MILLS & BOON

Miss Lizzy's Legacy

Peggy Moreland

Vintage 90s

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Miss Lizzy's Legacy

«HarperCollins»

Moreland P.

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The Cowboy and the City Gal Callie Benson had come to Guthrie, Oklahoma, to trace her roots, only to discover she was descended from Lizzy Sawyer, the town's original local madam! And when sexy cowboy Judd Barker began trailing after her - branding her with his fiery kisses - she discovered there was more of Lizzy's passion in her than she'd ever dreamed!But Judd was hiding a shocking secret - far more serious than the family scandal Callie had uncovered. And while he couldn't resist the promise of passion he saw in her eyes, he knew that once she discovered the truth, he would never be able to claim her as his own.

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 28

Miss Lizzy's Legacy
Peggy Moreland

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For my grandparents Jesse and Audra Admire, who gave me my Oklahoma roots. Thanks for sharing with me your love for the country, and by example, your strength of character, your integrity and the joy derived from simple things.

Dear Reader,

Many times a story idea is spawned from a setting. Such is the case with Miss Lizzy's Legacy. Several years ago, I visited Guthrie, Oklahoma, and visited the Blue Bell Saloon and Miss Lizzie's Once a bordello, the upstairs of the Blue Bell has been renovated into a collection of antique, art and gift shops and affectionately named Miss Lizzie's Bordello. I found the entire concept, as well as the speculation concerning Miss Lizzie, intriguing, and allowed my imagination to spin its own idea of Miss Lizzie and how she became the most infamous madam of Guthrie. Thus this story, and others to follow.

Many residents and business owners of Guthrie contributed information and/or gave permission to fictionalize their businesses: Jane, Claude and Randy Thomas of the Harrison House; Lloyd C. Lentz III whose book Guthrie, A History of the Capital City, 1889–1910 provided much-needed information and pictures; Craig and Judy Randle of the Blue Bell Saloon; the employees of the Logan County Court House; the staff at The Territorial Museum; Shirley and Bob Powell; the staff of the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple. The mistakes, of course, are all mine! I'm a fiction writer, not a historian, and I took liberty with the original building dates and origins of some of the businesses in order for my story to happen in the way I saw it.

There is a note in the newsletter published by the owners of Miss Lizzie's Bordello. It reads, "Our hope is the same as the girls of the old house, that all our customers leave satisfied." My wish for my readers is the same..that when you turn the last page of this book, you, too, are satisfied with the tale and the romance as I have chosen to spin it.

Enjoy!

Peggy Moreland

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Prologue

Guthrie, Oklahoma—1890

On days like today, I yearn for home. With the wind coloring the sky red with dust, the air so thick a person can barely breathe, I long for the ocean and its stretch of white beaches, its crisp, clean, salty breeze. I think, too, of my family, my life in Boston...but the memories do nothing but sadden me and remind me that I can never return. The decision to leave was mine, knowing when I did, my family would never permit me to come home.

The sacrifices made in coming here were great. First my family, my baby, and lastly my heart. Some will say my father was right, that I should have listened to him and stayed away from Ethan. Others who knew Ethan might understand the blindness of my adoration. At any rate, this is my home now, whether by chance or by choice.

To brighten my spirits, I have only to look out my window. The sights and sounds on the street below console me, for they are those of progress, of challenges met but not yet attained. This is a wild territory, as yet unsettled, plagued by problems of bureaucracy and greed. But there is hope here, promises for a future.

Though only recently arrived, I feel very much a part of this community of newcomers. Their enthusiasm fills me with excitement and the desire to be a participant in the settling of this new land. For me it is an opportunity to begin again. A new life, without regret for that which is gone, but with a hand outstretched to grasp at what the future might hold for me....

One

So this is Guthrie, Oklahoma. Callie wrinkled her nose as she drove down Division Street at a slow crawl. Retail shops and offices fronted both sides of the street, mostly contained in one and two-story buildings, their architecture dating back to the late 1800s and early 1900s. A man lazily whisked a broom across the sidewalk fronting his business, stirring fall leaves and sending them tumbling to the curb.

Wanting to enjoy the full benefit of what remained of the fall day and take in the sights that lay just up ahead and around the corner, Callie whipped into an empty space at the curb and lowered the convertible top of her Jaguar. As she climbed up on the bumper and stretched across the rear of the car to snap the canvas boot in place, an eighteen-wheeler roared by so close, the wind it stirred sucked at her, making her cling to the canvas to maintain her balance. A ribald proposition from the cab of the truck and three short blasts from the truck's air horn let Callie know, in no uncertain terms, what the truck driver thought of the view of her backside.

Frowning, she dropped to the roadside and tugged her leather jacket back over her hips. "Men," she grumbled under her breath. "Their brains are all located just south of their belt buckles."

With an exasperated huff of breath, she climbed back into her car and gunned the engine, kicking up puffs of dried leaves from the road's shoulder as she swerved back onto the street.

Two blocks farther and a street sign for Harrison Avenue had her turning left. Callie did a neat —although illegal—U-turn in the middle of the intersection of Harrison and First streets and parked alongside the curb.

She looked around, frowning. She didn't know what she'd expected to find when she reached her destination, but this hick town certainly wasn't it. More accustomed to the zip and zoom of expressway traffic and Dallas's towering skyline, the town of Guthrie seemed to Callie like a ghost town in comparison.

Stepping from the car, she pulled her hair back from her face, craned her head back and just looked. Three stories of Victorian brown brick marked the Harrison House, her home for the next few weeks. Across First Street, a sign outside the Victor Building boasted antiques, shops and the chamber of commerce office. With dusk quickly settling, the businesses as well as the street looked all but abandoned.

A bark and a scuffling noise sounded behind her and Callie turned, but not in time. Before she had a chance to prepare herself, a huge beast of a dog leapt at her. Planting his paws on her shoulders, the animal knocked her flat over the hood of the car, pinning her between the car's still-warm metal hood and a hundred pounds of muscled fur.

From her position beneath the animal, all Callie could see were black eyes and saliva-dripping fangs. A scream built in her throat, then stuck there as the dog lowered his gaping jaws closer to her face. Squeezing her eyes shut, she buried her fingers in the animal's thick coat, locked her elbows and shoved for all she was worth.

"Baby, heel!"

In response to the shouted command, the dog barked. The sound vibrated from his paws through Callie's body and ripped the air so close to her ear it nearly deafened her. Her eyes still squeezed shut, she continued to struggle beneath the stifling weight, waiting for the dog to sink his fangs into her cheek, or worse, her neck.

As suddenly as it appeared, the weight of the animal disappeared. Her eyes still closed, Callie let her arms fall weakly to her breasts. She lay there, her chest heaving with each indrawn breath.

"Baby, is that any way to greet a newcomer?" she heard a deep, male voice ask. "I've got him now," the man said, sounding nearer. "Do you need help getting up?"

His voice was as close as the dog's breath had been only moments before, and it blew warm against her cheek, bringing with it the scents of tobacco and peppermint. Callie opened one eye to find the man's face only inches above her own. Coal black hair worn long in the back brushed his collar, and a black Stetson shadowed his face. He poked a finger at the brim, levering the hat farther back on his head. A half grin tweaked one side of his mouth and his brown eyes danced with laughter.

If anything humorous had occurred thus far, Callie hadn't seen it! She glared at him through the slit of one eye, then lifted her head a notch and opened both to assure herself he did, in fact, have the animal under control. Struggling to her elbows, she planted a palm at the man's chest and shoved. "No, I don't need help," she stated indignantly as she clamored to her feet.

"Baby didn't mean any harm," he offered by way of an apology as he stepped aside, avoiding an elbow rammed a little too close to his midriff. "That's his way of saying welcome."

"Baby?" Callie paused in the act of straightening her clothes to look down her nose at the dog, wondering how anything so vicious could earn such an innocent name. "I'd hate to see what happens when you sic him on someone," she said dryly.

"Don't usually have the need."

Rubbing at a shoulder that was already beginning to ache, Callie shifted her gaze from the dog to the man, a frown building around her mouth and eyes as she took her first good look at him. He looked like a gunslinger straight off a Western movie set. A black duster draped him from shoulder to mid-calf, below that nothing but a glimpse of jeans and a scuffed pair of boots. The wind caught the hem of his duster and fanned it out, revealing a Western shirt of vibrant reds and blues. Instead of the gun and holster she had expected, a black tooled leather belt banded the waist of his jeans, clasped navel-high by a silver belt buckle the size of a lady's oval hand mirror.

He turned his back on Callie and braced wide, tanned hands on the side of her car, taking in the leather bucket seats and a dashboard with enough controls to confuse a fighter pilot. "You're not from around here."

A statement, not a question, yet Callie felt obligated to answer. "No, I'm from Dallas."

"Nice car," he said as he leaned over to peer into the back seat where her purse, overnight bag and several cameras were stashed.

"Thanks," she murmured grudgingly as she edged closer, not sure whether she should trust the guy or not.

He picked up a Nikon, snapped off the lens cover and put his eye behind the viewfinder. "You a photographer?" he asked as he focused in on Callie.

"Don't—" The shutter clicked and she groaned, dropping the hand she'd raised to stop him.

He lowered the camera. "Don't, what?"

She snatched the Nikon from him. "Mess with my camera," she muttered through tight lips. The pinging sound of water hitting metal had her slowly turning. Baby stood by the front left tire, his leg hiked, relieving himself on her chrome hubcap. Incensed by the audacity of both the dog and his owner, she snapped the lens cover back in place. "Don't they have leash laws in this town?"

When he didn't answer, she whipped her head around to glare at him. The lethal look in his eyes made her take a wary step backward. He held her gaze a good ten seconds that had Callie all but squirming before he settled a hand atop the dog's head and scratched an ear. "Don't need one," he said in a lazy drawl. "The dogs in this town, as well as the residents, are friendly. It's the visitors we have to keep an eye on." He turned on his heel. "Come on, Baby," he called as he strode away.

The black Labrador retriever hesitated, looked at Callie, barked, then finally loped off to follow his owner. Callie watched them both, her chest swelling in anger.

"Well, I never!" With a frustrated huff of breath, she jerked her overnight bag and purse from the back seat and headed across the street to the Harrison House.

* * *

"I've been propositioned by a truck driver, mauled by a beast I swear is half wolf and half dog, and put down by a local yokel. Prudy, the nicest thing I can say about the town so far is that it's quaint." Callie tucked the phone receiver between her shoulder and ear and stretched the phone cord as far as it would allow as she ran a hand along the carved front of an antique armoire in her hotel room, one more of the "quaint" features the town boasted.

"If you wanted to be propositioned, all you had to do was stand down on Harry Hines Boulevard with the rest of the hookers, and with the right command from John, Yogi would've taken a chunk out of your leg. 'Quaint' you can find within an hour's drive of downtown Dallas."

Though the reply was almost acid in delivery, Callie heard the concern beneath. After sharing studio space with Prudy for seven years, the two were more like sisters than business associates, and she'd learned that her friend hid her emotions behind a caustic tongue. "You miss me."

"Hardly. Without your constant distraction, the studio is relatively quiet. I've actually put in a full day at my potter's wheel and put shape to three really unique pieces."

"Ouch! My ego is taking a beating."

"If I thought for one second I could damage your ego, I'd worry." A deep sigh crossed the phone wires, then, "Callie, come home."

"Prudy, I didn't *move* to Guthrie. I'm merely here on vacation."

"A vacation is the Bahamas or Las Vegas or Vale. Guthrie is a hole-in-the-wall and a wild-goose chase you're using as an excuse to escape—"

"Prudy..." Callie warned.

"Well, it's true. Okay, so we all suffer a creative lag now and again, and considering the pressure Stephen's put you under— Oh, I almost forgot. He called."

Callie plopped down on the bed, her shoulders sagging. "Oh, no. You didn't tell him where I was staying, did you?"

"No. But your mother called, too."

"What did *she* want?"

"She wanted me to use my extraordinary persuasive powers to knock some sense into your head."

Callie fell back across the bed, slinging her forearm across her eyes. And to think she'd thought she could escape a confrontation by leaving Stephen and her parents notes and high-tailing it to Oklahoma at her great-grandfather's request before either had time to respond. What a joke! "Well, go ahead. Give it your best shot," she said in a weary voice.

"I'll tell you the same as I told your mother. I don't interfere in other people's lives."

Though she felt more like curling up in a ball and having a good cry, Callie chuckled at the outrageous lie. "That'll be the day."

"It's true! And besides," Prudy added, with an offended sniff, "if I were going to interfere, I'd have stopped you from running away before you even left."

Callie sat bolt upright on the bed. "Prudy! I have not run away. I'm simply fulfilling a request Papa made of me."

"Oh, yes, Papa. The man is one hundred and four years old and about three bricks short of a load. For heaven's sake, Callie. Half the time he doesn't even know who you are. How can you possibly think he could remember enough about your family's history for you to run off on some half-cocked errand to locate his mother's grave for him?"

"Because I love him and because he asked me to and because I needed a vacation. Satisfied?"

"No." Silence followed, then more reluctantly, "Just be careful and hurry home. I do miss you. Sort of."

* * *

Anxious to escape her room before her mother or Stephen located her, Callie headed for the lobby. Behind the front desk, a man sat with his head bent, his back to her and seemingly oblivious to her presence as he scribbled entries into a ledger sprawled across a rolltop desk.

An old display case, the bubbles and waves in its glass a testament to its age, separated her from the clerk's desk. The jewelry and trinkets filling it caught her eye, and she stopped to admire then. Colorful stones ensconced in various settings of silver, gold and platinum blinked up at her.

"Would you like to have a closer look?"

Startled, Callie glanced up to find the man still had his back to her. "No, just browsing."

"Here on vacation?"

A particularly interesting cluster of stones on a brooch caught her eye, and she replied offhandedly, "That and a quest."

"Yours wouldn't be the first." Tucking the pen in the valley created by the ledger's swelled pages, he spun his chair around to smile at her. "And what quest would you be on?"

Tufts of white hair puffed over the man's ears and a pair of reading glasses perched precariously on the end of his nose. He looked like an absentminded professor, but it was the openness of his smile that made Callie forget the brooch. After her encounter with the gunslinger on the street earlier, she'd been half-afraid the entire population of Guthrie shared his personality.

Thankful to discover that at least one person didn't, she propped her elbows on the top of the glass and smiled back. "My great-grandfather's to be honest. He asked me to track down some of his family who lived here during the late eighteen hundreds, but the only information I have is the woman's maiden name. I've never done anything like this before. Any suggestions on where I might start?"

"The courthouse, the State Capital Publishing Museum, the Oklahoma Territorial Museum, the historical society, the police records, the—"

"Whoa!" Callie laughed as she straightened to dig a scrap of paper and a pen from her purse. She scribbled the information quickly, then glanced up. "Where else?"

Springs creaked as the man reared back in the chair and folded his arms across his ample middle. "That would depend on what information you have to work with."

Callie shrugged, embarrassed that she had so little to go on. "A name, an approximate time she moved here...that's about it."

He puckered his lips thoughtfully. "All those places I mentioned will be helpful, but if you want to know more, Judd Barker down at the Blue Bell Saloon might be able to help you. He knows everything worth knowing about Guthrie."

Callie tucked the slip of paper into her jacket pocket. Knowing that all the places he'd mentioned would be closed by now, she settled on the suggestion of talking to Judd Barker. "And where do I find the Blue Bell Saloon?"

"One block west on the corner. Can't miss it. Just tell Judd, Frank sent you."

"Thanks." Callie pushed out the door, quickly folding the plackets of her jacket tighter around her as a blast of wind hit her full force. With a shiver she tucked her hands beneath her armpits and headed west in the direction the hotel clerk had suggested. The street both behind and beyond her was abandoned. Lights shone from a few businesses that were still open, but the only sounds in the night came from the click of her bootheels against the brick sidewalk that stretched in front of her and the whine of the wind as it whistled its way into the buildings' nooks and crannies.

Streetlamps cast a golden glow, lighting her way while turning the bricks beneath her feet a rosy hue. Intent on her mission and with her head bowed against the wind, she passed the Victor Building, crossed a short alley, and then a café without offering any of them a second glance. Her steps slowed, though, as she passed a single, weathered door that looked unused and long-forgotten wedged in the wall of brick.

Faint strains of music drifted through the night air, but it was the sound of a woman's laugh that made Callie stop and listen. She glanced at the locked door then inched closer to peer through its dusty glass. Though dark inside, with the aid of the streetlamp behind her she made out a wooden staircase in the narrow hallway beyond, its painted steps worn with time and hollowed with the scrape of feet traveling upwards to a second floor. The building appeared empty, yet Callie was sure the music and laughter she'd heard had come from within.

Using the heel of her fist, she rubbed a clean spot on the dusty glass, then looked again. Shadows danced on the landing above, their forms surreal, ghostlike. A woman's laugh came low and lusty, and Callie could have sworn she heard the woman's invitation to, "Come on up and join us."

Stepping back from the door, she placed a hand over a heart that was thudding a little faster than a moment before. "You're losing it, Callie," she warned beneath her breath. Turning on her heel, she all but ran the remaining distance to the Blue Bell Saloon.

Set in the corner of the building, the bar's door offered welcoming light and the comforting sound of conversation and laughter. Fighting the wind, she wrestled open the door and slipped inside.

While she took a moment to catch her breath, she glanced around. A long bar stretched on her left, behind it a mirror spanned its length. Polished brass gleamed from the footrails of the stools pushed up to the antique bar. On her right, tables covered with linen cloths were arranged in cozy groups for the diners enjoying an evening meal.

She took a step inside, intent on reaching the bar and ordering a hot cup of coffee laced with whiskey to calm her nerves before seeking out Judd Barker. A low growl stopped her—one that sounded frighteningly familiar. Steeling herself, she slowly turned and saw Baby standing between her and the door she'd just entered.

His hair bristled around the collar at his neck and down his spine, and his teeth were bared. Had he followed her in? She stole a glance at the door, expecting it to open and his owner to appear, but there wasn't a sign of the man through the glass. She thought about screaming, but feared that would only upset the dog further. Surely someone in the bar would see the dog and come to her rescue. Keeping her eye on him, she slowly began to back away. "It's okay, Baby," she soothed in a voice pitched low to hide her fear. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Her back hit a wall of flesh and she stopped, her eyes widening in surprise. Not wanting to make any sudden movements, she whispered, "Quick! Get the owner or the manager. This dog followed me in here."

"He didn't follow you, he was here first."

At the sound of the familiar male voice, Callie whirled. "You," she whispered accusingly when her gaze met the brown eyes of Baby's owner.

He spread his arms wide. "None other."

She threw a glance back at the dog to make sure he hadn't snuck up behind her before she turned to glare at the man again. "Isn't there a law against having dogs in bars?"

He shrugged. "Probably. Nobody complains, though. Baby's sort of the mascot of the place."

"Well, *I'm* complaining," she said, stabbing her thumb at her chest for emphasis. She pushed past the irritating man and made for the bar. Angling a hip to slide onto a stool, she folded her hands on the bar and managed a smile for the bartender. "Are you the owner, sir?" she asked politely.

He glanced over her shoulder at the man behind her, then looked down again, hiding a smile. "No, ma'am. I just work here."

"Well, my name is Callie Benson. I'm a visitor in Guthrie, but I've already had one run-in with that dog this afternoon and don't relish another one. Would you mind asking this man to remove the animal, please?"

"I—" The bartender shifted his gaze from hers to a spot above and behind her. Slowly, he shook his head as he returned his gaze to her. "No, ma'am. I'm sorry, but I can't."

Imperiously Callie straightened, adding a good two inches to her height. “Then I would like to speak to the owner, please. Is he here?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The bartender picked up a towel, trying real hard not to laugh and said in an overly loud voice, “Judd, this woman here wants to talk to you. Says she wants you to kick out Baby.”

If the bartender had lifted a pistol and squeezed off a shot, he couldn’t have stopped the conversation in the room any quicker. In horror Callie watched the mirrored reflection of the room’s interior as every occupant turned his head to stare at her.

“Really?”

Callie shifted her gaze on the mirror to focus on the speaker of the single word, the man behind her—Baby’s owner. She watched as he moseyed up to the bar beside her.

Nausea quickly replaced horror.

“You’re the owner?” she whispered weakly.

“Yep.”

She swallowed hard. “Judd Barker?”

“One and the same.”

“Oh, God.” She dropped her elbows to the bar and her face to her open palms.

“Baby, heel.”

Callie heard the pad of Baby’s paws and the occasional click of a claw hitting the wooden floor as the dog made his way across the room. Embarrassment kept her eyes hidden beneath her hands.

“Now, Baby,” she heard Judd say, “this lady here seems to be holding a grudge against you for the way you greeted her earlier today, and she doesn’t think you ought to be in the Blue Bell. My pappy taught me long ago that the customer’s always right, but heck, Baby, I sorta’ hate to put you out on a night as cold as this one. Can you think of a solution to this problem?”

Callie split her fingers a crack, just enough so she could peek down at the dog. He sat on his haunches not a foot away, his eyes as soulful as a cocker spaniel’s and looking for all the world like a repentant child being lectured by his father. She closed her eyes against the sight of him, refusing to soften to the beast who had twice that day scared the living daylights out of her.

The next thing she knew, Baby’s front paws were planted on her right thigh and his tongue, as coarse and abrasive as the pumice stone she kept on the side of her sink at the studio, was licking at her pressed fingers.

Steeling herself against the warmth flooding her heart, she knotted her hands on top of the bar, but continued to ignore him.... That is, she did so until she felt the damp, velvety texture of his snout as he nuzzled her cheek and heard the most pitiful whimper rumble low in his chest. Then she crumbled.

“Oh, good heavens,” she said, trying to hide the effect he had on her with irritation. He lifted his head and barked twice in rapid succession, then looked at her, panting happily, his tongue lolling, dripping saliva on the leg of her jeans.

Laughing, Callie cuffed him behind his ears and as a reward earned a full lick on the cheek. She looked up at Judd, her eyes dancing. “How do you call off this beast?”

“Baby, sit.” Immediately the black Labrador dropped to his haunches beside Callie’s barstool, but continued to stare at her with those huge black eyes. She looked right back, but with humor this time, not irritation or fright. Stealing a pretzel from the bowl on the bar, she held one out to him. He nabbed it, then lay down at her feet and happily crunched away.

“Does this mean he can stay?”

Callie turned her head to look at Judd. “Do I have a choice?” She opened a palm and gestured toward the customers in the bar who had gone back to their own private conversations. “Between them and Fido here, I think if push came to shove, *I’d* be the one cast out on the street, not him.” She looked down at the dog again and snorted. His paws were as large as her opened hand. “How in the world did a beast like that earn the name Baby?”

Judd sidled up to the bar and lowered a hip to the barstool beside her, his knee brushing her thigh. Heat radiated from his leg to hers. Callie felt it, but didn't draw away. Neither did Judd, although she knew by the slight narrowing of his eyes that he was as aware as she of the contact. She arched one brow slightly as she listened to his explanation.

"He wasn't always this big. Believe it or not, when I first got him, I could hold him in the palm of my hand. He was the runt of a litter of fifteen and about as poor as they come. Why, you could pluck the chords of a song on his rib cage, he was so skinny."

Callie couldn't help but laugh.

"My goodness, Baby," he said in mock surprise. "The lady can smile."

Immediately, her lips puckered into a frown. "Don't push your luck. I still may press charges for assault with intent to kill."

"Baby? Kill? He wouldn't hurt a fly. That's just how he greets people."

Callie looked down at the dog at the same moment Baby looked up. His appearance alone was enough to intimidate a person. Wide, square forehead set off by two pricked ears, shoulders as broad as any professional linebacker and paws as wide as her outspread hand. But his eyes... Once she looked into them, really looked, she knew the dog was a pussycat. His eyes were pure black, but soft and totally endearing. As she looked into them now, she couldn't believe she'd been afraid of this animal.

"Yeah, well..." she said in embarrassment. "He looks innocent enough now, but that growl." She suppressed a shudder, remembering, then cocked her head to look at Judd. "If he's so safe, why did he growl at me like that?"

"He's protective."

"Of what?"

"Not what, whom." He bent to scratch Baby behind the ears. "He thought you might pose a threat to me."

"Me?"

"Yeah." He straightened, and Callie saw a half grin tug at one corner of his mouth. She couldn't help thinking how similar the pet and his owner were. Like his dog, Judd Barker looked meaner than sin. A gunslinger, she remembered thinking when she'd first seen him earlier that evening. And that's exactly what he'd looked like. Tall and lanky, the lines of his face hard and unforgiving.

But now, without the sinister black duster and Stetson, and with that grin softening the hard lines of his face, he looked almost friendly. She was sure he'd deny the comparison, but beneath that rough exterior she would swear lay a heart as soft as Baby's.

"You raised your voice this afternoon, and Baby takes offense at anybody who yells at me. So when you came in the door a minute ago, Baby was just warning you to keep your distance."

"Well, for heaven's sake," she said in exasperation.

"No, for mine." He chuckled and signaled the bartender. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Something warm and strong."

He eyed her a moment, then told the man behind the bar, "A Jersey Mint for the lady and a beer for me." He hooked the heels of his boots over the barstool's brass rail and spun toward her. The graze of starched jeans against her leg was like bumping up against a live electrical wire. The jolt brought every nerve ending in her body humming to life.

"Now tell me," he said, turning his elbows out and splaying his hands on his knees. "What's a beautiful lady like you doing in a place like this?"

The line was old, but delivered with such a smoothness, Callie had to fight back a laugh. That he was a flirt was obvious, but she could give as good as she got. "Looking for you," she said demurely.

The muscles in his neck immediately tensed. "Me?"

"Yes," she replied, chuckling at his raised brow. She extended her hand. "I'm Callie Benson." His fingers closed firmly around hers. Instead of shaking as she'd intended, he merely held her hand in his while he studied her through narrowed eyes.

“And what would a pretty girl like you want with an old cowboy like me?”

The ball of his thumb moved in a slow, seductive arc across her knuckles while he asked the question, and Callie had to swallow twice before she could form an answer. “The hotel clerk at the Harrison House said you might be able to help me.”

“In what way?”

The bartender appeared and shoved a steaming mug topped with whipped cream and shaved chocolate in front of her. Thankful for the excuse to remove her hand from the heat of Judd’s, Callie accepted the mug with a grateful smile. She took a tentative sip, and her eyes widened in surprise. “This is delicious. What is it?”

“A Jersey Mint. Hot chocolate with a shot of peppermint schnapps and wallop of whipped cream on top. Thought you might enjoy the taste.”

“It’s wonderful!” She sipped again, letting the warmth of the drink penetrate while savoring the minty, chocolaty flavor. “Anyway,” she said as she licked at her upper lip to capture the smudge of whipped cream that stuck there, “I’m trying to locate information about my great-grandfather’s mother, and the clerk said you might be able to help me. I have her name and the approximate date of her arrival in Guthrie.” She wrinkled her nose. “Unfortunately, that’s all I’ve got.”

“People have had less and found what they needed. What’s the woman’s name?”

“Mary Elizabeth Sawyer.”

The beer halfway to his mouth, Judd froze, his hand halting just short of his lips. Slowly, he lowered his gaze to hers and the mug to his thigh. “Mary Elizabeth Sawyer?”

“Yes.”

“And you say she’s your great-grandfather’s mother?”

“Yes. Have you heard of her?”

Judd stared at her, his eyes darkening and narrowing with what Callie could only describe as suspicion. After a moment, he dropped his gaze to the frosted mug of beer, then lifted the glass and drained it. As he lowered the mug, he swiped the back of his hand across his mouth. Pressing his fists to his knees, he rose. “Maybe. I’ll let you know.” He shoved the empty glass across the bar. “Hank,” he called to the bartender. “The lady’s drink is on the house.” He slapped a hand to his jeans. “Come on, Baby.”

Two

Judd stood in the narrow alleyway, one shoulder propped against the rough brick wall and a hand stuffed deep in the pocket of his jeans. A ribbon of smoke curled lazily upward from the cigarette dangling from his lips. Baby lay at his feet, his head resting between his front paws. Judd's gaze was pitched high on the brick wall opposite him to a square of newer brick he could just make out in the dim light.

At one time a catwalk had crossed from the building opposite his into the second story of the building his bar was housed in. At some point in time, someone had seen fit to remove the catwalk and had bricked up the openings in both buildings.

But the memory of its purpose remained.

Sighing, Judd pulled the cigarette from his mouth and flicked it away. He hunkered down beside Baby and dropped a hand to scratch absently at the dog's head. As was his habit, the animal rolled to his back, exposing his belly. Chuckling, Judd scratched him there, as well. "You big lug," he said in gentle reproach. He sighed again as he lifted his gaze back to the wall.

If the woman had asked about anything or anyone else, he would have given her what information he could and sent her on her way without a second thought. But the lady had made a mistake. A big one. Mary Elizabeth Sawyer—the woman she claimed was her great-grandfather's mother—had never had any children. At least none who had lived.

All of which led Judd to wonder who Callie Benson really was, and what she wanted. The options were limited, for what would bring anyone to Guthrie, Oklahoma? The town was small, businesses few. Guthrie's only draws were the Lazy E Rodeo Arena and the bed-and-breakfast inns that served the tourists who came to enjoy a bit of history.

She sure as hell wasn't a cowboy. A tourist, then? He shook his head at the thought. Granted she had a car full of cameras, but they weren't the standard equipment a tourist would carry. More like a professional photographer's gear. To his way of thinking, that only left one purpose for her visit. She'd come to dig up more dirt on Judd Barker. As if enough dirt hadn't been heaped on his name already.

He heaved another sigh. "So what are we going to do, Baby? Call her hand?"

In response, the dog whined low in his throat. The sound vibrated through Judd's fingertips and drew a rueful smile. Baby was his oldest friend, and at times in his life, his only friend.

Baby's ears perked, and he sat up and growled. Judd placed a restraining hand on the dog's head to quiet him, and listened. He heard the faint click of footsteps on the brick sidewalk on the street beyond and took a step back to fade deeper into the alley's shadows. Moments later he watched as Callie passed by the alley's opening, her head bent against the wind, her shoulders hunched against the cold.

She didn't look like a reporter, at least not the sleazy variety who'd hounded him in the past. She looked like money, old money, the kind who dressed as they pleased and thumbed their noses at fashion. The leather jacket she wore was soft and supple with age. She wore it with a disregard for its value that only the privileged could pull off. Her jeans were even older than her jacket and threadbare in places that made a man look twice.

And her car. Jesus. The sticker price on it alone was higher than that on most of the houses in Guthrie.

As he watched her disappear from sight, the rounded cheeks of her butt playing a game of "now you see me, now you don't" beneath the hem of her jacket, he curled his fingers in Baby's fur. That he was attracted to her didn't surprise him. Last time he checked, he wasn't blind or dead—yet. And Callie Benson was a beautiful woman. Hers was a God-given beauty, nothing fake or implanted or modified about her. And, with his experience, Judd should know.

He had a reputation as a lady's man, and he couldn't deny the tag. The guys in the band and in his road crew used to have an ongoing bet to see how long it took Judd to get laid once he hit a new town. To him it wasn't a competition, only the simple pleasure of a pretty woman and—if she was willing—good sex. He knew no other kind.

Yep, in the past a woman out on the prowl, looking for a good time, would've found it with Judd Barker.

But not anymore. He'd learned to curb his appetite for the taste and feel of a pretty woman.

"Liar," he muttered under his breath. He slapped a hand against his leg and headed for the rear door that led to his bar with Baby padding along at his heels.

* * *

Callie burst through the door of the hotel, her arms wrapped tight around her. Frank turned and looked up at her over the top of his glasses. "Cold out?"

"Freezing!"

He chuckled and gave his chair a push, spinning around to face her. "It's the wind. Cuts right through a person."

"That's for sure." She shivered and dropped her arms to shake them in an attempt to get her blood flowing warm again.

"Did you find Judd?"

She stopped flapping long enough to frown. "Yeah, I found him, all right." She crossed to the front desk and propped her elbows on its top, puckering her lips into a pout. "What is it with that man? Does he eat nails for breakfast, or what?"

"Judd?" Frank chuckled and reared back in his chair, lacing his hands behind his head. "Nah, he just doesn't take to strangers." He leaned forward to scrape some papers from his desk. "Had a call or two while you were out." He stretched to pass the messages to Callie.

"Thanks, Frank." Frowning, she stuffed the papers into her pocket without looking at them. The burden of them made her shoulders sag, but she forced a smile. "Well, I guess I'll call it a night. See you in the morning."

"Sure thing. We start serving breakfast at eight."

Once in the privacy of her room, Callie shrugged out of her jacket, then held it by its sleeve while she dug in the pocket for the messages Frank had given her. She tossed the jacket to the bed as she opened the first.

Call Stephen—214-555-5622.

She sank down on the bed and unfolded the second message.

Call Stephen. Urgent—214-555-5622.

She fell back, groaning, her hand moving to shove her hair from her eyes. In the note she'd left him, she had asked for space, time. Obviously, Stephen wasn't going to honor either request.

A knock at the door had her jackknifing to a sitting position. Frowning, she scooted off the bed and crossed to the door. Standing on tiptoe, she peered through the peephole. All she could see was unrelieved black, which in itself was enough to identify her visitor. The outline of a Stetson pulled low on the man's forehead only served to confirm who stood outside.

Grimacing, she flung open the door. "A little late for a social call, don't you think?"

He planted a hand on either side of the frame and leaned toward her, his gaze boring deep into hers. "Who are you?"

A frown puckered between her brows at his threatening look, and she took a cautious step back. "Callie Benson."

"So you said." He stepped inside, blocking any chance of her slamming the door in his face. "But what I want to know is *what* you are. Why you're here."

Unconsciously, she lifted a hand to her throat, wondering if Frank would hear if she screamed loud enough. "I told you, to find information on my great-grandfather's mother."

His hand arced out, fanning the air narrow inches from her nose. “Cut the bull. Mary Elizabeth Sawyer never had any children.”

Callie fell back a step. “I beg your pardon?”

“She never had children. None that lived, anyway.”

“She most certainly did!” She whirled to grab her purse. “I have the papers right here to prove it.” She dug in the depths of her feed-bag style purse, pulled out yellowed documents and thrust them under his nose. “See for yourself. William Leighton Sawyer, born June 14, 1890, Oklahoma Territory. Son of Mary Elizabeth Sawyer.”

Judd looked at the paper, then shoved her hand aside. “There’s a tombstone out in Summit View Cemetery that carries the same information.”

Callie’s mouth dropped open, then clamped shut with an indignant click of teeth. “I’ll have you know my great-grandfather is William Leighton Sawyer, and he might be old, but he’s very much alive.”

“You’re a reporter, aren’t you?”

“A reporter!” she repeated, her voice rising in anger and frustration. “No, I’m not a reporter. I’m a—” She threw up her hands, unable to believe she was even having this conversation. “I don’t owe you any explanations. Now get out of my room, or I’ll call Frank and have you thrown out.”

When he didn’t move, she reached for the phone. He caught her arm at the wrist and pulled it to his thigh, dragging her to stand nose-to-nose with him. “You came to find me, didn’t you?”

Callie’s chest swelled in anger. “What are you? Some kind of egomaniac? I don’t know you, and furthermore, don’t care to know you. Now, if you don’t mind,” she said through clenched teeth as she tried to wrench free of him. “Get your hands off me.”

Instead of releasing her, he tightened his fingers on her wrist, making her wince. “Look me in the eye and tell me you’ve never heard of Judd Barker.”

She lifted her gaze to his and glared right back at the cold, hate-filled eyes pinned on her. “No, I’ve never heard of—” She stiffened as the name clicked a hidden memory, one of headlines with the name in bold, dark type. Judd Barker—Country Western’s Favorite Son Gone Bad.

She wasn’t a fan of country music, but like every other person who’d ever stood in a grocery checkout line, she’d read the headlines on the tabloids racked there. She would have dismissed them for the sensationalistic trash they were, except she’d also seen the cover of “People Weekly” magazine and read the story within. Judd Barker Charged With Rape Of Fan.

He watched her eyes darken in fear and felt the kick of it in her pulse through his fingertips. Her reaction both sickened and angered him. “So you have heard of me.”

“Ye-yes,” she stammered.

“And you came to see for yourself what kind of man would rape a defenseless woman and maybe get a front-page story for your trouble? Well, take a good look, sweetheart. This may be the only chance you get.”

Her head wagged back and forth in mute denial before she found her voice. “No. No, I told you. I didn’t come here to find you. I came to trace my great-grandfather’s mother.”

He twisted her hand behind his waist, dragging her body flush against his. He fisted his other hand in her hair, yanking her head back, forcing her face up to his. “Liar.”

Unwanted tears budded in her eyes. Her neck ached with the strain of looking up at him, but she was no match for his strength. Refusing to show her fear, she met his gaze squarely. “I’m not lying. And if you do not remove your hands from me by the time I count to three, I’m going to scream bloody hell and have everyone in the hotel in this room.” She narrowed her eyes, levering a note of threat into her voice as she added, “With one charge of rape of against you, you might have a hard time explaining your presence in my room. One. Two. Thr—”

His face came down, his lips crushing against hers, absorbing the scream that built in her throat. Her heart slammed against her chest at the first shocking contact. He’s going to rape me, she thought

incredulously as she instinctively strained against the hand that held her face to his. Or kill me, she thought on a shudder. And she didn't know which would be worse.

With every ounce of strength within her, she fought him, twisting her wrist within fingers cinched like a steel band, shoving against a chest, iron-hard with padded muscle. Her attempts to escape were futile for his mouth continued to punish her for a wrong she couldn't name.

Her wrist throbbed from the effort, her neck ached from the strain, yet she continued to struggle as his lips persisted in their bruising assault.

Then it changed. Everything. In the span of a heartbeat, his fingers loosened in her hair to cup her nape, his grip on her hand disappeared only to reappear, softer, gentler, at her waist. The lips on hers no longer punished, but teased; his tongue hot and wet, tracing the seam of her lips, skimming down her throat to savor the smooth skin there.

She found the sudden change from abductor to seducer as debilitating as his strength had been only moments ago. She knew that nothing held her to this man any longer, but she couldn't—didn't—pull away.

Instead, she curled her fingers into his shirt and clung. Against the flat of her palm, his heart beat. The back of her hand monitored her own heart's thundered response. Passion, the kind she'd dreamed of but wasn't sure existed, heated the blood coursing through her veins, turning her skin to fire, her sanity to a pile of ash.

He lifted a hand to nudge off his hat. It hit the floor, bounced against her leg then rocked slowly to a stop at her feet. Her fingers climbed up his chest to anchor on his shoulders. Her chest heaved with each intake of breath, her nipples hardening with each scrape of silk against cotton.

Her reaction to him both shocked and repulsed her. This man was a total stranger...a suspected rapist...and yet there was nothing strange about the way she felt in his arms. There was a familiarity in the way they responded to each other, an instantaneous spark of recognition that defied reason.

She dropped her head back on a low moan. "Don't," she whispered.

"Don't, what?" he murmured, his breath heating the soft skin of her throat before he returned his lips to hers. He leveled his hands on her waist, then skimmed slowly upward over her ribs.

"Don't—" She sucked in a ragged breath when his thumbs pushed against the swell of her breasts, sending rivers of sensation flooding through her. "You've got to stop," she cried on a broken sob. "Or else I'll— I'll—"

His body went rigid against hers. "Or else you'll what?" He took a step back, branding her with eyes dark with loathing. "Scream rape?" With his gaze still locked on hers, he bent and scooped his hat from the floor and fitted it over his head. He ran a finger along the brim to pull it low over his eyes.

"It's not rape when a woman's willing," he said, then spun and walked to the door, his black duster swishing against the legs of his starched jeans. He stopped, one hand braced high on the door, then turned to look at her over his shoulder. "And you, sweetheart, were more than willing."

* * *

Hours later Callie lay on her back, the sheet and blanket clutched to her chin, her eyes wide, staring at the ceiling overhead. Though the thermostat in the room registered a comfortable seventy-two degrees, shivers shook her body.

He'd been wrong. She hadn't been willing. She'd been desperate, almost crazy with her need for him. If he hadn't stopped when he did, she wasn't at all sure she could have found the strength to end what he had started.

Even now, with regret stinging her eyes and throat, an ache still throbbed between her legs, crying out for a satisfaction she knew she shouldn't want.

A sob rose in her throat, and she caught her lower lip between her teeth, holding it back. She'd always known there was more between a man and a woman than what she'd experienced. More than just a physical joining. There had to be a higher level, an almost spiritual experience that transformed

a man and a woman when they touched. She'd never experienced that with Stephen, which explained her hesitancy in agreeing to set a date for their marriage.

But she had felt "that something different" with Judd Barker. God help her, but she'd felt it.

* * *

"Prudy, I want you to fax me everything you can find on Judd Barker."

"The country-western singer?"

Callie juggled the phone between her ear and shoulder while she laced up her hiking boots. "Yes."

"For heaven's sake, why?"

She caught the phone in her hand, tightening her fingers on the receiver as she lurched to her feet. "Look, I don't have time to explain right now. I'm on my way to the cemetery to see Papa's grave."

"Papa's! He's not dead! You're supposed to be looking for his mother's grave. Callie, what is going on? Are you all right?"

Callie closed her eyes and pressed a hand to her forehead, not sure that she'd ever be all right again. Not after last night. But she wouldn't trouble Prudy with that now. "Yes," she replied. "I'm fine. I'm just in a hurry. I'll call later and explain."

She hung up before Prudy could demand an immediate explanation. Gathering up her jacket and purse, she headed out the door. She avoided the elevator and took the stairs, shrugging on her jacket as she went, hoping to escape the hotel without seeing anyone. She slipped out the side door and shoved sunglasses onto her nose. Thankfully, the wind was gone, the air crisp and clear, the sun almost blinding it was so bright.

She crossed quickly to her car, unlocked the door and tossed in her purse. Leaning over, she pushed the button to lower the top, then moved to the back of the car to snap the boot in place. A streak of black flashed past her, nearly making her jump out of her skin. She turned to find Baby perched in the back seat.

Glowering at the dog, she marched to the open door. "Out!" she ordered, her index finger pointing in the direction she expected him to take. The black Lab simply looked at her, his tongue lolling, his tail swishing across the leather seat. She planted a knee in the bucket seat, stretched to close a hand around the dog's collar and tugged. Baby braced himself and tugged just as effectively in the opposite direction. After a good two minutes of tug-of-war with the stubborn beast, Callie gave up.

"Fine," she muttered under her breath. "You can ride along, but you better watch your manners," she warned. "And no drooling on the seats," she added as she twisted around and dropped down behind the steering wheel.

Gunning the engine, she peeled away from the curb, sending leaves spinning in whirlwinds behind her rear tires. After giving her sunglasses an impatient shove back on her nose, she dug into her purse for the directions Frank had given her earlier that morning for Summit View Cemetery.

Once she reached the cemetery, she'd prove Judd Barker to be the lying snake that he was, she promised herself as she braked for a red light. Her fingers drummed on the steering wheel in impatience. She'd walk the entire cemetery if necessary, look at every headstone and marker, and when she didn't locate one with William Leighton Sawyer's name on it, then she'd find Judd Barker and—

She glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror. And what? she asked herself. Have him tarred and feathered and run out of town? The image drew a smug smile.

It isn't rape when a woman's willing. And you, sweetheart, were more than willing. A shiver chased down her spine at the memory and her frown disappeared.

She despised him for his cockiness. She despised him more because he'd been right.

A horn blared behind her and a man's voice yelled, "Hey! What shade of green do you want?"

Scowling at the man in the rearview mirror, she shifted into first gear, pressed the accelerator to the floorboard, then tossed back her head and laughed when she saw the look of surprise on his face when she left him in a cloud of dust.

Frank's directions proved easy to follow, and within minutes she drove between the limestone pillars and black wrought-iron gates marking the cemetery's entrance. The cemetery was laid out just as Frank had described. A tree-lined drive led to a center island where the United States flag and that of Oklahoma waved and snapped in the wind. The island served as the hub while narrow paved lanes fed off of it like spokes, dividing the cemetery into neat sections.

Callie parked beneath an elm tree and sagged back in her seat as she looked around, overwhelmed by the number of markers scattered across the hill. "Come on, Baby," she muttered in resignation as she climbed from her car. "We might as well get started."

Baby bounded out of the back seat and trotted along beside her. They walked for over an hour, with Baby occasionally darting away to chase a squirrel up a tree or a rabbit into his burrow. With each passing marker, Callie's original purpose for the trip was forgotten as emotion built, tightening her throat. Infants, young children, young wives. Each marker she read reflected the hard life of the early settlers of Guthrie and the tolls it took. One in particular caught her attention, and she stopped, studying the grave of a mother and infant buried together.

Sighing, she walked on to the next marker. The surname BODEAN topped the double-wide marker and below it the names Jedidiah to the left and Mary Elizabeth to the right.

Mary Elizabeth? She knelt in front of the marker and, using her thumbnail, scraped away the gold-brown moss which had attached itself to the etchings in the granite and noted the dates. The age according to the year of birth would be approximately right for her great-great-grandmother's, but the stone read that the woman had died in 1938. That would have made her sixty-seven years of age when she'd passed away, and Papa's mother had died in childbirth.

Certain that she was wasting her time, she took a pen and paper from her purse and jotted down the dates of the couple's births and deaths in order to check them with the court records later.

With a little less than half the cemetery covered, she pushed to her feet. "Come on, Baby. Let's go." She strode off, but stopped and looked back when she heard Baby whimpering. The dog stood at the edge of the plot, clawing at the ground. Dead grass and dirt flew beneath his front paws.

"Baby! No!" Callie ran to clamp a hand around the dog's collar and haul him back. "You mustn't dig here." Feeling responsible for the dog's desecration of the grave site, Callie dropped to her knees to scrape the dirt back in place. She bit back an oath when her finger rammed something hard. Curious, she smoothed the dirt away and saw the edge of a flat granite stone. Using the palm of her hand she whisked away the dirt and dead grass covering it, then shoved her sunglasses to the top of her head.

William Leighton Sawyer

Infant Son of Mary Elizabeth Sawyer

June 14, 1890

She sat down hard on her heels and dragged her hands to her knees. "No," she murmured, shaking her head in denial. "No, it can't be."

She dug her nails into the fabric at her knees, clinging to reason. William Leighton Sawyer hadn't died at birth. He had lived a very full life, fathering two sons himself while parlaying the Boston Sawyers' wealth to new highs in Texas oil.

He'd outlived both his sons and saw three of his grandchildren—one of which was Callie's mother—start their own families, giving him four great-grandchildren. He had ruled the dynasty he'd created from the eighteenth floor of the office building he owned in downtown Dallas before he'd been forced into retirement at the age of ninety-eight by Callie's father and a handful of greedy relatives who couldn't wait for him to die so they could get their hands on his money.

They'd said he was crazy, although the legal papers they'd drawn against him read mentally incompetent. Callie had never considered him crazy. Eccentric, yes, but who wasn't in their own way?

Throughout her life, she'd heard the stories about Papa. How his mother had run away from home, chasing after some smooth-talking stranger on his way to the Oklahoma Territory to seek his fortune. How the man had gotten her pregnant and abandoned her without marrying her once they'd arrived in the wild territory. And how she'd died giving birth to Papa.

Cousins from Boston who'd come to Texas to visit during the summers would whisper stories of how Papa was considered the renegade in the family, just like his mother. It was that streak of wildness that had carried him to Texas, they'd said, much to the dismay of the grandparents who'd taken him in and raised him as their own. Papa had thumbed his nose at them all and their high-society ways and proceeded to build a fortune that made the Boston Sawyers look like poor white trash in comparison.

Always strong and full of energy, but with the power of his businesses stripped from him, Papa's health had quickly faded and his focus had shifted to his past. His mother had become his obsession. Her life in Oklahoma and his part in her death seemed to haunt him. He wanted to find where she'd been buried and ensure she'd received a proper burial. Although the rest of the family had pooh-poohed his request as just one more outrageous demand from a crazy old man, Callie had agreed to help him.

A tear streaked down her face followed quickly by another, then another, until her shoulders shook with sobs as she stared at the slab of granite. Guilt stabbed at her, for her reasons in agreeing to help Papa weren't purely unselfish. Yes, she loved him and wanted to help him, but she'd also wanted to get out of Dallas, and Papa's request for help had been the excuse she'd needed.

With the deadline quickly approaching for a signed commission sculpture she couldn't seem to create, and Stephen's and her mother's constant pressure for her to set a wedding date, she'd needed to escape it all. In her mind, that put her in the same category as the rest of her family. Selfish, greedy and spineless. She'd thought she could locate the grave, take a picture for Papa and maybe find a few tidbits of information about his mother for him, then spend the rest of her vacation working out her own personal problems.

And now this.

Baby dropped down beside her, nuzzling his snout against her hand. Hardly aware of her movements, she shifted a hand to scratch his ears. He lifted his head and licked at the tears on her cheek, whimpering low in his throat.

"Oh, Baby." Callie threw her arms around the dog's neck and buried her face in his fur. "Now what am I going to do?"

"You can start by letting loose my dog."

Callie opened her eyes to find a pair of scuffed boots planted not a foot from her knee. She raised her gaze, skimming it over jeans and a black duster until her eyes met the accusing ones of Judd Barker.

She immediately turned away, hiding her tears. Heat flooded her face as she remembered all too clearly the way she'd responded to him the night before. "I didn't steal your dog," she mumbled.

"Didn't say you did," Judd replied, although that was exactly the thought that had crossed his mind when Frank had told him he'd seen Callie drive away earlier that morning with Baby riding in the back seat of her car.

Callie dropped her hands from around Baby's neck and swiped at her cheeks. "You insinuated as much. But the truth of the matter is, your dog jumped in the back of my car and wouldn't get out. It was easier to just let him ride along."

Judd hunkered down beside them, placing a hand on Baby's head. "When he sets his mind on something, he's hard to sway."

Callie sniffed and gazed off in the distance, refusing to look at him.

Judd nodded in the direction of the stone. "I see you found what you were looking for."

Without favoring him a glance, Callie replied sharply, "I don't know that I have."

“Seems clear enough to me. There’s the stone bearing the name William Leighton Sawyer, infant son of Mary Elizabeth Sawyer. And there—” he said with a nod toward the larger upright stone “—is the grave of Mary Elizabeth Bodean. What more proof do you need?”

She snapped her head around to glare at him. “I don’t know for a fact that Mary Elizabeth Sawyer and Mary Elizabeth Bodean were one and the same person.”

The streak of tears on her face took Judd by surprise, for he couldn’t imagine what the woman would have to cry about. The grave was more than a hundred years old, so she couldn’t have any affection for the infant buried there. Which led him to believe that more than likely she was crying because she’d been caught in her lies. Still, the tears moved him. He tucked his duster behind his hip and dug in his back pocket for a handkerchief. He held it out to Callie.

“It’s clean,” he assured her when she hesitated.

“Thanks,” she mumbled grudgingly as she accepted it. She mopped her eyes, then blew her nose.

“Why the tears?”

The question made fresh ones well in her eyes. Grimacing, she balled the handkerchief in her fist. “I’m just tired, is all. I didn’t sleep well last night.” As soon as the words were out, she regretted them, knowing that with his ego, Judd would naturally assume thoughts of him were what kept her awake. Biting her lower lip, she glanced away.

Judd hadn’t slept well, either, but he wouldn’t tell her that. He didn’t trust this woman any farther than he could throw her, but he couldn’t deny the fact that she had aroused a craving in him that he’d kept under harness for the better part of a year. Just his luck to be tempted by another lying wench.

Because he wasn’t willing to confess to his own lack of sleep or the reason for it, he thought it only fair to ease her embarrassment. “Always had trouble sleeping in a strange bed, myself.”

If she heard him, she didn’t acknowledge it, for she continued to ignore him, staring off in the distance. She looked so pitiful, kneeling there in the dirt, looking so forlorn and lost that Judd was tempted to comfort her. He quickly squelched the urge. He didn’t need this headache.

Sighing, he pushed against his knees to stand above her. “Sorry if Baby made a nuisance of himself.” He shuffled his feet, not sure what else to say, but feeling something more was needed. “If you want to verify that Mary Elizabeth Sawyer and Mary Elizabeth Bodean are one and the same, you can check the records over at the Logan County Courthouse.”

“I intend to.”

Her acidic tone made him wish he’d kept the helpful advice to himself. The woman had an attitude and seemed determined to take her hostilities out on him.

“Come on, Baby,” he said, slapping a hand to his thigh. “Let’s go home.” He turned away, vowing that they’d be churning ice cream in hell before he offered any more help to Callie Benson.

Three

"Here it is!" The court clerk spun the heavy ledger toward Callie and pointed to an entry dated August 1, 1891. Callie's heart sank as she read the entry the woman indicated. Throughout the trip from the cemetery to the Logan County Courthouse she'd held on to the thread of hope that Mary Elizabeth Sawyer and Mary Elizabeth Bodean were two different women. But the proof was there before her eyes: "Mary Elizabeth Sawyer and Jedidiah Bodean, wed on August 1, 1891." The words were blurred on the yellowed page, but legible, and they forced her to accept the truth.

Mary Elizabeth Sawyer hadn't died in childbirth as her great-grandfather had been led to believe. She'd married Jedidiah Bodean, and—if the information on the tombstone was accurate—had lived to the ripe old age of sixty-seven.

Then why had Papa, as an infant, been returned to Boston to be raised by his grandparents? she wondered. And why had he been told his mother had died? The answer was obvious and had Callie sinking into a chair, her knees no longer able to support her.

His mother hadn't wanted him. And now it was up to Callie to tell Papa that the mother whose death he'd blamed himself for all these long years hadn't died as a result of his birth. The truth was, she hadn't cared enough about her son to keep him. Anger burned through Callie for the injustice to her great-grandfather.

"Ma'am? Are you all right?"

Callie lifted her head. "Y-y-yes," she stammered as she slowly rose. "I'm fine." She raked her fingers through her hair, but her thoughts weren't as easily gathered as the strands of hair that had fallen across her face. She looked up at the clerk. "I need to find out more about these people. By any chance, have you ever heard of them or a family of that name?"

The woman offered an apologetic smile. "No, I'm sorry. I'm not originally from Guthrie. My husband and I moved here two years ago." Her smile brightened. "But I know someone who might be able to help. No one knows more about Guthrie than—"

Callie feared she knew what was coming, because the description so resembled the one Frank had given the night before. "Judd Barker," she said, finishing the sentence for the clerk, her shoulders sagging.

"Him, too," the woman said, tipping her head in acknowledgement. "But I was going to suggest you talk to Molly Barker, Judd's mother. She used to teach Oklahoma history over at the high school, but she's retired now. Spends most of her time doing volunteer work for the historical society."

Though she wasn't sure she wanted to talk to Judd Barker's mother, or even what she'd ask if she did decide to, Callie dutifully jotted down the location of the historical society headquarters, then gestured toward the ledger. "Would it be possible for me to get a copy of this document?"

The woman picked up the large volume. "Certainly. It'll only take a minute."

Callie waited, curling her fingers against the chair's back, wishing like hell she'd never heard of Guthrie, Oklahoma. She'd have been a lot better off staying in Dallas, dealing with Stephen face-to-face and leaving Papa's memories of his mother intact.

* * *

Callie opened the door of the Harvey Olds House Museum where she'd been told she would locate Mrs. Barker, to find a woman dressed in a period costume standing at the end of a short hall.

"Mrs. Barker?"

The woman turned, pulling off her glasses. "Yes?"

Callie extended her hand. "I'm Callie Benson. A clerk at the courthouse thought you might be able to help me. I'm trying to trace some of my family."

The woman's smile was genuine and warm as she took Callie's hand in greeting. "I'd be happy to assist in any way I can." She waved Callie into the parlor toward an antique settee while she took the

rocker opposite it. “Callie Benson,” she replied thoughtfully, settling her skirt and petticoats around her. She tapped the earpiece of her glasses against her lower lip as she studied Callie. “Your name is awfully familiar. Were you one of my students?”

Callie smiled patiently. “No, I’m a visitor to Guthrie.”

The woman blew out a relieved breath, sending wisps of grey hair that had escaped her bun, flying. “Thank goodness. I didn’t think my memory had faded that badly.” She put the toe of a high-topped shoe to the floor, settled her hands on the chair’s curved arms and gently started the chair rocking. “So, how can I be of assistance?”

“Well, I’m not sure,” Callie replied hesitantly. “I’m trying to locate information about Jedidiah and Mary Elizabeth Bodean. Have you heard of them?”

“The Bodeans!” she parroted. “Lands, yes! One of Guthrie’s first families. Jedidiah made the run in 1889 and claimed himself some prime real estate in what is now downtown Guthrie. You see, because of the law’s governing townships in the new territory, Guthrie at that time was divided into four sections: Capital Hill, West Guthrie, Guthrie Proper and East Guthrie.” She batted a hand, chuckling, and sent the chair rocking again. “But you didn’t come here for a history lesson, did you, dear?”

“Oh, no, please. It’s fascinating.”

“Yes, it is. But, then, I love history. But you wanted to know about the Bodeans. Now, what exactly can I tell you about them?”

“Everything. I wasn’t even aware Mary Elizabeth had married until I saw the tombstone.”

“My, yes, she married. Such a romantic tale. As the story goes, Jedidiah courted Miss Sawyer for over a year before she agreed to marry him. Jedidiah was a bit of a rake. Had his hands in all kinds of businesses, a few of which some of the townspeople didn’t approve,” she added, arching a knowing brow at Callie. “There was also another complication. You see, Miss Sawyer believed she was in love with someone else, then along came Jedidiah and swept her off her feet.” She tipped back her head and laughed merrily. “Although I’m quite sure Jedidiah wouldn’t agree with the term ‘swept,’ being as it took him over a year to convince her to marry him.”

“Did they have children?”

“No.” She shook her head sadly. “Not together, anyway. Elizabeth had a child before they married, but the child died at birth. Times were hard then. No doctors or hospitals to speak of. Usually women helping women through the births.” She knitted her forehead in concern and leaned toward Callie. “Did I say something to upset you, dear?”

Callie scraped the heels of her hands across her cheeks to swipe at the hot tears. She tried to smile, but couldn’t. She was too damned mad. “No, it’s nothing you said. It’s just that Mary Elizabeth Sawyer’s son, the one everyone insists died at birth, is my great-grandfather.”

Mrs. Barker reared back, her eyes wide. “Great-grandfather?” she repeated.

Callie dug in her purse and pulled out the faded paper on which Papa’s birth was recorded. “This is his birth certificate,” she said as she passed the paper to Molly. “Contrary to popular belief, William Leighton Sawyer is very much alive and lives in a nursing home in Dallas, Texas.”

Molly placed her reading glasses back on her nose and studied the document. “It looks real enough,” she murmured.

“I assure you,” Callie replied indignantly, “it is.”

Molly leaned to pat Callie on the knee. “I’m sorry, dear. I didn’t mean to infer that you weren’t honest. I just don’t know what to make of all of this.”

“Nor do I.”

Molly passed the document back. “Makes a person wonder if there wasn’t foul play of some sort.” She sighed. “I guess we’ll never know.”

“Oh, yes we will.”

Molly raised a brow. “But that was over a hundred years ago. How will you ever unravel it all now?”

“I don’t know, but I’m not going back to Dallas until I find out the truth.”

“That kind of research will take time,” Molly warned. “Can you be away from your family and your job that long?”

Stephen came to mind, if only briefly, but Callie quickly discarded the thought. “Family isn’t a problem.” Her thoughts shifted to the statue she’d been commissioned to sculpt for the new women’s wing at a hospital in Houston. The deadline for that silently ticked nearer—yet another point of stress in an already stressful life. “As far as my job goes, I do have a project I’m working on. But I can do that here as easily as at home, although I’ll require more space than my room at the Harrison House offers.”

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