons and schedule in a few minutes," he said, moving into the room. "I made some coffee, help yourself."

Kat was bright enough to know when she was being dismissed. She said good-night to Anna, then went to search for a mug in the kitchen. She never drank coffee, but she needed something to hold onto when she and Logan went over Anna's lessons. She dumped in milk and sugar, hoping to hide the taste, but when she sipped the hot liquid she wrinkled her nose at the still-bitter flavor.

She was sitting at the kitchen table when he came in a few minutes later. He poured himself a cup of coffee, then turned and leaned back against the counter.

"We haven't had a chance to talk about Anna yet," he said, holding her gaze. "About her disability."

Kat had the distinct feeling he'd expected her to look away when he'd used the word "disability." She knew there were people, a lot of people, uncomfortable being around, or even discussing the disabled. Based on his blank expression and flat voice, Kat had the feeling Logan himself wasn't comfortable.

"She was the most beautiful baby I'd ever seen," he said quietly. "A little button nose, big blue eyes, pink cheeks. Everything about her was perfect. She said her first word when she was ten months, took her first step when she was a year." He stared at his coffee cup for a moment, then finally continued. "JoAnn—Anna's mother—and I didn't really notice any problems until Anna was almost four. She just seemed lazier than normal, sometimes even refusing to walk, or crying if we

made her. She couldn't seem to keep her balance and oftentimes she'd stumble or fall. When we took her into a specialist in Houston, he found a tumor in her spine. He operated, but there was nerve damage to the spinal cord that affected her lower body movement. She has partial feeling in her legs, but no motor control."

Kat tried to picture Anna at four, all the doctors and the hospital, the surgery. How scared she must have been. "And she's been in a wheelchair since then?"

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