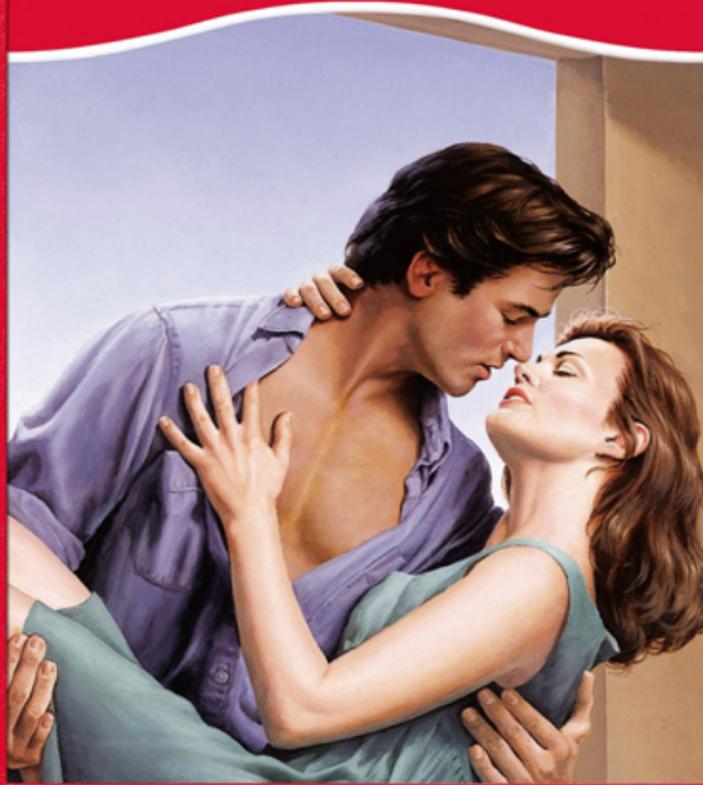


MILLS & BOON

Taken By A Texan

Lass Small



Vintage 90s

Lass Small Taken By A Texan

Аннотация

THE KEEPERS OF TEXAS TANGLIN' WITH A TEXAN Ranch hand Rip Morris had quite the reputation... although what he really knew about women wouldn't add up to a pile of hay. So who would have guessed a lovely socialite like Miss Lu Parsons had requested the pleasure of his company for her first roll in the proverbial haystack?The taut-bodied Texan was all set to comply with the lady's wishes. But fate and Mother Nature seemed to be conspiring against them losing their virginity. Or maybe this was Rip's chance to lose his well-guarded heart to a woman whose body and soul were his for the taking... .THE KEEPERS OF TEXAS: Every book's a keeper in this sexy saga of untamable Texas men and the stubborn beauties who lasso their hearts.

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You won't want to miss any of the memorable characters in this newest series by bestselling author Lass Small. While each of THE KEEPERS OF TEXAS books stands on its own, the continuing saga of the Keeper family and ranch will surely keep you coming back for more!

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Rip Morris: This stubborn and seductive cowboy worked hard for the Keeper family. And though he had a reputation as a ladies' man, he'd only reveal his true nature to one special lady. Could she be...

Lu Parsons: This innocent Texas socialite was going to learn more about the birds and the bees than she ever dreamed. And maybe she'd find a permanent home on the Keeper ranch, though she'd only come to town to take care of her brother...

Andrew Parsons: What had this greenhorn been doing, trespassing on Keeper land? And what would he remember once he awoke from his unconscious state? One person was determined to uncover the truth about the mysterious accident....

Tom Keeper: Heir to the Keeper ranch, he'd loved and lost one time too many. He claimed to have given up any thoughts of marriage, but Mrs. Right could be just around the corner!

Dear Reader,

This month Silhouette Desire brings you six brand-new, emotional and sensual novels by some of the bestselling—and most beloved—authors in the romance genre. Cait London continues her hugely popular miniseries THE TALLCHIEFS with The Seduction of Fiona Tallchief, April's MAN OF THE MONTH. Next, Elizabeth Bevarly concludes her BLAME IT ON BOB series with The Virgin and the Vagabond. And when a socialite confesses her virginity to a cowboy, she just might be Taken by a Texan, in Lass Small's THE KEEPERS OF TEXAS miniseries.

Plus, we have Maureen Child's Maternity Bride, The Cowboy and the Calendar Girl, the last in the OPPOSITES ATTRACT series by Nancy Martin, and Kathryn Taylor's tale of domesticating an office-bound hunk in Taming the Tycoon.

I hope you enjoy all six of Silhouette Desire's selections this month—and every month!

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Melissa Senate". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Senior Editor

Silhouette Books

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Lass Small

Taken By A Texan



www.millsandboon.co.uk

LASS SMALL

finds living on this planet at this tune a fascinating experience. People are amazing. She thinks that to be a teller of tales of people, places and things is absolutely marvelous.

Prologue

It all began, oddly enough, because Thomas Keeper was a restless man who had been overlooked by the female gender. Of course he was also a selective man, and had limited the opposite gender to those females who attracted him.

Tom was a TEXAS man. Which meant that he wasn't something as simple as just male. He thought like a man. He looked like one. He was strong and could bend just about anything. But more important than his strength, was his ability

to persuade.

He knew cars and understood them. Any woman knows on sight that cars are obstinate and male. Men get along with cars. Women get towed.

In chancy situations, Tom Keeper was calm. His face was stoic. He moved his glance to what was happening, but he didn't have tunnel vision and ignore everything else. He kept the whole area under his observation without seeming to do so.

Just like his daddy.

Tom was a man in the sense we all suppose males are. He never took a hand, in anything, unless he was needed. Then he was logical. Or he was physical, if it came to that. He caught arms, stopped fists with his open hand, or just said, "Be quiet" like you would to a dog or a child or an adult male who wasn't really in control of himself.

Women tended to go to Tom when they had problems with another man. Like Kayla Fuller had when she'd been baffled on how to regain her stupid ex-husband Tyler.

And it was Tom who took over the dogs from Kayla when she bought them at an illegal dog pit and didn't know what to do with them.

The fact that Kayla had never been interested in anyone else but that budding lawyer, Tyler, was obvious to everyone but Tom. He had really thought he had another chance with Kayla.

During that time Tom had been with Kayla he'd listened to her. And after a while he'd mentioned to her that she still loved

Tyler. The woman had been shocked and strongly denied it, but Tom had watched Kayla as she'd protested that she was finished with Tyler. She'd protested too emotionally. She'd cried.

It had been a sad time for Tom. He'd still felt the same way about Kayla as he had before Tyler had intruded onto the scene. Tom had always thought that when he wanted to settle down, Kayla would be available.

But she'd loved Tyler. That had been a stunning observation. A nasty realization. How could she?

Her marriage to Tyler had been a waste of a good woman. At best, Tom thought, women were a trial. It made Tom wonder why God had given men such odd companions. Such baffling, complicated solutions to a man's needs. Women were a chore for any needy man. Women wanted men to do so much else!

The men from the distant past were probably the smartest. They protected the village, hunted and supplied the meat while the women kept the village neat and did the planting.

Theirs was a better organization. Their women had other women to ease them and listen to them. Women understood other women. Men never really did.

But at the current time, in TEXAS, with the women being snatched up by other men, Tom felt like an abandoned coyote outside the corral. How was Tom to get his sheep? How was he to live like everybody else, here, on this land? He was of the age when he needed to be paired off and responsible.

Why was his family named Keeper? What had somebody,

back long ago, been keeper...of? Did the long ago Keepers raid other places and not give anything back?

Tom's eyes narrowed and he thought how he'd like to raid Tyler's house, snatch Kayla and keep—her. His ancestors very probably raided other places and stole women. His name wasn't keep-im or keep-it. It was keep-er.

Tom tilted his head and considered raiding. It was attractive to him. The urge was probably genetic. Since the Keepers had so much land and money, Tom finally wondered just how the devil they'd gotten all that land and all that money.

So the next time he saw his daddy, he asked him. They were out on the Keeper place, looking around, seeing what was going on. They'd come to a small stream with a large oak for shade.

The two were resting their horses. So they had stepped down and stood talking, letting the horses look around without the human weight on their backs.

There were three big dogs with them. The dogs were watching around and probably exchanging comments about where they were and what the humans were up to. The dogs were probably glad not to be horses. No saddles, no bridles, they went around almost free.

They listened as Tom asked his daddy, "How come we've got all this land and all this money?"

For the dogs it was not an interesting subject, so they went off a ways and looked around.

But Tom's father looked at his son and replied soberly and

with a tad of puzzlement, “The reason we got this place is that we worked our tails off.”

“How’d you go about getting the land?”

“I asked my daddy that same question when I was just a tad.” He then commented in an aside, “It’s interesting it took you so long to inquire about that.” Then he looked afar as he instructed his twenty-eight-year-old son, “When our family wanted to come here, back then, just by the strangest chance, our ancestor learned the Indian chief of the tribe that lived on this land then could speak English. Your seven greats grandfather heard a conversation by the purest accident. The chief not only spoke English, he’d been to Europe!”

“Now why had he gone there?”

Tom’s daddy said, “He was curious how come all us strange, pale people were invading their lands. He did sell us this plot and charged us a tad more than anybody else around here paid.”

“Where’d the tribe go from here?”

And his daddy told him, “North to Canada. They didn’t have the European rifles. Just their bows and arrows. They saw the future.”

Tom considered as he looked around. Then he said, “It must have been tough for them to leave here.”

“Apparently not. Other tribes were vicious in defending their land, but the small tribe we contacted was ready to leave here. They didn’t much cotton to us newcomers and went off on their own to another place.”

Tom said, "I've had it pretty easy."

His daddy agreed, "Just saying that shows you're getting ready to share the load. You're through school five years, now. You've traveled. That part's important. You got so's you realize how lucky we are to have this spread, and you understand you need to pull your share. About time you settled down."

Tom said sadly, "I thought I had the woman I wanted, but she went back to her husband."

His daddy nodded as he named them. "Kayla Davie went back to Tyler Fuller. Sometimes that happens. Women aren't at all predictable. She probably thinks she can help Tyler be a really great lawyer, and she could be right. But don't you fret none, you'll find a woman for yourself. Like I found your mama."

"How'd you find Mama?" Tom tilted his head back so that he could look at his daddy from under his Stetson brim.

His daddy gazed off across their land, remembering. "I'd really planned on being a bachelor. With seven brothers, I didn't think it was at all vital to the family that I get married and have kids. Then your mama came along on a horse that was limping..."

Tom waited. Then he responded, "I don't think I've heard this particular part of your life. What happened when Mama came up on a limping horse?"

"I was out looking for a heifer that was due, and she'd gone off into the bushes and got lost or killed or something. And your mama came along up on that limping horse." From under the oak, he looked at the horizon. Then he looked at the nearby

nuisance, the lacy mesquite trees. He said softly, "She was really something."

Tom inquired, "She push a stone under the horse's shoe?"

"Now, I never even once thought of something like that happening! I just wonder if that could have been so!"

Tom licked his smiling lips and waited.

"She was so concerned about the horse. She asked if I'd look at it. That she was late getting back to the Sullivans'. I'd heard the Sullivans had company, and I'd been invited over for their dance that weekend. I let my unmarried brothers go. I stayed here. I had no need to meet some woman like that who was visiting."

"So she came looking for you?"

His father snorted. "Well, I never even once thought of it thataway! Do you suppose she trapped me? She said she was just out riding. It was fretful to find her all by herself like that. I scolded her."

"What'd she do." Not a question but just a nudge for his daddy to go on with the story.

"She told me to hush and fix her horse's foot. Think of a person calling a hoof a foot."

And Tom remembered. "She wasn't a ranch girl."

"Naw. City."

"So what happened?"

"She flung a leg over the horse's neck and almost slid down. I caught her in time and pulled her away from the horse."

Tom mused, "That horse would have been too old to be the

one that was their biter.”

“It was a grandparent of that one that’s such a nuisance.” But his daddy was remembering. “Your mama was nice to hold. Women are just...different.”

“She let you hold her?”

“She wiggled and objected. She was so soft!”

“Daddy, you shock me. Now don’t tell me your hands got out of control on her.”

“Heavens to Betsy, no! I was in shock or they might have! I couldn’t think clear a-tall, boy. I was sundered right then.”

“What’d you do about the stone under the horse’s shoe?”

“I put your mama aside very carefully and told her to stand still. Of course, she didn’t do as I directed. But then, you know your mama. Nobody can direct her.”

“So you quarreled?”

“Oh, no. I went to the horse who was really peeved. How ever that stone got under his shoe, it was a chore getting it out! I asked your mama-to-be how that stone had happened? She said that she’d gone through the creek.”

“That wasn’t far from where you were, was it?”

“She never did admit to anything. She just watched me and waited. She didn’t flirt or talk or anything. She surely was a beautiful young woman.” He shook his head once. “She made me prickle.”

“So that was when she wrapped you around her little finger and just kept you thataway?”

“Yep. That about tells the whole story.”

“Did you get the stone out of the horse’s shoe? Or did you just watch her?”

And his daddy said, “So you understand what a woman can do to a man? Was that Kayla rattling you?”

“Yeah.”

His daddy sighed with some regret. “I got to tell you she’s really something. I agree to that. I just wonder why you didn’t do your chasing before she met Tyler?”

Tom explained, “I didn’t really notice.” Tom was gently turning his head, looking around. “Then there was such a choice! I thought I had the time.”

“Men are greedy.”

“Yeah.”

There was a thoughtful silence. Then his dad advised, “You better get to looking farther for other women and get serious. Men snatch them up awful quick.”

“Do you suppose the magic She will come out here on a limping horse?”

“Who’s that?”

“Mama did it for you. Think there’s a woman who could cotton to me?”

His daddy frowned as he studied his son. Still frowning, he observed, “You got all the parts. You look good. You seem smart enough. I think you’re a catch. You be careful you get a good woman. Don’t get panicked and bring in a shrew.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“Yeah.” His daddy watched his son for a full minute. Then he sighed and mounted his horse. He asked, “Coming?”

Tom came out of his thoughtfulness and looked up at his father. “Hmmm?”

“What you thinking, boy?” His voice was gentle.

“I think I’ll go over to the prairie dog kingdom and see how the dog is doing. He might be lonesome.”

“Go by the house and take Queenie along.”

Tom had been pensive. But as his daddy’s words soaked in, he smiled a tad and he said, “Right.”

Tom watched as his father moseyed off on his horse. The dogs chose to go with his dad.

Tom went to his own horse and took up the reins. He looked at the horse and indicated the bunch leaving them as he asked Oscar, “You that easy?”

The horse blew through his loose lips in disgust at such a question, then walked on off with his burden.

So at the ranch house yard, Tom whistled for Queenie. Think of a dog having such a name. It must irritate the hell out of her. They’d labeled her Queenie while Tom was gone, so he hadn’t had any part of the naming. But she was now used to being called such a name.

It was rather apologetically that Tom called to Queenie. She came with curiosity. That was the best part of her. She was endlessly curious. If something went into a hole, she watched,

but she looked around to see if there was an exit hole. She was an unusually smart dog.

Tom told the other dogs to run along, but he took Queenie. He closed the gate so that the other couple of dogs stayed where they were supposed to be.

It didn't take forever to get out to where the prairie dogs lived. The holes were many and the ground was bare and hilly from their digging.

As soon as they approached the prairie dog mound, the dog was there. It was the dog that Kayla Davie Fuller had bought from the dogfight pit and one of those given to Tom to find a home.

The dog was not a family dog or even a barn dog. It was a loner. However, the dog did notice Queenie quite avidly. He ignored the human and the horse and was zeroed in on the female dog. She wagged her tail and her smile was big.

Off a way, Tom stepped down from the saddle and watched, not intruding. Queenie obviously communicated with the big, mended dog, who had fighting scars and healed rips. She was impressed. The big dog moved and watched her watch him. She continued her pleased smile.

The two looked at the prairie dog hill. The dog in charge apparently told her why he was there. That he was invaluable in keeping the rodents under some control.

She apparently was curious. So after several serious tries, he caught her a prairie dog and gave it to her, laying it before her.

Queenie was intently curious. She sniffed the gift, and it

flipped over to run! The male caught it again! It wasn't dead! He'd given Queenie a live one.

Tom watched, absolutely fascinated. How amazing to realize what the male dog was doing to impress the female. How typical of all males to show off, and willingly be the slave of a female. After she'd eaten the little creature, the dog took Queenie to a small rill that emptied into a bigger stream down a ways.

She lapped the water. She looked at the male dog and then lapped some more. She had indicated to her host that the water was good.

There was no difference between the males of all species. The male courted the female in the very similar ways of all males. They all communicated.

After a time, Tom went to his horse, mounted and turned it slowly to go back to the ranch house. He went diagonally, at first, so that he could look back at the dogs.

. Queenie saw that he was leaving. She watched but since he did not call to her, she didn't feel committed to follow. She turned alertly to the male dog and her smile was big.

The male dog stood with his head up and his neck stretched, watching after the human on the horse. Then he turned and looked at the bitch. He smiled. She moved and flirted and played around the big dog.

He sat and laughed.

Tom left knowing that delivering Queenie to the isolated dog had been a good thing. The fact that he'd supplied another male

with a handy, willing female was balm to his own lonely feelings. Tom had helped a male to a life of better interest. And apparently Queenie hadn't minded at all.

Then Tom wondered who in the world had named that female dog...Queenie? When the two dogs met just what real name had she'd given as hers to the male and what real name had the male supplied as his?

For some reason, Tom turned his horse away from the direction of the ranch and toward the stream. There he allowed his horse to drink rather slowly and quite a bit. He encouraged it as he went upstream and also drank water. The man and his horse were oddly silent and watchful.

The horse kept looking up and to a certain spot. He blew his lips as he watched and lifted his head higher.

Tom glanced around the area and was aware they were very alone. Then he noticed the attention of the horse, and he looked out and away. He saw nothing to cause the horse to give such attention.

Then Tom saw a dot in the distance that was a dog. With a deep breath and using his fingers in his mouth, he whistled the ranch double whistle for dogs at that distance, and the dog came his way. Tom noticed it had come from some distance, and that it was not one of the ranch dogs. It was the human whistle that caught the dog's attention. It walked oddly.

Tom told the horse, "Steady."

Although it wasn't yet summer, the dog could have rabies.

Sick dogs generally left home. Or he could be lost. And he could be a calf killer. The approaching creature could be just about anything.

The man and the horse looked other places, to keep track of the area, but they were for the most part concentrated on the approaching dog.

Because of the waterless area beyond, Tom didn't go to meet the dog. If it had come across that stretch of barren land, it would be thirsty, and there was water close to where Tom was standing.

The dog could smell it. He was urgent to turn back, but the water lured him on. And Tom remembered that he and the horse had drunk especially—for a reason. Was there a person out there on the flat, alone? In danger? Harmed? Where would he be? She?

With more intentness, Tom watched the approaching dog. So did the horse. The dog was coming from a bleak area. The land was used to graze cattle—on occasion—depending on how the weather had been, which year. If it'd been wet, there'd be enough growth for a herd, if it had been dry, other places were used. Beyond, the land was fragile.

When the dog came to the water, it was still some distance from where Tom stood. It walked into the water and lapped carefully.

To gulp water immediately could flounder a creature. The dog was dehydrated. The dog looked at Tom but did not attempt to approach him. It was mostly trying to adjust to the water. And

it began to shiver.

The water was too cool for the dog.

Concerned, Tom carefully went toward the dog. It didn't try to get away. It watched, shivering. But it wouldn't get out of the water. It lapped some and shivered.

It tried to bark, to communicate, but its throat was raw from the lack of water and a long journey.

Tom took out his cellular phone and called in to the house. "This is Tom."

"It's Joe," came the answer. "What's up?"

"An exhausted, dehydrated dog just came in off the upper flats. He's in the stream but he isn't yet drinking much."

"Is anybody following him?"

Tom looked around again out to the edge of forever. "Not that I can see."

"I'll bring some of the boys out and a couple of tracers," Joe suggested. "If he's available, it might help if Rip goes up in the plane and looks around. We'll have him land out by you so he can find the dog's tracks. Keep in touch. If the dog should leave, go along but let us know."

"Right."

"We'll be along as soon as possible." That had a meaning of immediate commitment.

And quite sure there was need, Tom said, "Thank you."

The answering reply was a serious, "Yeah."

Slowly, Tom began to move toward where the dog was. If the

dog stayed put, he was probably used to people. But Tom knew he'd never get the dog to stay close. It wasn't looking for a place but for help.

How strange that Tom felt that so clearly.

He watched the dog and told it, "You need to get out of that water and shake yourself dry so's you won't chill."

The dog shivered.

Tom unsaddled his horse and took the blanket off. "Come here, boy. I'll help you. You chill, you'll get really sick. Who've you left out there? Where are they?"

The dog lapped several times. Then he went to the edge of the water in the shallows and shook himself hard, sending water flying everywhere. It was as if he'd understood Tom's words.

Tom said, "Let me just put this blanket on you."

The dog became careful. He watched but he was not at all sure the man should come closer.

Tom backed away and put the blanket aside.

Tom took note of the slight indentations of the dog's arriving paw marks. How far across the plain could the prints be followed? How far had that dog come?

Would the dog have come to the stream directly? Or would he have circled, looking for a habitation? Looking for people.

Tom listened for the plane.

A plane would cover the area much quicker. If the dog was that dehydrated, so would be whoever the dog had left out there, on the tableland.

One

Rip Morris landed the range plane near Tom Keeper with casual finesse. He was a casual man, lazy-eyed and aloof. He was also one hell of a pilot. He had eyes like a hawk. He could spot anything...even if it couldn't move.

As Tom went over to the two-seater, exposed-cockpit plane, Rip was throttling it down. He pushed up his goggles and lifted the flaps on his helmet. He needed a shave. That wasn't unusual.

Tom tersely said, "I think there's a person out there that this dog is worried about. How about you taking the dog up and go slow enough that the dog just might know where you are and where he's been?"

And Rip regarded the medium-sized dog, who was mostly black with some white, with a measured look. Get the damned dog aloft, Rip thought, and it would probably throw up, or see something and jump out. No sweat. It was the dog's funeral.

So with some effort and no help from Rip at all, Tom got the dog in the front cockpit. Tom suggested, "You might just go along low and slow and see how the dog reacts."

Rip nodded once as he said, "Wait here." He revved the engine and took off.

Rip flew the plane low and slow, allowing him to follow the dog's trail on the ground. The trail did circle, but the plane was by then up high enough that Rip could see farther.

Remarkably, the dog didn't try to jump out, but its attention was riveted. Then, from the back cockpit, Rip noticed that the

dog wasn't looking along the way, its attention was ahead. They went quite a way, even flying. Then the dog's head moved in little adjustments.

Way ahead, there was a tiny spiral of buzzards.

The dog barked.

It turned and barked again at Rip. But under the distant spiral of waiting buzzards, Rip had already seen the speck-sized, floundered horse with a person trapped underneath it. Rip throttled down and did a low, slow circle. The buzzards rose higher, and Rip had the room he needed to land.

The horse did not move. The trapped person raised a feeble hand. Well, hell. Whoever it was under that horse was still alive but probably damn near dead.

But the dog was smart enough not to jump out yet. He squeak-barked down at the still horse and the raised arm—and he stayed in the plane. But he squeak-barked back at Rip as if to tell him to land.

Rip gave the dog an enduring glance. He then turned the plane, easing it down slowly in a wide circle so as not to stir up too much dust in the low grasses.

As he turned, Rip called in to the ranch, telling exactly where he was and to call Tom Keeper. He was told he needed to release the guy from under the horse without hurting him worse. Rip said he'd see if he could do that while he waited for the other planes to get there. Yeah, he had extra water.

Rip's disgruntled mind wondered why the hell that guy was

out there in that empty area with only a horse and a dog. People are stupid. It only takes one stupid nut to tie up the whole area looking for him. Rip remembered that was how Jones had crashed, looking for some dumb pilgrim who didn't know enough to pay attention to where he was. At that time, the storm was such that the flooding land pockets on the plain could drown a man.

After saving the damned pilgrim, Jones's spirit had probably just trudged on off to heaven feeling he'd done his share. He would've had no hostility about stupidity like Rip Morris was grinding his teeth over, right then, for another pilgrim out—alone on a plain—and trapped under a dead horse.

If he'd had somebody with him, he wouldn't have been this bad. On top of all that, he had invaded private land without permission.

With skill, Rip landed the plane downwind so that no dirt blew over the motionless horse or the man.

The dog was out of the cockpit first. It went to the man, sniffed and looked up at Rip urgently.

Rip got the water bag and went carefully to the man who was trying to speak. His tongue was swollen. His leg was trapped under the dead horse.

Rip took out a clean handkerchief and soaked it to lay it on the man's mouth. Then he dribbled water onto it as he talked, soothing, telling the man that others would be there shortly.

And they were. Planes landed downwind. They avoided the buzzards and did as Rip had done. The men came with ropes and

pulled the dead horse away with care. They talked to the man who was, by then, covered with blankets so that he wouldn't chill further.

The injured, dehydrated man was put on a stretcher, carried to the cargo plane and put inside. The dog tried to get into the plane, but Rip held him.

The dog hoarsely tried to bark, not fighting or growling but lunging in Rip's firm grip. It just showed that Rip knew animals. He talked gently the entire time, soothing, explaining.

Watching the rescue plane rising from the ground, the dog shivered and sat still. Rip tied a blanket around the dog. Then he carried the dog back to his own plane, leaving others to find where the horse had been, who the man could be and why the hell he'd been out there alone.

Rip got into the plane and flew back to the ranch. On the plane's communication radio, he told Joe what all had taken place. Then he told about the dog. He was coming in with the dog. Rip asked Joe, "Could you see if one of the vets is available?"

So when Rip landed, there was an interesting number of people available. The dog shivered. They took the dog and put him on a stretcher and, still wrapped in the blanket, they carried him into the vet's bailiwick.

People can be very kind to humans who are in distress, but they are doubly so with animals. Animals aren't as informed nor is there the communication between the human and the animal.

In his house, Rip slept next to the dog that night. He wakened every couple of hours to give the dog water and made sure the dog was all right. This man was a loner. He had no real use for the rest of the population.

Well, he had gone out to help find a lost person more than that one time. But he never had much compassion for any of them. They'd been stupid. If they'd paid attention to just the basics of logical thinking, they would have never gotten in the binds in which they'd managed to trap themselves.

Rip called the hospital the next morning and said, "Tell what's his name, that the Keepers' crew found out on the plain, that his dog's doing fine."

And the snippy nurse asked, "Is this Rip Morris?"

"Yeah."

"The person's name is Andrew Parsons. He is doing as well as can be expected. He's still rather fragile right now—"

"Just tell 'im his dog's okay."

"—and his sister's here. She's really grateful to you for finding him. She wants to thank you."

"Tell her she's welcome to the damned fool. The dog is smarter and worth more than the dumb nut you've got to save."

The nurse sassed, "You tend to be somewhat prejudiced and opinionated."

"Knowing that, saves you."

And the snippy nurse said in a very prissy manner, "If we could get through the quagmire of lurid magazines and reach

what is left of the core of your altered brain, we might make some headway in civilizing you.”

“I don’t read something as mild as that.”

“You need help.”

“Naw. Tell the pilgrim his dog’s okay. That’ll give him something to think about. Don’t mention the horse is dead as yet. He killed it, taking it out there. It looked like a good horse, too. The dumb bastard.”

And the snippy nurse retorted, “You need therapy.”

“What kind?”

“Not what you’re thinking.” And she hung up.

That didn’t bother Rip one bit. He was used to women hanging up on him...after they’d called him all sweet and honey. But he didn’t want a female who was all sweetness and honey. He wanted a woman. He wanted a woman who was different from what he’d known. He wanted a partner.

He hated gigglers. He hated tart and snippy women. Why couldn’t women be more like men? Not that he could be lured by any man. He just wanted a female who had the logic and straightforwardness of the male thinking. A woman who could handle a surprise mouse without shrieking and carrying on from the top of the table. Was that asking too much?

Rip simply could not tolerate a vapid woman whose mind was lost in materials and colors and clever food bits. A woman like that, irritated him.

So it was about three days later, and he still hadn’t shaved.

Rip had an okay from the vet, so he took the dog to the humans' hospital. He did that so the man, Andrew Parsons, might understand the dog was okay. However, it was mostly so that the anxious dog could see the man. A fly head, like that man, was a heavy responsibility for any dog.

Rip took a silent, patient breath when he realized the stupid nurse was there. But then she said, "His sister would like to see you."

Hell.

He'd thought, at that time of the morning, visitors wouldn't be underfoot. It was for the dog that he was there. The dog was superior. But he was restless and anxious.

Why on earth had the dog gotten tangled up with an owner who was so stupid? Poor dog. Just maybe, the man would allow Rip to take the dog off his hands. If not permanently, at least getting away for a while from the pilgrim would be a respite for the dog.

There was the snippy nurse saying, "—and this is Rip Morris" to a woman who had just approached them.

Rip looked at the pilgrim's sister with naked eyes of shock. The sun-squint lines beside his eyes disappeared and there were the white lines that had been hidden by the sun squint. His lips parted, and he looked vulnerable. He was.

Rip had not heard her name.

The woman held out her hand and her handshake was a good firm one that didn't tickle or rub or flirt. Her hand was small but

her grip was just right. So were her eyes.

The irises were blue and she wore a hell of a lot of mascara or she'd had those false eyelashes planted. If she blinked the wind from those lashes might knock him back a step. He said, "How do you do." No question. She needn't reply.

Then he realized she wasn't interested in him. Thank God for that. Women tended to be pushy.

She was saying, "—first there. Thank you."

He nodded. She wasn't moving her body to call attention to herself. She was just talking about her brother.

Because it had baffled them all, Rip asked the sister, "Why was he out there?"

"I haven't heard." That's what she replied. She did not expand on it. She wasn't particularly interested in visiting. She just wanted to thank the first person there who had helped her stupid brother.

Of course, she didn't call her brother stupid. That was only Rip's I.D. for him. Rip asked again, "Why the hell was he out there all alone, on that plain? The grass was too low even for grazing. Who the hell would be out that way if he got in trouble?"

"You were."

"That's only because the dog came limping in, and Tom Keeper called me."

And she said in a level manner, "Oh. Then it's Tom Keeper whom I must thank."

Somehow that stuck in Rip's craw. "I'll pass the word along."

“How nice.”

Rip frowned at her. Snippy. Who cared what she was? Not him. He took the dog over to the hospital bed and told the nurse, “He’s had a bath and been defleaed.”

She grinned.

Now that’s how women were supposed to react. But his face didn’t smile nor did he look at the nurse. He looked at the man on the bed. Andrew Parsons. He looked like a parson from olden times. Probably was a descendant of one. He told the silent man, “Your dog is here to see to you. Open your eyes and look at him so’s he’ll know you’re okay.”

The nurse protested, “He’s drug—”

But with some effort, Andrew opened his eyes and his head turned very, very slowly. The dog put his paws on the side of the bed and he made an anxious throat sound.

Andrew’s hand came slowly, slowly up and sideways until it touched the dog’s neck.

The dog licked Andrew’s hand, the nurse gasped and reached, but Rip’s hands stopped her and he wouldn’t let her go.

She was furious, but she looked up at Rip who was simply watching the dog. So she did also, and the dog licked the man’s hand again.

Rip murmured to the nurse, “Good, clean dog spit.”

She shuddered.

But there was the slightest smile on Andrew’s face. His eyes closed. There was a long exhale of breath and his body seemed to

dissolve. There were several gasps there in the room. All female.

Rip looked at the sister. She was watching her brother intently. The nurse took Andrew's wrist and felt the heartbeat She'd thought he'd died. His breathing was so slow. But it was steady. He had sunk down into deep sleep.

The dog looked at Rip. He told the dog, "He's okay. You can stay fifteen minutes, then we'll go home and you can come back this afternoon."

Rip was actually letting the nurse know how he was going to let the dog come visit. She took a protesting breath, but the floor doctor was at the door.

The doctor came inside the room and took up Andrew's wrist. The doctor didn't push the dog aside but left him with his forefeet on the side of the bed.

The doctor lifted one of Andrew's eyelids and listened to his breaths, then he said, "He's sleeping very nicely. He needs to sleep. This has been a very tough time." Then he turned to Rip and smiled. And he said, "Thank you for bringing his dog up. Do it again this afternoon. Andrew has been restless and frowning. Obviously, he's been worried about the dog. Knowing the dog is all right, Andrew will rest better."

"When's the best time?" That was Rip's response to the obvious logic.

"We'll stimulate him and shift him. We'll wake him about two. Come then."

"Okay."

“—and bring the dog.”

“Off course.”

As Rip left the room with the dog, the patient’s sister followed. She had not protested the dog or the man, and it was now that she said, “Thank you for bringing Buddy along.”

“So that’s his name?” Rip found himself looking at the snippy woman. She was a looker without doing anything about it. She didn’t have on any makeup other than those eyelashes and her hair was casual.

She said, “Andrew and Buddy are good friends... buddies.”

“That’s why the dog went looking for help.”

“Is that how you found him?”

“The son of our boss, Tom Keeper, saw the dog first. He sent out the alarm. He was on horseback. I had a plane. I took Buddy and flew low and we found him...Andrew.” And again Rip asked, “What the hell was Andrew doing out in that territory?”

“I have no idea.”

About then, the doctor came up the corridor and smiled as he said, “There’s a boy who should see Buddy. Would you mind taking a little more time?”

Being a loner, visiting wasn’t one of the things Rip chose to do. But how could he refuse when he knew the dog was a curious creature? Actually, the dog was nosy. So Rip said to the doctor, “Lead the way.”

The thing that surprised Rip most was that the sister... whose name he hadn’t heard... was following. She must be bored just

sitting next to her sleeping brother. But then, what good would that do, just sitting by a man who was entirely out of it?

So what's-her-name went along. She had a good, easy walk.

The doctor told Rip, "There's a very lonely boy whose home is a long way from here. He has brothers and sisters who call him, but he doesn't have any visitors. He, too, has a bad leg. But his is broken."

The boy's name was Chuck. He lay in bed with his leg elevated somewhat by a complicated bunch of wires. He was pale and very quiet. He was watching TV.

In an aside, the doctor said to Rip, "Thank God for TV children's shows."

Two nurses said softly, "Amen."

Andrew's sister asked, "But do the kids get together and watch?"

The doctor nodded. "Those who can walk. Some of them come here, if they're not too ill."

The doctor went in the boy's room. "Hello, Chuck. May I bring in a friend?"

The boy turned his head slowly. "Yeah."

And the dog came in alertly, looking. Did he expect to see Andrew again? He put his feet up against the high bed and looked at the patient.

The boy was delighted! "Hello!" he exclaimed. "How'd you get inside?"

And the doctor said, "His master is in the hospital. He's asleep.

The dog's name is Buddy. I thought you might like to know him."

Chuck smiled and put out his hand. The dog, Buddy, gave the boy's hand a lick, and Chuck smiled as he petted the dog.

It was a nice thing to watch. But the doctor had to leave and did so quietly.

The nurse said to Chuck, "Don't put your hand on your face or in your mouth until I've washed it."

They all laughed, but the important laugh was Chuck's.

After fifteen minutes, the nurse in charge reluctantly signaled Rip to leave. Rip told Chuck, "We'll see you this afternoon."

Another visit from the dog was something for the boy to anticipate.

The nurses were charming in their goodbyes.

Andrew's sister watched those people leave before she said to Rip, "Thank you for coming. Andrew will be so glad to see Buddy again this afternoon. I know keeping the dog and bringing him here takes your time. Is Buddy a problem for you?"

"Naw. He just goes along with me. He likes flying."

She actually looked at him as she asked, "What sort of flying do you do?"

He returned her look, and he found he liked the way she watched him. He told her, "I look at crops, at the height of grasses, for vans that are off the highway and could be rustlers after cattle...and I look for people who don't have cellular phones and can be lost."

She watched him soberly. "...or trapped under a dead horse."

“I mostly look for our guys. Andrew is my first foreigner.” Well, he wasn’t from another land, so Rip added, “A nonresident...trespasser.” His tongue just added that. It was true. Andrew hadn’t had permission to trod on acreage that was private land.

Andrew’s sister guessed, “He was where he wasn’t supposed to be?”

“Exactly.” Then without his permission, Rip’s tongue just went on, “He could have gone to any highway rest stop and inquired as to how he might go anywhere. There are state cops at almost all the rest stops. They give information. Nobody intrudes on private lands. And to go over a fence and out on the lands and get lost is a great nuisance for the owners and crews on the places. It takes our time and concern. We are busy people.”

“How are you managing?” She gestured. Then, realizing that wasn’t enough, she added, “Coming here and taking care of Buddy?”

Rip looked at Andrew’s sister and thought it was probably a good thing he didn’t know her name. She lured him. He didn’t want that kind of serious, unknowing lure. He sighed and said, “I manage. He’s a good dog. My boss gives me the time to bring him to see the pilgrim.” He almost instantly bit his lip.

“Pilgrim?”

It was not a kind name. Rip had used it to mean a person who’d landed where nobody wanted him. So Rip said, “Uhhh. Well, he was new to us.”

Andrew's sister nodded. Then she said, "If anything... changes...I could call you and save you the time coming into town. Is there a phone number where I can reach you?"

He asked, "What's your name?"

"Lu."

Thoughtfully tilting his head back, Rip questioned, "Wasn't there a song about a lady named Lu?"

"Probably. My dad named me. He's a...different person. He baffles my mother."

Without any warning, Rip found himself blurting, "I never knew my parents." His teeth went back into his lower lip. They should have stayed there.

Lu guessed. "You left home as soon as you could."

"Yeah." They'd left him. He watched her a minute with his eyes slitted. He'd never given his phone number to any woman. "Don't you give my number to anybody, do you hear me?"

She began to smile. "Women throw themselves in front of your car?"

"Any man gets tired of being hounded."

"Hounded." She tasted the word. Then she inquired with the slightest smile, "You're implying women are...hounds?"

Rip slowly shook his head, as he said very seriously, "Not all of them. Some really good women live in this world."

She was curious about his replies so she asked, "But there are...females who...hound you?"

Rip shrugged logically. "—and there're the male variety of

—hounds,” he admitted. “I’m one every now and again.” He watched her. He became aware that she was tired and had been concerned and worried about that stupid brother of hers. “You got a place here to stay that’s convenient?”

“Yes. Just down the block, there’s a hospice. This hospital services a large area.”

“Yeah. People like Chuck who come a long way.”

“He’s a nice little boy. I met his mother.”

“How’d you do that?”

“I can’t just sit in Andrew’s room. So these last few days, I’ve helped out... distributed books, that sort of thing.”

Rip didn’t verbally praise her but his smile was a benediction. He gave her his phone number. Just doing that, wobbled him. He told her, “Remember, you don’t give that to anybody, do you hear me?”

Very seriously she replied, “I’ll have a blind tattooer put it on my body in a discreet place.”

Rip groused, “And you’ll tell him what to tattoo. He’ll know the number.”

She licked her smile. “I’ll do the tattooing. He won’t have a clue.”

Rip tilted his head back and squinted his eyes. “Where you gonna put my number?”

“No one will ever know.”

“Remember to burn the paper.”

“Of course.”

Again Rip squinted his eyes at her and asked softly, “How you gonna see the number if you’re in public?”

She considered. “Be sure the telephone booth door is closed?”

“That’s when the light goes on. When the door’s closed.” He watched her more closely.

“I’ll find a private phone, if it’s important to call you.”

“Oh.” He studied her with a serious face. “I thought you just meant that you’d want to talk to me.”

“No,” she reminded him. “The phone number is because I might need to cancel you coming here if Andrew is out of it or something like that.”

“Well.” He hesitated and looked around rather stubbornly. “I thought you were interested in... uh...the boy.”

“Chuck.”

“Yeah. Him. Don’t you think it’s important for Buddy to come visit the kid? Even if your brother’s out, the kid might like to see Buddy.”

She considered that quite seriously and finally nodded just a tad. “You could be right.”

“So we’ll see you this afternoon. Uh. You wanna go out for lunch?”

“With the dog?”

“We can go to a drive-in.”

“I don’t think I can even look at another hamburger”

“There’re drive-ins that have Mexican food.”

“Anything else?”

“Soup?”

“My stomach might accept soup.”

He considered her with a still face. He understood that she loved her brother. Her stomach was scared over him and she was having trouble eating. He'd take her to Marge's. She'd get the soup.

Well, Marge was in a tizzy with Rip's phone call. Rip was bringing a woman to her stand for soup! He was bringing along a woman! For Pete's sakes alive, who'd ever believe that Rip would bring a woman out at noon! What the hell was happening?

And there he came in his pickup. He had a dog with him and a woman. She was there! A woman in broad daylight! And she looked like a normal woman. No exotic makeup, all smeared. Her clothes were simple and rather blah. What was happening to Rip!

The woman was kin? She was someone else's wife? He was responsible for some guy's wife? Or lover? The woman didn't look like a lover. She looked more like she'd been pulled through a knothole. She looked tired and quite pale.

So Marge figured they'd been in bed together for at least a day or two. It made Marge a little jealous. She called out to her husband, Hank. He needed to see what could happen between couples.

Marge said to the pale woman when she and Rip walked in, “I'm Marge. This here's my husband, Hank.”

The pale woman said, “How do you do?”

She was a lady. Marge knew that right away, but what in the world was Rip doing with a lady, for Pete's sake? If he stayed around something like her for very long he'd be ruined!

Rip told Hank, who was the real cook in the place, "How about some kind of gentle soup for her?" Then wanting to make an impression on Lu, he added kindly, "She's been through a lot these last several days."

Marge knew it! The two had been holed up in Rip's bed all that while and the woman was starving! It was no wonder that she looked so tired.

Marge looked over at Rip with a serious frown for such a greedy man, but her wrinkled face smoothed out and she smiled just a little. No woman would complain, even after being in bed with Rip for three days running. Three days of being moved around on a bed by him. Ahhh. He was really something.

Marge smiled at the woman and asked softly, "You okay?"

And the woman replied, "I'm fine."

Marge laughed. Any woman would've answered that a way.

But Marge's laughing response made Lu blink. What could be so amusing about having a brother in a hospital?

The soup came with crackers and there was a glass of milk. As anyone would, Rip had two hamburgers and a beer. On the side he asked for a double patty of raw meat with milk.

Hank was forced to inquire, "That raw meat help?"

Marge immediately knew Hank was aware the couple had spent three days in bed together, and—

Rip mentioned kindly, “The dog’s in the truck. He needs food just like the rest of us.”

Marge understood the dog had been neglected during that three-day bed marathon. She said to Rip, “Next time you two get together, bring the dog here, and we’ll take care of him.”

That left the couple blank-faced. Although male and female, their faces were very similar. While Rip’s eyes squinted a little as he tried to understand Marge’s offer, Lu just went back to her soup. She’d found West TEXANS were a little strange and there was no purpose in trying to sort them out and finding a way to understand them. She’d be back home in East TEXAS by then.

Two

Marge and Hank’s fast-food place was in an old house in a neighborhood that had lost most of its residential status. Their yard had been altered into a driveway, along which were parking places for those who wanted to eat inside. They didn’t dine; they ate. The downstairs rooms of the house were separated eating places. It was casual.

In one room at one of the small tables, Lu and Rip slowly ate their lunch. The dog, Buddy, was allowed out of the pickup and on the cooler back porch. The dog didn’t need to be tied and obeyed orders to stay.

Rip looked at Lu. When had he ever really looked at a woman just to see her? He realized what she needed most was a nap. She was wrung-out. He did not want to take her to the hospice. He’d not be welcomed to go to her room and waken her.

He looked at his watch. If they drove out to his house at the Keeper place, they'd just about, right away, have to drive back to the hospital for the two o'clock visit.

He asked Marge, "You got a bed for her to nap?"

Marge's eyes widened. He was going to get her out of his reach and let her rest! She asked carefully, "Just her?" In spite of her riveted interest, this was her own place and she couldn't really allow anything, well, anything like that in her place.

Rip replied, "I'm not as tired as her." In his manner of speech, the "tired" sounded like tarred.

But his comment made the misguided Marge burst into a quickly attempted smothered laugh. Obviously, his lust had outlasted Lu's. The exhausted, overly used, budding woman needed some rest, but she had to be out of his greedy reach!

So with her eyes flickering with suppressed interest, Marge said, "We got a bed upstairs."

Rip didn't like leaving Lu in a strange place alone, and while he'd gladly stay and protect her himself, he had her reputation to consider. So he asked, "Could Buddy stay with her? He's house-trained."

The dog was a problem, but Marge found the whole situation so fascinating, that she was ready to tolerate the dog. She said a rather hesitant but oddly quick, "Okay."

Then they had to convince Lu. She said, "No, I can't give you more to do. You're busy enough. I'll just go to the hospice."

"No." That, of course, was Rip. He tended to control.

Marge's eyes danced but her mouth was still and did not smile. She said, "No problem. Really. You're welcome."

Just the idea of a bed, right then and there, had Lu saying, "You're very kind."

Marge, thinking on her own track, had figured erroneously why the young woman was so tired. Lu'd be given an hour or so of being left alone, by Rip, this time, and sleeping. Marge said, "Stay here for a while."

Very seriously, Rip agreed, as he said to Lu, "You can sleep."

Rip's and Marge's urging rather amused Lu, then, because she had just realized the clientele of the eatery would be noisy and laughing and banging dishes around. She said, "I could go back to the hospice."

"No, no." That time the response was almost in chorus with Rip, Marge and Hank all seriously protesting.

So it was Marge who led the draggingly tired young woman up the stairs, and Buddy went along without any human indication that he should go with her.

In the small room, the screened window was open to the spring air. The bed was big and soft.

The dog looked around and settled down under the window. He watched with his chin on his front paws.

Marge watched as Lu slid her dress off over her head. The young woman was obviously very weary. She crawled slowly onto the bed and pulled the light blanket up over her. She said to Marge, "This is like a cloud."

It was only then that Marge understood Lu wasn't only a love partner, she was also a young, tired human. Having never had children of her own, Marge awkwardly tugged on the blanket, setting it askew. Awkwardly, she said, "Sleep tight, honey."

Then Marge turned and went out the door, closing it gently.

So with the woman gone, the dog came over and jumped up on the bottom of the bed and curled around several times before it sighed and settled down.

That almost overly amused the tired Lu. She moved her feet over to one side, already cramped by the area the dog had taken as its own, but she did go right to sleep.

It was later that Lu felt the dog get up and cross over her covered, cramped legs to jump down onto the floor. His toenails clicked as he went over to the window to sit there. She opened her eyes to watch the dog. He was watching the door.

There was a soft knock and before she could say or do anything, the door opened. It was Rip. "You awake?"

She said, "The dog sleeps on the bed. He's a sham."

"I didn't think he'd pull that on a fragile lady! I am shocked." He shook his head and tsked, looking at the dog.

Then with his lack of any surprise, she mentioned, "Apparently, not very much."

"I've gotten used to it in this time he's been with me. The curious part is he has no qualms about sleeping with somebody, but he's careful to be on the floor if somebody else comes along."

She nodded. "A total fraud."

Rip asked gently, "Did you sleep at all?"

"Like a dead rock!"

"There are live rocks?" he gasped.

She groaned. "You're one of those kind who is easily shocked."

So, of course, he then said, "So you slept like a dead rock."

"I breathed."

With her words, Rip remembered their watching to be sure her brother in the hospital breathed. Her brother. Rip asked, "Where are your parents?" "My daddy had a heart attack when he heard Andrew was missing. Mother's with him."

"Ahhhh. He okay?"

"It was mild. It might not have been a heart attack, as such as it was panic. He tends to be emotional. Our doctor is careful of him. My daddy talks to the medical staff here. They give him updates."

Rip by then had slowly moved to the side of her bed. He sat on the edge very carefully, like an animal who isn't sure of his welcome.

She asked logically, "How am I to get up and get dressed with you here?"

"I'll help."

"No. I'm capable. Go downstairs, and I'll be there in just a couple of minutes."

"You're selfish!" He made the two growling, hushed words into shock.

She considered for a minute and then nodded as she agreed, “Yep.”

He looked disgruntled. He did a good job of it, but she wasn't lured. She was worse. She was patient.

Rip sighed with great drama, then he said to the dog, “Come along, Buddy. If I can't stay here and watch her dress, then neither can you. You've already slept with her. I am surprised at you. Shame on you!”

The dog lifted his head, closed his eyes and panted oddly as if he was laughing.

She said, “It's as if—”

“Yeah. He thinks I'm funny. He laughs most of the time. And he tries to communicate. He thinks I'm real dumb.”

She agreed with his study. “Dogs tend to be tolerant, but you wonder what sort of words they mumble under their breaths.”

He nodded as he replied, “You've been the servant of dogs.”

She shared: “Cats are less demanding. They can get up on tables easier than dogs. On beds, they at first pretend to be little, fluffy balls that take up no room at all. Then when you're asleep, they take the middle of the bed and sprawl out...sideways.”

“Dogs are similar. They're surprised when any human objects to not having their share of the bed.”

“How do you handle that?”

“I pitch the dog outside.”

“In this weather?”

“It's spring for crying out loud! He ought to just sleep outside.”

He would, but there isn't a fence around my place.”

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