



Silhouette®

1693
October

Marlie's Mystery Man

DORIS RANGEL

SILHOUETTE
Romance®

Soulmates



Doris Rangel

Marlie's Mystery Man

«HarperCollins»

Rangel D.

Marlie's Mystery Man / D. Rangel — «HarperCollins»,

To: Grammie From: MarlieRe: I'M FALLING FOR TWO MEN-SORT OF!
Gram, Something strange has happened on my summer vacation—there are two Caid Matthews in my life! One Caid—the one only I can see and hear—is romantic and sexy, with a wicked sense of humor. The other is intensely passionate and determined to get what he wants: me! Both give knee-weakening kisses, and I'm falling for each of them...for different reasons. But I can't be happy with just half a man—so how can I get the two halves to reunite and become the perfect, whole man for me to love?HELP! ^

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“Who the heck are you and get the heck out of my room!”

Marlie finally managed to get out.

Well, hell. They were back to this. “Marlie,” Caid said patiently, “I told you last night who I am. Remember?”

“Caid?” Her tone sounded disbelieving.

“Yeah. Caid Matthews.”

“Caid Matthews, you’re naked as a jaybird! Get out of my room!” Marlie screeched, throwing a pillow at him.

But Caid didn’t move. “You can see me?”

Marlie finally seemed to grasp the importance of the moment. She blinked, then slowly, wickedly grinned. “Yes, Caid, I can definitely see you.”

Dear Reader,

October is bringing big changes in the Silhouette and Mills & Boon worlds. To strengthen the terrific lineup of stories we offer, Silhouette Romance will be moving to four fabulous titles each month.

Don’t miss the newest story in this six-book series—MARRYING THE BOSS’S DAUGHTER. In this second title, *Her Pregnant Agenda* (#1690) by Linda Goodnight, Emily Winters is up to her old matchmaking tricks. This time she has a bachelor lawyer and his alluring secretary—a single mom-to-be—on her matrimonial short list.

Valerie Parv launches her newest three-book miniseries, *THE CARRAMER TRUST*, with *The Viscount & the Virgin* (#1691). In it, an arrogant royal learns a thing or two about love from his secret son’s sassy aunt. This is the third continuation of Parv’s beloved Carramer saga.

An ornery M.D. is in danger of losing his heart to a sweet young nurse, in *The Most Eligible Doctor* (#1692) by reader favorite Karen Rose Smith. And is it possible to love a two-in-one cowboy? Meet the feisty teacher who does, in Doris Rangel’s magical *Marlie’s Mystery Man* (#1693), our latest *SOULMATES* title.

I encourage you to sample all four of these heartwarming romantic titles from Silhouette Romance this month.

Enjoy!

Mavis C. Allen

Associate Senior Editor, Silhouette Romance

Marlie's Mystery Man

Doris Rangel



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For the TMTW faithful and the mountains that keep me coming home.

Books by Doris Rangel

Silhouette Romance

Marlie's Mystery Man #1693

Silhouette Special Edition

Mountain Man #1140

Prenuptial Agreement #1224

DORIS RANGEL

loves books...the feel of them, the sight of them, the smell of them. And she loves talking about them. She has collected them, organized them, sold them new and used, written them, worked with others to write them, read them aloud to children and has hopefully imparted the magic of them to the grade school, college and adult students she has taught over the years. History, philosophy, science, satire, Western, mystery...In her home, books are the wallpaper of choice.

Romances hold a special place on her shelves, however. A story that ends with a couple stepping into the future with love and hope may be an ideal, but it is an ideal she wishes for the tomorrows of every living thing in the universe. Love, after all, in whatever form it takes, is all that is.

Doris enjoys hearing from readers and you may contact her via snail mail at P.O. Box 5645, Victoria, TX 77903-5645, or via e-mail at Drangel@selectrec.net.

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Prologue

“Hell, I can’t fire Waldo! He’s been ramrod on the Rolling M since before I was born.”

Snorting angrily, Caid Matthews down-shifted the pickup to climb another steep grade.

“He’s eighty, dammit, and I’m not firing him. Dad gave him a good retirement package. And it’s not like he’ll have to live on the streets. He can move to Florida, like he always said he would. Flirt with the blue-haired widows. Maybe marry one.”

“Sure that’s what he says, but everybody knows that’s just talk. Waldo’s lived in West Texas all his life, most of it in the Davis Mountains as a hand on the Rolling M. The day he shucks his Levi’s for swimming trunks is the day the sun stands still.”

Caid sighed and used a knuckle to rub the bridge of his nose. He’d been fighting with himself over this for the past week, his brain knowing the ranch could no longer afford Waldo’s salary, but his heart knowing it would kill the old man to leave the Rolling M.

And it wasn’t just Waldo. The Rolling M’s finances were in deep horse hockey in a way they’d never been before. Caid had trimmed everywhere he could find to trim, with part of him knowing it had to be done and the other part madder than hell that he had to do it.

Waldo had to go. There was no other way. And five hundred acres had to go, too. That five hundred acres might be only a drop in the Rolling M’s proverbial bucket, but never in the history of the ranch had any acreage been sold.

Though he knew there was no alternative, Caid often felt like his soul was being ripped in two.

The pickup topped the grade and settled into the long glide toward a wide valley below where he’d have several miles of flat. Good. Now he could make up time.

Hell of a thing. He’d driven from the ranch all the way to Fort Davis, even checked into the hotel so he could be at the bank first thing in the morning.

But he’d no sooner placed his duffel bag beside the bed than he realized he’d left the papers he needed for the bank on the kitchen table.

There was nothing else to do but return to the ranch and get them, then make the long drive back to town.

Just went to show the state of mind he was in lately. He’d never been this forgetful. Why, he’d even left his hat with his lucky jay feather back in the hotel room.

Now on the flats, Caid sent the ancient truck flying down the highway. The sun was low in the west and he hadn’t passed another vehicle in the last twenty miles—not unusual in this part of Texas.

“You ever stop to think that leaving those papers might be a way of telling you something?”

Caid shook his head angrily, wishing he could somehow yank his other, softer side completely out of his body. This constant inner debate with himself interfered with every decision he knew he had to make.

“I’ve got to sell and that’s all there is to it. It’s that or lose the whole damn ranch. I’m doing what I have t—”

A deer! Stepping right into the headlights.

With no shoulder to the road, he swerved off the highway completely to avoid the petrified animal. By the grace of God and three good inches, he missed it.

Unfortunately, he didn’t miss the sixty-year-old ponderosa pine.

“Your man is a western man, honey.”

“Oh, Gram. Please. I’m going to West Texas for a vacation, not another man. After Nicholas, I can’t think of anything I want less.”

“The Great Ones don’t care if you want him or not, Marlie. They just told me he’s in Fort Davis. Take him or leave him, it’s yours to decide.”

“I’ll leave him, then, but you can tell The Great Ones thanks for the playmate while I’m there. Just warn them that I’m not bringing home any souvenirs.”

“Don’t be flip, dear. It’s not becoming. Besides, the heart has a mind of its own.”

“Sounds like a country-western song, Gram. And I don’t have a heart anymore. Nicholas threw it out with yesterday’s leftovers.”

Recalling the conversation she’d had with her grandmother before leaving San Antonio, Marlie smiled grimly to herself and signaled to exit the interstate. Forty more miles and she’d be in the picturesque little town of Fort Davis where she planned to get a grip.

Forty extremely dark miles. The state highway had even less traffic than I-10, and led her through the kind of darkness San Antonio hadn’t experienced for over a century. A million stars spangled the sky.

Gradually, however, the stars along the horizon blotted into a jagged line that Marlie assumed were the Davis Mountains. The road twisted and turned as it wound among them, slowing her driving to a nervous crawl.

Marlie’s neck and shoulders ached with tension and exhaustion.

Sighing, she thought of the brightly lit motel she’d passed eighty miles behind her.

She’d almost stopped. Why hadn’t she? After all, she didn’t have hotel reservations to keep. Her friend, Jill, who had recommended Fort Davis as a great place to relax and hike—a good place to recover, she’d meant—had said reservations weren’t necessary this time of year.

Yet Marlie had passed up the motel and was now figuratively kicking herself for it.

This was supposed to be a vacation, not an endurance race. It didn’t matter if she spent the night in Fort Davis, for Heaven’s sake! Yet here she was, seven hours out of San Antonio and eighty miles past common sense.

Her part Native American grammie would say The Great Ones guided her. But then, Gram didn’t like to admit that any of her family were stupid. Stupid over men, stupid over sticking her nose into what was none of her business.

To Gram, descended from a noted shaman, everything was a sign. Take the blue feather that now rested in Marlie’s shirt pocket, for instance.

After uncharacteristically stalling her with errands and lunch and cleaning the kitchen, Gram had finally allowed Marlie to head out the door to get her vacation underway.

She’d placed a loving arm around Marlie’s shoulders and walked her to the car. “You’ll see,” the older woman said. “Your happiness is in the west, sweetness. Look. Here’s your sign.”

Following Gram’s pointing finger, Marlie obligingly looked down. A small blue feather lay on the concrete drive right beside the car door.

“Take it with you, dear. Your man has the other one.”

But Marlie had hesitated before picking it up.

The family had a saying: “When you’re going on a trip, never accept one of Gram’s little presents if she didn’t buy it.” All of them knew strange things happened when Gram decided to give “just a little something” from her own possessions.

Not bad things, mind you, but...strange ones.

So far, Grammie’s “little somethings” had brought into the family two husbands, a wife, a baby, a pet iguana and a 1970s VW bus for a delighted teenager—all of which came at considerable surprise to the cousins involved who had thought they were merely going from Point A to Point B for a little R and R.

Still, Marlie reasoned, the feather was a found object, not truly a gift. It ought to be safe.

She picked it up. The vibrant blue of the feather seemed to glow against her palm.

How very appropriate, she had thought. My bluebird of happiness is molting.

Fort Davis, two miles. Thank God.

Chapter One

Marlie's eyes popped open.

Something had wakened her. What?

And then she knew.

Coming from nowhere, from everywhere, a soft, elongated groan seemed to fill the hotel room. With her heart slowing to a shallow, desperate chugging, Marlie held her breath, which wasn't easy when what she really wanted to do was scream.

Inch by cautious inch, she sat up to peer into the darkness, but only the clock on the bedside table had any substance. Twelve thirty-six, it declared precisely in bilious, luminescent green.

Another soft groan floated into the darkness and Marlie gasped, yet squint as she might, she couldn't see a thing.

Clutching the blankets to her chin, she considered hurling them over her head. Hey, it worked, didn't it? Certainly the maneuver had taken care of monsters when she was a kid.

The eerie sound began again, starting on a soft note then gathering strength for another stretch of oral misery. Yep, she was heading under the covers.

Suddenly, however, the building ooo-ooohs snorted and strangled and gasped themselves into an explosive and decidedly damp Ker-choo!

Ghosts don't sneeze!

Without thinking, Marlie reached out a hand and switched on the bedside lamp.

The room was empty.

Her gaze swung to the door, but the chain was still on, the deadbolt still in place. The room's one window was up, but only about three inches, the exact amount Marlie had raised it. Surely no self-respecting intruder would come through a window, then close it behind him once he was in the room. Besides, she was on the second floor.

The second double bed, a match to the old-fashioned iron one she slept in, was a mess of sheets and blankets, the way it had been when she arrived only a half hour before. Marlie hadn't minded.

Her friend Jill's blithe assertion that she wouldn't need reservations had been sadly mistaken. A large amateur astronomy group was in the area and the stargazers who weren't camping filled every available room in town.

Marlie had tried every hotel in Fort Davis, but only Ann, the desk clerk at the Hotel Limpia, had taken pity on her after one look at Marlie's exhausted face.

By chance, the Limpia did have a room, Ann told her. It seemed its former occupant had checked in but left the room almost immediately. Unfortunately, he'd been involved in an automobile accident and was now in the hospital.

Since the room had been secured with a credit card but not actually paid for, Marlie could have it if she didn't mind it being briefly used by someone else and therefore not in the hotel's usual pristine condition.

Marlie didn't mind, but would the former occupant?

Ann had laughed, saying the man was a local and an old school friend who would like even less being charged for a room he didn't use.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Marlie took it.

When she was shown to the room at the end of the old-fashioned hall upstairs—a double; the man, too, had taken what he could get—a duffel bag still sat on the floor beside one of the two beds. The bed itself was heavily disarranged, but when Ann went to straighten it, Marlie told her not to bother. She would be sleeping in the other one anyway.

The desk clerk left, taking the man's bag and toiletries with her and giving a last apology for the used towels in the bathroom. There were clean ones in the cabinet.

By then so tired she felt like a wet noodle, Marlie simply pulled off her clothes, slathered herself with lotion and tumbled into the untouched bed. She was not so exhausted, however, that she hadn't known for a positive fact there was no one in the room but herself.

Yet the moan had sounded so close.

Slowly, cautiously, Marlie leaned over the edge of her bed to peer under it.

Nada. Not even a dust bunny.

But while she was bent over, practically standing on her head with her rump still on the mattress, another massive sneeze made her jump so hard she had to catch herself to keep from tumbling onto the floor. She whipped upright, only to hear a sniff of what clearly had to be congestion...then, incredibly, the sound of someone honking into a handkerchief or tissue.

Another moan, a short one this time. A sigh. Another sniff.

Silence.

And there was no one but herself in the room!

Absolutely stunned, Marlie leaned slowly back against the pillows—and reality struck.

This was an old hotel, built around the turn of the century, Ann had said. Old hotels had thin walls. A man—it was definitely a masculine sneeze—in the next room had a cold and didn't mind moaning and groaning about it.

Mystery solved.

Letting out a relieved sigh and feeling a little foolish, Marlie clicked off the lamp and snuggled back under the warmth of the covers.

But just as her eyes drifted blissfully shut, she heard a sniff and another low moan, though now the sounds seemed muffled, as if whoever it was had turned his face into a pillow.

Thanks be for that, Marlie thought sleepily, and did no more thinking at all until she awoke early the next morning to the sound of birdsong and what Fort Davis called traffic.

Caid swung his legs over the side of the bed and immediately clutched his head with both hands to keep it anchored to his shoulders.

God, it hurt. He probably had a mild concussion.

Too bad. He didn't have time to see a doctor. What would a doctor tell him anyway but to stay quiet, drink plenty of liquids, etcetera, and don't take any naps? But, though he didn't remember actually getting into bed, he had slept and hadn't wakened up dead, so no problem there except the headache from hell.

And his allergies giving him fits.

The thought of breakfast made him queasy, but he'd find coffee and an aspirin at The Drugstore before heading on to the bank and his appointment with Miles Durig.

When he stood, however, the room tilted and it took a moment of standing with his eyes squeezed shut before the floor settled down.

When he could open them, the first thing his gaze landed on was the clock. Holy smoke, it was 9:05! He was already five minutes late.

Where the hell was his duffel bag? He needed fresh clothes. The shirt he'd worn yesterday had bloodstains all over the front and shoulders. So where was his bag, dammit? He'd left it by the bed before going back to the ranch yesterday afternoon.

Striding to the old-fashioned wardrobe, swallowing bile induced by his pounding head, Caid yanked open one of its two doors.

What the hell? Clothes hung there but, since he didn't wear skirts, they damn sure weren't his. And his bag wasn't there.

This was his room, right?

Yes, he'd used his key to get in. It had to be his room. There was his hat, still hanging on the corner of the mirror where he'd forgotten it yesterday.

Hell of a thing, a rancher forgetting his hat.

He opened the other door and was relieved to see his jeans and bloodstained shirt hanging just where he'd placed them, his boots side by side on the closet floor with his socks inside them and his briefs in the plastic bag supplied by the hotel. The bag with his change of clothing, however, wasn't there.

Well, hell. He hated to wear dirty clothes, but he didn't have time to track down his bag. By now, everyone in Fort Davis knew about the accident anyway. The town was like that.

The three cowboys who'd given him a ride into town had stopped at the sheriff's office and Caid, hardly able to speak because his head hurt so badly, left them to make the report while he crossed the street to the hotel. Sheriff Elan knew where to find him if he needed more information.

Elan's secretary would have typed up the report first thing this morning, and by now everyone and his dog would be discussing it anywhere in town serving breakfast.

All of which meant Caid and Durig could have a friendly chuckle over his bloodstained shirt without Caid doing any unnecessary explaining, and then they could settle down to business. No problem.

Since he'd showered last night, all he needed was a quick shave and he was outta here. His kit was in the bathroom so at least he knew where that was.

The bathroom, however, produced another surprise. For one thing, there were women's toiletries all over the counter. For another, it had the steaminess of recent use. And for a third, damn it all, his kit was nowhere to be found.

To hell with it. He didn't have time now to get huffy with the staff or find out what in blazes was going on, but they were damn sure gonna hear from him later.

Eyeing the proliferation of feminine articles, Caid used what he could. He wasn't about to use the woman's toothbrush, but he used his finger and her toothpaste, then shaved himself in record time with her pink disposable razor.

Grimacing, he put on his socks, stepped into yesterday's briefs and jeans and tugged on his boots. He was avoiding putting on his blood-soaked shirt and he knew it, but he had to wear something.

He glanced at the closet door. All he'd seen earlier was feminine clothing, but maybe her husband's things were hidden among the frills. If so, he'd borrow a shirt and explain later. For that matter, once he had the loan against the sale of his five hundred acres, he'd buy the guy a new one.

The closet held nothing but feminine disappointment. As Caid went to close the door, however, his gaze fell on a long, brown-plaid sleeve.

Hmm. Pulling out the garment, he held it up consideringly and found a woman's cotton jacket with western shirt styling. Best of all, it was huge, extra-wide shouldered and boxy, with detachable shoulder pads.

In seconds, Caid had the pads out and the shirt on. Not too bad, he thought, eyeing himself in the mirror. The shirt was tight across the shoulders maybe and pulled a little at the chest, but it was clean.

He rolled the too-short sleeves up his forearms, snagged his hat and headed out the door. He had to shoulder his way through a lobby full of milling tourists, but finally stood on the Limpia's front porch in the bright morning sunshine.

Inhaling deeply, he grinned. Nowhere in the world had summer mornings like the Davis Mountains.

But that deep breath played hell with his delicate head, and when he went to put on his hat, he found he couldn't tolerate that either. Fortunately, the bank was just across the square from the hotel.

He wished he'd had time for a cup of coffee, but Durig would give him one.

Two hours later Caid was back at the hotel, dismayed, disbelieving and totally disturbed. No one had given him a cup of coffee.

Hell, no one had given him the time of day.

Marlie had breakfast at The Drugstore, the oddly named restaurant across from the hotel, then shopped a little before returning to her room to change into hiking boots. The state park three miles out of town had a couple of good hiking trails, she'd been told.

Driving to the park, admiring the mountain scenery and shallow, sun-sparkled Limpia Creek running beside the highway, Marlie did her best to forget the last semester of school where she was counselor at Martinez High in San Antonio. And since hiking was right up there with sweaty necks on Nicholas's hate list, she managed to keep him out of her thinking, too.

That evening when she walked into the lobby of the hotel, she was pleasantly tired and pleasantly full, having had dinner and watched the sun set at the restaurant in the park.

Ann smiled at her in greeting. "Good evening, Ms. Simms. How was your day?"

"Wonderful, thanks. This is a beautiful area."

"It is, and I say it as one who's lived here all my life. Is everything all right in your room?"

"Everything's fine. It took me a while to get used to the thin walls, but I suppose that's a minor price to pay for the hotel's history. The man in the next room kept me awake for a while with his moaning and sneezing. Sounds like he's coming down with a cold."

"I'm sorry," Ann apologized. "We've never had anyone complain about noise through the walls before. Actually, they're pretty thick. I'm even more surprised because there are two maiden ladies in the room next to yours, both probably in their seventies."

"One of the sweet things has a sneeze like a water buffalo," Marlie replied with a grin. "But once I knew where the sound came from, I had no problem sleeping through it."

She glanced around the deserted lobby. "After the crowd this morning, it's certainly quiet now. Where is everyone?"

"Out looking at the stars. Most of them won't be in till the wee hours."

"Then would anyone mind if I browse the hotel bookshelves and read for a while in the parlor?"

"Not at all. We want our guests to feel at home."

"Be right back," Marlie said as she headed up the old-fashioned staircase to pull off her hiking boots.

When Caid heard a key rattle in the lock, he turned away from the window and his perusal of the street below to deliberately step toward the center of the room.

The door swung open and a woman entered, switching on the overhead light as she did so. His roomie, apparently.

Somewhere between mid-to late-twenties, she had short tousled brown hair, a snub nose with a dusting of freckles across it, a generous mouth, and eyes that he couldn't tell the color of but which were bordered with thick lashes the same shade as her hair. She was a little on the short side perhaps, but feisty with it, he could tell.

The woman was just plain cute, he thought, the kind of cute that in a puppy would make him want to take her home.

She also completely ignored him. A strange man stood in the middle of her hotel room and she didn't so much as back up a step.

Caid rubbed a tired hand over his mouth and jaw. He'd been getting the same reaction all day... or lack of it. People he'd known all his life looked through him as if he wasn't there. He'd gotten right in Durig's face at the bank and yelled at him, but Durig hadn't even blinked.

After failing to get anyone at the bank to notice him, Caid went to The Drugstore to buy aspirin and get a cup of coffee. Though he sat at the counter right in front of the kid behind it, no one waited on him. He finally dropped change by the cash register, took a bottle of aspirin off the shelf and left to walk to the garage where they'd towed his truck.

The vehicle was a mess and certainly not drivable, but when Caid tried to talk to Jimmy to get the lowdown on repairs, the garage owner ignored him, too. An oil stain had better conversation.

Totally frustrated and even more totally bewildered, Caid used a public telephone to call the ranch. He didn't like what happened then, either.

"This is the Rollin' M," Waldo snarled, his usual way of answering the phone.

"Waldo, it's Caid. I need you to drive into town and pick me—" Caid began.

"Hello? Hello?"

"It's me," Caid said loudly. "Turn up your hearing aid, dammit. I need you to..."

But he was speaking to a dead phone. Swearing, Caid dug into his jeans for more change and punched in the ranch number again.

"Rollin' M, and buster, you better have somethin' to say. I ain't got time for this," Waldo spat.

"It's Caid. Can you hear me? I need—"

The response was an earful of profanity that would make a stevedore blush.

"It's me!" Caid yelled at the top of his lungs. "Listen up, Waldo. I need—"

Dial tone.

Defeated, Caid replaced the receiver.

Next he tried to hitch a ride to the ranch with the owners of the property adjacent to his, but the Hendersons looked right through him and turned a deaf ear.

Not knowing what else to do, he at last walked back to the hotel, snagged a cup of coffee from the complimentary carafe in the deserted lobby and climbed the stairs to his room. His head felt like a mission bell at the noon hour and all he wanted at the moment was a handful of aspirin and a bed. He'd deal with the rest later.

Well, it was later, and even after a restless nap, he still didn't know how to deal with it.

People just weren't seeing him. He felt like the Invisible Man, except that guy could at least be heard.

The woman sat down on the side of the bed opposite the one he slept in and bent to untie the laces of her hiking boots. He'd like to ask just why the heck she'd commandeered his room, but knew it was probably a lost cause. No one else today had listened to him.

She'd tugged the second boot off when she paused, still holding it in her hand, and gazed for a long moment in front of her. Then she frowned.

Following her gaze, Caid looked to see what had captured her attention. All he saw was the bed he'd spent the afternoon in. The rumpled unmade bed.

"Bad housekeeping," she finally muttered disapprovingly, then stripped off her socks and walked barefoot into the bathroom.

When she returned, she rummaged in a dresser drawer, came up with a clean pair of socks, picked up a bottle of lotion from the top of the bureau and sat down in the chair near the window, brushing by Caid in the process, actually touching his shirtsleeve—well, her shirtsleeve—without so much as breaking stride.

What she did next had Caid groaning inwardly. The woman poured a generous dollop of lotion into her palm and proceeded to massage her cute little feet.

As soon as the peppery smell of lavender filled the room, Caid sneezed.

The woman jumped a mile.

She'd heard him! But before Caid could say anything, he sneezed again. This time, however, she paid no attention, just went on slathering lotion.

Caid sneezed again. And again.

Finally, eyes streaming, he walked to the open window behind her chair and took a deep whiff of clean, unscented mountain air. By keeping his nose pressed to the screen, he managed to keep from sneezing until she closed the bottle, put on her clean socks, picked up her key from the dresser and headed for the door, obviously not bothering with shoes.

Good. As soon as she left, Caid was finding the nearest trash receptacle. Bye-bye, lavender lotion.

But she didn't exit the room immediately. Instead, after pausing at the door, she backtracked and picked up his Stetson where he'd left it on top of the dresser.

And then she stood stock still, eyes wide and startled, her luscious mouth slightly parted as she stared in apparent amazement at his hat.

Or rather, at the blue feather he kept in the hatband.

Chapter Two

With a tentative forefinger, the woman touched the blue feather, for some reason far more interested in it than Caid's rattlesnake hatband.

"Coincidence," he heard her whisper to herself. She turned the hat over to look inside the crown.

Then, to Caid's total amazement, this cute button of a woman did an extraordinary thing.

Gazing at herself in the mirror, she put his hat on her head, where it immediately sank past her ears to cover her eyes and rest on the bridge of her nose. Grinning, she pushed it up again.

"Howdy, partner," she greeted her image in an exaggerated drawl.

Fascinated, Caid watched as she stuck her thumbs in her belt loops and set her hips to rotating in a slow swivel.

"Ah'm an ol' cowhand," she sang nasally, "from the Rio Grande, but mah...something ain't... something, and mah cheeks ain't tan...."

Smiling broadly by now, and forgetting completely to keep his nose out the window, Caid turned more fully into the room, the better to appreciate the performance of that enticingly generous derriere.

He sneezed.

The woman stopped midtwang.

Dammit, he'd swear she heard him, but instead of turning toward the sound as any normal person would, she just laughed and shook her head at the far wall, causing his Stetson to drop over her eyes again.

This time, however, she took it off, replaced it on the dresser, flipped off the light and left the room.

The show, apparently, was over.

Disappointed, Caid sighed.

And sneezed.

Well, hell. If he was sharing the room with this woman, he was damn sure getting rid of the lotion she'd just used along with anything else she had that was lavender scented.

And he was sharing the room. At the moment, it was the only place he had to hang his hat, literally, until he could figure out what was going on. Besides, the hotel owed him. Maybe he hadn't paid for it yet, but he'd reserved the room before they gave it to the woman. Come to that, she owed him, too.

He sneezed.

It wasn't late when Marlie slowly walked up the staircase to return to her room, but after her active day she could barely keep her eyes open. She'd read for an hour in the hotel's charmingly Victorian front parlor and now clutched the Agatha Christie mystery, planning to take it to bed with her.

Earlier, she'd asked Ann if the Hotel Limpia had any resident ghosts, but the desk clerk merely laughed, saying the only one she'd heard about, but never seen herself, mind you, was that of a soldier from the old fort.

But it wasn't a soldier Marlie thought she'd seen. For a split second, as she'd been wearing the hat with the coincidental blue feather and acting silly in front of the mirror, she thought she'd caught the vague outline of a cowboy standing near the window behind her. But then her neighbor sneezed, and of course there was nothing reflected in the mirror but herself.

The Hotel Limpia, with its antique furnishings and bygone western charm, certainly had a way of sending the imagination into overdrive, she thought, unlocking the door to her room.

Once inside, she didn't bother with the overhead light but switched on the lamp near her bed. In the dimness outside its glow, she eyed with disfavor the double bed that matched her own. Its sheets and covers were lumpy and rumpled just as they'd been this morning.

In all other respects, the hotel service was first rate, but its housekeeping staff left a lot to be desired. Marlie had meant to say something to Ann earlier and forgotten, but she was telling the desk clerk first thing in the morning. There was no excuse for an establishment of this caliber leaving beds unmade.

Gathering clean panties and her pajamas, she headed for the bathroom and a long hot bath, but after stepping out of her jeans and partially unbuttoning her shirt, she remembered the soap she'd found today in one of the shops.

Ah. The perfect end to a perfect day.

Traipsing back to the bedroom, Marlie rummaged through a couple of sacks until she found it. But just as she turned toward the bathroom again, she thought she heard a breathy whistle from next door.

It was just a whisper of sound, but for no apparent reason she suddenly became very aware of her bare legs and half-open shirt.

She grimaced. Too bad there wasn't another room available. As it was, she had a double room too big for her single self when what she needed was double walls.

All was forgiven, however, when she lowered herself into the deep bathtub. Hot water and lavender soap. Life didn't get any better.

Unless, of course, a handsome someone scrubbed her back.

Unh-huh. Cut that last thought. Nicholas wouldn't scrub her back. He'd just tell her how bad hot water and perfumed soaps were for her skin.

Forget Nicholas. And forget hats placed strategically by an interior decorator to enhance an old hotel's western decor. Forget, especially, hats with blue feathers in the hatband.

A half hour later, too pleasantly lethargic from her hot bath for even Agatha to have appeal, Marlie called it a day. Turning off the lamp, she sank into the old-fashioned bed's very modern and oh-so-comfortable mattress.

And heard a giant sneeze.

Oh. Good. Grief.

Still, if she could hear the people next door, they could surely hear her. "Don't you have anything to take for that?" she asked the wall loudly.

Silence.

One might even say stunned silence, it was that thick. Apparently the elderlies in the next room didn't realize how thin the walls were.

There was another sneeze, followed by a muttered, "Well, hell."

"Bless you," Marlie called out, grinning.

"You can hear me?" a voice asked diffidently.

Aha, Marlie thought. Masculine. One of the supposed maiden ladies still had some energy.

"Yes, and you really ought to take something for that cold. We'd all sleep better."

"It's not a cold," the voice replied. A husky voice, with a hint of drawl. And it didn't sound like that of an old man, either. It sounded velvety, downright sexy even, if a trifle cranky and stuffed up. One of the dears must have found herself a young stud while she was stargazing.

"It's allergies," the voice continued. "I'm allergic to your soap."

And Marlie could swear that whoever spoke was right beside her. She heard a rustling in the other bed.

With a shriek, she reached out and turned on the light.

Nothing. Even better, no one.

Sinking limply against the pillows, she sighed....

Ker-choo!

And bolted up again.

"If you'd bathe with something besides lavender soap, we'd both be happier," the voice said.

"Where are you?" Marlie whispered.

"In the bed opposite yours. Don't get your britches in a knot, lady. I won't hurt you."

Throwing back the covers, Marlie bolted for the door, fumbled with the lock, threw the door open and was about to slam it behind her when she realized she heard no pursuit. She paused, uncertain, but stayed poised to immediately run and/or scream, whichever was needed.

Cautiously reaching over, she flipped on the overhead light. How could she describe the intruder to the local badge if she didn't know what he looked like?

Nothing. No one. Nobody.

"Are...are you there?" she whispered into the seemingly empty room.

"I'm here."

"Where?"

"I told you. In the other bed."

The covers on the bed in question rose and fell as if they'd been given a disgusted shake. Marlie's heartbeat rose and fell with them.

"I'm...I'm going for the police," she warned, trying to keep the wobble out of her voice.

"Go ahead. If you can explain this to someone you'll be doing a hell of a lot better than I did today. And Fort Davis doesn't have police. We make do with a sheriff and a couple of deputies." Ker-choo!

"You've got a sneeze like an atomic blast," Marlie said dryly. "I don't think I'll have much trouble explaining things."

"Have at it," the whoever or whatever it was responded, and blew his nose.

Once the woman marched her straight-backed, swishy-bottomed little self out the door, Caid got out of bed, went to the closet and retrieved his jeans. If on the off chance someone could finally see him as well as hear him, he wanted to be decent. He wasn't holding out much hope, however.

Still, for the first time today he'd actually exchanged conversation with someone. Perhaps whatever the heck it was that had happened to him was starting to wear off.

When Marlie returned, she had Ann with her. After hearing the story, the desk clerk had talked her out of going for the sheriff.

Ann looked around the quiet room. "I don't see anything or hear anything, Ms. Simms. Are you sure you weren't dreaming?"

"I hadn't gone to sleep yet," Marlie replied shortly. "And I know what I heard. A man talked to me and he sneezed. He said he was allergic to my lavender soap."

"Hey," she called out to the seemingly empty room, feeling brave now that she had company. "Are you here?"

"I'm here," the voice answered.

"Where?"

"Standing about three feet in front of you." Ker-choo!

"There." Marlie turned to the desk clerk in triumph. "You heard that, didn't you? I'll bet people in the next county did, too."

But Ann merely gazed back at her in confusion. "Ms. Simms, I, uh, didn't hear anything."

"Sure you did," Marlie told the desk clerk bracingly. "That sneeze registered on the Richter scale."

But by now, even though she wasn't but a few years older, Ann's look had turned motherly. She put a comforting arm around Marlie's shoulders.

"Ms. Simms...Marlie, I think you had too much sunshine and thin mountain air today. You crawl back into bed now, honey, and I'll bring up a nice cup of herbal tea to help you sleep. You'll feel better in the morning."

Ker-choo!

"You didn't hear that?" Marlie asked in a small voice.

“No, sweetie. You get a good night’s rest now and I’ll bet you feel tip-top by tomorrow.”

Marlie sighed. “Perhaps you’re right. But I don’t need any tea. Really. Thanks for coming up, though.”

She walked Ann to the door and was about to shut it behind her when she noticed the bathroom trash basket sitting by the doorway in the hall. In it was her brand-new, used only once, very expensive tablet of lavender soap.

Marlie debated pointing this bit of evidence out to the desk clerk, who was wishing her good-night again, but in the end decided it probably wouldn’t do much good.

After closing the door, she leaned against it to gaze accusingly into her seemingly empty bedroom. “Say something, darn it. I know you’re still here.”

“That makes two of us.”

There was the sound a deep sigh followed by a massive Ker-choo!

“Oh, for goodness’ sake! Do you have to keep doing that? Ghosts aren’t supposed to sneeze.”

“I’m not a ghost.”

“Could’ve fooled me. What are you then?”

“Alive, for one thing. For some reason, people just can’t see me, and so far the only person who can hear me is you.” Ker-choo!

“Well aren’t I just the lucky one,” Marlie said nastily. “How delightful that the whole world now thinks I’m crazy.”

“Not the whole world, just Ann Jergin. But she’s a nice girl. She won’t tell anyone.”

“You know her?”

“Of course I know her. We were in the same grade all through school.”

Marlie frowned in the direction of the voice, now coming from the vicinity of the other bed. In fact, the bed looked a little depressed on one side, as if someone were sitting on it.

“Who are you?” she asked slowly.

“I’ll tell you after you shower. Lifebouy, Irish Spring, Dove. Take your pick. Any scent but lavender.”

“How do I know you won’t float into the shower with me? You might be anywhere for all I know.”

“Lock the damn door,” the voice snapped. “I can’t walk through walls. I already tried.”

“You could be lying.”

“Yes, ma’am, I could. You’re just gonna have to trust me now, aren’t you?”

Why should I, Marlie wanted to ask, but didn’t. A ghost with allergies seemed...trustworthy, in a bizarre sort of way.

Good grief! She was certifiably crazy.

But she headed for the bathroom. Just before she closed and locked the door, however, she stuck her head out again. “Where are you?”

“Here,” he replied, his tone one of long suffering, but the sound of his voice came from the bed. “Now get a move on. I’m tired, I’ve got a hell of a headache and I don’t want to stay up all night yakking.”

What a crab.

When she returned, showering in record time, the woman smelled like nothing but cleanliness. Caid had never thought of eau de clean as erotic before, but as he watched her prance across the room, then hop into bed, he had the overwhelming urge to hop into it with her.

Huh, he thought. So she had great legs. The real attraction was probably because he could talk to her. Communication could be a powerful aphrodisiac.

And strangely, though sharing a bed with the woman had strong appeal, going beyond sharing didn’t seem to...suit the moment.

“What’s your name?”

They'd asked the question at the same time.

"You first," the woman said. "And your story better be good, buster."

"Or what?" Caid asked, truly curious.

"I'll think of something. Don't think I won't. Now start talking."

Caid grinned. "Yes, ma'am." But his story was no laughing matter and he sobered immediately. "I'm Caid Matthews," he said. "Kincaid Matthews the Fourth, owner of the Rolling M."

"That's your feather on the dresser, isn't it?" she said wonderingly. "I mean, your hat. Your name is inside. I thought it was part of the hotel decor."

"Only since yesterday. I forgot it when I went back to the ranch."

He heard a startled little movement in the next bed. "Oh my Lord!" the woman exclaimed. "You're the rancher who was involved in the accident. The one they took to the hospital last night."

"No, ma'am. I'm the one who ran into a tree, all right, but I never went to the hospital."

"But...but when I checked in last night, they said you'd been taken to the hospital. That's why they gave me the room."

Caid was beginning to get irritated. Whose story was this? "No, ma'am," he contradicted stubbornly. "I was right here in this bed last night."

There was a long silence. "Oh."

Though it hurt his head to do it, Caid raised up so he could look across the intervening space at the opposite bed, part of which lay in a pool of light cast by the lamp on that side of the table between them.

The woman sat against a bank of pillows, gazing into space and chewing her bottom lip, obviously thinking deeply.

"Do you remember how you got into town?" she asked at last.

Caid could tell she was keeping her tone carefully noncommittal and it riled him no end.

"Yes, I remember how I got into town. Three cowboys from the MT gave me a lift. They found my truck and I hitched a ride into town with them. But my head was killing me, so I let them talk to the sheriff and I came on here."

Uh-oh. Maybe he shouldn't have said that "killing me" part. The woman's own ideas were bad enough.

"But did you actually talk to them?"

She just wasn't going to leave it alone, was she? "Hell yes, I actually talked to them. Well, some. Maybe not a whole lot, but I told them I'd ride into town with them. Then I crawled into the back of their pickup and we came on to Fort Davis."

"You told them? They didn't ask? And they let an injured man ride in the night air in the back of the pickup? That doesn't sound strange to you?"

"Not particularly," Caid replied shortly, though come to think of it, it did seem a little harsh even for West Texas cowpokes. Nobody had even offered him a handkerchief to sop up the blood.

"Did you get a good look at your truck?" the woman then asked.

"Yeah, I saw it. What about it?"

"There was blood all over the seat."

"Doesn't mean anything. There was blood all over my head and my shirt, too. I probably had a mild concussion, but so what? I've had worse. And how do you know there was blood on the seat?"

"Your truck was the sensation of the morning, Mr. Matthews. When I had breakfast, everybody was talking about it at The Drugstore this morning, so I walked down and looked at it, too. You could see the bull's-eye in the windshield where your head hit. Why in Heaven didn't you wear your seat belt?"

Caid felt his ears turn red. "I forgot," he mumbled.

"What?"

"I forgot, dammit, just like I forgot my hat and just like I forgot the blasted papers in the first place. I've had a lot on my mind lately."

There was another long silence.

"Something else was being talked about in the restaurant this morning, Mr. Matthews," she said at last.

"Caid."

"Um, Caid. People were talking about the latest news from the hospital after the ambulance took you to the emergency room. They said..."

She paused, and Caid had a feeling he wasn't going to like what came next.

"They said, um, Caid, that you were...on life support."

It was Caid's turn to be silent for a long moment. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well, hell. All I know is, I'm not in the hospital, I'm sitting right here on this bed talking to you, and the only thing wrong with me is a humdinger of a headache."

And then she just had to say it. "But no one can see you or hear you."

"You can."

"I can hear you, but I can't see you. Mr. Matthews...Caid...I'm sorry to have to say this, but I—I think you died. Life support keeps the body going, but it doesn't necessarily keep the spirit going."

"Bull hockey. I'd know it if I was dead. I'd have seen the light or something. And why the heck would I stick around town when I could go to Paradise?"

"Maybe Paradise isn't an option. Or maybe you just don't know you're dead. I mean, isn't that kind of what a ghost is, someone who doesn't understand that they're dead so they refuse to go to the other side? That's why they do exorcisms, isn't it?"

"Exorcisms! Lady, are you crazy?" Caid sat straight up in bed, then had to grab his ears to keep his head from bouncing off. Hell, if he was a ghost he wouldn't have this damn headache. And what did she mean, maybe Paradise wasn't an option?

By now, Marlie was near tears. There was no easy way to tell someone they were dead and this man just kept arguing with her.

"My name is Marlie," she said, "and I'm not the one who's crazy here. Everyone can hear and see me just fine, thank you very much. It's you who can't seem to get with the program. If you'd just go on to the other side like you're supposed to, you wouldn't have this problem."

"Marlie what?"

"Simms," she said, and sniffed.

"Marlie Simms, are you crying?"

The voice from the other bed sounded very gentle. She could have liked this man, Marlie thought. When he wasn't being stubborn.

"I'm s-sorry you're dead," she said wetly.

She could almost feel his instant withdrawal.

"I'm not dead. Now turn out the light and let's get some sleep. I'm tired of arguing. My head feels like a Chinese gong at prayer time and I'm out of aspirin."

Marlie blinked. "You've been taking aspirin?"

"While I had it, but I can't say it's done much good."

"There's medication stronger than aspirin," she said tentatively. "I, um, have some in my purse. I'll give you a couple of tablets, if you like."

"Appreciate it."

Throwing back the covers, she left the bed to get her purse, returning to sit on the edge to rummage through the bag in the lamplight. Naturally the ibuprofen was on the bottom so that she had to take out a few things.

"Say. Are you going to eat that candy bar?"

Startled, she looked over at the bed next to hers that appeared empty, yet was so very full of pure unadulterated male. How she knew that last she wasn't quite certain, except that a picture had begun to form in her mind from the moment she'd picked up his hat.

"You're...you're hungry?"

"Haven't eaten a bite all day. When I tried to order a meal, no one would listen to me."

"Here, take it," Marlie said immediately. But with no hand to give it to, she placed the chocolate bar on the far side of the bedside table. It immediately disappeared.

"I also have a couple of packages of crackers, and a granola bar," she added, placing them, too, on the nightstand.

She heard the rustle of paper wrappings and a crumbly, "Thanks," as if Caid was talking with his mouth full. In seconds, the crackers and granola bar vanished. Discarded wrappers appeared in the trash basket under the night table.

It was all very disconcerting, but not nearly as disconcerting as seeing the water carafe disappear and water slowly fill one of the glasses left for guests at their bedside. When the carafe reappeared and the glass disappeared, Marlie hurriedly placed two pain relievers within reach. Poof. They, too, were gone.

"Um, Caid," Marlie said slowly, "I don't suppose you'd consider haunting another room?"

"Not on your life. I reserved for two nights, I'm staying two nights. It's thanks to me that you have the room at all."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Marlie sighed, and switched off the lamp.

"And I'm not dead."

She let him have the last word, mainly because she was too startled to speak. Just as she plunged the room into darkness, she thought she'd seen the blurry outline of a dark head on the pillow of the other bed.

Turning over, she closed her eyes.

Nah, couldn't be.

Chapter Three

Bright sunlight and a piercing whistle from somewhere outside caused Caid to sit straight up in bed. Lordy, he hadn't slept this late in years. His head still hurt, but not with the splitting agony of the day before.

He yawned and leisurely scratched his bare chest, then threw back the covers and left the bed. First thing on the agenda today was figuring out how to get breakfast or he'd be down to eating his boots.

But before he headed to the closet for his jeans—his dirty jeans—he paused a moment to gaze at the woman who still slept peacefully in the other bed.

Marlie Simms. A dumpling of a woman, just the right size to fill a man's arms, he'd bet. Too bad she also had the look of a woman who didn't take that kind of thing lightly. Because lightly was the only thing Caid was interested in anymore.

The last time he'd taken a woman seriously, she'd taken him to the cleaners in the divorce courts—the main reason the Rolling M was in the financial crisis it was in right now.

Still, he had to admit Marlie had been pretty decent about letting a strange man share her hotel room, even if only because she thought he was a ghost.

She stirred and Caid backed up a step before he remembered that she couldn't see him. So he lingered, fascinated by the way the woman stretched all over before she opened her eyes. Her two arms went over her head in a long slow reach for the ceiling and she inhaled deeply.

Then—and by now, Caid had stopped breathing completely—her whole body undulated in one long...luxurious...sensuous...writhe.

His throat went dry.

Then her mouth parted in a dainty kitten of a yawn, and she slowly opened her eyes....

And screamed at the top of her lungs, nearly giving him a heart attack.

She was fumbling frantically at the bedside phone only to drop the receiver between the nightstand and the bed before he came to his senses.

"What is it?" he managed to gasp, by now on his knees groping under the bed in an effort to retrieve the receiver for her. "Are you having a seizure? What?"

"You! Who...How..."

Caid, finally finding the phone, handed it to her and sat back on his butt, their faces now at a level.

"Who the heck are you and get the heck out of my room!" she finally managed to get out.

Well, hell. They were back to this.

"Marlie," Caid said patiently, "I told you last night who I am. Remember?" He was the one with the head wound here.

"Caid?" Her tone sounded disbelieving.

"Yeah. Caid Matthews."

She stared him right in the eye as he squatted by her bed. Her eyes were a pale silvery gray, he noted, and looked mad as bedamned.

"Caid Matthews," she screeched, setting his ears to ringing and escalating his headache up a notch, "you're naked as a jaybird! Get out of my room!" and she threw a pillow at him.

But Caid didn't move. "You can see me?"

And Marlie finally seemed to grasp the importance of the moment. She blinked in startlement, then slowly, wickedly grinned. "Yes, Caid, I can definitely see you."

"Thank God." Leaning forward, Caid bussed her on the cheek, stood and all in the same movement, tossed the pillow in the air, pumped a triumphant fist and caught it when it came down.

Marlie tried to keep her gaze on the flying pillow, or on Caid's exuberant face. She really did.

But she really couldn't.

From sheer self-preservation, she reached behind her and threw the other pillow at him, hitting him right in the midsection. Fortunately, it was a large pillow.

"Don't you have any clothes?" she asked.

"Clothes?"

Comprehension dawned. "Oh. Clothes."

He clutched the pillow to him strategically, trying to look nonchalant as only a man with red ears can. "Well, don't just sit there. Close your eyes."

Marlie obligingly closed her eyes, opening them as soon as she heard the wardrobe door open, the better to admire Caid's rock-hard little rear as he took his jeans off a hanger. As soon as he stepped into his pants and turned around, she snapped them shut again.

"You don't fool me, Cutes. You were peeking."

"Was not." Well, not actually peeking. Her eyes had been wide open.

"So, like what you saw?"

She tried her best to look righteously indignant. "I didn't see a thing."

"Huh."

Once Caid left for the bathroom, Marlie hopped out of bed to get her pillows, then jumped back in again and leaned against them. She didn't want to get up just yet.

For one thing, the two of them milling around the room in states of semidress was just a little intimate for her peace of mind. It was far easier to deal with this cowboy's disembodied spirit than it was his materialized substance. And what a substance!

But Caid was definitely on his way to somewhere and once he left the room, she'd get up herself. In the meantime, she'd savor the mental image of the tightest tush she'd seen in a long time.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Caid's hair was damp and curled the least bit, and Marlie took a couple of seconds to get a good look at his face, the rest of his anatomy being already etched in her mind.

It was a good face, she thought, angles and planes in all the right places, a nose just a trifle large and definitely arrogant, eyes the color of pine needles.

One eye, however, had a dilly of a shiner, with its bruise taking up half of Caid's smooth cheek below and reaching into his hairline above. On the same side, his forehead bore a big knot topped with an ugly-looking gash.

He sat down in a nearby chair to pull on his boots. "Damn, I hate dirty socks," he muttered. "Do you have any idea where my bag is?"

"Ann took it when she gave me the room."

He sighed. "I'll get it later. And I need my kit. It's hell shaving with a pink razor."

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