MILLS & BOON

Vintage *Cherish*

Not Your Average Cowboy

CHRISTINE WENGER

Christine Wenger

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THE DESERT NEWSIs Rattlesnake Ranch ready for prime time?Stop the presses! Miss Hospitality herself, Meredith Bingham Turner, has been spotted bringing her unmistakable decorative flair–and delicious recipes–to Rattlesnake Ranch. Rumor has it she' s visiting her best friend, Karen, and helping to spruce up the Porter homestead. But I think there' s a reason she might be extending her stay: her best friend' s brother, the bona fide cowboy, Bucklin Porter.Single dad Buck can be as prickly as an Arizona cactus if he thinks that you' re messing with his home–or with the daughter he adores. But even he has to admit that ranching' s been a hard road recently. Domestic goddess Merry might be the solution to all of Buck' s prayers…in more ways than one!

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Содержание

“You’ll be perfect,” Merry said, turning in her chair to face Buck. “I thought that the second I saw you.” 6
Not Your Average Cowboy 7
CHRISTINE WENGER 8
Contents 9
Chapter One 10
Chapter Two 16
Chapter Three 22
Chapter Four 28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 32

“You’ll be perfect,” Merry said, turning in her chair to face Buck. “I thought that the second I saw you.”

He raised an eyebrow, obviously amused. “Oh, yeah?”

“Your blue eyes are killer. And a couple shots of you with your shirt off shoveling hay, well…” She suddenly realized that she’d said too much.

He smiled, knowingly. His blue eyes pinned her with a gaze so intense, she couldn’t breathe. “So, you’ve been watching me, Miss Turner?”

His voice was throaty. Sexy. A shiver went through her.

“Well, not exactly.” She tried to look anywhere but at him. “I was looking at you from a purely business standpoint.”

“But you liked what you saw? From a purely business standpoint, that is.”

“Yes. I mean no.”

How did she get into this?

“Chris Wenger writes stories that tug at your
heart and make you laugh out loud.”
—New York Times and USA TODAY
bestselling author Carla Neggers

Dear Reader,

I am a native central New Yorker who has never left the area, but my sister moved to Tucson after she graduated from college. After one visit, I fell in love with all things cowboy, cactus and coyotes. Then I discovered rodeo, specifically bull riding. Yee-haw! Now my husband and I follow the Professional Bull Riders (PBR) and the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association (PRCA). We’ve met many of the cowboys, bull fighters and stock contractors and have traveled to many events. These guys (and gals) are salt-of-the-earth types who come from hardworking ranch families. I’ve found that they are polite, honorable and truly good role models for their young fans.

That’s why I love to write about cowboys. There’s just something special about them.

So no matter where you live, get your favorite beverage, sit back, put your feet up and let me tell you about a cowboy who lives in Lizard Rock, Arizona, who meets his match in a TV star from Boston….

Cowboy up!

CHRIS WENGER

Not Your Average Cowboy
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CHRISTINE WENGER

has worked in the criminal justice field for more years than she cares to remember. She has a master's degree in probation and parole studies and sociology from Fordham University, but the knowledge gained from such studies certainly has not prepared her for what she loves to do most—write romance! A native central New Yorker, she enjoys watching professional bull riding and rodeo with her favorite cowboy, her husband, Jim.

Chris would love to hear from readers. She can be reached by mail at P.O. Box 1212, Cicero, NY 13039 or through her Web site at christinewenger.com.

To the memory of my sister, Sue. How I miss you.

To my cowboy brother-in-law, Rick. Hang in there.

To Alex and Katie. Your mother will always
be in your heart and mine.

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter One

Where on earth am I?

Meredith Bingham Turner pulled her generic gray rental car over to the side of the road—what little side there was. Rolling down the window, she peered down the drop-off to her right and frowned at the scruffy vegetation and huge prickly cacti that stood with their arms raised toward the blazing Arizona sun.

It was hot. Very hot. And she was very, very lost.

Once again, she read the directions to the Rattlesnake Ranch that her friend Karen had e-mailed her, but something was still wrong, and there was no one around to ask for assistance. No cops. No pedestrians or joggers. No shoppers. No tourists.

Just lizards, scorpions and tarantulas.

She shuddered and quickly rolled up the window. She hadn't seen any of those creatures yet, but why tempt fate?

Two weeks ago, Karen had called Merry and asked for a favor. "I know you're busy, but it's important. My brother is at his wit's end. With Caitlin's psychiatrist bills, Louise's and Ty's tuition and all… Well, we might just lose the ranch if we don't do something drastic. Besides, I read about you and that George fellow in Celebrity Gossiper, and it sounds like you need a break, too."

Karen was right. She needed to get away from Boston and her corporation. She needed to get away from George Lynch, her latest "kiss and tell" ex-boyfriend. Whenever she thought of the headline in the Celebrity Gossiper: "Sensational Cook Not So Sensational in Bed," she wanted to scream.

Merry did the only thing that she could do. She turned it over to her lawyers.

"Of course I'll help," Merry had replied to Karen's request. "What do you need me to do?"

"Help us turn the Rattlesnake Ranch into a dude ranch. I can take care of the business end, but I'll need decorating help, menu-planning, maybe you could help with publicity. An endorsement by you would guarantee a full house."

"I'm coming up with ideas already," Merry replied.

She was more than happy to help Karen. Karen had gone out of her way to help Meredith, a lonely introvert from Beacon Hill in Boston, loosen up at Johnson and Wales University. Those four years at J&W with Karen as her roommate had been the best time of her life.

Karen was her only friend in the world. She could trust Karen with her innermost thoughts, feelings and problems and know they wouldn't end up in the Gossiper.

Maybe it wouldn't be too awful here in the desert. All she had to do was to come up with some decorating ideas, lend her name to garner some publicity for the launch of the dude ranch, and then she'd fly back home to Boston and her beautiful condo overlooking Boston Harbor.

Karen believed there was a market for "wannabe cowboys," especially from the Northeast. Merry supposed that there were some city slickers who wanted to play cowboy for a week and go on trail rides and chuck wagon cookouts, even though it didn't sound like fun to her. Why would they travel all the way to Arizona? Then again, corporations liked that kind of thing for team building. Maybe that was the answer—attract the corporate crowd.

Whatever Karen wanted, Merry would roll up her sleeves and do anything she could to help.

Merry studied the map that the auto club had marked out for her and thought that she had to be somewhere on the little gray line between Dead Man Mountain and Galloping Horse Mountain.

Wild West names were just so colorful, but she wasn't in the mood for colorful names. She needed better directions.

She looked out of her rearview mirror. Not a car or a person in sight. Not a soul to ask how to get to Hanging Tree Junction—another colorful name. It would have been nice if someone had

thrown up a sign at frequent intervals, so she would at least know if she was still in the United States and not in Mexico.

Maybe she should just keep going forward. The sun would be setting soon, and she didn't relish driving on twisting and turning mountain roads in the dark.

And then she saw him.

Her first real-life cowboy.

He was moseying, as they say, toward her, riding a big black horse. The cowboy wore a long white duster. Only a bit of faded denim was visible under his brown leather chaps with black fringe. As he rode closer, she saw that he had silver spurs on his boots.

She couldn't take her eyes off him. He looked so rugged, at one with the landscape. So did the rifle butt sticking out of a long leather rectangle hanging from his saddle.

Rifle?

Her mouth went dry and she braced herself, ready to floor the gas pedal.

The cowboy squinted into the sun. She couldn't make out the color of his eyes, but she'd bet the next royalty check from her latest cookbook that they were as blue as the sky above.

If she lived to talk about it, she'd have Joanne, her new publicist and assistant, hire him for the video shoot advertising Karen's dude ranch. He'd be perfect.

He tweaked the front brim of his white cowboy hat in casual cowboy fashion as he approached, and she melted—even though the air conditioner was on full blast.

His horse stopped at the side of her car and proceeded to wipe its nose on her window.

Thank goodness it was a rental car and not her Jag.

He motioned for her to roll down the gooey window. With her foot poised over the gas pedal, she hit the button with her left hand and opened the window a few inches. She stared up at the cowboy, and wished she could see more of his face. The horse was tall and, so it seemed, was he. She craned her neck, keeping a wary eye on horse and rider.

"Howdy, ma'am." He did the hat-tugging thing again. "You lost?"

"Undoubtedly."

"I take it that means yes."

"Yes."

"Would you be Meredith Something Turner?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm Meredith Bingham Turner."

"Close enough."

"And you are?"

He pushed his hat back. "Bucklin Floyd Porter. But people call me Buck."

"You're Karen's brother!" Thank goodness. She recognized him now. She remembered seeing pictures of Buck and Karen's other siblings whenever Karen returned to college from visits home. She'd always thought he was handsome, but the pictures didn't do him justice—especially when he was in full cowboy regalia.

He nodded. "And you're the lady who's going to help turn my home into a dude ranch?"

She put the window down completely and leaned farther out. "That's me."

He shook his head, not seeming happy at all. "If you don't mind, I don't want to stand around talking in this heat. Karen sent me to fetch you."

"Fetch? As in dog?"

"Fetch as in she knew you'd get lost. She said you'd need road signs every couple of feet."

So much for the strong, silent cowboy. "Glad you're here. Lead the way."

She could see his eyes twinkling in amusement. They were blue. Sky-blue, just like she knew they'd be.

"You can't follow me, ma'am. I'm headed down there." He pointed at a path through the cacti. "I'd strongly suggest that you stick to the road."

He turned the big black horse and began to give her directions, pointing and waving his hand down the road. She stuck her head farther out the window to hear what he was saying over the blasting air-conditioning. As she did, his horse swung its tail, stinging her in the face.

"Yeow," she yelled, pressing her hand against her burning cheek. She leaned back into the car as the horse pranced beside her.

The beast swung its tail again. This time she was spitting the horse's tail hair out of her mouth and brushing it away from her eyes. Her elbow hit the horn.

The horse whinnied, took off at a gallop, leaped the guardrail and plunged down the cliff with Buck Porter hanging on for dear life.

"Whoa, Bandit. Easy boy."

Buck pulled on the reins, but not too much. He might as well give Bandit his head and just go with it. The Bandit could handle anything.

Why the hell had the fool woman laid on her horn? Didn't she know that it would spook his horse?

Buck leaned as far back in the saddle as he could. Cactus needles stabbed into his duster and scraped his chaps. During the plunge down the mountain, it didn't take long to figure out that Meredith Something Turner was going to be trouble.

"She's a celebrity chef. She's on TV and has written several cookbooks," Karen had told him. "She'll bring in a lot of good publicity. Besides, she's my best friend, and I haven't seen her in a long time. We can do some catching up."

Buck didn't want any part of turning Rattlesnake Ranch into a dude ranch. He liked it just the way it was. Unfortunately, he didn't have much choice. He'd been outvoted by his two sisters and brother, who, along with him, each owned one-fourth of the Rattlesnake, left to them by their parents.

"Whoa, Bandit," he yelled, leaning back even more. "Easy, big guy."

Finally, Bandit hit level ground and stopped dead in his tracks. Shaking his head, the big black stallion pawed at the ground with a hoof.

"Yeah, I know. I know. The city gal probably didn't know any better."

He heard a sound like the wailing of a coyote and looked up. There she was, hanging over the guardrail.

"Do you need help?" she yelled.

She'd made a megaphone over her mouth with her hands. If he did need help, what would she do? Make blueberry scones?

"No," he shouted back.

"Are you hurt?"

She was scaring every bird, animal and lizard within a fifty-mile radius. Bandit was fidgeting like he was going to jump out of his skin.

"I'm fine," he yelled. "Get in your car and go."

"But I don't know where to go."

"Go back to Boston," he mumbled, then shouted, "Follow the road until the end. Turn left, then right, then your second left. Rattlesnake Ranch will be on the right."

"Any of these streets have colorful Western names? You know, something I can remember?"

"Like Beacon Hill?" he said.

"Wha-a-at?"

"No. No names." No one ever bothered naming the dusty paths that ran through Rattlesnake Ranch, least of all him.

"Right. Left, left. Then turn right. Or did you say two rights? I should write this down. Right? Stay there until I get a pen and paper from my purse, will you?"

Oh, for Pete's sake. He had chores to do, and leading a city gal around by the nose wasn't one of them.

A scream cut through the air, startling the buzzards and vultures right out of the trees. Her again.

He released his grip from the saddle horn and catapulted off Bandit. Grabbing his rifle and rope, he ascended the same path he'd just ridden down.

"Meredith? Hey, Meredith Something Turner, are you okay?"

Silence.

"Answer me, dammit," he shouted, struggling up the steep incline.

The gravel crumbled under his feet, but he was making progress. Cactus needles stabbed his arms through his duster, through his shirt. Sweat poured down his face as he scrambled higher… higher.

He set the rifle down, shook loose some rope, twirled it over his head several times and let it fly. It hit his target—a post of the guardrail. He tugged to test it and took up the slack. With his rifle tucked under his arm, he climbed up the rope hand over hand as quickly as he could.

"Meredith?"

Another scream split the air.

In one smooth motion, Buck vaulted over the guardrail, rolled to the ground and took aim….

What the hell?

Two wild burros were eating the contents of Meredith Something Turner's purse. Papers and cosmetics were spread out on the road, and the burros were busy grazing on them. She was pressed against her car, wide-eyed as another burro nibbled on the lapel of her pink suit.

He could tell she was ready to let loose another granddaddy of a scream, and he didn't think his ears could take any more.

But she surprised him. Instead of screaming, she croaked out, "Don't shoot them. Just get them away from me."

He lowered his head, so she wouldn't see his grin. Securing his rifle, he got up from the ground and took off his hat.

"Shoo," he said, waving the air with his hat as he walked across the road. "Scat. Go on. Get on. You're scaring the lady and she's scaring half the state of Arizona."

They eyed him, then trotted off down the road.

Buck turned toward her. "What the hell's wrong with you? You scared me half to death."

"You? You were scared? What about me?" She walked over to the mess on the road, picked up a pack of tissues and, after careful inspection, blew her nose into one. "What were those things?"

"Wild burros."

"W-why aren't they in a zoo?"

"This isn't Boston, lady."

She sniffed and brushed off her lapels. "No kidding."

Bending back down, she picked up her purse and began to toss items in it. "My purse has a hoof print on it. They chewed on my cell phone. And they ate my makeup." She stopped to looked at him. "There are stores around here, aren't there?"

Buck didn't think she needed any makeup. In spite of how she irritated him, he had to admit that she was one of the prettiest women he'd ever seen. And he didn't know much about fashion, but that pink suit she had on looked expensive. So did her gold jewelry.

Everything about the woman looked expensive.

He sure hoped she didn't expect to be waited on. Karen wasn't feeling well, and he had a ranch to run. In his experience, women who were on Meredith Bingham Turner's level were too high-maintenance.

"Yeah, we have stores around here. We have a feed store over in Lizard Rock. Oh, and there's a John Deere store in Cactus Flats, too."

She stared up at him with big green eyes, probably trying to figure out if she could get makeup shipped from Boston via overnight mail. Then she glanced down the road at the burros, which had stopped to graze. “You will stand guard, won’t you? In case they come back.”

He choked back a laugh. “Yeah, I’ll stand guard.”

“Thank you.” She sniffed. “But don’t shoot them.”

“No, ma’am.”

She bent over to pick up more items from the road, and he couldn’t help noticing how the fabric of her skirt molded against her perfect butt.

“Mr. Porter, where is your horse?” She stood straight and focused her eyes on his rifle. “You didn’t have to shoot it, did you?”

“Lady, I don’t shoot everything that moves out here. If I did I’d have to carry all my ammo on a packhorse,” he snapped, then realized she was dead serious. She’d probably seen too many westerns on TV where animals were put down. Remembering she was from Boston, he softened his voice. “Bandit’s fine. He’s probably back in his stall and eating dinner by now.”

“Bandit?”

“My horse.”

“How are you going to get home?”

“I thought I’d ride with you.”

“You cowboys ride in cars?”

She really was a slicker, unless she was pulling his leg, as he’d pulled hers. He couldn’t tell.

“I’ll give it a try.”

Speaking of legs, hers were blue-ribbon winners. Her hair was the color of corn silk and probably just as smooth to touch.

What the hell was wrong with him? He was waxing as romantic as a cowboy poet. If he didn’t stop himself, he might break into song and start yodeling.

She had to go. She was going to be nothing but trouble. He could feel it right down to his bones.

But one thing he knew for sure, he wasn’t going to spend half his born days bailing a tenderfoot like Meredith Turner out of trouble. He had a ranch to run.

Or what was left of it.

“Would you like to drive, Mr. Porter? You do know how to drive a car, do you not?” She held out a key with a yellow paper tag hanging from it. Her voice held a bit of sarcasm. She was pulling his leg.

He slapped his thigh and added a dumb grin. “Gee, shucks, ma’am. Ya mean I can drive a real car like this?” He went over the top with a Texas accent. “How about if I drive you back to the airport? This place isn’t for you.”

She was silent for a dozen heartbeats, and Buck immediately regretted his words. He was being a knothead. If Meredith was as big of a celebrity as Karen said she was, the new Rattlesnake Dude Ranch would be a success.

He supposed he should be happy about the plans for the ranch. It would be the answer to his financial problems, but he just needed more time to come up with the money himself. He had a plan, but the clock was ticking and the bank foreclosure was looming.

His plan was to sell the furniture he’d been making. An old Army buddy owned a fancy gallery in Scottsdale and had scheduled a show and sale for him. Whether or not his sale would be a success was a crap-shoot, but he was keeping his fingers crossed.

Meredith met his gaze. “Your sister said she needed me. Therefore, I intend on helping her in any way I can. So if you don’t want to drive, point me in the right direction and I’ll find my own way.”

Loyalty. Buck admired that, but he still didn’t want a bunch of dudes on the ranch he loved, wandering around, playing cowboy and sleeping and eating inside his parents’ house. He had Caitlin to think of, too. His daughter had retreated so deep into her own world since her mother left that he just couldn’t reach her. A bunch of strangers might make her withdraw even more.

His siblings disagreed, particularly Karen. She felt that Cait needed people around her, especially kids her own age to encourage her to open up more. He reluctantly agreed to give it a try. He'd cut off his arms if it'd help his daughter.

He tried to point out that even if the ranch did turn a profit, it wouldn't be that significant. The ranch was in the red almost two hundred thousand bucks, give or take, and the bank said he had to pay that off before he could borrow another penny to diversify into stock contracting for rodeos.

He wished he had the money to buy them all out, but that was spitting in the wind.

He let his eyes skim over the generous curves of his sister's friend. Maybe it wouldn't be all that bad having her at the ranch. If nothing else, she was fun to tease and easy on the eyes. He could use some fun in his life.

Cait seemed to be looking forward to Meredith's visit, or at least that's what Karen assumed. Every Tuesday when Meredith's cooking show was on, Karen would microwave some popcorn and the two of them would watch it together.

He should be used to Cait's silence toward him by now, but he wasn't. He kept hoping that someday she'd say something—anything. He wanted to hear his little girl's voice again, to hear her call him Daddy.

Meredith Something Turner tossed him the keys and mumbled a question about whether or not Lizard Rock or Hanging Tree Junction, Arizona had a dry cleaner.

He was willing to bet she wouldn't last a week here before he'd be driving her back to the airport and his home would be safe from change.

Then he hoped like hell that people would like his furniture and buy it. If they did, he could get out of the red a lot faster and his home would still be safe.

But by then it might not be his.

Chapter Two

Buck skillfully guided the rental car down the narrow mountain road, but Meredith still found herself holding her breath on every twist and turn. The craggy rocks were so close to the car, she could reach out and touch them. Every fallen tree branch looked like a snake or a lizard, and every other stone or twig was either a tarantula or a scorpion.

Swallowing hard, she adjusted the air-conditioning vents until the cold air blew right on her face. As she took a couple of gulps of the air, she decided that she was being ridiculous by scaring herself like a teenager at a summer camp bonfire.

But still, there was no sign of civilization as far as she could see. No hotels. No stores. No banks. No fast food places. Arizona was as foreign to her as Jupiter.

She stole a glance at Buck. He was so tall that he had to take his hat off to sit in the car. His hair was jet-black and tied back in a ponytail with a piece of leather. It made him look more masculine than some of the men back home with their neat Boston haircuts.

Merry remembered the day that Karen had called her, sobbing about Caitlin, and how devastated her brother was when his wife had walked out. Apparently, Buck's wife, Debbie, had left for Nashville to pursue a singing career more than two years ago, and Cait had stopped talking from that moment on. Buck was having a hard time dealing with his daughter's silence.

Buck had found a psychiatrist for the child to see, but based on Karen's last call, the little girl was still withdrawn and still not talking to anyone.

Merry stole another glance at Buck. How awful for him to have gone through so much pain. In a way, he'd lost his wife and his little girl on that same day two years ago. Karen had said that he'd barely left the barn for a year or so, and was there all hours of the day and night, barely sleeping.

His siblings, Karen, Louise and Ty, had told Buck he needed to snap out of his funk, for his daughter's sake. He finally had, and tried to make things up to Cait, but she still wouldn't talk.

Sighing, Merry concentrated on remembering the road, the road that would take her back to the airport when she was done with her business here. But there were no landmarks, no side streets and still no signs. They just kept climbing, twisting, then descending.

Buck must have heard her sigh. "It's not much longer," he said. "About twenty more minutes."

"Thank you." She racked her brain for more conversation, but for a woman who made a good chunk of her income as a TV personality, she couldn't think of a thing to say to this man with broad shoulders and dark stubble that made him look more than a little dangerous.

The weather was always a safe subject, so she dove in. "Have you had much rain lately?"

"It's the desert."

"Oh…I guess not, then." So much for conversation with the cowboy. She twisted her fingers together and checked her manicure, remembering how Karen had gotten her to stop biting her nails. Seeing her good friend again would be wonderful.

She looked out the window. Every so often, she was surprised by the flash of color from a patch of fragile-looking wildflowers, or daunted by a lethal-looking cactus, both co-existing in a strange type of harmony.

All right, so this wasn't Boston. It was…tolerable. And she told herself that there weren't acres of poisonous reptiles out to get her, just wild burros.

She resolved to concentrate on helping Karen just like she'd promised. The sooner she did that, the sooner she'd be back home in familiar territory.

With that decided, she relaxed her grip on what was left of her purse.

"Over there." Buck pointed off in the distance, to his left. "Rattlesnake Ranch."

She craned her neck and squinted. "Where?"

"Over there."

"Over there" got closer, then disappeared again, as they turned another bend and descended until the mountain road turned into packed dirt barely wide enough for a car. They were on flat land now, up close and personal with the desert.

Buck turned right and before them was a bleached sign proclaiming Rattlesnake Ranch. She shuddered involuntarily and immediately her eyes scanned the road for anything slithering.

"Um…Buck?"

"Yeah?"

"About snakes…"

"What about them?"

"Do you have a lot of them out here?"

His blue eyes glanced at her briefly, and then returned to the road. "It's the desert."

"Of course there are snakes" was what he didn't say.

Quit obsessing, she told herself.

They rolled to a stop in front of a sprawling ranch house.

"Here we are," he said.

Merry heard the obvious pride in his voice. She took out a notebook and leafed through it for a clean page, free from burro slime, and found a pen at the bottom of her purse. Brainstorming time had arrived.

At first sight, the ranch house was welcoming. Designed in traditional Santa Fe architecture, it had a big porch that ran the length of the house. Bright flowers spilled out of terra-cotta pots of every size and shape along the brick walkway. More colorful flowers cascaded from hanging baskets.

Beautiful.

She knew that the flowers were Karen's doing. She'd always had a green thumb and went into the business program and floral arranging curriculum at Johnson & Wales with the hope of opening her own florist shop.

The car door opened, startling her. Buck held out a hand to help her out, and she placed her hand in his. She wasn't a small woman, but when his rough, callused hand covered hers, she felt very feminine and protected.

She tried to analyze why she was having a cowboy fantasy, when a small hurricane descended down the thick wood stairs.

"Merry! It's been so long."

Buck dropped her hand, and Merry found herself in Karen's bear hug.

"I see my lug of a brother found you, or did you find him?"

Merry laughed. "He found me. I was lost."

"I knew it," Karen said, turning toward her brother. "Buck, thank goodness you're okay. When Bandit came home without you, I got worried and sent Juan and Frank out looking for you. What happened?"

"It's a long story," Buck said, carrying Merry's suitcases up the stairs, as easily as if they contained feathers instead of a closet's worth of clothes.

Merry scribbled in her notebook. That would make a perfect picture for Karen's brochure—a rough-and-rugged cowboy bringing luggage up the stairs of the dude ranch.

Perfect.

Buck stopped on the porch and looked down. "Karen, where do you want this stuff?"

"In your bedroom, Buck."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Well, you haven't been using it," Karen snapped, and then turned her attention back to Merry.

At just the thought that she'd be staying in Buck's room and sleeping in his bed, Merry's heart flip-flopped in her chest, and her face heated as if she were a teenager.

Jet lag. It must be jet lag. Or the low elevation.

Karen gave her another hug. “I am so glad to see you in person. I watch you on TV all the time, but it’s not the same.”

“It’s good to see you, too.” And it really was.

“How’s business?” Karen asked.

“Overwhelming.” She’d hired an additional publicist, Joanne Gladding, to handle the George Lynch fallout. Joanne was a go-getter, but Merry wasn’t sure that Joanne was right for her. She’d hired her anyway, though, because she was leaving on this trip, and the matter had to be deflected immediately.

Whenever Merry thought of the tabloid articles, a new layer of humiliation settled like lead in her chest. Her parents were still absolutely furious with her about the one before George Lynch—her assistant director Mick, who also blabbed to the tabloids about their relationship.

Her parents. They never missed an opportunity to remind her not to get involved with an “underling” ever again, saying that her actions reflected on them and their business, too.

She never could win with them. Yet something inside her still made her want to keep trying.

Merry pushed her parents and the George Lynch fiasco to the back of her mind. She was going to enjoy her time here.

“I have some presents for you from Boston and Rhode Island.” Merry opened the trunk of the car and began to lift out some boxes. “I hope everything made it in good shape.”

She handed Karen a couple of the boxes. “This is chocolate-covered fruit from that shop by City Hall, and this one contains those cookies we lived on in college. And I bought some homemade bagels from Mrs. Jeeter, who said to say hello to you. And…ta-da…some New England clam chowder, packed in dry ice, fresh this morning from Clamdiggers.”

“Be still my heart.” Karen laughed. “But no clam cakes from Rhode Island?”

Merry pulled out a bright purple bag. “Two dozen of them right from Point Judith.”

“You’re a sweetheart.”

Singing the song they’d made up about Johnson & Wales University, their alma mater, they climbed the stairs and entered the ranch house.

Merry stood on the thick, glazed Mexican tiles and looked at the brightly striped serapes over the couches and side chairs, the rough-hewn beams, the beehive fireplace in the corner and the thick wood furniture. She could smell fresh paint.

“Karen, it’s beautiful. The pictures you sent didn’t do it justice. The architecture is magnificent. It’s so homey.”

Peeking out from behind one of the couches was a small, blond-haired girl with big blue eyes—just like Buck’s. She had two straight ponytails that started high on her head and brushed her thin shoulders.

Caitlin. Merry gave a cheery wave and a wink to the little girl, who then disappeared back behind the couch.

Merry raised an eyebrow at Karen.

“Cait, come and meet my good friend Meredith Turner,” Karen said. “You know her. We watch her on TV all the time.”

But there was no sign of Cait again.

Karen turned to Merry and shrugged. “She just loves to watch Making Merry with Merry with me. She even helped me make your chocolate-chip snowball cookies last Christmas.”

“Maybe we can make them together, even though it’s not Christmastime. I like them all through the year.” Merry felt as if she was doing the dialogue from her show.

Merry deposited her tote bag on the gleaming plank floor and looked around again. “It’s perfect, Karen. Your guests could gather here and play cards, or read a book by the fire, or just talk.”

“I can’t wait,” Buck said sarcastically, walking into the room.

"Buck, for heaven's sake, Merry is trying to help us." Karen lifted her hands in the air, as if she were giving up.

"And to that end, I was thinking of a feature on my show once the ranch opens, like a 'before and after' segment. I can get a crew out here, and they can start filming the 'before' segment."

"Think of the publicity. It'd be fabulous." Karen clasped her hands together.

"You'll also need a brochure and a commercial. We might as well take care of both of those, too." Merry leafed through her notebook. "I have some ideas."

"Excellent," Karen said. "I knew you'd help."

Merry eyed Buck. He seemed less than thrilled. Matter of fact, his face looked like he had just eaten something sour. "Karen, you were the business major, you have to tell me your ideas."

"Let's have some chowder and clam cakes first." She looked into the bags and pulled out plastic containers. "Then we can talk business."

"It's a deal, but I'd like to change first, if you don't mind," Merry said. "Some burros thought my suit was lunch."

"I can't wait to hear that story." Karen laughed and raised a shopping bag in the direction of a hallway. "Last door on the right. I'll show you."

"Don't bother. I'm fine. You go and find a place for all the goodies."

"Don't be long," Karen said. "I can't wait to catch up."

Merry felt a warm feeling building inside and spreading out. She hadn't felt that in a long time. Real friends were hard to find, and Karen was a real friend.

Merry inched down the hall to the bedroom, stopping at frequent intervals to admire the bold paintings of cowboys and cowgirls at work. She hoped to catch another glimpse of Caitlin somewhere.

"Would you like to join us, Buck?" Merry heard Karen say.

"No, thanks. I'd rather muck the stalls," he answered. Then the door slammed.

She flicked the light on in Buck's bedroom. She had to brace herself against the sheer force of masculinity. It was a man's room with its big, thick furniture and no frills. Her gaze focused on the centerpiece of the room, a bed that looked as if it had been shaped from a fallen tree.

Merry was instantly drawn to the bed. She inspected every inch of it, and reminded herself to ask Karen who the artist was that had created such a masterpiece. For heaven's sake, it looked as if there were some buds ready to bloom on some of the branches that were twisted to form the headboard. More branches formed a canopy above. It was almost as if the wood were still alive.

She imagined lying on the bed as green leaves and flowers cascaded above.

Exquisite.

A vivid blanket in blocks of stripes and arrow designs covered the bed, and she couldn't resist inspecting the workmanship. It was handmade, and unless she missed her guess, it was the genuine Native American article.

She noticed a huge bleached-wood armoire that was the focal point of one wall. A matching seven-foot-long dresser lined another, and on each side of the bed were matching nightstands accented with saguaro cacti ribs in the doors. She had seen similar pieces in galleries in New York City and Boston, but nothing as magnificent as these.

Against another wall was a couch, but on closer inspection, she saw it was actually a futon or a daybed. The arms were of thick wood with inserts of some kind of long, spindly, bleached wood on the back for ornamentation. Lying on one of the colorful cushions of the futon was a beat-up, floppy stuffed cat. She assumed it was Caitlin's.

Merry picked up the pathetic beige cat with only one eye, and remembered a similar cat. Hers. She'd called it Bonita, and she had been a Christmas gift from Pamela, their housekeeper and cook, because her parents wouldn't let her have the real thing, no matter how much she begged or no matter how good she was.

Merry had cried many times into Bonita's gray fur. Once, she remembered coming home to find Bonita missing. She looked all over the house, sobbing. Finally, her mother had ordered her to stop crying and told her she was too old to play with a stuffed cat.

Merry had been inconsolable. She knew in her heart that her mother had thrown Bonita away. The cat had become too dirty and too worn to be a resident of the Beacon Hill house any longer.

She returned the cat to its exact place and chuckled as she remembered how she'd rescued Bonita from the trash can in the alleyway in the dead of night.

She'd hid Bonita from her parents from then on. Currently, her childhood confidant, lovingly mended and with additional stuffing, rested on an antique rocking chair in the bedroom of her condo.

She looked at all of the various cowboy and Indian artifacts that were displayed in the room. Each piece was a work of art and seemed to be positioned perfectly.

If all the guestrooms looked like this, and with the media blitz that Merry had planned, the phone would soon be ringing off the hook with people making reservations for the Rattlesnake Dude Ranch.

Gingerly, she sat down at the edge of the bed, and bent back to study the twisted canopy of branches over her head. She imagined Buck lounging on the bed, wearing nothing but his hat, holding out his hand for her to join him there.

Suddenly feeling warm and jittery, she jumped up and walked over to the huge windows lining the three walls. She could see the corral and the barn and the setting sun, which was just about to disappear in a blaze of orange and yellow behind the craggy mountain that seemed close enough to touch.

She noticed Caitlin pressed against the barn, covertly watching her father brush Bandit. Buck must have spotted the girl because he set the horse's brush on a post, and walked over toward Caitlin, smiling. But instead of staying to talk to him, she ran away.

Through the open window, she could hear him call to her. "Caitlin. Cait." She could hear the anguish in his voice, see him shake his head and kick the dirt with a booted foot.

The girl was running fast, down past the barn, until she vanished behind another outbuilding.

He turned back to Bandit. As he petted the horse's neck, she heard the deep rich tones of Buck's voice. Although she couldn't make out his words, Bandit nodded as if he understood what Buck was saying to him.

She'd always heard that a cowboy's horse was his best friend. Now she believed it.

As she was about to get ready, she saw Karen blazing a quick trail to Buck. Angry words floated on the air, and Merry wondered what they were fighting about, not that it was any of her business. She knew that Karen was close to all her siblings, and they shared exactly what was on their minds. That was one of the things that Merry had always envied, the fact that Karen had a large, close family and they all cared for one another.

An only child, Merry had been nothing but lonely.

As if Buck and Karen sensed her presence, they both turned and stared. Startled, she backed away from the window, but not before she saw Buck shake his head and Karen cover her mouth with her hand as they noticed her watching them.

With a sinking feeling, she turned away, opened her suitcase and changed into a pair of expensive new jeans she'd just bought, and a peach blouse that felt silky against her skin.

Karen would tease her unmercifully when she saw her in designer ranch clothes. Merry smiled. She hadn't been teased in a long time, and she needed it.

A gray cloud intruded on her light mood as she thought of the scene she'd just witnessed between brother and sister. She already knew that Buck didn't particularly want her here, but why? Surely, he wanted the Rattlesnake Ranch to generate a big profit. Didn't he?

Well, that was the reason she was here. It would be an added bonus if she could get a little rest and relaxation. She needed it desperately. And maybe she could think about how to get a handle

on her own business. It was getting too hard to manage with all the culinary products she'd been venturing into—pots and pan, a line of spices, stainless steel utensils, synthetic bakeware and heaven knows what else.

It seemed that lately everyone wanted a piece of her.

Merry let her hand glide over the exquisite bureau one more time and glanced over her shoulder at the incredible tree bed. Then she closed the door behind her and went to find Karen.

She needed to know what was going on before she decided whether or not to unpack.

Chapter Three

Merry leaned against the rounded archway to the kitchen and studied her friend. “So tell me what progress you’ve made on the dude ranch idea, and tell me what’s going on with your brother, not necessarily in that order.”

“I never could keep anything from you.” Karen smiled as she set plates, mugs and bowls on a thick pine table.

Merry walked over to the table, picked up a plate and studied the artwork. A sketch of a cowboy galloping his horse and roping a calf was centered in the middle. Under the drawing were two Rs back-to-back with a wavy line under them.

“That’s our brand,” Karen said. “And that’s my father roping that steer. My mother drew it and had the plates made years ago.”

Merry thought about the time and trouble Karen’s mother had expended to make such a personal gift that meant something to the whole family. It was in stark contrast to the very expensive, very bland, English bone china with the gold-leaf border of the Turner family.

“You know, Karen, I think that if you get mugs made up in this pattern, your guests would buy them for souvenirs. Have you thought of a gift shop? It would be perfect in a corner of the lobby —I mean the living room.”

Karen ladled clam chowder into bowls and the steamy soup scented the air. “Before we discuss the dude ranch, I have something to tell you.”

Merry noticed that her friend’s face was somber. Whatever she was going to say wasn’t good news. Merry put the plate down, pulled out a chair and sat down.

“I just took a call from my doctor. I have to have my gallbladder out in three days.”

Merry reached for her friend’s hand and squeezed it. “I didn’t know you were having trouble. You never said anything.”

Karen took a deep breath. “It’s all so sudden—the surgery, I mean. But I’ve been having pain for a long time now. And it’s getting worse. It was selfish of me not to call you and tell you to postpone your trip, but I wanted you here. I couldn’t leave the ranch in such a state of flux, especially when we’re hoping to have our first guests in a few months. I didn’t want to call Louise. Her bar exam is this week and—”

Merry took a deep breath. Already her brain was listing things she needed to do. Where was her notebook?

“Leave your sister where she is, and don’t worry about a thing. Meredith Bingham Turner, the Goddess of Hospitality, is on the scene,” she said with more confidence than she felt. “How long will you be in the hospital? Are you having laser surgery?” Merry knew that laser surgery had a quicker recovery time.

“No such luck. They have to take it out the old-fashioned way. They think I’ll have to stay in the hospital about four or five days.”

Merry bit back her disappointment. She’d been looking forward to spending a lot of time with Karen, just like the old days when they were living at the dorm.

Well, she could still have the long talks. Merry would just have to visit Karen in the hospital.

“There’s something else.” Karen grimaced as tears shimmered in her eyes.

Merry prayed that Karen wouldn’t tell her that she had more health problems.

“It’s nothing too serious.” Karen opened one of the boxes that contained a Boston cream pie. “I need a favor, and I know it’s an awful imposition, especially when you told me over the phone that you were burned out and needed a break after all that horrible publicity about you and…and what’s his name?”

"George Lynch, but forget about him. My good friend needs me. I can take care of things on the home front."

"Thanks. I knew you would." Karen smiled weakly. "But there's Caitlin. She needs someone to watch over her. Buck is so busy with the cattle and all."

A door opened to the mudroom off the kitchen, and Merry recognized the white duster and white hat through the glass-topped door. Buck. She heard the sound of something hitting the floor —his boots.

Karen's eyes darted to her brother, and she stood. "How about some coffee, Buck? I was just about to make some for Merry and me."

"Sit down, sis. I can get it."

Suddenly, Karen gasped and doubled over. Buck hurried to her side, holding her so she wouldn't fall.

"I can't take it anymore." Karen puffed out the words, grimacing in pain.

Merry rushed to her other side. "What can I do?"

Buck thrust out his chin in the direction of the phone on the wall. "Call 911 and get an ambulance here. Then get a hold of Doc Goodwater."

She barely had time to nod before Karen gasped again. Buck swept Karen off her feet and held her. She groaned into his chest.

"The doc's number is tacked to the bulletin board on the side of the phone," Buck advised. "Let him know Karen's on her way to the hospital. Tell him that her surgery has just been moved up."

Merry hurried toward the phone. Buck left the kitchen, still with Karen in his arms. She could hear them talking in the living room.

When the 911 operator asked Merry the location, she realized that she had no idea where she was. She could only say "Rattlesnake Ranch."

"Buck Turner's place?" the operator replied. "What's wrong?"

Thank goodness for small towns. "Gallbladder. Karen."

"An ambulance is on the way."

"Thank you."

Merry punched in the doctor's number and left a message with his service.

Then she poured Karen a glass of water and hurried into the living room with it.

Karen was curled up on the couch with some pillows under her head. Buck sat on the edge of the couch and held on to his sister's hand.

"What about the ambulance?" Buck asked her.

"It's on the way."

"Thank you." His deep voice was rich with emotion when he spoke those two little words. Gratitude showed in his eyes, and it was obvious that he was glad she was there to assist him. That made Merry warm right down to her toes.

"The pain is gone," Karen said. "I'm okay now. I can last until the operation."

No," Buck said. "This has gone on long enough."

Karen winked at Merry. "If I were a sick horse, he would have put me out of my misery a long time ago."

She took a sharp breath and closed her eyes, and the slow stream of a tear traced a path to her ear. Her pain was back.

Merry turned to look for a box of tissues, but just as she did, Buck reached over and wiped his sister's tear with his thumb.

Merry's heart melted as she wondered yet again what it would have been like to have siblings. Would they have been as close as the Porters?

She heard the distant wailing of the ambulance. Buck must have heard it, too. His blue eyes looked up at her, and he sighed in relief.

"Buck, I'd like Merry to come with me in the ambulance. Would you mind?"

"Whatever you want, sis. This is your show. I'll follow in the pickup with Caitlin." He looked around. "Where's she hiding now?" His voice held a hint of frustration.

"Caitlin," he shouted, but the little girl didn't appear.

"Buck, why don't you stay here at the ranch with Cait?" Karen asked with a strained smile. "You know how you get around anything medical."

"I want to make sure that you're okay," he said.

Karen shook her head. "Are you sure I can't convince you to stay put? Caitlin will probably be up too late."

"She doesn't have school tomorrow. Besides, Merry needs a ride back, unless you want her to stay at the hospital all night with you."

"No. Of course not."

"Then it's settled. I'll get my boots." He walked over to the mudroom. "Caitlin," he shouted again. "I need to talk to you."

When Buck left the room, Merry took his place on the couch and held on to Karen's hand.

"Cait has been doing well in her special ed class," Karen said softly. "Her teachers are wonderful."

Merry nodded. "That's great."

Karen closed her eyes and winced from more pain. "Underneath all his bluster, my brother's a pussycat."

"Since you're in the middle of a gallbladder attack, I'll excuse that misfire."

"You'll find out for yourself soon enough." Karen chuckled, then grimaced in pain. "But maybe I shouldn't leave you two here alone for five days. I could become an aunt again in nine months."

Merry's cheeks heated. "I don't think there's a snowball's chance in the desert that anything like that is going to happen between us. We clash."

Karen's hand closed tight around Merry's. "Take care of Buck and Cait while I'm gone," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. Her hand relaxed, her eyes closed, and her head sunk deeper into the pillow. "They've been having a real tough time."

Two long hours later, in the waiting room of the Lizard Rock Hospital's emergency room, a doctor dressed in aqua-colored scrubs caught Buck's eye and motioned for Buck to follow him into a small conference room. In turn, Buck gestured for Merry and Cait to follow. Buck introduced Doctor Goodwater to Merry as Karen's visiting friend.

"And, Doctor, I think you remember my daughter, Caitlin."

The doctor tweaked Cait's nose, and she quickly retreated to stand in a corner of the room, clutching her stuffed cat.

"Buck, we're getting Karen ready for surgery," the doctor said. "She's scheduled for eleven in the morning." He checked his clipboard. "She's in room 4014—you can go see her now."

"Thanks, Doc." Buck pumped the doctor's hand. "Take good care of her."

"You know I will."

They took the elevator to the fourth floor and found Karen's room easily. Karen was already hooked up to IVs and seemed to be dozy, but was fighting it.

Caitlin headed for a chair and sat wedged into the seat as far as she possibly could, still clutching her stuffed cat.

Merry's heart went out to the girl. She seemed so detached from everything and everyone. It was as if she was in her own little world and didn't welcome intruders.

Merry went over and stood before her, not daring to touch her. "Your aunt Karen is going to be fine, Caitlin. Don't worry."

Cait never made eye contact. She curled up into an even tighter ball and buried her face in the stuffed cat.

Merry had an overwhelming need to somehow break through to the girl. In a way, Merry had been just as withdrawn and shy when she was Cait's age, but Merry had been starved for someone to talk to, someone who'd pay her attention to break through her shyness. Cait didn't seem to care.

Merry had heard the old chestnut, "Children should be seen, but not heard," a million times from one of her parents, usually whenever a dinner guest would comment on what a well-behaved child they had. In Merry's case, she was just trying to be perfect to please her parents. Cait had more significant problems.

What could she do to reach Caitlin that her family and the best psychiatrists couldn't? Merry was a TV cook and a hospitality expert. What made her think that she could break through Cait's shell?

Merry petted the stuffed cat's head. "What's your kitty's name, Cait?"

Silence. Merry looked at Karen.

"Tell Merry that your kitty's name is Princess, Cait," Karen said.

Cait remained silent, so Merry decided to tell her a story. "Princess. What a perfect name for your pretty kitty. My kitty's name is Bonita. I've had Bonita since I was a little girl. Do you want to know a secret, Cait?" Merry could see a hint of interest in the girl's eyes. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I told Bonita all my secrets. I bet you tell all yours to Princess."

Merry could have sworn that Cait gave a slight nod. She didn't know if she did that regularly or not, but it made Merry feel good.

She turned to Buck to see if he'd noticed Cait's small reaction to her. He gave a slight nod and a wink indicating that he had. For some reason, that made her feel even better.

"Buck?" Karen motioned for Buck to come over to her bedside. She put her hands around his neck as if she were choking him, and said, "Get out of here, you big lummox, so I can get some sleep."

When he bent over her bed, she hugged him. "Really, Buck. Take Merry and Cait home. Merry's dead on her feet, Cait is tired and so are you. There's nothing either of you can do here."

"I'll call Louise and tell her what happened," Buck said. "And then I'll try to find Ty. One of his buddies will know which jail he's in this time."

Karen yawned. "He's up at the line shack and you know it. And make sure Lou doesn't come home. She needs to take her bar exam."

"She'd better pass so she can get a job and finally earn her own keep. I'm not supporting her any longer." His voice was gruff, but his eyes twinkled.

The ride back to the ranch was quiet. Cait slept sandwiched between Merry and Buck. Even in sleep, she was guarded. Her head didn't lean any farther to the left, because if it did, it would have rested on her father's arm. Nor did she lean to the right, as Merry was there, a stranger she only knew from TV.

Merry wanted to know what had happened between Buck and his daughter to make the little girl shun his affection. Could Cait still be that traumatized because her mother had left her? Maybe it was because Buck had thrown himself into his work and ignored her at a critical time in her young life.

Merry supposed it was possible that both of these things could have made Cait withdraw.

It was obvious that Buck loved his daughter, but he seemed frustrated as to what to do at this point.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Buck gently take Cait's little hand and hold it. Merry blinked back tears. At least when the girl was sleeping, she didn't pull away from him.

Merry's own eyes wouldn't stay open, and she felt herself floating into sleep. Her head was so heavy, she couldn't help but lean the side of her face against the cold pane of the truck's window.

She let herself drift off, just a little.

"Hey, Meredith Something Turner, wake up," whispered a deep voice. "We're here."

"This isn't Boston," she mumbled, trying to get the cobwebs out of her brain.

"Far from it."

Rubbing her eyes, she noticed that the passenger's side door was open, and Buck held his daughter and the stuffed cat—Princess—in his arms.

Then she remembered. She was at the Porter ranch.

She scrambled out of the tall pickup, shut the door and followed unsteadily behind him, more than a little sleep-drunk.

"Would you mind opening the door? The key's under the third flowerpot from the right."

Merry found the key and was unlocking the door when she heard Buck humming a soft tune. She stole a glance at the big cowboy, swaying slowly, studying his daughter, who was sleeping peacefully in his arms.

By the light of the moon, she could see the love on his face. Yet bone-deep sadness was visible in the tightness around his mouth. His daughter couldn't—or wouldn't—return his love.

He met her gaze as she held the door open for him to enter the house.

When he was halfway down the hallway with Cait in his arms, he asked, "Is there anything you need?"

"No. I'm fine. You just take care of Cait."

He shifted his daughter's weight. Cait gave a little sound but never woke. "Cait has been sleeping in here because her room is being painted. We were going to move her to Karen's room when you arrived, but her room isn't done yet, either. The painters just need one more day so they can finish up. Then we can get everything back to normal." He hesitated. "I don't know what Karen had in mind for sleeping arrangements for Cait tonight. The two of them were sharing my bed. Every other room is cluttered with furniture and smelling of paint. I could put Cait on the couch in the living room."

"Don't you dare put her on the couch. If anyone goes on the couch, it'll be me. Cait can have the tree bed." She remembered that Buck had moved out of his room. "I could take the futon, that's perfectly fine with me. But I don't want Cait waking up, seeing me, and being scared. I'm really a stranger to her."

"Everyone's a stranger to her," he whispered.

Merry followed Buck into her room. She flung back the linens of the tree bed. "She must be getting heavy."

"Never."

He set his daughter down gently, her head on the pillow. He took off her shoes and set them on the floor. Then he placed the stuffed cat next to her. He moved the sheet, blanket and comforter over Cait and gently brushed her hair from her face. He kissed her softly on the forehead. "G'night, Caitie. May your dreams be as sweet as you."

How beautiful, Merry thought. How loving. If just once her mother or father had said something like that to her, but they never had. She'd gotten all her kind words from Pamela, the housekeeper.

He stood, looking at his daughter for a while, and then turned as if suddenly remembering that Merry was there.

"I should get you settled." He looked around the room. "Where did Karen put the linens for the futon? They're probably in the closet in the bathroom."

He suddenly looked tired.

"I can handle it."

He nodded. "Thanks."

"Buck, are you sure I shouldn't sleep on the couch? If she wakes up and I'm here—"

"Hard to tell what Cait will do. She seems to tolerate you more than some," he said. "She knows you from TV, so you're not a complete stranger. I'm sure she'll be okay, but it's late, so if you don't mind for one night…"

"No. Not at all."

For what seemed like an eternity, he stared at Merry. "You know, if you're scared to be alone, I can sleep here, too."

She raised an eyebrow.

"I meant that I'll take the couch in the living room," he added, and grinned. "But really, there's nothing to be afraid of. There hasn't been a snake or a burro in the house in…" He looked at his watch. "In at least two hours. But let me get my rifle, and I'll have a look under the futon for you."

Terror struck deep into her bones. Snakes? But even in the dim light, she saw the twinkle in his eyes, and she knew she was being teased.

"Buck, you don't have to sleep on the couch. You can go to the…um…" She couldn't think of the word that Karen had used earlier. "Barracks?"

"Bunkhouse."

"Yes. Go ahead. We'll be all right."

He tweaked the brim of his hat and walked out of the room. In the doorway, he paused and looked back. "Thanks again…for everything," he said, but didn't leave. "Um…Cait might have a nightmare. I just wanted you to be aware of that."

With that, he was gone.

A nightmare. Terrific.

She could make an eight-course meal for a party of fifty. She could decorate a three-thousand-room hotel and casino. She could write bestselling cookbooks, change the Porter's home into a successful dude ranch like they'd asked her to do, but she knew nothing about children.

Meredith Turner had never been a child herself.

The windows of the room stared back at her like huge, blank eyes. She undressed in the bathroom.

Even though Buck had been teasing her about snakes, she hated to have her fears thrown in her face. She hated to show one chink in her armor. Her competitors would like nothing better than to find something on her, something past or present that they could zero in on.

She was supposed to be the perfect woman, the perfect hostess, the perfect cook and homemaker.

Meredith Bingham Turner, Miss Hospitality.

If she believed her own hype, there wasn't anything she couldn't do.

She found a sheet, blanket and pillow in the linen closet in the bathroom, and began to make up the futon.

Listening to Caitlin's gentle breathing, she wondered again what demons had a hold of the sweet little girl.

Merry knew about demons. She was a personal failure, in spite of her business success. Men wooed her, then they used her for her clout or for her bank account, or both, so it was impossible to know whom she could trust.

She couldn't get a compliment from her parents even if she received every award known to humankind. She needed to get better control over her company, and she needed a break from men. Her one true friend was in the hospital, and Merry had a gut feeling that Bucklin Floyd Porter and his daughter were going to test her mettle.

So no matter how handsome he was, no matter how delicious he looked in jeans, no matter how sweet he was to his daughter or how his deep voice made her think of moonlit nights and satin sheets, the last thing she needed was to get involved with him or Cait.

Then again, he hadn't asked her to get involved. She was just here to do a job. And that was a good thing because she had nothing else to give anyone.

Chapter Four

Buck shook out the folded serape and picked out a couple of pillows that were positioned on the furniture.

He'd decided to sleep on the couch after all, just in case Cait had her usual nightmare. He wanted to be nearby. Karen usually handled nightmare detail, since his presence sometimes made things worse, but Meredith shouldn't have to deal with it.

He also didn't blame her if she didn't exactly feel safe. After all, she was a city girl who didn't know her way around a ranch or the desert.

With her big green eyes, shiny blond hair and designer everything, Meredith was a tenderfoot and totally out of her element. It wouldn't be long before she was gone, and that was fine with him. Although he appreciated her help with Karen's illness, and her attempt to be nice to Cait, he didn't want her changing his ranch—his life—around.

Until he could put her back on a plane and get the time to work on his furniture—his plan to save the ranch from bankruptcy—he'd keep an eye on her, for his sister's sake.

He supposed he owed Merry a debt of gratitude for coming to help. It wasn't her fault that the ranch was going under. He'd tried like hell, but he couldn't turn a profit. There had been too many unforeseen expenses after his parents had died. Because he'd wanted his brother and sisters to go to college, he did what he had to. He refinanced and took out loans. Because he wanted Caitlin to go to the best psychiatrists around, he took out more loans.

At this point in time, the Rattlesnake Ranch needed to diversify and not depend only on cattle. He'd hit the area banks and applied for more loans so he could buy a couple of bulls with a good track record that he could breed to some of his more outstanding cows. He also wanted to buy a half-dozen good bucking horses and some basic breeding equipment that he needed to get started. All his applications were denied. Bank after bank told him that he had too big of a debt load already.

Karen, Louise and Ty had insisted that something serious had to be done. Hell, Buck always thought that, too, which was why he wanted to get into rodeo-stock contracting.

Then Karen suggested the dude ranch thing, saying that the profits could go into paying off all the loans first. Then he could develop the rodeo-stock part of the operation.

That might happen if he lived long enough, but it wouldn't happen in the year that he said he'd give them to make the dude ranch a success.

Already he couldn't stand the thought of strangers living in his house. The ranch meant everything to him, much more than it did to his brother and sisters. Karen wanted her own nursery and flower shop in town. Louise had set her sights on being a corporate lawyer. Ty—well, Ty didn't know what he wanted yet, but he definitely didn't want to be stuck on the Rattlesnake much longer. Ty liked to roam.

Buck wanted to buy them out, and he was pretty sure they'd all want to sell. They just didn't have the love of the land that he had. He knew that they were only sticking around because they felt that they owed him.

But they didn't owe him anything. After the car accident in Florida that killed his parents, he just did what he had to do, plain and simple, and was glad to do it.

He'd been in the Army and assigned to Fort Benning, Georgia, when he was called into the chaplain's office and told that his parents had died. It had been his folks who'd encouraged him to take some time off from the ranch and see the world after he graduated, and when the Army recruiter came to his high school, he'd thought it was the perfect answer. He could see the world and serve his country while doing so. Mostly, though, all he ended up seeing was Fort Benning for a year as an assistant to the captain of Human Resources.

He'd received a hardship discharge from the Army and came home to take care of his brother and two sisters, even sending them all to college, just like his folks would have wanted. Now, to save the ranch, he'd had to go along with his siblings. He hated to do it, but his gallery sale wasn't scheduled until six months down the road. He'd tried to stall things until then but was overruled, and the wheels started moving even before Karen had placed that call to Meredith. His sisters and Ty didn't want to wait until the sale.

"Why bet against a sure thing?" Karen had asked.

The Rattlesnake Ranch was going to become the Rattlesnake Dude Ranch, and Buck was powerless to halt things at this point.

Porters had ranched this land since after the Civil War. He'd die before he sold to that lunatic Russ Pardee, who made him periodic lowball offers. Pardee probably already knew that a Southwest developer, the Jace Corporation, was interested in making a golf course and condos for the rich out of a chunk of the Rattlesnake, and he no doubt planned to turn Buck's land over to them for a fat profit.

In the dim light, Buck scanned the family room. Everything in it held special memories for him. He remembered his mother painting all the pictures that were displayed. There was Ty riding his first horse. Louise, with her red hair flying, running barrels. Buck, his dad and Gramps fishing by the river. Karen potting flowers.

He remembered helping his dad put in the beehive fireplace around which the family gathered every night. Blankets, rugs and pottery made by their Pima Indian friends were displayed through the house.

He had to give Karen a lot of credit for playing the Meredith Turner trump card. He should be grateful that there was a way out, but he was going to be the laughing stock of Arizona when he opened his ranch to dudes. Russ Pardee would see to that.

Damn. His brain was going in circles. He wanted to get rid of Meredith so the dang-blasted dude ranch wouldn't be a success, but that would be like kicking himself in the ass.

He needed to shut down and get some sleep, but he was finding that harder and harder to do with everything on his mind.

Now he had Karen to worry about. He wondered how his sister was doing over at the hospital. She'd looked so sick and pale. He knew she'd be okay after her surgery, but he hated for her to have to suffer all that pain. He said a quick prayer for her, tried to get comfortable on the couch, closed his eyes and hoped that sleep would come.

Merry awoke to the neighing of horses instead of the sound of honking traffic. She couldn't remember where she was, but twisted tree branches were over her head.

Burrowed into her side on the bed was a little girl with light blond hair. Caitlin.

Cait had had a bad dream during the night, just as Buck had said she might. She'd been crying and whimpering in her sleep, and Merry remembered getting up and putting her arms around her. Then she'd lain down next to Cait in the tree bed.

Merry had pushed back Cait's sweat-soaked hair, and in the girl's sleepy state, she'd mumbled, "Mommy, why don't you love me?"

Merry felt the tears stinging her own eyes. She remembered thinking the same thing when she was Cait's age.

After Cait was quiet, Merry got up to go back to the futon. Then the girl had said, "Mommy, don't go."

Merry looked at the sleeping child. She had Buck's jaw and maybe his nose. She definitely didn't have his thick black hair. She wondered about Debbie, Buck's wife. There weren't any pictures of her in the house, and Karen hardly spoke of her.

Merry decided to get up and start breakfast. Carefully, she moved away from Cait so as not to wake her.

On her way to the kitchen, Merry stopped, startled by the sound of soft snoring. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw the massive form of Buck sleeping on the couch in the living room. His chest was bare and broad with just a hint of black hair. A blanket was draped—barely—across his middle and over one leg, but his other leg was exposed from his thigh on down.

Her fingers itched to touch the hard muscles of his chest and arms. She wanted to trace a path with the palm of her hand down his tight stomach and let it linger. Instead, she tucked her hands into the satin-lined pockets of her khaki pants and forced herself to steady her breathing, then she hurried to the kitchen.

The kitchen had always been her sanctuary.

She paused for a minute as she flipped on the light switch, wondering why Buck was intruding on her waking moments as well as her dreams.

It was more than a little unsettling to be so attracted to Buck. He wasn't her type at all.

But who was her type? George and his kiss-and-telling to the tabloids had hurt her to the core. Before George, it'd been her assistant director, Mick.

Mick had charmed her in the hope that she'd make him director. After she'd given him her heart and soul, she'd come close to doing just that. Luckily, or unluckily, she'd caught him in a lip-lock with the studio's receptionist.

She'd finally learned her lesson with George. She was going to be more careful than ever. In fact, she might forget about romance altogether.

Merry pushed all that to the back of her mind and flipped the switch to start the coffeemaker. She admired the bright Mexican tiles, and wondered if Karen's mother had a hand in designing those, too. It was a great kitchen with yards of counter space and gleaming appliances.

Everything about the rambling ranch house was homey and comfortable. It had the feel of a close-knit loving family.

It was a shame to turn it into a dude ranch. This was a house meant for a family. Oh, sure, guests would feel warm and welcome, but the house wouldn't speak to them like it spoke to her. It represented everything she'd never had growing up.

Cranking open the windows above the sink, she took in a deep breath of the cool morning air. Instead of the smell of Boston Harbor, Arizona had the scent of horses and something else… mesquite maybe, or sage.

Morning was her favorite time of the day. She loved to sit with a cup of coffee and watch as the world around her came to life.

She noticed that distant mountains looked like a lacy silhouette against the orange glow of the sky. At the base was a smoky layer of clouds that made the mountains look like they were floating. She knew that it was going to be hot soon.

As Buck kept reminding her, it was the desert.

The chirping of the birds surprised her. Back home, the squawking of the seagulls drowned out any other birds that might be nearby, but here in the desert, the birds were singing in several-part harmonies. It was all a glorious cacophony of sound, and right now it sounded better to her than the Boston Symphony.

She peeked into the refrigerator, looking forward to the prospect of cooking a big breakfast for Buck and Cait and maybe even the ranch hands. Instead of the pressure of testing recipes for her show and making sure everything was just perfect, she could cook for the fun of it, just like she had once upon a time. Before cooking became her gold mine, then her albatross.

As her eyes skimmed the contents of the refrigerator, her mind quickly sorted everything into various combinations of dishes. She could make several different quiches, or omelets, or even her ham-and-cheese scones.

Depending on when everyone usually ate, she might even have time to make her maple biscuits.

She wondered what Buck would want for breakfast. She figured him for the meat-and-potatoes type, nothing fancy, so he'd probably like eggs like rubber and bread that was carbonized. He'd want potatoes swimming in grease and onions and a hunk of artery-clogging meat. She could do that.

She glanced in the direction of the living room where Buck slept and wondered what, if anything, he had on under that blanket. She wanted another peak at him lying on the couch.

As if by magic, the door opened and Buck materialized. "G'morning." He rubbed his closed eyes with the tips of his fingers. "I checked on Cait. She's still sleeping."

He ran his hands over his chest as if he was rubbing himself awake, and Merry couldn't turn her eyes away. He wore only jeans, but a white, long-sleeved shirt hung around his neck, the same shirt he'd been wearing last night. He clearly wasn't a morning person in the least, but he looked very male, from the top of his disheveled black hair to the bottom of his bare feet.

He yawned, then sniffed the air, his eyes still at half mast. "Coffee?"

"It's not quite ready yet," Merry answered. "Can I make you breakfast?"

The second his eyes focused on her, he froze and blurted, "I thought you were Karen."

"Hospital."

"Right."

"How about breakfast?"

"Uh, no. I have to take care of the horses." He crossed the room, bent over to grab his boots, then he hurried out the door.

Looking out the window, she saw Buck hopping as he pulled on his boots. He shrugged into his shirt and continued walking as he buttoned it. He let out a low whistle, and several horses that were in the corral moved toward the fence and hung their heads over it. Laughing, he petted their noses.

"I overslept, ladies and gents, but I'll feed you now," she heard him say.

The coffeemaker gave a final chug, and she decided to deliver Buck's coffee to him at the barn and watch him feed the horses. Since she didn't know how he took his coffee, she found a silver tray, draped a yellow-checked napkin over it, and set a creamer and sugar bowl on it along with a spoon and two mugs of coffee, one for him and one for her.

Tentatively, she walked out to the corral, ever alert for anything that crawled or slithered. She could feel every pebble under her feet, and knew for a fact that she should have packed some sturdy shoes rather than strappy Italian sandals.

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