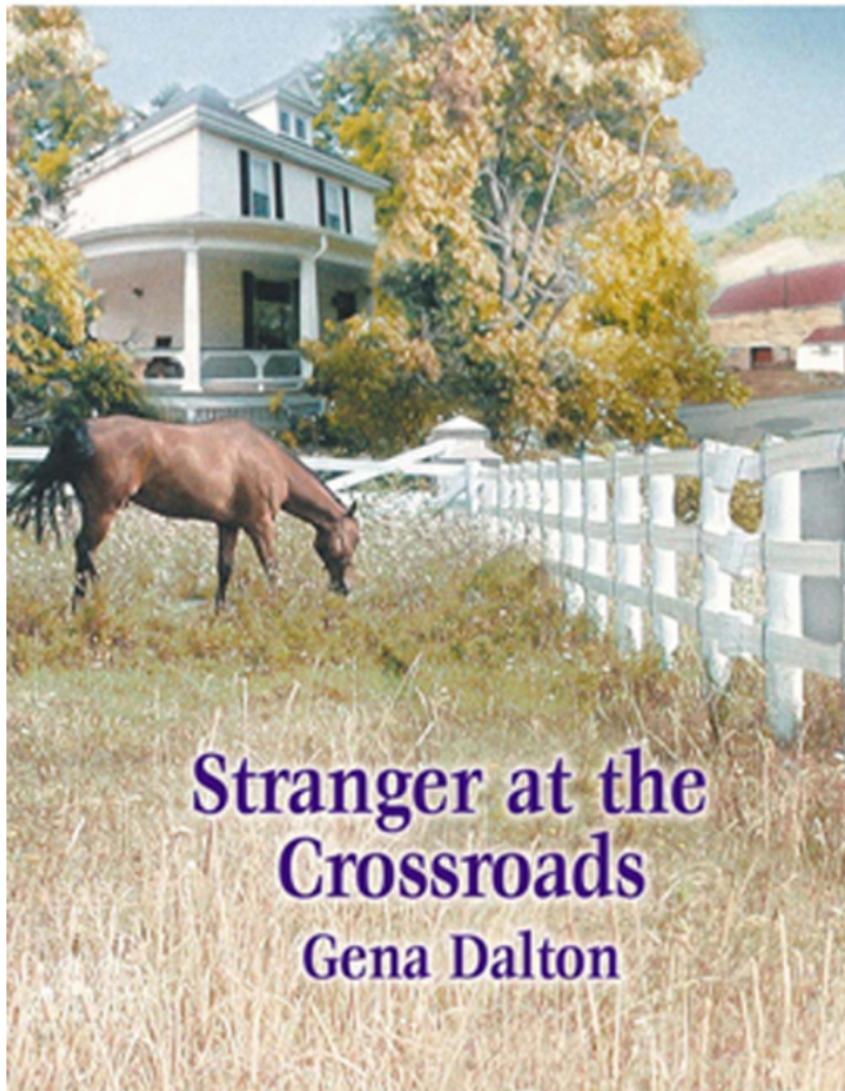




Love Inspired[®]

May 02

Heartwarming Inspirational Romance



**Stranger at the
Crossroads**
Gena Dalton

Gena Dalton

Stranger At The Crossroads

Аннотация

TIME HEALS ALL WOUNDSWidowed veterinarian Darcy Hart wanted to believe the old adage, but a year after the tragic deaths of her husband and son, she knew it wasn't true. Desperate to escape her grief-stricken life, Darcy headed south to Mexico—and landed in the arms of a kindred soul with the bluest eyes in Texas.**LOVE HEALS ALL HEARTS**Reclusive rancher Jackson McMahan didn't want Darcy's help, but with a pregnant mare to care for, he needed the feisty female vet more than he cared to admit. What was it about the green-eyed beauty that made him want to welcome her into his home—and into his heart?

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“Jackson, I’m going to do my very best to save your horses.”

He met her straight look with one of his own.

“Thank you, Darcy.”

“We’ll have to pray as hard as we work,” she said, “but, God willing, we’ll have them on their feet and on the mend in a week or so.”

Jackson shook his head. He looked down at the soda can in his hands.

“I’ll do the work. You’ll have to say the prayers.”

Then suddenly, almost as if against his will, he blurted, “Mine wouldn’t rise above the treetops.”

“Why do you think that?” she said.

“I know it,” he said, in a tone of complete finality. “I lost my faith a long time ago.”

GENA DALTON

has wanted to be a professional writer ever since she learned to read at the age of four. However, she became a secondary teacher and then a college professor/dean of women instead, and only began to write after she was married and a stay-at-home mother. She entered an essay contest, which resulted in a newspaper publication that gave her confidence she could achieve her lifelong dream of becoming a “real writer.”

Gena lives in Oklahoma with her husband of twenty-four years. Now that their son is grown, their only companions are two dogs, two house cats, one barn cat and one cat who belongs to the neighbors but won't go home.

She loves to hear from readers. She can be reached c/o Steeple Hill Books, 300 East 42nd Street, 6th floor, New York, NY 10017.

Stranger at the Crossroads

Gena Dalton



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But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion when he saw him. He went up and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him on to his own mount, carried him to the inn and looked after him.

—Luke 10:33-34

This story is dedicated to God, Who, as always, gave me the book, and to my friends Karen and Paula, who helped me listen for the words.

I would also like to thank my friend Jill Peale, DVM, who advised me on all matters veterinary.

Any mistakes are mine alone.

Dear Reader,

This story of veterinarian Darcy Hart and reclusive rancher Jackson McMahan may be my very favorite of all my books. Any of us can find ourselves called by God to help a stranger who is more wounded by life than we are, and in giving that help receive love in return.

That kind of giving and receiving began on the side of a narrow Texas road the day Darcy ran away from Oklahoma, fleeing from her grief. That same early morning Jackson was compelled to rescue a neglected, pregnant mare he used to own. Once Darcy stopped to help him, their journeys would never be separate again.

While you hold *Stranger at the Crossroads* in your hands, I'm back in the Texas Hill country on the McMahan Ranch, the Rocking M, following the love stories of Jackson's brothers, Clint and Monte, to their own happy endings. I hope you will look for them, too.

Please let me know how you like this book. I would love to hear from you. You can reach me c/o Steeple Hill Books, 300 East 42nd St., New York, NY 10017.

Warm wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gena Dalton". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background.

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Chapter One

Stealing a horse wasn't easy. At least not this one.

Jackson McMahan put the halter and lead rope behind his back and tried to soothe the mare with his voice while he slowly moved closer to her.

"Settle down, now, girl," he crooned, "I'm not gonna hurt you."

Finally, ten or fifteen minutes after he'd driven onto Blake Collier's ranch by the back road so he wouldn't have to pass the house, he maneuvered the nervous animal into a corner. He shifted off his good leg onto his lame one and, ignoring the sudden pain in his knee that made his gait even more awkward, stepped up to her head without spooking her.

Her big belly slowed her down, and too little food had made her weak, so he managed to get his arm around her neck, and then the rope, just before she tried to break away again. He let out a sigh of relief that he hadn't known he was holding.

"Come on home with me, Mama, and get a square meal," he said, while he slipped the halter onto her head and buckled it with his clumsy gloved hands. "You want your baby to have all its parts, don't you?"

It was way too late to affect that, though, he decided, glancing over his shoulder as he led her out of the pen and toward the trailer's open door. From the looks of her distended sides with

the ribs standing out under her skin, this foal would be on the ground, alive or dead, before it had a chance to absorb very many days' worth of nutrients.

He had brought the three-horse trailer with the ramp so she wouldn't have to make the short leap up into it, but that didn't help much. She refused to have anything to do with the trailer. She balked and pawed the ground and swung side to side every time he tried to lead her forward.

Jackson glanced over his shoulder toward the house. No sign of life.

That was good, because Blake Collier would be much more likely to shoot a horse thief than to call the sheriff.

He smooched to the mare again, waited, and smooched again. When she took a tiny step forward, he started up the ramp as if he thought that was what she'd intended to do. Suddenly docile, she walked beside him. He led her into a slot, ran the rope through the ring and, willing his fingers not to fumble too much, tied her off. His heart lifted as he fastened the divider and hurried to close the door and raise the ramp.

Shooting danger aside, any fight with Blake would be a toss-up now that Jackson's body was so unreliable—and an unnecessary delay, to boot. It was past time to get out of here.

Darcy Hart didn't recognize herself when she glanced in the rearview mirror. Wild green eyes stared back at her, unseeing, and her auburn curls whipped and tangled madly in the wind. She looked like an Orphan Annie doll scared half to death.

She didn't care. She had to have the fresh air. With the window rolled up, she couldn't even breathe.

It was almost cool this morning, with a nice October breeze blowing, but her cheeks felt burning hot. Well, then, they'd really feel hot in Mexico.

If she wound up in Mexico.

The sound and the rhythm of the tires against the pavement soothed her a little. She wouldn't have to stop again for awhile, since she'd filled the truck with gasoline before she stopped at last night's motel. She had no desire to eat, either.

Being on the move helped. It helped a lot. The dreams that had wakened her at 3:00 a.m. were fading again. Every mile seemed to put them farther away.

Not the sorrow, though. It was part of her now, as much as her stomach and her veins and her fingers and toes, since it filled them all with its cold cement.

She prayed her constant and only prayer.

Dear God, please give me the strength to bear it.

Then she added a postscript.

You can see by where I am this morning that I don't have enough. More strength, Lord. More strength.

Never did she dare to pray for the sorrow to be taken away—then she would truly be alone.

The truck swerved on a narrow curve, and she set her gaze on the road again. She'd better be trying to hold it between the ditches if she didn't want to end up in one.

Actually, she didn't much care. Her life still wasn't worth living. It had been a year. A year that had been a hundred times longer without her dear, dear Todd to hold her in his arms every night and her precious baby boy, Daniel, with his huge dark eyes to gaze into with her own.

Grief rushed into her heart, fresh as ever.

Time heals, they'd all told her. You'll start looking to the future one of these days. Well, at this rate, since she'd made precious little progress in a year, she'd have to be the oldest woman on the planet before she lost even a little of her longing for the past. To get to that point, God would have to give her all His own strength.

At that instant, a cross appeared in the heavens. Up ahead, on the right. A white cross shining in the sun against the blue morning sky.

Darcy stared, not caring that the truck swerved into the opposite lane. Her eyes were glued to that cross. Could it be a visible answer to her prayer?

She blinked and looked again as she straightened her steering. No, the cross wasn't floating in the sky. It rested atop an adobe building that vaguely reminded her of the Alamo. Ancient and small and run-down, it must be a church, or maybe even a private chapel, judging by the size. No miracles today.

Something flashed in the corner of her eye, something closer. A glint of silver, then she saw the shape of the horse trailer, and her focus came back to earth.

No one with a grain of sense would pull onto the side of a two-

lane road with no shoulder like this one unless there was trouble. That spot was steep enough to tilt the trailer sideways.

The ramp was down, and the trailer door hung open, swaying a little over the deep ditch.

Maybe the driver was just checking on a horse that had been kicking the side or putting hay in the hay bag that he'd forgotten. It probably wasn't an emergency at all. At least, not a medical one.

She prepared to pull over to give a wider berth as she drew closer to the rig.

It was a blowout on a trailer tire. The trailer sat tilted sideways not just because of the terrain. One wheel rested on the ground because the tire had disintegrated. Darcy glimpsed pieces of rubber scattered over the road, but she couldn't look at anything but that open door. Was the horse hurt?

It surged into view at that moment, backing up fast and in a zigzag line. A man appeared, holding the lead rope, struggling to keep it from being jerked out of his hands, fighting to stay with the terrified animal as it plunged down the ramp.

A pregnant mare. Very pregnant. As she hit the ground with her hind feet, she lost purchase on the blacktop pavement and, scrabbling, half rearing, she slipped off the edge of the ditch and kept on sliding down the incline, reaching with her front legs for balance in the air.

The man held onto her, but it couldn't have been easy. He had something badly wrong with one leg and could barely keep on

his feet and stay with the desperate mare. She reared mightily as the fear rushed through her, hauling the rope through his gloved hands so fast that he came within a heartbeat of losing it. He had all he could do to stay out from under her raised forefeet, but he did it. Darcy pulled even with them.

The mare was huge with the foal that had obviously sapped every bit of her resources. It was a miracle she even had the strength to rush out of the trailer and try to get away, much less fight to stay out of the ditch. The red dun mare had spirit, that was for sure.

She wasn't hurt, though. She didn't appear to be hurt.

"Don't stop," Darcy said to herself out loud. "Do. Not. Stop."

She stopped.

The trembling, sweating mare, her eyes rolling into the whites, stretched impossibly higher against the early morning sky, then threw herself backward into the bottom of the ditch.

"Hang on," Darcy called, through the open passenger window. "I'll help you."

She pulled off the road in front of the man's new Ford dually, killed the engine, leaped out and ran to him and the mare. He whirled on his heel and glared at her. He was furious. Absolutely furious.

And handsome as any man she'd ever seen. He had a strange intensity about him that held her eye, and it wasn't just the anger. Blue eyes like flames in a fire and black hair. Weathered and tanned face, chiseled and lined some from wind and sun, but she

doubted he was more than thirty-five.

Why was she even noticing anything about him? She'd stopped because of the horse.

"Get back on the road," he said, before she'd reached him. "Get out of here."

He barked the order in a tone hateful enough to drive anyone away. Anyone who cared.

"I'd love nothing more," Darcy said.

It was true. She couldn't handle her own affairs, and here she was meddling in somebody else's. She didn't want to be around anyone, especially not such a venomous someone, because what she wanted, what she needed, was to be alone to think about her own problems.

Stopping had been a stupid thing to do when she was supposed to be running away—from her profession as well as from the rest of her life. She looked into the ditch.

The little red dun was wedged on her left side in the narrow space, struggling to find her feet but unable to get up or even move her legs much at all. She was cast. It'd be impossible for her to get her feet under her and get up without help.

It wouldn't be long, either, until the mare ran out of strength to help them help her.

Darcy heaved a huge sigh. She had taken an oath, after all.

"We've got to get her out of there pretty quick. I'll help you. I'm Dr. Darcy Hart. I'm a veterinarian."

"I saw the vet box," he snapped.

“So,” she said, just as sharply. “Be grateful I happened along.”

“Go back to Oklahoma.”

“You’re pretty observant for a man with a sick, cast horse in a ditch on the side of the road.”

“It’s hard not to notice a bossy woman veterinarian hollering orders at a perfect stranger.”

Darcy felt a stab of anger.

“Hang on?” she said sarcastically. “I’ll help you? That’s all I said. You call that hollering orders?”

He pulled his straw hat down and impaled her with his bright blue gaze.

“Get on down the road,” he said harshly. “I don’t need any pity assistance.”

She had to think about it, because she wasn’t quite sure what he meant, at first. Then she knew. His leg. He thought she’d stopped because he was physically disabled.

Darcy looked him straight in the eye for another long beat. He wasn’t the kind of man to seek or accept help from a woman. He was, no doubt, a typical male of the cowboy kind. Those men had the desire and duty and determination to protect and take care of any female bred right into their bones.

“I wouldn’t waste my pity on you, mister,” she said evenly, “although you deserve a truckload of it for being mean as a snake. My only concern here is the mare and foal.”

He tried to hide it, but she saw a flash of surprise in his blazing eyes. And maybe...even a twitch of humorous appreciation at

the corner of his mouth?

That gave her a tiny satisfaction.

Her blood was pulsing with urgency to help the mare, but she waited. He needed to decide what to do. He needed to be the one to give the orders if they weren't going to waste any more time arguing.

He was the kind of man she thought he was. He was a horseman, and the horse came first.

"I'll get a rope," he said. "Scoot down in there by her head and see if you can calm her a little."

Darcy started down into the ditch as he turned to his trailer.

"What's her name?" she called.

"Tara."

"What's yours?"

He hesitated for an instant, as if she had a lot of nerve to ask, but finally he answered.

"Jackson."

Whether that was his first name or his last, Darcy couldn't tell. But what did she care? It didn't matter. He wasn't the reason she was here.

Tara had stopped struggling for the moment, but her eyes were still showing fear, and she was looking over her shoulder at her flank. Darcy slid down the incline to her head and began stroking it and talking to her.

It helped a little. She struggled once again, hard, and then stopped.

Her breathing sounded wheezy, and it wasn't just from the fall. Since her eyes and nose were runny, there was every likelihood that the stress of the developing foal on such short rations had probably lowered her immune system and caused her to contract a respiratory virus.

Darcy's heart clutched as she sat on her haunches there, stroking the pretty head, looking into one of the big soft eyes of the mare. The foal would most likely be sickly, too, if it wasn't stillborn.

Jackson came back with a length of soft rope in his hands and managed, a bit precariously, to half-walk, half-slide into the ditch behind Tara. He talked to her soothingly so she'd know he was there and stepped sideways along the near side of it to reach her, all the while forming a loop in the rope with his gloved hands. Darcy thought vaguely that that would be easier to do without gloves.

Quickly, almost before she knew it, he had the rope around all four of Tara's feet and was making his way around her to the lower side of the ditch. He had a little trouble with the terrain, but he made it, and as Darcy got to her feet, ready to help, he set his heels into the ground as best he could, braced himself and pulled. Talking to the mare in a surprisingly soothing voice, he quickly pulled her feet over her massive belly so that she could stand.

"I'll get it," he said hatefully, hurrying around to take the rope off.

"All right."

When he had it off, Darcy backed up to give Tara some room and pulled up on the lead rope to help her. Jackson gave her hindquarters a little help. Heavily, awkwardly, the mare got to her feet.

“Now,” Darcy said, “let’s get her out of the ditch and I’ll look her over....”

“No need of that,” he said, and he came past the mare to take the lead from her.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Darcy snapped.

She tried to think, tried to control the sudden anger that took her. Here he had a volunteer veterinarian for a horse in danger and he wasn’t even going to let her take care of the animal. How could he be such an ungrateful wretch?

The question stopped her short. The man didn’t matter. The mare did.

She put a conscious effort into trying to control her temper. He had every right to send her away, and if she wanted this mare to have care, she had to get his permission.

“Jackson, you’re a good horseman, I can tell,” she said. “And this clearly is a good horse, even if she does look as if she’s been turned out during a seven-year drought.”

Jackson didn’t answer. He led Tara out of the ditch and onto the side of the road.

Darcy followed.

“When you had the blowout, did you call anyone to come get her? She needs...”

“I had just had the blowout when you came along.”

His tone said that was the end of the conversation.

“Well, while you wait for someone to come for her, let me check her...”

“I’ll walk her home,” he said harshly. “That’s my barn over there.”

He gestured toward a small barn and house that she hadn’t noticed in the near distance, not far past the chapel. The place was within easy walking distance across a pasture.

The mare could make it that far, and Darcy could meet them there. If she could get him to agree.

A thought struck her. Maybe his infuriating attitude stemmed from worries about money. Yet his truck was expensive and new. His place wasn’t, though.

“This is a new experience for me,” she said. “Most of the time, people are trying to get free veterinary care instead of turning it down.”

Still wheezing, Tara looked at her flanks as they walked toward the trailer, then lifted her head and looked straight at Darcy as if she knew she was trying to help her. Her tail lifted and switched back and forth restlessly. She was obviously in early labor and ready to foal.

Darcy patted her sweaty side and tried again.

“If you want her to get through this foaling alive, she’s going to need some help.”

Then it hit her.

“You don’t want a woman veterinarian, do you? You’re that narrow-minded!”

She bit her tongue. This was no way to get him to let her treat the mare.

It made him talk, though.

“I don’t know why women are always trying to be equine vets when they’re not strong enough to do half of what needs to be done,” he said bitterly.

His blue eyes blazed at her again.

“And you’re smaller than most.”

“And you’re more two-faced than most,” she said, blazing back at him. “You act like a real horseman, yet you starve a fine mare. And then you deny her medical care.”

Jackson opened the tack room door of the trailer. He flicked a careless glance at her as if her opinion meant absolutely nothing to him.

“If you want a job so bad,” he said, “hold her a minute while I get a better halter.”

He handed Darcy the lead rope, opened the door and stepped into the neatly arranged tack room. Its contents included several expensive saddles on built-in racks. He could certainly afford a veterinarian.

Tara moved around uneasily, and Darcy turned her attention to the mare. Her tail was going like a metronome, switching back and forth. Back and forth. Then she dropped her head and seemed to be looking for a spot to lie down.

Dear Lord, don't let this mare foal right here in the road.

She was so angry with this strange, contradictory man she could scream. But she had to control her temper and her tongue or she'd never be able to help this good mare through her hard time coming.

Maybe she could be friendlier and accomplish more.

To calm herself and Tara, she stroked the horse's cheek some more. Her fingernail caught in one of the ravelings of the halter. It was nothing but a ragged remnant of a halter, truly not safe to use.

"Why did you ever put this one on her?" she called.

"I was in a hurry," he said, his voice muffled by the wall. "It was all I could find."

"Were you hauling her to the vet?"

When he didn't answer, she turned to look at him. He was stepping down from the trailer, favoring the weaker leg as he reached the ground.

"No," he said. "I was stealing her."

Darcy stared at him. He appeared to be perfectly serious.

He walked toward her with a good halter, new, high-quality and embroidered along the side. It fit with the truck and the saddles but not with the looks of the place. She read it as he slipped off the old one and slid the new one on.

Rocking M Ranch, it said, and beneath that was the brand.

"Is the Rocking M mainly a horse-stealing out-fit?" she said, trying for a lightly charming tone.

She smiled at him as she checked Tara's respiratory rate. It was twice what it should be, and the mare was sweating more than ever. Darcy flipped the mare's lip up to reveal pale, pasty gums. This horse was in trouble.

"Not usually."

He growled the words but he looked straight at her, his eyes and mouth holding that hint of humor again. His gaze lingered on hers for a long moment, too—almost as if he were seeing her for the first time.

"Tara's a special case," he said. "I don't make a habit of stealing just any horse."

"Why'd you pick her?"

He adjusted the halter and buckled it.

"We bred her on the Rocking M and sold her as a two-year-old. She won a lot in reining and she gave her all every time—she beat a lot of more talented horses. Her heart's as big as Texas."

He took the lead from her, and she thought he was going to walk away.

"What about the consequences of being a horse thief?" she said quickly.

He shrugged.

"He may come after me, but I doubt it."

"Who?"

"The worthless neighbor of mine who won her papers in a poker game. He neglected her. I warned him twice."

Tara's side rippled, and she turned to look at it. Again, she

smelled the ground and thought about lying down.

“Well, God sent you to get her this morning,” Darcy said. “She’s in first stage labor. She would’ve died foaling over there.”

“God has bigger things to do,” Jackson snapped, his voice so bitter it chilled her.

Then, in a slightly nicer tone, he added, “Thanks for your help in getting her out of the ditch. I’ll take her home now.”

“You know,” she said, “I should just wrap that tail for you and scrub and dry the—”

“I’ve foaled out many a mare,” he said.

Darcy’s control snapped.

“Then how come you can’t see that she’s sick, as well as in labor? That she’s sweating like mad and acting as if she’s going down? Her mucous membranes are as white as a sheet, she can barely breathe with those raspy lungs and she’s dehydrated.”

Jackson bristled and glared at Darcy.

Tara made her decision and lay down, half-on, half-off the road.

As soon as he felt the tug on the lead, he tried his best to keep her up, but she went down too fast.

Darcy wanted to scream with frustration, but then she was glad. Maybe this stubborn man would see that he needed help.

“Well, at least there’s not a whole lot of traffic along here,” she said sweetly. “In case you can’t get her up, I mean.”

Jackson threw her a furious frown, then he pulled and pushed, smooched and begged, but Tara ignored all that and looked at

herself as if wondering what was going on inside her.

“If you’re determined to let her foal here in the road,” Darcy said, in a professional tone, “it’ll be hard to have clean bedding for her if you can’t leave her to go get some.”

Jackson ignored that.

“Then there’s the problem of keeping her from being run over, of course.”

He gave her that frown again.

“Will you cut the sarcasm?” he said.

Something about the way he said it sounded as if they were old friends instead of strangers.

Darcy turned toward her truck. She might as well go. She had better go, for her own sake, now that she’d started hallucinating.

“Sometimes, this early in the process, they lie down just for short periods of time,” she said, speaking over her shoulder. “She’ll probably get up in a minute.”

After a beat, she turned and added, “But then, you already know that because you’ve foaled out many a mare.”

He glowered at her, then set his eyes on the mare. He dropped to his haunches, although his injured leg wouldn’t bend well, then lifted Tara’s head.

“I doubt she’d stay down long, anyhow, because even though it’s early yet, this pavement isn’t exactly cool.”

She waited another moment.

“But then there’s the fact that she’s so sick she might just lie down and die.”

“Will you just get over there, get your kit and get to work?” he snapped. “Instead of standing around all morning running your mouth?”

A great thrill of victory raced through Darcy’s veins.

“Are you asking me to attend this mare as a veterinarian or as a woman?”

He looked at her, pushed his hat back so he could look at her with those fierce blue eyes of his. As his gaze moved over her body, she felt it as surely as the warm caress of a hand on her skin.

And she felt a curious desire to brush the hair that had fallen from beneath his hat onto his forehead. He had a farmer’s tan—white skin where his hat had been that showed a clear line against his sun-darkened face.

After a long moment, he spoke.

“I reckon as both,” he said dryly. “You’ve got no quit in you, just like Tara, and she’s gonna need that more than anything. I’ll supply the muscle power.”

Chapter Two

Darcy turned and ran for her truck, her heart pounding because of Jackson's permission to treat the mare. She was thrilled to have won this battle, not only for the sake of the mare and foal, but also for the challenge of saving them. God willing, the struggle might take over her mind completely and let her forget about everything else.

Her heart was not beating so hard from the powerful way Jackson had looked at her. Yet she could still feel his gaze moving over her in that very assessing kind of look.

Well, if he'd been trying to judge whether she would respond to him as a man, she could tell him right now that she was not interested. Not in any man.

Despite that surprising, insane urge she'd felt—the desire to touch his face and brush his hair that had come over her when his eyes met hers?

Her little voice of truth wouldn't let her get by with anything.

She punched in the handle of her equipment box and twisted it, then threw up the lid. A horse's life, no, two of them, depended on her right now, and she needed to get her mind on her business.

Automatically, her hands flew to the necessary compartments and began to make selections. First, the IV catheter, needle holders, suture, cordless clippers and a handful of Betadine solution packets, gauze sponges and a bottle of alcohol. Then

both her hands were full. She'd have to come back for the antibiotic injection and the bag of fluids.

No. Good heavens, she couldn't even think straight! Everything would go much faster if they brought the mare to the truck.

Tara's hooves scabbled against the pavement. Darcy heard Jackson kiss to her in encouragement, and when she glanced over her shoulder, the mare was regaining her feet.

"Bring her over here," Darcy called. "I want to get a dose of antibiotic in her and start some fluids before we walk her home."

He frowned.

"You're the one saying she'll foal any minute," he said, leading Tara toward her. "Can't it wait until we get her to the barn?"

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