HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

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Wife Wanted in Dry Creek

Janet Tronstad

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Аннотация

Thanks to his uncle posting a prayer request in the church bulletin, all of Dry Creek, Montana, thinks Conrad Nelson wants a wife. A busy mechanic, Conrad is doing just fine on his own.But then the very woman he described as the perfect wife drives into his life. Katrina Britton is in town only temporarily to care for her young nephews–and the worry in her pretty green eyes has him keeping his distance. Until even Dry Creek's confirmed bachelor realizes they're each other's answered prayers.

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After a few steps, Katrina felt the heels of her shoes suddenly go down into the mud.

"What's wrong?" Conrad stepped over and steadied her arm.

"I think I'm stuck," Katrina confessed. When he'd taken her arm, she'd realized how tall he was. Of course, she'd shrunk an inch when her heels slid down in the mud.

Conrad frowned. "Hold on to your hat," he said as he scooped her up and settled her into his arms. "There. I'll get you to the asphalt, at least."

"You don't need to—" Katrina started, but he was already walking with her. "Being swept off my feet like this is really quite romantic. You know, like those old movie stars." She was very close to him and it gave her a dizzy feeling in her stomach. His eyes were dancing with laughter.

"If you want movie-star romance, here it is."

And with that, he kissed her.

JANET TRONSTAD

would never presume to tell anyone who they should marry. But she does admit to a little matchmaking between the pages of her twenty-some books. She has a series of contemporary and historical books set in Dry Creek, Montana (based loosely on the small Montana town where she grew up). Another four-book series, sharing the lives of four young women in the Sisterhood of the Dropped Stitches, is set in Old Town Pasadena, California, where she currently lives. Janet is a full-time writer and, when she's not at her computer, she enjoys spending time with friends and family.

Wife Wanted in Dry Creek
Janet Tronstad

www.millsandboon.co.uk

He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord.

—Proverbs 18:22

For my nephew, Orion MacDonald, with love and prayers that, in due time, he will find exactly the right wife. Meanwhile, of course, he's more concerned with his puppy. And getting through the second grade.

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Chapter One

Katrina Britton stood looking out the window of the only gas station in Dry Creek, Montana. The handful of houses she saw had their curtains drawn. It was supposed to be spring, but winter still had a grip on this tiny town. The ground was sprinkled with frost and dried mud was splattered on everything from parked cars to that little garden gnome sticking up in someone's dead lawn.

In all her thirty-two years, Katrina had always liked winter. But seeing how lonely the gnome looked surrounded by all that withered grass made her eyes tear up so she blinked and concentrated on the window in front of her. The ground wasn't all that was frozen. Twenty minutes ago, she'd pulled off the I-90 freeway outside this town to take a call on her cell phone. When she finished the conversation, she knew her new photography business was as cold and lifeless as anything she could see out this window. In the past couple of months, she'd fought against everything—her unsupportive boyfriend, her dwindling savings and her own doubts—all in hopes of landing this one big client that would jump-start her career as a freelance photographer. She wanted this more than anything she'd ever wanted. And just when she thought it was hers, the client had said they couldn't use her photos because, although they were technically good, they lacked heart.

Lacked heart? How could they lack heart? She'd spent almost everything she had getting the perfect models to portray that illusive thing called heart.

Not knowing what to do after that call, she started the car again, only to have the muffler make a horrid noise and begin spewing out black smoke. She was forced to take the first exit she could find to get help. So, here she was. Her day was miserable and it was only eight-thirty in the morning.

She hiccupped and saw the man at the desk look up at her. In an effort to stop the tears from falling, she turned back and focused on the window. Eventually, she'd need to decide what to do next in her life, but for now she just needed to breathe. Of course, a distraction would help her get through the next few minutes, but there was nothing more to see outside. That's when she noticed that the large glass pane itself was amazingly clean.

"Who does the windows?" she turned to ask the man who was watching her instead of tallying up a repair estimate for her muffler.

"I do them," he answered a little tentatively. "Why, do you see a spot?"

She'd grown up in a muddy town like this so she knew how hard it was to keep windows clean during the winter. "I just think that whatever they're paying you to keep them looking like this, it's not enough. You're doing a great job." She peered at his name tag. "Conrad."

She would love to have someone tell her she was doing a

good job—at anything. It would certainly make her feelings of failure a lot less right now. But he didn't seem to care if anyone appreciated his efforts. He grunted and turned back to the repair estimate he was filling out.

Well, Mr. Congeniality he was not. She studied him anyway because she needed to focus on something right now. His brown hair was cropped close, but not styled. His beige uniform had his name, Conrad Nelson, embroidered on the top pocket in orange thread. She'd guess he was in his late thirties. He was fit, but not buff. The shirt of his uniform was neatly tucked in and his shoulders were military straight as he sat in his wooden chair.

Something about him steadied her, though. His demeanor said he was a rock. She guessed he was a man who always quietly did his duty.

He pointed to the small sign by the door. "This is my place. I take care of it all. Top to bottom, including windows."

"You're fortunate." She envied him; there'd been pride in his voice.

"I do okay. Moved everything here from Miles City a few months ago." Conrad paused to look at her some more. "You need a job or something? Washing those windows wouldn't pay much, but—"

She tried to smile at him, but couldn't.

"I'm just passing through," she managed to say. When that didn't seem like enough, she added, "This place is wonderful, though."

Actually, the town looked like it had sprung up in some rancher's field and would blow away if a good wind bothered to come along. The only thing that connected it to the outside world was that winding asphalt road she'd driven into town. Across the street from the gas station, she'd seen a hardware store and a little farther down was a café. That was it for businesses, unless she counted the small church.

She wished she could overlook that church, but it stood out. The old-fashioned white building had concrete steps leading up to the front door. Stained glass windows lined the side. If it had a steeple, the place would look almost like the church she'd gone to as a child. That had been so long ago. Back then, she believed God was in His heaven and all was right with the world. Of course, she knew better now. If God was up there looking down at her life, it was only idle curiosity that moved Him.

She blinked. That bothered her more than it had in a long time. And made her feel like she had too much in common with that old garden gnome out there, standing isolated and frozen in some eternal winter she didn't understand. She blinked again. She'd always made do with what she had in life; she would again.

Just then she heard the faint sound of a sliding chair. She turned and saw Conrad reach into a side drawer of his desk, take something out and stand up.

"Here." He opened the box of tissues and held it out to her. He didn't even look at her when he offered the box with the yellow flowers on it. She wondered how often women burst into tears

in his office. She hated to look that emotional. Her boyfriend—well, ex-boyfriend now—always walked away from her when she cried. And the tears had come too easily ever since the lump in her breast had turned out to be cancer. The doctor said the surgery had probably removed it all, but he wouldn't know for sure until six months had passed. She had four and a half months left until the final verdict.

"I don't need anything." She lifted her head high, which proved to be the wrong thing to do as a tear lost its moorings and slid down her cheek. Well, she supposed she did need something. She reached out and took a tissue. "Sorry."

"Don't be."

"I don't usually get so upset." She waved her hand in a vague way. "It's just because of—"

"It's okay," Conrad said and set the tissue box down on his desk.

"I've been fired." She didn't want him to think she was unhinged so she needed to explain there was a sensible reason for her tears. And she hadn't talked about the cancer with anyone since the one disastrous conversation with her boyfriend, so she wasn't going to mention that. "Well, technically not so much fired as not hired."

She took a breath.

"But I'm doing fine," she added before he could say anything more about the window washing job. "I have so much to be grateful for. Really."

"Yeah," he said in a voice almost as phony as hers.

He clearly didn't believe her. "Of course, I wasn't wild about having the muffler fall off. But my life is good," she said.

That might be a stretch. But she was at least trying to make everything right. After her surgery, she hadn't wanted to go back to her secretarial job, not when she craved so much more out of life. Over the years, she'd taken a dozen photography classes so she decided to at least try to make her dream come true.

Conrad looked up and glanced at the wall where a calendar hung. He was probably only checking the date, but Katrina's heart stopped.

"April 9," she offered quickly. "Today's Saturday, April 9."

She felt the heat rise on her face. She'd forgotten she was pictured on this month's page of that particular agricultural calendar. Last year, she'd answered an ad in the paper for models. She'd only wanted to see what a professional photo shoot was like, but she'd ended up being chosen to model for a Depression-era picture. The tractor was the star of the photo; she was in a distant farmhouse calling her "husband" home from the fields for dinner. She'd told herself she was far enough away that no one would recognize her.

Conrad looked up from his desk and opened his mouth to say something. Then he closed it again. He didn't say anything, but she noticed something had changed in his face. Maybe he was having a heart attack. He was white as snow. Well, not snow in general, but he sure matched the kind of gray that would be found

in this town during winter. He was even slumped a little in his chair.

Just then the phone on his desk rang.

Conrad straightened himself and picked up the phone. “Service station. Nelson here.”

Katrina could hear another man’s voice indistinctly on the other end of the phone.

“Easy now,” Conrad said as he put his hand over the receiver and looked up at her in apology. “Sorry, but this is my uncle. It’ll only take a minute if—”

Katrina nodded. She was more than happy to leave. She turned and walked into the repair part of the gas station and shut the glass door behind her. She hadn’t had a chance to tell Conrad that the car belonged to her sister, Leanne. Her sister had asked her, begged her really, to come for a visit. It had been bad timing, though. Katrina arrived at Leanne’s place yesterday, just in time to listen to her sister fret about why her husband, Walker Rain Tree, hadn’t come home the night before.

This morning, Leanne had asked her to take three-year-old Zach and six-year-old Ryan with her for the day so she and Walker could have a serious talk without them around. It seemed this wasn’t the first night Leanne’s husband had been gone and then refused to explain why. Katrina didn’t want the boys to witness that kind of a quarrel either, so she said yes, and now the boys were asleep in the back of her sister’s car. Leanne had insisted Katrina take her old car in case she wanted to take some

of the back roads. That way, Katrina wouldn't risk damaging her leased Lexus.

On a whim, Katrina had promised the boys a quarter for each photo she took of them today. They had been excited about earning money so she expected they'd be up soon. Even with all of the delays, they should be home at Leanne's in time for an early dinner.

Conrad waited for the woman to walk out of his office before he put the phone back to his ear. "Now, start at the beginning."

He had to admit he was glad she was gone. His whole face relaxed. For a while he thought he might be hallucinating, but his uncle Charley would bring him back to reality.

"Is she still there?" the older man asked a little unnecessarily in Conrad's opinion. His uncle was looking out the window of the hardware store across the street. There was no way a person could leave Conrad's gas station without being in full sight of anyone looking out that window.

"Yeah, she's still here," he answered anyway. "Did you happen to get a good look at her?"

"Elmer said she has really long black hair and is pretty."

A whole group of older men sat inside the hardware store and kept their eyes on the comings and goings of Dry Creek. Elmer had underestimated her beauty, Conrad thought. Pretty was too tame a word to describe her. She was leggy and walked toward the beat-up old car with her long hair swinging with every step she took. She had warm brown eyes and creamy skin. Even

wearing jeans and a black leather jacket, she was too exotic for this place. He hadn't given much thought to her apart from that until he saw the tears in her eyes. That's when all of the pieces fell into place and he recognized her.

Conrad remembered his uncle was waiting. "Yeah, she is that."

"Is she acting peculiar?"

"In what way?"

"Well, nervous. Is she anxious to get away from here?"

"She might be a little impatient, but lots of people are." He didn't know how to go about this, but he knew a man needed to lance a boil if he wanted it to heal. "The thing is she looks like someone in a picture I have and—"

"Aha," his uncle interrupted in triumph. "Elmer told me she's probably on one of those wanted posters you keep on that bulletin board of yours. The sheriff called and asked us to be on the lookout for an old gray car with a dent in the right fender. Somebody stole it down by Pryor. On the Crow Indian reservation. Even I could see her car is gray. And banged up, too."

Conrad closed his eyes. No one would steal that old car she was driving. Not unless they were drunk or too blind to see it clearly. "I don't think she's wanted for anything. That's not where I saw her." He drew a deep breath. "I know it's not her, but she looks like the woman on the calendar."

"What calendar?"

“You know the one I showed you.”

There was a moment of absolute silence.

“You mean the woman you’re going to marry?” Uncle Charley finally asked in a hushed tone. “That calendar?”

Conrad didn’t know why he hadn’t seen the pitfalls last week when he’d used a page in his calendar to make a point with his uncle. “No, she’s not the woman I’m going to marry. I’m just saying—oh, I don’t know what I’m saying.”

The fact that he had not wanted to have a serious discussion with his uncle about his love life was the reason he was in trouble now. Last Wednesday the older man had come over to show Conrad what he’d put in the church prayer bulletin—“Wife wanted for my nephew.”

A prayer didn’t get more public than that. Or more embarrassing.

Conrad knew he should have sat down right there and assured his uncle that he would get married eventually, in his own time. But he was in the middle of rebuilding a tractor engine for the Redferns and they needed it soon if they were going to plow the ground they were leasing in time to get a crop planted. So he’d tried to stop his uncle’s crusade the quick way, by pointing at the calendar on the wall and announcing that he had already picked out his future wife. It had been a joke, of course. Just a way to avoid the awkwardness of a conversation he didn’t want to have.

“She’s really here? Your wife?” His uncle sputtered, his voice rising.

“Don’t get excited. It’s not good for your blood pressure.”

“Well, I can hardly believe it.”

“That’s because there’s nothing to believe. It’s just that someone who looks like the calendar woman is here.”

When he said it out loud, it didn’t sound so bad. The problem was Conrad wasn’t sure this woman looked like anyone else. He’d never seen anyone like her in town before, not even when folks from the Miles City rodeo spilled over into the Dry Creek café. He took another look at her. For one thing, those strappy black high heels she wore would jump-start a dead man’s heart. Women around here didn’t wear shoes like that.

“Still, maybe it’s a sign,” Uncle Charley said hopefully.

“She just needs to get a new muffler on her car.”

If he had to pick some woman to make his point, Conrad wondered why he hadn’t chosen an ordinary woman who really existed in his world. Maybe someone like Tracy Stelling, who cut his hair once a month at the Quick Clips in Miles City. She’d grown up on one of the ranches near here and, although she’d left for a dozen or so years, she’d returned, looking subdued and grateful to be home. He’d have a chance with someone like that. He’d even been thinking of asking her out to dinner so he wouldn’t be lying if he said he was considering Tracy for a wife.

“Every relationship needs to start someplace,” his uncle said.

“That’s the whole point. There is no relationship. She’s just passing through. And she’s not even the real woman. I mean the woman I thought she was.”

He looked over at the calendar again. The woman was wearing a deep red dress with a white apron and holding open the door of a rundown farmhouse. The woman stood defiantly as if she was trying to fight off some crushing despair. He hadn't noticed until she was standing at his window, looking out and blinking back her tears, that her profile was the same as the calendar woman.

"Conrad? You still there?" his uncle asked.

He swallowed, but he couldn't talk. The calendar woman had reminded him of the feeling he'd had when he'd been five and his mother had died from pneumonia. Just the way she stood there holding that door, he'd known she'd shared the same feeling as him at some time in her life. They'd both screamed at the wind, even when no sound was coming out of their mouths.

"I'm just thinking—what if she did steal that car?" his uncle continued. "A thief could be dangerous. Knives. Guns. That kind of thing. Not that the sheriff said anything about the suspect being armed, but you never know. You need to be careful."

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine," Conrad said, hoping it was true.

"I could call the sheriff and have him check the woman out," his uncle persisted. "We should at least get a license plate number."

If it would make his uncle stop asking questions about the woman, he'd give him the numbers to Fort Knox if he had them. He looked down at the work order he'd just filled out. "The plate number is SAQ718."

He'd had to go back into the service bay to write down the number because the woman didn't know it. Of course, lots of people didn't know their license plate numbers. That didn't mean they were driving stolen cars.

"Say it again so I can write it down."

"SAQ718. But I just don't think—"

"Well, you're a good judge of character," his uncle muttered, contradicting everything he'd said up to this point. "You're probably right about her. It wouldn't hurt to talk to her, though. Find out a little more about her."

"She's got two little kids in the backseat sleeping."

"Oh." His uncle's voice turned flat. "She's married then?"

To his surprise Conrad felt an echo of the older man's disappointment. He hadn't quite realized that. "I suppose that's what it means all right."

Now this, he told himself, was the reason it was foolish to put that prayer request out there. It was bound to be discouraging to everyone involved. He trusted God with his very soul, but when it came to finding a wife, all Conrad could remember were the few days in junior high when PE class became dance class. A boy, or a man, had to ask the question and hope for a dance even if he knew the woman would rather spit in his eye than say yes.

And the church—he couldn't bring the whole church congregation into this. There'd be advice given and awkward questions and, worst of all, expectations. No, a man needed to find his own wife. His friends couldn't do it for him.

“I’ve got to go,” Conrad said in a hurry. “She’s coming back over here.”

“Now?” his uncle asked. “Hold on—I’ll be there.”

“No—She’s my customer—I’ll—” Ask her to dance, he almost said, but stopped himself.

“I’ll bring her some coffee,” his uncle said. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

“No—” Conrad protested again, but the phone was already dead.

He wasn’t equipped for this kind of thing. He’d always figured that, if he married, it would be a dignified, orderly thing. If only he’d spoken directly to his uncle instead of making a joke, then he could have told him that he intended to ask Tracy out. He’d always thought that, if he got married, it would be to someone comfortable and safe like her.

He’d seen how his father had suffered when his mother died so he wasn’t looking for some grand passion that would twist him around and knock him flat when something went wrong. He didn’t expect his wife to be a great beauty or a great talker or to inspire a great feeling in him. She’d just be an average woman who was content to stand beside him in life.

He only had to look through the windows to see the calendar woman as she now stood waiting for him. There was nothing average about her.

Even more alarming, when he turned to look out the other window, he saw his uncle coming across the road with a grin on

his weathered face and a cup of coffee in his hands. His arthritis certainly wasn't bothering him now.

Well, Conrad decided, there was nothing for him to do except to walk into the garage and find out what he was made of. She was waiting for him. It wasn't a good time for him to recollect that he never had learned to dance, but the thought came anyway. His palms were already starting to sweat.

Chapter Two

Katrina shivered as she crossed her arms and stood in place. The windows in here were small and covered with frost from last night. The smoke from the muffler still hung in the air. A large tractor took up half of the garage, but there was plenty of room for her to pace around her sister's old car.

"I'm freezing," she said as he was coming out of his office. She was surprised her nephews were warm enough with just their coats on to keep sleeping, but she'd checked on them and they were.

"The heat will kick on in a minute," Conrad said, stopping a few feet away from her. "I don't usually have customers back here so I don't keep it heated all the time. But I turned it up before I came through the door."

"Well, thanks." She drew her jacket closer.

It must be almost nine o'clock now and she'd left Leanne's place around six this morning. They both had been half-asleep then so she forgot to give Leanne the number for her cell phone. Not that she would have expected to hear from her sister anyway. Walker hadn't come home until early morning and Leanne said he would sleep late. Katrina had been careful not to comment on Walker's absence. It didn't matter how suspicious it looked to her, Leanne needed to be the one to decide if her husband might be unfaithful.

“There’s a bulletin board over there that has some jobs listed on it.” Conrad pointed to the far wall. “It’s mostly cleaning houses, but you might find something to do until you get a more regular job.”

Just then a beam of morning light made its way through the frost on the window and settled on Conrad’s head, gradually showing up the sprinkling of golden strands in his brown hair. Now that was the kind of diffused light she’d wanted for her photographs. She didn’t know why she wasn’t rushing to get her camera. The longer she looked at Conrad the more of a glow he had. And his green eyes were filled with the mossy colors found in a backwoods pond. Even his skin was taking on a rosier hue. The faint roughness of whiskers on his cheeks and the set of his jaw made him look rugged and strong.

It was unusual that sunlight would make that much difference. He was almost handsome.

“You didn’t get into your wife’s shampoo, did you?” Katrina asked before she thought about it. “Your hair sparkles.”

“There’s no wife. I got some grease on my head working under that tractor.” He nodded to the piece of equipment standing in his garage. “My aunt Edith made up something with lemon juice and other things to get it out. I smelled like fruit pie for days.”

So, he was single. “Well, it works. Your hair is great.”

Then she remembered she shouldn’t be asking any man if he was single. Not until she knew whether or not her cancer was coming back. She didn’t need a repeat of the scene with her

boyfriend when he decided being with someone who was sick was not sufficiently entertaining to keep him by her side.

Conrad's face eased up a fraction. "Thanks. If you need anything, just let me know."

He seemed to mean it which surprised her enough that she considered telling him all her troubles just to see if he was like her ex-boyfriend. It wasn't easy to tell someone, though.

She hadn't even told Leanne about the cancer. At first, she hadn't wanted to worry her and then, when the surgery was all over, she didn't know how to say the words. Maybe later, when Leanne wasn't so worried about her marriage, she'd tell her then. If she waited a few months, she'd know more anyway. By then she hoped to be closer to her sister, too.

"Is it getting warmer in here?" Conrad asked.

She nodded.

He was looking at her again with concern, only this time he didn't seem to be worried that she was going to fall apart. "My uncle is coming over."

"That's nice."

"Well," he said without much enthusiasm. "He won't stay long."

They were both silent for a minute.

"He'll probably ask if you ever had your picture taken for a calendar."

Katrina swallowed. "Oh. So you did notice?"

The director for the ad had kept pressing her to feel the despair

of that woman caught in a never-ending drought. Finally, Katrina had let her emotions go.

Conrad nodded.

"Well, it was a mistake." When Katrina saw the final picture, she was appalled. The camera had caught her emotions too well. "I never thought about all those people looking at me. All month long. It's strange."

"I can understand that," he said.

He stood and looked over her shoulder at the tractor.

"I didn't mean I don't like people to look at me in person." She wondered how neurotic he thought she was.

"Oh." He looked back at her. This time he smiled. "Good."

He shuffled his feet. "If you need anything, let me know."

"I could use some juice," Katrina said. Every time she saw that calendar she got thirsty. "For the boys when they wake up. They've been sleeping a long time. Is there a place I can get some?"

"There's a vending machine in the back." He motioned to the far corner of the garage. "It has some boxes of apple juice. If you need some quarters, let me know."

She looked and saw the bright blue machine with the red stripes along the rear wall of his shop.

"I've got plenty of change in my purse," Katrina said. She'd left her purse in the car and when she turned in that direction she saw a small head in the window.

"Looks like they're waking up," Conrad said as he followed

her gaze and waved at Ryan. “Do they sleep in the car like this often?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t taken them anywhere before.”

His face went white. “But they’re yours, right?”

She shook her head. “They’re used to the car, though. They probably sleep in it all the time so they’re fine.”

He was silent. Maybe even stunned. He certainly didn’t have that friendly expression on his face anymore.

Just then she heard the side door open to the garage. She looked up and a gray-haired man stepped inside holding a coffee cup. Short and a little stout, he had a red shirt on his back and his hair was puffed up around him like he’d been in a windstorm. Even his cheeks were rosy.

“Maybe you should go back and get another cup,” Conrad said to the old man as he stood in the doorway with the cup held out. “Tell Elmer he might be right about everything. That’s ev-ery-thing.”

Conrad’s voice was funny. Each word was spoken clearly before the other word came out of his mouth. Maybe his uncle had trouble hearing.

“Oh,” the old man said as he looked into the garage like he was trying to find something.

Through the open door, Katrina could see that the sky was darker than when she’d seen it last. It was probably going to rain or snow before long. There were no more beams of sunlight sneaking through.

“Let me just give the coffee to your friend here. No point in taking it back,” the older man said as he stepped into the garage and looked straight at Katrina. “Hello. I’m Charley Nelson.”

She moved closer to save him some steps. It was brave of him to meet new people when he obviously had challenges.

“Let—me—help—you,” she said carefully and a bit louder than Conrad. Then she reached out to take the cup. “Thank you for bringing me some coffee. I’m Katrina Britton.”

The older man seemed startled, but he gave her the cup. Then he stood there grinning.

Conrad spoke up then. “It seems the boys aren’t hers. I’m guessing the car might not be, either.”

She turned and saw he looked upset.

“Well, not everyone has children,” she protested. She didn’t know what business that was of Conrad’s. And who cared about the car? “That doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy being around someone else’s children. I was just taking them for a ride.”

The old man must have agreed, because he didn’t even talk about children when he said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know if you liked cream or sugar so I just brought it black.”

He probably hadn’t heard Conrad, she concluded. The poor man. It must be hard to carry on a conversation.

“Black—is—fine,” she said loudly and took the cup. Then she pointed to her ear. “I—understand.”

That seemed to delight him.

“My uncle Charley hears fine,” Conrad said from behind her.

“He’s just being stubborn.”

“How can you say that? He brought me coffee in a beautiful mug.” She looked down at the red cup she held. It had a white heart and a winged figure. “Why it’s a cupid mug!”

“Love is always in the air around here.” The older man stepped closer to her, still grinning.

“Love isn’t all that’s in the air,” Conrad muttered. He didn’t sound too happy. “Bonnie and Clyde were in love. That didn’t mean you’d want them to come to your town. Or take your children for rides in your car.”

Katrina took a sip of the coffee. It was good and strong.

“We’re known for our love matches in this town,” Charley continued, not looking at his nephew. “We even have a stop sign that’s shaped like a heart up the road a bit. It got bent like that years ago when a couple of teenagers—one of them my son, actually—had an accident while they were eloping. It’s our main tourist attraction.”

“We don’t have any tourists,” Conrad protested.

Katrina certainly could believe that. “You need to put on Shakespearean plays or something. Or build a water park. They’re popular.”

“We’re a good, decent town. That should be enough,” Conrad said.

Then it struck her. She turned to the old man. “You have a stop sign shaped like a heart?”

“Well, half a heart,” he admitted. “It’s where the fender of my

old pickup hit it."

She set her cup of coffee on the roof of her sister's car.

"That'd be perfect." She used her hands to try and picture that sign. Maybe she wasn't out of the running to supply photos for that Romance Across America calendar after all. She'd already used most of her savings hiring those models for the photos she'd sent. She'd had beautiful blonde women and men with teeth so white they gleamed. But maybe she could find a couple of models that would work for some kind of future payment. She had her camera in the trunk. She had film. If she could get strong enough natural daylight, she'd have a chance.

"Do you have any blondes here?" she continued. "You know, young women in their twenties who'd like to take a chance at modeling. Pretty, of course, and curvy—"

Well, maybe not too many curves, she thought. Her boyfriend had been swayed by the curves of one of the models as much as he had been by Katrina's surgery. She'd only had a partial mastectomy, but he said it made him uncomfortable. The young blonde, on the other hand, apparently made him very comfortable.

"Curvy? Why?" Conrad sounded bewildered.

She eyed him skeptically.

"I want to take some pictures. I guess the main thing is that the models have fresh faces and lots of heart," she finally said. "They need to look sincere when they pretend to be in love. I often tell my models to think of food when they're trying to look smitten."

Uncle Charley's face brightened. "That's a tip we can all live by. I love my wife's cooking. Especially her sour cream raisin pie. Every time Edith bakes it, I fall in love with her all over again."

Just then there was the sound of a siren in the distance. Katrina saw Conrad's jaw tighten.

"Elmer called in the number before I left," the older man said with a quick look at her. "I didn't wait to hear what the sheriff said, but I guess they matched since he's here."

"Sheriff?" Katrina asked. "What's wrong?"

Conrad knew there was no need to go over and open the door. Sheriff Carl Wall would find his way into the garage. His uncle had just been making sure the woman stayed here, Conrad concluded. That made sense, thankfully.

Meanwhile, the woman had moved closer to the car so Conrad stepped around to block her. He didn't know who those two boys were, but he didn't want her to use them as hostages.

Suddenly, it occurred to him. "They're not drugged, are they?"

"Who?" The woman turned bewildered eyes to him.

"The boys."

He wondered if she would play the innocent until the end. He'd sure been fooled by her. He'd never tell anyone, but after seeing her tears he had been planning to put a new muffler on that old car of hers and not charge her a dime. Wouldn't that have been something?

The door to the garage opened and Sheriff Wall stepped inside. He pushed his worn Stetson back so he could see from

beneath the brim. He was a solid man and he didn't put up with much nonsense from people. He got his hair cut by Tracy in Miles City, too, so underneath his hat he was neatly, but conservatively, trimmed.

"Conrad," the sheriff said with a nod. Then he turned his head slightly and nodded again, "Charley."

He looked at Katrina. "Ma'am."

The sheriff had a gray wool jacket over his uniform and Conrad realized he was relieved the man hadn't come in with his guns drawn. Catching a car thief would be high excitement for the sheriff, but he seemed to be taking it in stride.

"What do we have here?" the sheriff asked in a mild voice as he stepped behind the car so he could see the license plate.

"I'm sure the plates are current," Katrina said. "They have the sticker on them for this year."

If Katrina had stolen that car, she was good. Conrad had to give her that. She sounded like a concerned motorist. But the sheriff needed to know everything wasn't the way it looked.

"She's got two boys in the backseat," Conrad said. "She doesn't know them."

"I didn't say I don't know them," Katrina protested. "I said they're not mine."

"So you're not married?" Charley asked.

"What difference does it make?" she asked in surprise. "A woman doesn't need a husband to drive a car."

Charley just beamed, his wrinkled face all scrunched up with

a smile. Conrad knew what his uncle was thinking and he didn't like it.

"So is she the thief?" Conrad decided it was time to bring everyone back down to earth.

"Well, it is a bit early to be making accusations," the sheriff said. He walked around the car and looked in the windows.

"What's going on here?" Katrina demanded.

The sheriff shrugged. "We'll know soon. I have a call in to the officials on the Crowe reservation. They take care of their own problems. I don't have jurisdiction there. I'm just looking into this as a professional courtesy."

"What problems?" Katrina asked. "Is something wrong with Leanne?"

Conrad looked over and saw two heads staring out of the car. "Both boys are up now."

"Well, why don't I have a little chat with them and see what they say," the sheriff said as he turned to look in the car windows. Then he turned back to Conrad. "It might be best if you took the young lady into your office while I talk to the boys."

Conrad nodded. "Makes sense."

"And make sure she doesn't make any phone calls," the sheriff added. "She might be working with someone."

"I'm not working with anyone," Katrina protested. "I mean, I didn't do anything either so I don't need a partner."

The sheriff grunted and looked at Charley. "Why don't you go with them, too?"

Conrad could see that Katrina wanted to protest, but she didn't. Instead, she walked ahead of him with her head held high and that long hair of hers swinging again like she was some princess. Her back was straight with indignation.

And, as if that wasn't bad enough, Uncle Charley leaned over and whispered, "Did you hear that? She's single."

Conrad muttered low enough that only Charley could hear. "Give it up. We've got trouble enough."

He couldn't stop watching her, though. Her high heels didn't even wobble as she marched across the concrete floor. Which was more than he could say for his heart. He supposed it was only natural that, after he'd looked at that calendar a hundred times over the past week, he would feel some warmth for the woman in the picture. He had sense enough to know that had nothing to do with real life though. This woman could be a criminal.

The three of them had no sooner stepped into his office than Katrina turned on them.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" she demanded. Her hands were on her hips and the color was high on her face.

Conrad didn't figure it was the time to say she looked magnificent.

His uncle wasn't so sensitive. "My!"

Fortunately, the older man didn't elaborate, but Conrad recognized the appreciation anyway.

"The sheriff got a call," Conrad answered. He figured she deserved to know. "The car you're driving was reported stolen."

“That car belongs to my sister. She lent it to me so I could go out scouting around for places that look romantic.”

“You mean like our stop sign?” Conrad asked in astonishment.

Uncle Charley just stood there looking like a cat who’d found a bowl of cream. “Romance?”

“If you must know, I’m hoping to become a professional photographer. I took some shots for a calendar called Romance Across America. I am—well, was—looking for locations for photo shoots this morning.”

The fire went out of her as she spoke.

“That’s the job you lost?” Conrad asked softly.

She nodded. “I’m thinking I could make another pitch for it, but I’ve already sent them my best work so I don’t know. They said my pictures lacked heart.”

“What do they know?” Conrad said without thinking. He wasn’t ready to champion this woman. True, something about her tugged at him. But he had sense enough to know that she would break his heart if he let himself get involved with her.

“So you’re a professional photographer?” Uncle Charley asked. “That’s why you wanted someone to stand by our heart sign?”

Katrina nodded.

“Then young lady, that makes you an answer to prayer,” he said with satisfaction in his voice.

“What?” Conrad almost swallowed his tongue. Here he was trying to be sensible and his uncle was diving off the deep end.

Surely, there had to be a limit to what his relatives would do in pursuit of a bride for him. “I’m sure you don’t mean—”

“No, she’s an answer to prayer.” Uncle Charley was adamant. He turned to Katrina. “My wife, Edith, has been praying up a storm asking God to send us a photographer to take some pictures for the church directory. She’s set on us having photos now that the church in Miles City has them. She says we need to keep up with the times.”

“The church directory?” Conrad was so relieved he didn’t care that he sounded like a simple-minded parrot.

“I don’t really—” Katrina stammered. “That is, I mean, I really should keep looking for more—well, other work. I used to be a secretary. I suppose I could do that again.”

Conrad saw all the life leave her face.

“We’ve got money to pay for the directory pictures,” Uncle Charley said.

“I don’t work for churches,” Katrina said. “I don’t even go inside them.”

Conrad could hear the bitterness in her voice. He expected his uncle to concede defeat. There might be a prayer request in the church bulletin asking for a wife for him, but no one would suggest he marry a woman who wasn’t at peace with God. That would be unending trouble. Instead of dropping the subject, though, his uncle got a thoughtful look on his face.

“I’ll help you find a blonde for that picture you want of the heart sign,” the older man bargained. “All you have to do is help

my wife set up the directory. Give her some pointers. Maybe take a few photos for starters. And you've got yourself a model."

"But I—"

"You don't need to set foot inside the church if you don't want. And I'll get you the best-looking blonde in Dry Creek."

"Really?" Katrina asked. Her face glowed. "That heart sign is perfect."

Conrad didn't know how a post of rusted metal could move a woman from despair to happiness, but it sure looked like one had.

Uncle Charley nodded. "It's a deal then."

Conrad's heart sank. He loved his uncle and didn't want to see him get hurt. But no good could come from being so friendly to a woman who showed up in a stolen car. He'd make sure the church didn't give her any advance money in the hopes she would take the directory job.

The woman walked over to the window. "Can I see the sign from here?"

"Just look down the road to your left as far as you can see," Uncle Charley told her.

"I see that garden gnome," she said without glancing back at them. She was quiet for a second. "Then the church. You know your church could use a steeple."

"We're looking into it," Charley said. "It takes money, though. And we have the directory to do. We're a small church."

She turned back. "I'm not taking all those pictures. Just so you know. I'm willing to get your wife started and do a few for

examples, but that's it."

Charley nodded and she turned back to the window.

"I don't see it," Katrina said.

"You're looking in the right direction. It's farther down," his uncle answered.

She moved her head, straining even more to locate it.

Conrad started to wonder if she wasn't trying to figure the fastest way out of town instead of looking for that sign. Or maybe she was just searching for a place to hide. If so, it'd be difficult. Most of the houses had fences around them, but all of them were see-through bars or wire so they wouldn't conceal much. There weren't any leaves on any of the bushes so she couldn't hide in the shrubbery, either.

"The doors are all locked around here," he said. That was an exaggeration. Granted, most of the front doors would be because no one wanted to track the mud and snow of early spring into their living rooms. But the back doors would be unlocked. That's where the rugs and boots were kept. He'd hate to have anyone come up against a car thief just because they didn't know one was in town, though.

Katrina turned to look at him in puzzlement. "I don't need doors for the photos. Just the sign."

Conrad grunted. She sure seemed innocent. "I'm just saying."

She gave him a look and turned back to the window.

By now he figured he didn't have to worry about being drawn into her web. The expression on her face said she wasn't planning

to cozy up to him anytime soon, either. Well, he supposed it was for the best.

He took a few steps farther away from her.

His uncle walked over and leaned closer to him. “You could be a little nicer. She might be your calendar lady.”

His uncle’s voice was low and Katrina couldn’t hear them.

“She is the calendar lady,” Conrad said.

“Really? Then that means—”

“It means nothing. I was joking when I said what I did. There’s no miracle answer to prayer going on here.”

“But—”

Conrad ignored his uncle. “The fact is, I’ve been thinking I should ask Tracy at the Quick Clip in Miles City out to dinner.”

“Really? Linda at the diner said you two might make a couple.”

Conrad nodded. He was glad to see someone else had some sense. “We’d be comfortable together.”

“Comfortable?” Uncle Charley exclaimed with a frown.

Katrina turned around and looked at them in puzzlement.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Conrad said to her and she went back to her window Then he turned to his uncle and said in a low voice, “Yes. Safe and comfortable.”

They were both silent for a minute.

“It’s my fault you’re willing to settle for that,” Uncle Charley said, his voice upset. “I should have paid more attention to you when your mother died. I didn’t know your father was so wrapped

up in his grief he wasn't even home most of the time."

"We got by."

"Yes, but—"

"I do okay," Conrad said. He could hardly even talk about those days after his mother died. Some things were just better left unsaid. There was no undoing what happened anyway.

The older man nodded and started to walk away.

Conrad didn't mean to upset his uncle. The man was only trying to help him out.

Just then it struck him. "Why, you don't even know any young blondes to use in the picture of that sign. How are you going to find a model?"

His uncle winked at him. "I figure that's your department."

"My—" Conrad was speechless. How was he supposed to find a pretty blonde willing to pose by an old stop sign?

No one said anything for a moment.

"It could be she's innocent," his uncle finally added with a nod toward the window. "Just like she says. I'd hate to think we treated her unfairly in Dry Creek if she is. God wants us to do better than that."

Conrad didn't have a chance to answer because just then Katrina stepped back from the window. She was beaming.

"I think I saw it," she said.

Conrad sighed. His uncle was right. He needed to see that she was given the benefit of the doubt. If for no other reason than that she was still his customer. He'd built his business on

doing everything he could for his customers. Usually, that didn't include standing beside them as they were arrested, of course, but he would do what he could. Besides, seeing her with her face lit up touched him somehow. No wonder he'd been willing to put a two-hundred-dollar muffler on her car and not charge her for it. The woman was a wonder. Well, either that or a very good actress. He wished he knew which it was.

Chapter Three

Katrina turned around and looked through the window into the garage. Fifteen more minutes had passed and the sheriff was still talking to the boys. She hadn't noticed until now, but someone had turned on a radio and a big band tune was playing softly. She saw the radio sitting on a green file cabinet behind the desk. She hadn't heard the soft static of a radio in years. It must have been Conrad's uncle who thought of the music since he was standing over there looking pleased with himself.

She looked up at the older man's lined face. "Thanks. Dance music always cheers me up."

She tapped her hands against her leg in time to the music just to show him she was feeling better.

The old man's face lit up. "I had a hunch you might be a dancer. Conrad dances, too, you know."

Katrina heard a garbled sound over by the door. Conrad had his hands in his pockets and a look of panic on his face. She half expected him to open the door and rush outside to check the gas pumps, but he didn't.

"In junior high," he muttered to her instead and then gave a dark look to his uncle. "I don't dance now."

"It's like riding a bicycle," the old man said as he bobbed his head to the beat of the music. "It'll come back to you."

"I fell off my bicycle. Remember?"

“Well, at first, but you got the hang of it,” his uncle said and then paused. “Later.”

Katrina wondered if dance moves did come back. “I took some ballet in junior high.”

Conrad shot her a look of pure terror. “I could never do ballet.”

“Nonsense,” his uncle said. “You got back on that bike until you could ride it. And you suited up as a clown at the last rodeo. That takes more nerve than ballet.”

“I only did it because the real clown didn’t show and the riders needed someone to be in the ring with them in case they needed help.”

“So you’d risk your life to help an old cowboy,” his uncle said. “But when it comes to bringing a little pleasure into a beautiful woman’s heart, you fold.”

“Well, I suppose I could dance if someone’s life was on the line,” Conrad conceded.

“You never know what you can do until you have to,” Katrina agreed. She knew the two men were trying to keep her mind off her troubles and she appreciated it.

“I ran into a burning building once,” Conrad offered. “Never thought I’d be able to do that. It was more of a shed than anything, but—”

His face had more color now that they’d stopped talking about dancing.

“That was a fool thing to do,” his uncle scolded. “That old cat never did appreciate it. She scratched you up good. You could

have gotten an infection."

"Well, she'd gotten tangled up in some string and couldn't get out. I couldn't just let her die, now could I?"

"No, I suppose not," his uncle agreed. "I've done reckless things, too. I can remember when I went skinny-dipping at the church picnic when we all used to meet at the Big Dry Creek. I was a young daredevil of seven and I thought I was far enough away. Almost didn't get my clothes on before some ladies came down to see how high the water was in the creek. And there I stood dripping wet in my shirt and pants. Looked like a fool."

No one said anything for a bit.

"I never thought I'd have the courage to face getting arrested," Katrina finally added to the list. "But here I am."

She looked around. Everything in the office was neatly squared off, the stack of invoices on the desktop. The white binders named with different motor companies. Even the way the file cabinets were arranged. The place was pleasantly warm, too, and she had one friend here. Conrad's uncle seemed to believe she was innocent.

"That sheriff won't arrest you," the older man muttered. "He has to stand for reelection in this town. I guess he could hold you for a few days, though."

"It's okay," she said. "He's only doing his job,"

Then the door from the garage opened and the sheriff came into the office. "I'm sorry. That took longer than I thought it would."

He didn't close the door to the garage area.

"Are the boys okay?" she asked as she stepped over to try and see them. The lights were off in the garage and only the subdued sunlight that filtered through the windows made it possible to see. The boys were sitting inside the car again. She could see the tops of their little heads.

The sheriff nodded. "Yeah, they're doing fine. That older one's pretty sharp."

Katrina had no choice but to turn back and look at the lawman even if she wasn't ready. He had a stern look on his face and it made her think he was expecting the worst. Well, she was expecting something pretty awful, too. And it would be happening to her, not him.

She didn't see Conrad take a few steps closer to her, but she heard him. She looked up and saw him standing next to her with the same resolve in his face as the lawman had on his. Only Conrad was directing his glare toward the sheriff instead of her.

She took a deep breath. Maybe she had two friends to stand beside her.

"It could be that the plates are stolen," she said to the sheriff. She tried to keep her voice from pleading. "Maybe the car thieves took Leanne's plates and put stolen ones on her car just to confuse things."

"It could have happened that way," Conrad said.

The sheriff raised his eyebrow in surprise and looked at Conrad for a second before bringing his eyes back to her. "Those

boys said you promised them money if they'd come with you today. Did you cross any state lines?"

"No, and I was only going to give them quarters. One for each picture I took with them in it."

She tried to smile at the sheriff.

He didn't return the courtesy. "The oldest one seems to think he'll have enough money to buy something called a Guzmoo or Gazmoo. Sounded like a military tank."

"It's a video game and I assure you he isn't going to make that much."

Katrina realized that might not make her look good, either, so she added, "I never told him he'd make enough for one of those things. He just got carried away. Besides, they're my nephews. My sister's boys."

"The sister with the car?" the sheriff asked.

She nodded. "Leanne Britton. Well, Rain Tree now. She's married to—"

"Walker Rain Tree," the sheriff filled in with a nod. "He sent word through a friend that the car was stolen. Walker lives down on the Crowe reservation. I've seen him here and there. Used to work construction in Miles City. Big guy."

Katrina had only met her brother-in-law once and that was before Leanne married him, but she didn't want to bring that up right now. She couldn't imagine why he'd report that Leanne's car was stolen. Or why Leanne hadn't stopped him.

"Jobs have been hard to find," Katrina said. "My sister says

he hasn't worked much in the past year."

"That's got to be difficult," the sheriff said, studying Katrina. "You got employment somewhere yourself?"

Conrad stepped so close she could feel his arm next to hers. "Having a job—not having a job. It's not a crime."

Katrina was glad to have Conrad beside her.

The sheriff looked at Conrad again, his eyes narrowing this time. "I thought you didn't know this woman."

"He doesn't," Katrina said. "He just worries about justice being done and—" She waved vaguely. "Things in general."

The lawman grunted. "That's Conrad, all right."

Then the sheriff turned his attention back to her. "These boys, they don't seem too sure about you. They say they just met you yesterday. Aunts usually know their nephews, at least by the time they're six."

She heard censure in his voice.

"Well, I've been busy. And, my sister and I have had our problems." She looked at the sheriff. She didn't want to say those problems involved Walker. Katrina had opposed the marriage and her sister hadn't forgiven her. That didn't have anything to do with the car anyway. "We really just need to call my sister and straighten this all out. Like I said, these probably aren't even her license plates."

"Since Walker is the one who had someone report the car as stolen, I need to clear it with him," the sheriff said. "You've got the phone number?"

"Of course," Katrina said. "It's the house number. Neither one of them have cell phones. But my purse is in the car and the number is in there on an old receipt. I'll get it for you."

"I'd rather have someone else bring your purse out of the car," the sheriff said. "If you don't mind, that is?"

Katrina got the feeling it didn't matter if she minded or not.

"I'll get it," Uncle Charley said as he walked over to the open door leading to the garage.

"There's some sandwiches in the front seat," Katrina called out to him as he walked through the doorway. "Those boys are probably hungry. Tell them I'll bring them some juice in a minute or two."

She hoped the sheriff noticed that she was trying to take care of her nephews.

"I'll bring you your coffee back, too," the older man said from inside the garage.

"Those boys will want a hot meal," Conrad said quietly beside her. "When we finish here, I'll take the three of you to the café for breakfast. My treat."

Katrina felt her eyes grow damp again. Really, this man was being very nice.

Then Conrad said, "The sheriff can't take you to jail until someone comes for the boys anyway. If he can't reach the parents, he'd have to call Children's Services in Billings."

Well, that was an effective douse of cold water, Katrina thought, as she stepped away to look up at her betrayer. Instead of

having his eyes aimed at her, though, Conrad had them focused on the sheriff.

It was clear from the twist to the sheriff's mouth that he hadn't given any thought to what would happen to the boys if he arrested Katrina. Of course, she knew Leanne would be over here in a few hours once they called her, but the sheriff didn't.

He just stood there.

"I don't think I've ever arrested someone who had kids with them," the lawman finally said. "I wasn't really planning to put her in jail right now anyway. At least not without checking out her story. We have to pay Miles City for room and board every time we give them a prisoner. It adds up."

"Don't worry, Leanne will vouch for me," Katrina said and then stopped. It had already occurred to her that Leanne and Walker might be off somewhere together. Or maybe they'd had a fight and that's why Walker said the car was stolen. Maybe Leanne was in the Lexus and Walker in his pickup. Either way, they might not get back to answer the phone until late tonight.

"The children seem to check out," the sheriff conceded. "And I'm not keen to pay Children's Services. Travel. Meals. And they always take their time. We're over our budget as it is."

Conrad pressed his point. "Then while you make your calls, you won't object to me taking Katrina and the boys to the café for something to eat?"

The sheriff shrugged. "It's your dime."

"I can pay," Katrina said.

“Don’t let her convince you to let her go free, either.” This command was given to Conrad. “That’d be a mistake.”

“Of course not,” Conrad said. “I’m just doing what needs being done.”

Katrina tried not to let that sting. She should know he was only doing his duty by her. He probably had something in his code of honor that said he had to stand by any weeping women who faced the law in his gas station. She couldn’t worry about that now, though.

“And be sure she doesn’t call anyone on that phone of hers,” the sheriff continued.

She reached into the pocket of her jacket and pulled out her cell phone. “Here. It’s not even on. Keep it if you need to.”

The sheriff took it and put it in his own pocket. “It’s just until I check things out.”

Then she saw Charley start walking back from the car. He had her purse in one hand and her youngest nephew, Zach, in the other. Her older nephew, Ryan, was following behind them.

The boys were looking a little scared.

She glanced up at the sheriff. “There’s no need to talk about arresting me in front of my nephews. They don’t need to be any more upset than they are.”

The sheriff snorted. “The only reason they might be upset is that they think I’m going to stop you from giving them their quarters. That’s what they wanted to know about. Besides I wouldn’t talk about arresting anyone in front of their kids if I

could help it. Or even just holding them for questioning, either."

"Well," Katrina said with a nod. "I appreciate that."

"I'm not the bad guy," the sheriff added. But he still held his hand out for her purse when Charley brought it in the office.

"I can open my own purse," she said.

"Got to check it out for—you know," he said with a meaningful look at her nephews.

Which, of course, stopped her protest. She didn't want him getting specific.

Instead, she smiled at the boys. "Everything's all right."

Both boys were still frowning.

"Of course it is," Conrad added with enough confidence that the boys relaxed.

The sky was spitting rain by the time Conrad grabbed his jacket and got everyone ready to go over to the café. Uncle Charley had already gone ahead and the sheriff was sitting outside in his car filling out paperwork. The lawman hadn't gotten an answer when he called the number on the back of that receipt. Conrad figured the man couldn't finish his report until he at least talked to Leanne and Walker, though.

Conrad put the Closed sign on his door.

"What if someone needs you?" Katrina asked when she saw what he'd done. "You can't just close your business in the middle of the day. You're the only gas station here."

He shrugged. "The pumps work with a credit card. And everyone knows to look for me at the café if they really need help

and I'm not around here."

Katrina shook her head. "This isn't how it's done in Los Angeles."

"I expect not," Conrad agreed as he opened the door. So that's where she lived.

Conrad took a deep breath when he stepped outside. The air smelled of damp earth and the sky was dark gray. There'd be no more sunshine today. He had only one umbrella so he turned and gave that to Katrina. Little boys never minded rain.

"My mom says we can't walk in the mud unless she says it is okay," Ryan announced after he stepped out the door. The tin roof of Conrad's shop covered the concrete slab around the gas pumps, too, but the area beyond that was getting wet.

"Walk on the road," Conrad said. Katrina and the youngest boy had come out behind Ryan and waited on the slab. "There's no mud on the asphalt."

"Maybe we could go off the road a little," Ryan suggested hopefully as he stepped to the edge of the pavement. "I can carry my shoes so they won't get dirty. I see a worm out there."

Katrina turned around. "You don't want to get the floor of the café all muddy when we go to breakfast."

Conrad laughed. What boy that age was worried about a floor? "That worm is long gone. Besides, you'll have to keep your feet and your shoes clean if you want your aunt to take your picture. Your clothes, too."

"Oh," Ryan said with a nod. "I guess so."

Conrad kept his hand on the boy's shoulder as he led the way to the café. "People don't really take that many pictures around here. We're too close to the Black Hills, I guess. They get more striking pictures there."

"Are we going there, Aunt Kat-rr—" Ryan gave up on the name and just looked up at her. The boy seemed anxious and Conrad watched him carefully as he continued. "You're still going to take our pictures, aren't you?"

Conrad relaxed. The boy just wanted his quarters. He was greedy, not afraid.

"I hope so, sweetie," Katrina said softly as she guided Zach down the street.

She held the umbrella over her head, but the rain slanted in sideways and Conrad could see that her hair was getting damp. He hoped her black jacket didn't get too wet. Her jeans would survive a soaking, but the leather looked imported. She had probably gotten it at Rodeo Drive down in Beverly Hills. He was getting ready to caution her to be careful of the rain, when she stepped over a crack in the asphalt in her high heels and he forgot all about the weather.

He almost had to stop and catch his breath again. The sight of those black patent leather straps wrapped around her delicate ankles made him think of the grand Hollywood movie stars of old like Marilyn Monroe. Those shoes of Katrina's were all steam and sizzle. He hoped that none of the ranch hands from the Elkton place were at the café. They'd see those shoes as an

invitation to flirt shamelessly. She even had her toenails painted a deep red. He'd never seen feet look so pretty in the rain.

"I have some boots you can borrow," he said.

Katrina turned around, a stricken expression on her face. "You're right. I can't go to pri—" she stopped herself. "I couldn't go with the sheriff in my high heels. I meant to put tennis shoes in the trunk, but they're in my car—not my sister's."

"They're nice shoes," Conrad felt obliged to say. He wasn't the kind of man to be taken in by nice footwear, however. He hoped that, if there were any ranch hands at the café, they didn't decide to help her get out of town before the sheriff got all his information. Some of them would do that for a woman wearing shoes like that.

They finished walking down the road together.

"Nice place," Katrina said as they started walking up the steps to the café porch. There was an overhang so rain wasn't hitting them where they stood. Katrina lowered her umbrella and shook it out. Ryan was already up to the door and Zach was holding on to Katrina's leg.

"I'll carry the umbrella in for you," Conrad said, but all he did was stand there looking at her. He told himself he was making sure no one could tell she was suspected of a crime before they went inside. He didn't know what clues he was looking for, though.

Strands of Katrina's hair were wet and hanging down. She was no longer as perfect as she had been when she drove into his gas

station and he liked her better for it. Drops of rain glistened on her cheeks. Her eyes were warm and a little shy.

If this were one of those old Hollywood movies, Conrad decided he would be saying something romantic about now. He tried to make the notion go away, but it lingered in his mind. It was just that all of the talk lately about him getting married was stirring around in his mind. He needed to put it to rest. She certainly wasn't the kind of woman he intended to become involved with. He already knew she was trouble. She cried. She liked old bent-up signs. She shouted to make herself heard by an old man she thought was deaf. She drank cold coffee. He wanted to like his wife, not love her. He'd learned how much love could hurt when his mother died. Katrina was just too intense for him.

And she had rain dripping down her cheeks. He reached out and wiped a drop away.

"It's not another tear," she said. "I was just caught by surprise earlier. I'm really not that much of a crybaby."

Another raindrop slid down her cheek and he caught that one, too. Her skin was cool and smooth like polished marble. "You had cause."

She seemed surprised at that. He winced. He had no business saying something like that. He needed to bury his emotions. For all he knew, she could be lying about her sister—and the car. She might not be striving to be a photographer or a good aunt. She might even have known he was the kind of guy to give away a new muffler to someone who couldn't pay for it. She might be

playing him for an old fool.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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