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Vintage *SUPER ROMANCE*

Trouble at Lone Spur

ROZ DENNY FOX

Roz Denny Fox

Trouble at Lone Spur

Аннотация

Settle down for a warm, wonderful read by the talented Roz Denny Fox!—Kristin HannahThe Lone Spur RanchCrockett County, TexasLizbeth Robbins has been following the rodeo circuit for the past six years, learning the farrier's trade, dragging her little girl from town to town. But now her daughter's in school and Lizbeth needs a more permanent job. She's relieved to find one at the Lone Spur: shoeing Gil Spencer's quarter horses. Even if it was his foreman who hired her and the man himself doesn't want her anywhere near his ranch!Gil Spencer hates rodeos—mainly because his ex-wife loves them. While he was busy pulling his ranch out of the red, she was busy pursuing a career as a champion barrel-racer. Worse yet, the ex-Mrs. Spencer abandoned her husband and their twin sons for the dubious charms of some bronc rider. So the last person Gil wants on the Lone Spur is a former rodeo employee. Even if Lizbeth Robbins is the most attractive woman he's met in years. Especially then...

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EPILOGUE

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“Rusty and Dusty don’t got no mom and I don’t got no dad.”

Melody took a deep breath. “So, Mom—we could be a family!”

“Oh, no!” Lizbeth gasped. “Melody, baby, you can’t just pick up stray people like you do kittens and make them part of your family.”

“Why not?” A tear caught in thick lashes, then trickled down a round cheek.

“Well, because...because...” Liz sighed. “Because you can’t. And whatever you do, promise me you’ll never bring up this subject with Mr. Spencer or his sons.”

“But how will they ever think of it on their own? They’re *boys* and—”

“*Never*, Melody. Is that understood?”

“O-kay. But will you make enough sandwiches for them? And take the rest of the cupcakes. Please, Mom.”

“Melody Lorraine. I can see the wheels turning. You will not lure the Spencers with food. Where on earth are you getting this nonsense? Certainly not from me.” Liz threw up her hands. “I want to make sure you know I’m dead serious about this, Mel.”

“All right. But jeez!” Melody slid off her pony and plunked down on the porch steps, chin in hand, to wait for the Spencers.

Dear Reader,

Trouble at Lone Spur is a composite of several story ideas that finally jelled into one. I've wanted to set a story in the wide-open spaces of west Texas ever since I discovered that this sometimes harsh, arid land casts a lasting spell. And so do the men who work it! Cowboys—who can resist 'em?

Gil came to me in a flash. A bone-weary rancher who'd inherited a run-down ranch called the Lone Spur. A man left to raise his unruly twin sons alone. I knew those twins; I baby-sat them in another life. Believe me, Gil needed a strong helpmate!

I found Lizbeth in my bottom drawer, along with an article I'd clipped from *Western Horseman* about a female farrier. The article was sketchy, my notes on Lizbeth brief. She was pretty and petite and she was married to a grand national bull-riding champion. A nice guy who was also a good-looking hunk. In my original version of Liz, she and this husband of hers had a sweet young daughter. Wow, talk about problems. Gil needs Lizbeth desperately, and she already has a man in her life! Plus trouble of her own. Stapled to Lizbeth's file were clippings and news stories about children who'd fallen in abandoned wells. More specifically, I'd played around with the idea of what would happen to Lizbeth's marriage if her daughter tumbled into a well while she was off shoeing horses. But I couldn't ask Gil to wait around for her to work through all that. So...I made Liz a widow. Let the trouble at Lone Spur begin!

As you'll see, a finished book rarely ends up the way it starts.

For all readers who, over the past few years, have written and asked how I come up with story ideas—I give you *Trouble at Lone Spur*. My secret is out, but I hope that doesn't mean you'll stop writing to me.

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Thanks to my former critique partners in San Angelo, Texas—Ken, Jan, Barbara, Janet and Linda—for helping me fine-tune Gil and Lizbeth’s story. Mary, thanks for all the horsey info. Humble thanks to the patient farrier who answered endless questions about shoeing horses. He prefers to remain anonymous—a macho thing, I guess.

And finally, thanks to Ken Hoogson for sharing his first-hand

experience with mine and well rescues.

CHAPTER ONE

IN THE TWO WEEKS since Lizbeth Robbins had hired on as farrier at Gilman Spencer's ranch, she hadn't laid eyes on the man. The Lone Spur, situated in a sparsely populated corner of Crockett County, Texas, was a quarterhorse operation—and badly in need of her services. But if Spencer's name hadn't appeared on the sign at the entry gate, she might well have believed that her elusive boss was a phantom. Not that Liz cared whether she ever met the Lone Spur's head honcho. She'd already formed her opinions.

From all she'd gleaned listening to Rafe Padilla, the ranch foreman, it sounded as if Spencer was a hardheaded perfectionist who didn't give second chances. She suspected he was ill-mannered, to boot. That notion had come to Liz through personal dealings with his ornery-assin nine-year-old twin sons. Last night's debacle cinched it.

While today she could laugh about the incident, it hadn't seemed funny then. She'd been in her grubbiest clothes, hanging stubborn wallpaper in her minuscule bathroom, when all at once, in waltzed this cowboy dandy, a total stranger, claiming he'd come for the candlelit dinner Liz had promised in the note she'd sent him.

Of course, Melody shouldn't have let a stranger in the house. But apparently her six-year-old daughter was dazzled by the

Chaps cologne that rose around the cowboy like a cloud. Darned stuff made Liz sneeze. The Lone Spur's biggest Don Juan wasn't happy when she'd ushered him out, suggesting someone had played a trick on him.

Turned out the trick was on her. Liz knew it the moment Rusty and Dusty Spencer tumbled off her porch in sidesplitting giggles. Cowboy Macy Rydell got the message then, too. Even though he should have figured it out from the crudely written note—on wide-ruled tablet paper, no less.

Liz caught the twins and threatened to tell their dad. It didn't faze the little punks. She was normally eventempered with kids, but this prank had been one too many in a string of antics those miniature con artists had pulled. Obviously trying to run her off the ranch. But Liz needed this job. Gilman Spencer's twins would find out she didn't run easily. No siree-bob!

Liz kicked dirt from her low-heeled Ropers and climbed two rungs up on the corral fence to study the magnificent blood-bay stallion three wranglers had just brought in. She doubted it took three men to handle the animal, but Spencer's hands had been riding in off the range all week to get a look at her. Liz found that amusing. Women must be in short supply on the Lone Spur.

"Aren't you a beauty?" she breathed, her eyes leaving the horse only long enough to locate his name on the clipboard she carried. This was Night Fire, the registered stud Spencer bred with his sand-colored mares to sire the beautiful buckskin quarter horses that made the Lone Spur a power in the breeding industry.

Liz put a check beside the stallion's name. She smiled as her gaze skipped back to admire his long legs and deep chest. "Ah, yes. Night Fire. The name suits you. I'd guess you're a hot lover."

As if concurring with her assessment of his prowess, the horse reared and pawed the air. Liz read the overt challenge in his sable eyes, but she didn't rush to meet it. Instead, she laid the clipboard aside and climbed atop the fence—to let the stallion grow comfortable with her presence and her smell.

She wouldn't actually shoe the stud, only trim his hooves and check for disease. According to the ranch foreman, Night Fire had been favoring his left hind foot—probably an indication that the horn had grown rough and uncomfortable.

Liz snapped off a piece of grass to chew. She loved the way the morning sun caught fire in the stallion's crimson coat. It was easy to see why his offspring were in constant demand.

First day here, she'd heard rumors that her predecessor had been fired over this animal. Liz didn't intend to make mistakes with him—or any of the others. This job was her chance to quit trailing the rodeo from one end of the Southwest to the other. Her chance to provide Melody with roots. Nibbling thoughtfully on the straw, Liz recalled a time when she hadn't minded the rodeo circuit. When love was young and Corbett was alive.

But things changed.

Redirecting her attention to the stallion, Liz tossed the straw aside. It was better not to dwell on the past. It stirred memories of a time when she'd been alone, pregnant, crippled by grief

and debt. Thanks to old Hoot Bell, a kindly soul who'd left horseshoeing to follow his lifelong dream of being a rodeo clown, Liz had learned a usable trade. And now, she finally felt strong enough to make a bid for independence—and a permanent home. Working for Gil Spencer meant her child could attend first grade at one school for the entire year. Kindergarten had been a hit-and-miss affair mixed with whatever home schooling Liz could manage between towns.

As she took the first step to coax the wary stallion closer, Liz considered again how nicely things had fallen into place. She knew for a fact that only the biggest outfits could afford to hire a full-time farrier, let alone provide accommodation. Sagging porch and all, the cottage seemed like a castle compared to the tiny camp trailer she and Melody had shared. And the rural school bus already stopped here for the Spencer twins. Yes, life at the Lone Spur was pretty much perfect.

Liz experienced a moment's thrill as the stallion trotted up to sniff her hand. Yup, she'd do whatever it took to please Mister do-it-right-or-get-canned Spencer. She and Melody *needed* the Lone Spur. And if they stayed here, she might be able to conquer another problem, too. These past two weeks she'd had fewer nightmares, fewer bouts with claustrophobia—annoying conditions that had plagued her since Corbett's death.

Liz gave herself a hard mental shake and met Night Fire's liquid gaze. "If you knew us," she murmured, "you'd see the changes in Melody. She's crazy about her teacher and loves

having friends. Let's not screw it up, huh, buddy?"

Liz dropped off the fence and slowly made her way back to her pickup to get the tools she'd need to clean and polish Night Fire's hooves. He might have caused her predecessor's downfall, but no mere horse was going to ruin things for Melody. Not if Lizbeth could help it.

The big horse kicked up his heels and circled the enclosure like a frisky colt. Liz eyed him, her thoughts again shifting to his owner. Gil Spencer wanted things done by the book, so that was how she'd do them.

Night Fire whickered, tossed his head and teased her, skittering away. "Easy, boy." Having donned chaps and pliable gloves, she quickly boxed him in and bent to pick up his back hoof. "Oh, oh!" He had extremely dry feet. Someone—the previous farrier, Liz supposed—had rasped too close and destroyed the natural varnish. "Darn. What now?" She climbed out of the pen and reached automatically for her heavy leather apron. She'd have to shoe him, after all, then really soak those feet.

Given the rumors surrounding the horse, Liz checked in the barn to see if Rafe Padilla was available to discuss treatment. He wasn't. Obviously he'd already taken the load of yearlings to market. Liz sighed. She had no choice. And with any other horse, any other owner, she wouldn't have questioned her decision.

Resolute, she fired up her forge. Her thoughts turned once more to the absent Spencer. In observing his sons, she'd formed

a mental picture of dear old dad. Not too tall. Stocky. Mid to late forties. The lucky stiff had inherited this gorgeous ranch; so, most likely, would his sons. That fact alone probably contributed to their cockiness. There was no Mrs. Spencer. At least not living on the ranch. Liz had some definite ideas about that, too.

Flame ready at last, she closed the gap between herself and the jumpy stallion. Even though this change in plans put her behind, Liz took time to stroke his neck before she started to work. The horse relaxed ever so slightly and nuzzled the bare flesh below Liz's short dark curls. She hunched her shoulder and laughed as his breath tickled her ear. "Aren't you the charmer," she crooned. "Pity you don't give lessons." Liz was plain peeved to think the twins didn't like her. She'd gotten on well with all the kids who hung out at rodeos. Another strike against Dad—and Ben Jones, the grouchy old excowboy who served as Spencer's houseman. Now, that man was a caution.

Shrugging, she bent to the task at hand. She slid her palm down the horse's leg, then gently bumped his side so that he'd shift his bulk and allow her to lift his foot. "So far," she muttered against Night Fire's side, "the boys tolerate Melody. If I ever see that they don't, I tell you they've swiped the last chocolate-chip cookie from *my* jar."

Keeping up a tranquilizing flow of conversation, Liz slowly and carefully trimmed the stallion's heels. "Whoa, boy." She fitted the cooled shoes, reheated and reshaped them until they were exact. "I guarantee these won't cramp your style with the

ladies.”

Night Fire whiffled uneasily as she got out her ruler to measure his front feet.

Tailoring shoes took time and was hot tedious work. By the time Liz had molded them to her liking, the only thing on her mind was nailing them home, then breaking for a tall glass of cold lemonade.

Lunch was definitely out. Rafe had said he needed her in the east pasture this afternoon to reshoe three geldings who'd thrown shoes during roundup. Liz doubted she'd finish today, especially since she had to meet Melody's school bus at three-thirty. Pulling old shoes and checking for any sign of hoof disease simply couldn't be rushed. Meticulous as she'd heard Spencer was, Liz was equally so.

Suddenly, when she was almost done, Night Fire began to fight her. “Whoa, fella, what's wrong?” Loosening the tie rope, Liz played it out.

As the powerful horse reared and rose above her, Liz saw the problem. A cowboy—a drifter by the look of him—limped down the lane leading a mare, whose scent was all it took to drive Night Fire wild.

Liz fought back simmering anger. Dolt! Couldn't he see the stallion?

GIL SPENCER'S SIGHTS were set on getting home. About a mile out, Shady Lady had stepped in a prairie-dog hole, thrown a shoe and pulled up lame. It was damned hot out, and Gil's boots

weren't made for walking—no *real* cowboy's boots were. Late last night, he'd given the last water in his canteen to the mare. Right now, he was about as dry as a man could be.

And he was mad. For three days he'd been trailing a stock-killing cougar. Today he'd had the cat cornered. All at once the wily animal had escaped into a rock-strewn canyon, to hide in any one of a hundred caves. So he'd been in a foul mood even *before* Shady Lady's accident. Now all that interested Gil was getting shut of the heavy saddle he'd packed a mile and drinking the well dry. That, and showering off several layers of roundup grime. The very last thing Gilman Spencer dreamed he'd see when he hobbled toward the Lone Spur's main barn was some woman wrangling his most expensive stud.

Was she nuts?

Dropping the saddle and Shady Lady's reins, Gil forgot his exhaustion. His thoughts centered on getting the woman out of the corral in one piece and without a lawsuit. Unfortunately Gil also forgot that his bones were thirty-four years old, not nineteen, as he vaulted the fence. Landing much too hard, he fell. His legs buckled and his Stetson flew off, spooking Night Fire.

The stallion screamed and lashed out with the foot nearest Liz. Although his kick was negligible as kicks go, she wasn't expecting it, and she was thrown a good three feet across the corral—sunglasses one way, Liz the other. She landed smack on her backside in the hard-packed dirt.

Gil straightened and froze. His heart pounded, his legs

quaked. Was she okay? Lord! Up close she was no bigger than a minute—and Night Fire stood sixteen hands. Gil dug deep for the wherewithal to race to the woman's side.

Too late to matter, Liz connected the man she'd seen in the lane with Night Fire's unprovoked attack. Furious, she leapt to her feet and dusted off her smarting rump. "You may dress like a cowboy," she shouted, "but you lack the brains the Almighty gave a gnat. Hasn't anyone ever told you not to sneak up on a farrier at work? And never, *never* surprise a person working in close quarters with a stallion." Liz shook a small fist under the unkempt offender's nose.

"Is that so?" Gil had heard about enough of the lady's lip.

"Who," he asked icily, "gave you permission to *be* in close quarters with that stud?" Flashing hazel eyes raked every scrawny inch of her before the man snatched up his Stetson and jammed it back on sweaty russet locks that needed a good trim.

"None of your beeswax." Liz didn't like the saddle bum's superior attitude. He wasn't the first man who'd presumed he could give the orders because she tackled what was deemed men's work. She'd met twice his arrogance on the rodeo circuit. But this man had no right taking his error out on her. "Rest assured I'm doing the job I've been hired to do," she snapped.

"Really? Who hired you?"

"God! So, take a hike." Liz stood her ground even though the stranger hovered over her. "Or better yet," she said, wrinkling her nose, "take a bath."

He didn't move. And that was when it dawned on Liz that this saddle tramp might have blown in from Spencer's roundup. Cursing her hot temper, she whirled to check on Night Fire. What if this know-it-all jerk carried tales back to his boss?

"Look, lady—" Gil clamped down on his anger "—I don't know who authorized you to shoe any horse of mine, let alone my prize stud, but I guaran-damn-tee this is your last job on the Lone Spur."

Liz turned back and let her eyes take a leisurely stroll from the top of his crusty Stetson to the tips of his run-down boots. Then she laughed. "*Your* horse? I've seen down-and-out bronc riders at the rodeo where I worked who looked more prosperous than you. I guaran-damntee Gilman Spencer'd know his prize stallion's hooves were split, and that without shoes and wet packs those feet will break down."

If her grating laughter hadn't been enough to make Gil see red, her jab about the rodeo definitely did. Nobody, but nobody, mentioned bronc riders in Gil Spencer's presence—not if they wanted to keep their teeth. Half the state of Texas had known before he did that his wife—now ex-wife—Ginger spent her nights in bronc rider Avery Amistad's bed.

The hurt went deeper than mere infidelity. Gil had needed Ginger's support while he worked his butt off pulling the Lone Spur out of the financial mess his father had left it in. But he'd been understanding about her desire to become a number-one barrel racer. So understanding that he'd hired Ben Jones to help

care for their infant twins while his dear wife followed the rodeo.

No, Gil didn't like anything about rodeos.

Gil was furious at this woman for reminding him of humiliations he'd managed to suppress. But dammit, he thought, as he took a closer look at Night Fire's hooves, she *was* right about the splits.

As Liz watched the stranger run sure hands down the stallion's leg, a sick feeling began to grow in her stomach. "Rafe Padilla hired me two weeks ago," she stated firmly, assuming—hoping—that would straighten things out.

The woman now seemed subdued, a fact that cooled Gil's temper. Even supposing Rafe had hired her, Gil would never allow anyone connected to the rodeo to stay on his ranch. "If that's true," he sighed, "my beef is with Rafe. But it changes nothing. Stow your gear and be on your way." He glanced away as huge brown eyes blinked up at him, then retreated into blankness again.

Liz's brain stalled. She saw all her hopes, all her dreams for Melody, slipping away.

"I see you still doubt who's giving you your walking papers," the man said harshly. "Here's my driver's license." He pulled a plastic sleeve out of his wallet and sailed it toward her. It plopped at her feet, kicking up a tiny cloud of dust.

Night Fire reared again and pawed the ground. Liz scooped the plastic out of the dirt before climbing through the rails. A terrible crushing weight trapped the air in her lungs as she

scanned the picture of a ruggedly handsome clean-shaven man who bore scant resemblance to this scruffy cowpoke. Except for maybe the cool hazel eyes that could freeze a woman's soul. And the name, Gilman Spencer, that leapt off the paper to taunt her.

Liz tried to speak. The words stuck in her throat. Shaking her head, she handed back his license. "I don't understand," she stammered. "The friend who recommended me set it up with Mr. Padilla, but I assumed *you* had hired me." If only she'd asked Hoot more about Spencer. Not that he'd have said anything, closedmouthed as he was.

Gil jammed his license into his wallet and returned the worn leather case to his back pocket. "*If* I hired women on the Lone Spur, *which I don't* because they distract my wranglers, I most assuredly wouldn't hire a rodeo groupie."

"I beg your pardon." Liz drew herself straight up. Even then the top of her head barely reached his shirt pocket. "Rafe told Hoot Bell—that's my friend—that you were desperate for a good farrier. I *am* that, Mr. Spencer. And for your information, I *am not* a rodeo groupie. I shoe horses as well as any man alive. Better than most."

"Not on the Lone Spur. I'm not that desperate."

"Really?" Liz arched a brow. "Wasn't it a *man* you fired? Padilla probably thought you wanted the shoeing done right this time."

A muscle twitched along Gil's cheek. "Look," he muttered, "I've had a hell of a day—three in a row if you want to get

technical. I'm not up to sparring, Miss—"

"Mrs.," Liz supplied. "Mrs. Corbett Robbins. Lizbeth. You may not believe this, but I usually get along with everyone—" Liz broke off. She'd be darned if she'd grovel. If he had an ounce of decency, he'd have told her up front who he was.

Gil frowned. "Corbett Robbins? The name rings a bell." The frown deepened. "I knew someone once who spouted rodeo stats. Robbins—isn't he national bull-riding champion?"

"Was," she whispered, eyes unexpectedly misting. "Corbett *was* champion. It's been awhile." Spencer's blunt statement hurled memories at Liz, the kind, of memories that normally woke her out of a sound sleep. But in the dead of night she had time to conquer her demons, even if she'd never truly forget the horror of watching her husband die in that narrow chute. Some made allowances because she'd been eight months pregnant. Not Liz. She knew that if she'd thrown her jacket, instead of freezing to the bench, she might have distracted the bull and saved Corbett's life.

"I see," Gil sneered. "Old Corbett lost a few purses, so you left him for greener pastures. Well, not on my ranch, sister."

Liz stared vacantly at the man whose bitter accusation broke into her private reverie. Her fingers dug into her thighs as the old pain rocked her heart.

Night Fire whistled and kicked over her shoeing box. The clank of metal jerked Liz fully back to the present. "Corbett was trying to beat his record in Houston—and he drew a rank bull.

It was his last ride. Ever. *Not* that my personal life is any of your business, Mr. Spencer. I hired on at the Lone Spur to shoe horses.”

“You’re quite right about the first part, Mrs. Robbins,” Gil said stiffly. Although something in her quiet dignity tweaked his jaded conscience. Not enough to make him relent, but enough to niggle. “I’m, ah, sorry about your husband. I’ll give you till, say, three o’clock to vacate the premises?”

He squinted up at the sun as if calculating the time. Indeed Liz saw that he didn’t wear a watch. She didn’t know why she found such an insignificant fact intriguing, unless it was because she assumed all men who built empires like the Lone Spur were slaves to the ticking of a clock. Especially men like Gil Spencer. Men like her father. The only difference between them was that one raised quarter horses in Texas, the other thoroughbreds in Kentucky. Her attention snapped back to what he was saying.

“...and it’ll take me at least that long to make myself human again. Maybe by then Night Fire will have calmed down enough to let me assess any damage you may have done. I think it’d be wise if you’re gone by then. I’ll deal with Rafe when he gets back.”

Liz couldn’t remember ever having the desire to hit anyone. Yet she’d have liked nothing better than to smack the arrogance right off this man’s face. Instead of acting on that desire, she stripped off her heavy apron. “Three hours won’t make you human, Mr. Spencer. But I wouldn’t leave by then even if

my daughter's school bus had arrived—which it won't. There remains a little matter of two weeks' pay. Not to mention that Padilla promised reimbursement for travel expenses and for the carpet and curtains I put in the cottage."

"Surely you don't expect me to believe Raphael let you shoe my stock for two whole weeks without telling me?"

Liz peeled off one glove and retrieved the clipboard that lay beside the corral. "I don't care what you believe. These," she said coolly, "are the horses I've shod."

Gil's eyebrows rose to meet a tumble of mahogany curls. "Some of these are the most ill-tempered horses on the ranch."

"Like horse, like owner, I always say." Liz ripped off the second glove.

"Why, you're no bigger than a peanut. Frankly I don't believe you got within spitting distance of some of these corksers."

Liz cut in. "Horseshoeing isn't about size as much as know-how. Funny, I had a feeling I was being tested. Maybe Padilla had second thoughts and figured if one of those nags put me in the hospital, he wouldn't be raked over the coals for giving me a job."

Gil frowned at the list, then at her. "Look, my accountant has the ranch ledgers in town. And the ranch checkbook—for quarterly taxes."

"Things are tough all over, Mr. Spencer."

"I can't go get it this minute. I need some sleep. Besides, regular payday isn't for another two weeks."

“That’s your problem.” Liz left him standing while she systematically stored equipment in her pickup. The shock of meeting him was beginning to wear off. Suddenly she found despair crowding out the need to have him acknowledge her worth. All she’d wanted out of this job was a chance to give Melody a normal life. But she couldn’t expect a man like Gil Spencer to understand.

She shot him a dark glance and was surprised to see he hadn’t moved. In fact, he looked as if he’d been hit by a freight train. How had she missed the tired slump of those broad shoulders? Her glance slid away to his drooping black mare. At least she thought the horse still waiting in the lane was black. Her coat was almost too dirty to tell. Covertly Liz’s eyes sought Spencer again. Darn, she didn’t want to show him an ounce of compassion. He certainly had none when it came to her.

The horse, who stood so obediently, reins touching the ground, shifted to take the weight off a swollen leg in a way that drew Liz’s trained eye. “Did the black throw a shoe?” She sauntered over and ran a hand down the mare’s leg before Gil could reply.

The pleasant feminine voice startled Gil from his stupor. He must be getting old. He’d missed sleep plenty of times, but he’d never forgotten to take care of his horse. Finding this woman working on his ranch had rattled him.

“Her leg needs icing,” Liz said matter-of-factly.

Gil fancied a hint of accusation in her statement as he joined

her. "I plan to call my vet." He edged her aside and stroked the mare's velvet nose, then picked up the reins and led his injured mount toward the barn.

Darn! Why couldn't she leave well enough alone? Yet no more than a second slipped by before Liz called, "Wait. I'll ice that leg and get a wrap on it while you catch forty winks." She caught up to Spencer easily. "Look at you. You're dead on your feet." Avoiding his eyes, she murmured, "A vet will shoot her full of cortisone."

Gil swallowed the refusal that sprang to his lips. Getting by without cortisone would be his preference, too. To find this woman so astute surprised him. Her offer was tempting. So tempting he let her take the reins from his grasp. A light herbal fragrance penetrated the trail dust clogging Gil's nose. He stopped dead, feeling his tooempty stomach tighten. She smiled over her shoulder and the breath left his lungs.

It'd been seven years since Ginger moved out with her cases of powders and paints. With a pang, he wondered if his sons missed the sweet scents of womanhood as much as he did, or if they'd been too young to remember. Gil scowled; he didn't like the path his mind had started to wander. He jogged after the woman and snatched Shady Lady's reins without a word. Back stiff, he entered the dark barn, away from Lizbeth Robbins and the unwanted memories her presence triggered.

Vaguely hurt, she stayed outside. For a minute there, she'd detected a crack in Gil Spencer's tough exterior. A brief

softening deep in the green-gold eyes. Perhaps it was worth pursuing. For Melody's sake, Liz didn't want to give up this job without a fight.

Inside, the barn was cool after the heat of the midday sun. She stood a moment to let her eyes adjust and to overcome the sudden choking claustrophobia darkness always brought. Her ears picked up a clank as Spencer heaved the heavy saddle over a rail. Liz gritted her teeth and moved toward the familiar sound.

Gil didn't have to see her to know the Robbins woman had followed him. Ignoring her, he began measuring feed into a trough. "You have unbelievable persistence. And you're wasting my time."

Her hands tightened into fists. To hell with him and his job. No one talked to her like that. "And you, Mr. Spencer, are unbelievably rude. Although I can't fathom why that should surprise me, considering your sons had to get their bad manners from *somewhere*."

She spun on her low-heeled boots and would have left him had his right hand not shot out to stop her. For what seemed an eternity to Liz, his eyes blazed through the dim light and his fingers cut off the circulation in her upper arm. She would have jerked away if a fleeting something—pain, anxiety, vulnerability, whatever—hadn't crept into his eyes.

She pushed at his hand, anyway, not liking the shiver that wound up her spine.

"What about my sons?" he asked, releasing her the moment

she struggled.

“Nothing.” Liz truly regretted her childish retaliation. It was just that his arrogance made her so mad. Her temper was a weakness. Hoot always said it would be her downfall one day.

Gil massaged the back of his neck, then closed his eyes and smoothed a hand over gaunt cheeks ragged with a three-day beard. “Does it have anything to do with the meeting their teachers requested? Ben sent a note out to the roundup. I was headed in, but then I picked up the trail of a stock-killing cougar —” He broke off, opened his eyes a slit and sighed. Gil didn’t know why he was spilling his guts to a stranger. He should be having this conversation with Benjamin Jones, considering how much he paid the retired cowboy to cook and keep a line on the twins in his absence.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” Liz said quickly. “The job is important to me, okay? I was disappointed, that’s all. I don’t know about any meeting at school.” She caught her lower lip between her teeth and glanced away from his tired eyes.

Gil silently observed the emotions crossing her delicate heart-shaped face. Outside, dressed in all that leather, she’d seemed small, but with it off she seemed...fragile. Feeling defensive, Gil turned back to the mare. He led her into a large stall with overhead refrigerated plumbing. He’d built it to deal with injuries to ligaments and tendons. As he uncoiled a hose, Gil said gruffly, “Rusty and Dusty don’t like school much. Fall is hardest, after they’ve spent all summer out on the range with me. Going back

means they miss roundup. Not that I'm excusing bad manners, mind you. But...out of curiosity, what did they do?"

If she hadn't been occupied inspecting his stall setup, Liz might not have answered with such honesty. She hunkered down beside where he knelt to lend a hand with the wrap and spoke without thinking. "You mean besides the snake in my bed? Or emptying my cookie jar on more than one occasion and then denying it? Or when they interrupted my work to claim their cat was caught in a crevice? I went to investigate, got down on all fours with my nose to the ground, and lo and behold, the furry ball I reached in and grabbed turned out to be a skunk. The devious little rats were quite disappointed to find out I could run so fast. And that's what they pulled the *first* week I was here."

Disbelieving at first, Gil did nothing while she finished the wrap. Then he reconsidered. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Robbins. I'll speak with them and withhold their privileges."

Liz secured the loose end and stood, but was thrown off guard when she saw the troubled shadows lurking in his eyes. "Hey, look, it's no big deal. Maybe it's because I'm new and can't always tell them apart," she ventured. "Why don't you go grab some sleep? I really am capable of keeping an eye on your horse."

Gil rose more slowly, hating to admit her offer held any appeal. "My sons' behavior is always a big deal to me, Mrs. Robbins." Dammit, he was disturbed by what she'd said. Although he supposed there was a chance she was lying to gain his sympathy. After all, she might have invented these escapades

for the sake of keeping her job. And didn't he just know how deceitful women could be when it suited their purposes?

"I'll square the Lone Spur's debt to you the minute Rafe returns. Today. And the mare will be okay until the boys get home from school. You'll need the time to pack." Gil touched two fingers to his hat brim and without waiting for a response left the barn through a side door.

Liz curled a hand into the mare's thick mane and gaped after him. Her mistake had been in believing he could be human. Tipping his hat had been out of habit, not courtesy, she decided. For a moment his brusque dismissal hurt more than she cared to acknowledge.

Then the mare nudged her, nibbling at her pocket. Liz got hold of her feelings and went in search of a feed bag. In the half hour it took the animal to eat and drink her fill, Liz rebuilt her defenses. She reminded herself that she had good health, skill in a marketable trade, and Melody. She didn't need anything from the likes of Gil Spencer.

Lizabeth Robbins was a survivor.

CHAPTER TWO

LIZ WASN'T ONE to cry over bad luck, and in her twenty-eight years she'd had plenty—estranged from her family at eighteen, widowed, broke and pregnant at twenty-two. Being tossed off the Lone Spur was a disappointment, but once she got the money she had coming, she and Melody would make do. Without it, they'd be stuck. Liz would be darned, though, if she'd let Gilman Spencer know she only had sixteen dollars to her name.

He said he'd pay her when Padilla returned. She'd watched Rafe load those yearlings, all full of jazz and spirit. The amount Spencer owed her wouldn't make a dent in the profit from Night Fire's offspring.

Liz made her way outside. She reminded herself that she still had to soak the stud's feet. She cast a glance back toward the barn, which she knew contained a stall with the requisite mud floor. But the stallion would tear up the place trying to get to Shady Lady if Liz took him inside. Although the treatment wouldn't be as effective, she'd flood a section of the small corral, instead.

After hunting up a shovel, she dug a shallow trench about four feet out from the fence. Next she carried buckets full of water until the ground was soft and muddy. Night Fire didn't much like it when she snubbed him to the top rail. He was used to running

free. “Don’t blame you, fella,” she murmured in a soothing tone. “I’m not big on being confined, either.” And that was putting it mildly. Never mind that now, she told herself. Just keep busy.

It had been her intention, even after Spencer fired her, to shoe those saddle horses in the east pasture—to fulfill her contract with Rafe. She was shocked to look up from looping the last knot in Night Fire’s lariat and see the school bus rumbling down the lane. Goodness, it was later than she realized. So, she thought with a pang, her successor, whoever he might be, would shoe the horses from the remuda—the group of ranch-owned horses the cowboys used during roundup. There wasn’t a doubt in Liz’s mind that her replacement would be a *he*.

The Spencer twins ran pell-mell toward her. She couldn’t tell them apart. Each had a chipped front tooth, as well. “Hold it, guys.” She stepped from the corral and snagged the closest boy’s arm. “I’ve got a jumpy stallion here. Don’t scare him.”

“Okay.” Speaking in unison, they skidded to a halt, matching plaid shirttails flapping around their knees. Ornery they might be, but someone had taught them a healthy respect for horses. Liz was thankful for that. The boys respected Melody, even though she was a girl, on the basis of her riding skills.

Liz smiled wryly. Melody could be tough when she wanted or a demure young lady—like now. She walked sedately down the lane, her clothes spotless compared to the mess the boys’ outfits were in.

“Why don’tcha use the mud stall?” asked one of the twins,

wrinkling his face as he looked up at Liz and into the sun.

She turned from watching her daughter. “Your dad’s mare went lame,” she said offhandedly. “She’s in the refrigerated stall.”

“Dad’s home?” The twin she’d pegged as Rusty let out a whoop and started for the barn. Spinning, he called back to his brother, “C’mon, Russ, get the lead out. We gotta catch Dad before Ben gives him those notes from our teachers, or he’ll never let us help look for that ol’ cat Rafe told us about.”

“He’s gone to take a nap,” Liz called, annoyed that she’d failed to identify them again. The two nine-yearolds were like matched bookends with their auburn hair, freckled noses and cleft chins. They did resemble their dad, except that his eyes were hazel to their green, and his hair a darker richer red. The boys’ faces were rounder than his. Gil Spencer was taller, leaner—and younger—than Liz had pictured. If he had a cleft in his chin, it was hidden today by stubble. But she could imagine him with one.

She found herself speculating what the boys’ mother looked like. Not that it mattered. The Spencers were nothing to her now. What should be at the top of her agenda was finding a way to break the news of their imminent departure to Melody. A sadness crept in, leaving Liz drained.

“Mom, wait’ll you see what I got in my book bag.” Melody hopped in circles. The red bow that held the girl’s dark ponytail flapped like a bird in flight.

Liz loved seeing sparks of excitement lighting eyes that had been somber for too much of Melody’s young life. But now...

She got hold of herself. “Um, let me guess.” She eyed the bulging bag. “Not a kitten. Tell me you didn’t rescue another stray.” She pictured the bedraggled ball of fur that had joined their household last week. If they went back to following the rodeo, how could they keep a pet?

Melody giggled, a dimple flashing in her cheek. “Not a kitten. We went to the liberry today. Miss Woodson let me check out *three* books.”

Something about the number was obviously significant to her daughter, but Liz’s thoughts had skipped ahead. This was Friday. Rafe Padilla was due back soon; shortly thereafter they’d be gone. How on earth would she get books back to the school? Liz put a hand to her forehead. It all seemed horribly overwhelming.

“What’s the matter, Mom? Two of the books are ‘bout horses. I figured you’d like those. The other’s all ‘bout a mouse named Frederick. It’s mostly pictures.”

“Honey, it’s not that...”

“Then what? Don’tcha feel good?” Melody slipped her small hand into her mother’s larger one and gazed up anxiously. She’d always been a worrier.

Suddenly Liz didn’t feel well. Not well at all. It made her positively sick to think about disappointing Melody. So she wouldn’t. Not yet. Not until she saw Rafe drive in. “Why don’t you go change out of your school clothes, sweetie? After I finish here, I’ll shower and then we’ll read one of the books. Deal?”

Melody’s smile lit her face. “Can we do it before bed? After I

change, I'm goin' to the barn—to see if the twins' dad is as neat as they said.”

He's not, Liz wanted to scream. She didn't, however. What was the use? “I don't want you bothering Mr. Spencer, hon. He just got home from roundup and needs to rest. Why don't you saddle Babycakes,” she suggested, referring to Melody's pony. “We'll treat ourselves to a short ride.”

Liz couldn't afford to keep a horse for herself, but the pony didn't eat much. So far she'd managed to trade shoeing for his vet bills. Liz hoped she could again. But what if some other farrier had moved in on her old job with the rodeo?

Dispiritedly Liz watched Melody skip toward the cottage. Sometimes Liz wondered if her father had put a hex on her when she ran off to marry Corbett—not that she believed in such nonsense. But he'd threatened dire consequences if she left the farm and broke her mother's heart. Toliver Whitley's most redeeming trait was that he loved his wife to distraction. Otherwise he was a cold harsh man. He certainly hadn't cared about his *daughter's* heart.

Sighing, Liz went back to rewet the ground beneath Night Fire's hooves. She figured he'd been restrained enough for one day and was loosening his bonds when Melody hurried past the corral juggling two paper plates. “What have you got there?” Liz called.

“Oatmeal-raisin cookies for me and the twins.”

“You'd better ask Mr. Jones if it's all right before you dole out

sweets to the boys. Didn't you tell me Rusty said they never get cookies?"

"That's 'cause they don't have a mother. And Ben says he's too old to make cookies."

Liz released the stallion and coiled the lariat. "People don't get too old to make cookies, Melody. My grandmother baked them up to the day she died, at eighty," she said nostalgically. "Mr. Jones can't be sixty."

"More'n sixty. And his bones hurt bad. Dusty said he got thrown from a mean horse and had to quit bein' a cowboy. That's why he hates his job."

"Surely he didn't say that to the twins," Liz exclaimed. "Maybe Dusty just told you that to gain your sympathy."

Melody shrugged.

"Well, never mind. Run along." Liz knew she shouldn't encourage Melody to speculate about her friends. But if this was true, it might explain why the twins swiped cookies, engaged in pranks and generally lacked discipline. Did Gil Spencer know how his houseman felt? She recalled the rapier gaze that missed little and decided he must. Anyway, by this time tomorrow, she'd be too worried about where Melody's next meal was coming from to feel sorry for a couple of kids who'd been born into the luxury of the Lone Spur Ranch.

THE BARN DOOR squeaked as it slid open. Gil glanced tiredly over the tops of his sons' heads. The sunlight hurt his eyes. It seemed he'd no more than dozed off when the boys bounced

into his bedroom. He'd decided to check on Shady Lady and was glad. She needed a vet.

Once his vision adjusted, Gil saw that a petite dark-haired girl stood in the sun filtering through the door's narrow opening. A pretty child, with huge chocolate brown eyes. Gil frowned. The eyes looked familiar, but he couldn't quite place where he'd seen them. It was rare for his sons to have visitors he didn't know.

The twins swiveled to see what had claimed their dad's attention. "Melody," they chorused. "Whazzat you got?" Rushing to meet her, they grabbed from the plates she held. "Cookies. Um, yum."

"Wait," she said, jerking the plates away. "You're s'pose to ask if it's okay to have some. My mom said to ask Mr. Jones but—Is that your dad?" she asked.

"Course it's all right if we have cookies, dummy," said the twin holding the biggest fistful.

Gil stepped out of the stall, his frown deepening. "Russell David Spencer. I don't object to your having a treat, but I do object to your calling anyone a dummy. Apologize." As he spoke, Gil recalled the new farrier's complaint about his sons, and he realized the girl watched him with the same wide velvety gaze as...Lizbeth—wasn't that the woman's name? Yes, and now he recalled she'd mentioned a daughter.

"Hello," he said, smiling down at the girl. "Russell," Gil prompted. "No apology, no cookie."

"Oh, Dad, she's just a *girl*."

That statement drew an even sterner look from Gil.

Dustin, quicker on the uptake than his brother, jammed an elbow in his twin's ribs. "Rusty's sorry, Melody. Aren't you, nerd?" he hissed.

"Dustin, it's no better to call your brother names. What's with you guys all of a sudden? I don't have time to get to the bottom of this now, but tomorrow we're having a family caucus."

"Now you did it, ding-dong," Dusty muttered.

"Me? You're the one callin' me names," Rusty shot back.

Gil placed his thumb and little finger between his teeth and issued an earsplitting whistle. All three kids jumped. "Enough. Go inside and ask Ben for some milk to go with the cookies," he said firmly. "I have to call Dr. Shelton to see if he'll take a gander at Shady Lady's leg, then I'm going back up to bed. Do you think you can quit bickering long enough to let a man get forty winks?"

As if their heads were connected by a string, the kids nodded of one accord. The twins raced off. Melody hung back and offered Gil a cookie. "Your horse hurt its leg?" she asked after he'd accepted one and thanked her.

"She stepped in a hole." One-handed, Gil punched out a number on the telephone that hung on the barn wall. "Do you like horses? Blast," he muttered, glaring at the bleating phone. "Vet's line is still busy." Scowling, Gil downed the cookie in two bites.

"My mom'll help. She knows everything about a horse's feet and legs. Hoot said she knows more'n a vet."

Gil choked on a crumb. "Well, if Hoot's your mom's

boyfriend, then he's probably biased." After he dusted off his mouth, he dialed again.

Melody rolled her eyes. "Hoot's not Mom's boyfriend. He's the best rodeo clown alive. Want another cookie? My mom made 'em. 'Course, her chocolate-chip ones are better. And her brownies. They're the *very* best."

Gil listened to the insistent busy signal, trying to recall how long it'd been since he last ate a homemade cookie of any kind. Maybe at his friend and fellow rancher Morris Littlefield's home. His wife, Nancy, took pity on Gil and the boys every few months and invited them to dinner. Mostly she served apple pie for dessert because it was the twins' favorite. Come to think of it, the last time he'd had cookies that didn't come from a package was at the June breeders' meeting. Madge Brennan had made coffee and passed around a plate of molasses cookies. He really wished he could say they were better than these, but he couldn't.

The girl passed the plate again, and Gil sampled another cookie. "These are pretty good," he mumbled. "Shouldn't you hurry on inside before the twins polish off the milk?" Her solemn stare unnerved him.

"You should go get my mom."

Before Gil could say he thought her mother was probably busy packing, the phone rang. He grabbed it up and was drawn into an unsatisfying conversation with his ranch foreman. The next thing Gil knew, the kid had disappeared. Just as well, considering he'd used some pretty colorful language. And not solely because

the brakes went out on the ranch truck, leaving Rafe stranded in Abilene, either. Gil did his fair share of chewing Rafe's tail over hiring that woman.

God, what next? Gil wondered as he signed off with a sigh. Mrs. Robbins wouldn't get her money today. And maybe not tomorrow unless he made an unscheduled trip into town. Rafe said the service center had to send to Dallas for parts.

Hell, she should know the Lone Spur paid its bills. His dad had let things go, but not Gil. He'd go hunt her up and demand an address where he could mail her a check. Dammit, what was wrong with Doc Shelton's phone, anyway? Gil hung up, then headed for the door. If he didn't get some sleep soon, he'd drop in his tracks.

He'd just reached the double doors when one slid open and Gil found himself face-to-face with the woman he needed to see. A light floral scent replaced the more pungent barn smells. Gil froze midstride. Gone were the accoutrements of a farrier. She looked dainty as a new filly in worn but clean jeans and a sleeveless flowered blouse.

"Oh!" Liz leapt back. "Sorry." She placed a spontaneous hand on Gil's arm. "I wasn't expecting anyone to be here, except maybe my daughter." She peered around him, or at least tried. His broad shoulders filled the doorway. "Melody was supposed to saddle her pony. I thought we'd take a last ride to sort of shake out his kinks before stuffing him in a trailer. Rafe let me ride Starfire," she said, referring to a balky gelding. "Do you mind if I take him

out one last time?”

When the man didn't speak but stared, instead, at the supple fingers resting on his long-sleeved shirt, Liz lifted her hand and snapped her fingers in front of his glazed eyes. “Mr. Spencer. Are you all right? Has something else happened to your mare?”

“Nothing,” he croaked, stepping abruptly back. “I was on my way to find you. Rafe called a minute ago. He's had trouble with the truck and won't make it to the ranch for a couple of days. If you bank locally, I'll have my accountant deposit direct. If not, you'll have to tell me where to mail a check.”

Liz braced herself against the door frame. Now she'd have to explain her ailing finances, no matter how embarrassing. “Uh, I haven't opened an account here yet. And I'm short on cash for gasoline. I'll have to wait until Rafe returns.”

Gil's eyes narrowed. “How short? Don't you have credit cards?”

“I, ah, no.” She felt her face getting red and toyed with the gold-plated chain Melody had given her last Mother's Day. She'd long since sold the two real ones she'd worn when she left her parents' home. Those and her wedding rings had bought the plot to bury Corbett. It had taken her until last year to pay off the casket.

Liz felt Gil Spencer's eyes following the movements of her hand. She stopped twisting the chain and hoped she'd washed away the green ring it sometimes left. She imagined the women he knew wore only high-grade silver and gold. Lizbeth Robbins

didn't need expensive baubles, and tried to convey as much to the owner of the Lone Spur with a carefree up-thrust of her chin.

Gil was too close to running on empty to pick up on any of her fleeting emotions. He could barely keep his eyelids ajar. The flash of sunlight on her gold necklace made him light-headed. "We'll settle this in the morning, Mrs. Robbins. If I don't get some shut-eye, I'm gonna pass out."

To Liz's surprise, he brushed past her and stalked across the yard and up the steps to his house. She'd barely closed her mouth when Melody and the twins came tumbling out the door that had so recently swallowed Gilman Spencer.

"My dad said for us to keep quiet," one twin announced. "He wants us to ride over and get Doc Shelton for Shady Lady. Can Melody come along?"

The boys had never asked her permission for anything before. They just took what they wanted, often convincing Melody to join them. But today...well, what harm in letting Melody accompany them one last time? According to Rafe, the vet was located near the west end of the ranch. Maybe a half-hour ride away. It would give Liz time to do some preliminary packing. "Okay," she agreed. "No side trips, though. Stay on Lone Spur land and come straight home afterward. It'll be supertime."

"Yuck," confided the twin who'd done all the talking so far. "Ben's fixing liver and onions. I hate liver."

"Me, too," said his brother, making a gagging sound.

Liz turned abruptly toward the cottage. Secretly she agreed,

but it wouldn't do to let those little rascallions see, Lord knew what they'd tell Mr. Jones. Not that it made any difference now.

Back inside the cottage, Liz didn't know where to start. In two weeks she'd scrubbed, painted, sewed curtains, put down rugs and made this place into a home. Unless Spencer's next farrier had a wife, she doubted the pastel paint and lace curtains would be appreciated. Yet to leave the floors and windows bare seemed petty. In the end she elected to leave everything behind, not wanting any reminders of her sojourn here. That decision made, her chore shrank considerably. Liz poured a glass of lemonade and went out to sit on the porch. No need to box things up until Rafe returned. Tonight she'd make Melody's favorite supper. Chicken and dumplings. With chocolate cupcakes for dessert. Later they'd read her library books.

The evening sky was streaked with what looked like layers of raspberry and orange sorbet by the time the children galloped into the yard. The cooled cupcakes were frosted, and plump dumplings simmered on top of thick chicken stew. As Liz stepped to the door, all three children slid off their mounts and talked at once. The gist was that the veterinarian's house had burned down. According to his neighbor, the doctor and his wife were staying at one of the hotels in town. The neighbor didn't know which one.

"Rusty and me gotta go tell Dad," one twin said as he tugged on his brother's arm. "He wanted Doc to fix Shady Lady. Now what'll he do?"

"Mom, you'll take care of her, won't you?" Melody asked earnestly.

Liz wiped sweaty palms down the sides of her jeans. "Oh, I don't know, hon. You know I'm not a vet."

"But Mr. Spencer said it's her leg. You know 'bout legs."

The children formed a ring at the bottom of the steps. Three pairs of eyes clung to Liz. She shrugged and tucked her hands into her front pockets. "Your dad was done in," she told the boys. "I'd hate to have you wake him needlessly. Tell you what, after supper, I'll take a look at the mare. If I think I can help her, I will. If not, I'll call around and try to locate Dr. Shelton."

One of the boys sniffed the air. "Something smells great."

Liz smiled. "Nothing special. Chicken and dumplings."

Melody's eyes danced. "Yippee!"

"You got 'nuff for me and Rusty?" one boy asked wistfully. The one Liz had thought *was* Rusty. Turned out she was wrong again.

"I have enough, but Mr. Jones—"

"—won't care!" whooped the twins together.

"But your father—"

"—said for us to be quiet," Rusty finished sagely.

"Please, Mom," Melody begged, prancing around on tiptoe. "We haven't had company for supper since we moved in."

Liz leveled a stern look at the boys. "We almost did," she said pointedly. "I mean Macy Rydell's surprise visit."

The twins had the grace to look guilty, but neither admitted

a thing;

Liz threw up her hands. If Melody wanted company, how could she say no? They were just kids, after all—kids without a mother. Liz didn't know what had become of Mrs. Spencer, but young as they were, they must miss her. "All right." She gave in. "Bed the horses, then see if Mr. Jones agrees. Melody, you go with them to make sure he knows it's me doing the inviting." For a minute it was difficult to associate the eager little boys with the hellions who'd harassed her for two weeks.

Supper went off without a hitch, even though one of the boys—Dustin, Liz thought—picked the celery out of his chicken stew and piled it beside his plate, and the other fed the cat under the table even though she said not to.

The cupcakes were, of course, the biggest hit. Both boys gobbled them up and conned her into allowing them seconds. It seemed like a good opportunity to satisfy her curiosity about their mother, but Liz struck out flatly when she asked a discreet question. Immediately thereafter, one twin spilled his milk. It was so quick on the heels of her query, Liz wondered if he'd done it on purpose. She cleaned up the mess without comment, and a few minutes later, when the boys insisted it was time to leave, she offered to walk them home.

"Boys ain't a-scared of the dark," one twin declared brashly.

Liz still trailed them to the door. "I'll look in on the mare," she promised, lingering on the porch until she saw they'd reached home safely. Not wanting to leave Melody alone, Liz suggested

she don her pajamas and bring a library book to the barn.

Turned out it was a smart move. Shady Lady had managed to get twisted in the sling. Cold water no longer ran on her injured limb. Liz spent forty minutes loosening the sling and turning the horse. By the time she finished, Melody was asleep in a pile of fresh straw. Liz felt bad about not reading to her. She stroked a hand through Melody's bangs and wondered if the Spencer twins would remember the cupcakes long enough to grant her the favor of returning the books to school on Monday.

Near midnight Liz thought the mare's leg looked a little better. She had dug through the supply cabinets and found two ingredients, liniment and DMSO, an anti-inflammatory salve. Some vets eschewed using either or both. In the past she'd had some success mixing the two. Her father always stressed trying homeopathic methods before using steroids. On that they agreed.

Melody slept on, and Liz lost track of time as she alternated the applications with ice packs.

GIL AWOKE with a start and looked at the clock—2:00 a.m? He still lay naked and crosswise on his king-size bed. The last thing he recollected was toweling off after he'd showered and shaved. All at once Gil remembered Shady Lady. He grabbed the clock and shook it. Was that the right time? He'd sent the twins for the vet. Why hadn't someone come for him when Doc Shelton arrived?

Bolting off the bed, Gil searched his closet in the dark for a clean pair of jeans. He jerked them on, tugged on his boots, then

hurried from his room and down the stairs, stopping at the second level to check on the boys. The pair were sleeping soundly in their bunk beds. The ranch house was big enough so each could have had a separate room, but every time he suggested it, they declined.

Smiling at the way Dustin slept with his rump in the air and Rusty lay curled around a raggedy stuffed dog, Gil backed out, closed the door and smothered a yawn. The teachers separated them at school, claiming that otherwise they couldn't tell the boys apart. Gil didn't understand that. He had no trouble. Dustin did everything with a swagger, sort of like his great-grandfather Spencer. That kid was a leader, a mover and a shaker. Lately, more of an instigator.

Gil paused on the landing to glance back at the closed door. Sobered, he headed down the next flight. Russell, now, was a thinker. A cuddler. He was also a follower, which worried Gil. He wished he had more free time to spend with his sons. Ben Jones, by his own admission, was slowing down. The boys needed someone caring yet energetic. A tall order.

Gil couldn't say why, when he stepped outside into the moonlight, his gaze strayed to the cottage snuggled beneath the live oaks—the ranch farrier's cottage. *She* fairly oozed energy. Clattering disgustedly down the steps, Gil jogged to the back door of the barn. He counted on the crisp night air to clear his head. He'd pretty well succeeded in shaking out the cobwebs when he burst through the barn's side door and tripped over the

woman who muddled his thoughts.

“Oof!” Liz let out a muffled scream as she fell. She’d taken Shady Lady out of her stall and they’d ambled the length of the barn. She was bent over checking the mare’s sore leg when a shadowy hulk barreled through the door, knocking her flat.

Gil grabbed for her and missed. His momentum toppled both of them to the hard-packed earthen floor. He sprawled over her, as yet unable to get his bearings.

She landed an elbow in his diaphragm, stealing his wind.

“Get off me.” Instinct prompted her wild struggle. For a second Liz feared Macy Rydell had decided to take revenge for the twins’ practical joke. It dawned slowly that she didn’t smell Rydell’s strong cologne; the warm skin pressed against her nose exuded the subtle scent of spruce.

Liz lay still, breathing deeply. It was silly to be attracted or repelled by a man’s cologne, but from the first day she’d met Corbett, she’d been drawn by his clean scent of heather and sea breeze. When good memories sneaked in like this, Liz still had problems accepting the unfairness of Corbett’s early death.

Her sudden quiescence allowed Gil time to scramble up. “What in hell are you doing in my barn at this hour?” he demanded, extending her a hand.

The warm feelings evaporated instantly. “Not stealing your horse, if that’s what’s running through your mind.” She batted his hand aside and climbed to her feet unaided. “Twice we’ve met, Mr. Spencer, and twice I’ve bruised more than my pride. Haven’t

you ever heard of a handshake?"

Gil ignored her sarcasm. He'd bent to examine Shady Lady's trim ankles. It was difficult to tell which leg had been injured. "So, were you here when Doc Shelton came by? I thought the boys would wake me."

"Your vet had a house fire. According to the kids, he's temporarily moved his practice into town. His neighbor didn't know exactly where."

"Then the ice water did the trick. Guess that leg wasn't as bad as I thought."

Liz debated whether or not to mention her home remedy, and decided he needed to know. "I popped in here after supper. Your horse had managed to twist herself up in the sling. I rummaged around and found cold packs, then alternated them with a topical mixture my dad used on his thoroughbreds. I was just walking her, to see if the swelling stayed down."

Frowning, Gil ran a hand through his sleep-tousled hair.

Liz's eyes followed the play of muscles down his arm and chest. She'd assumed, because of the long-sleeved shirt he'd worn earlier, that the skin beneath would be pale. In fact, his tan was the color of Kentucky bourbon and covered every inch of his flesh she could see. And that was quite a few inches. No farmer's tan for Gilman Spencer. He bronzed nicely for someone with so much red in his hair. Liz studied his body with open appreciation.

Gil noticed. He ran a self-conscious hand over his bare chest. "Sorry if I offend your Southern sensibilities. I didn't expect to

find ladies in my barn at this hour—except the equine variety.”

Liz didn’t flush or look away. “Who says I’m Southern?”

Gil crossed his arms and laughed. “You have that drawl, Miss Scarlett.”

Whirling, Liz led Shady Lady to an empty stall she’d spread deep with sand and sawdust, then covered with fresh hay. “I was born and raised in bluegrass country. We don’t consider ourselves Southern.”

“That’s right,” he said lightly as he followed her. “You said your daddy raises thoroughbreds. So why aren’t you home in Kentucky shoeing *his* horses?”

Liz felt a knife blade slide into her heart. How had their conversation taken this turn? Corbett and Hoot Bell were the only two people who knew about her permanent estrangement from her parents. Melody had never asked about grandparents or her lack thereof. Liz wanted to keep it that way. The poor kid had enough strikes against her having never known her father. Patting Shady Lady’s silky nose one last time, she backed out of the stall and quietly closed the door. “I’ve left the mixture for her leg in the fridge. You should use it liberally two or three times a day until the swelling’s completely gone. And don’t ride her for a week. But I’m sure you know that.” Liz strode briskly through the barn, stopping where Melody lay asleep in the hay.

Gil wondered at being so rattled by Lizbeth Robbins that he hadn’t seen the child until now. He was even more puzzled by the woman’s curt response.

“Wait,” he called as she bent and slid her hands beneath the girl. “You aren’t going to carry her, are you? She must weigh fifty pounds.”

“Forty-four,” Liz replied. “And I’m quite capable, Mr. Spencer.”

Gil didn’t know why it grated on his nerves when she said “Mr. Spencer” in that tone, but it did. “I’ll take her,” he offered politely, refraining from suggesting she call him Gil. “It’s the least I can do to thank you for the time you put in on my horse.”

Liz straightened, Melody draped over her arms. “I wasn’t looking for gratitude,” she said, moving carefully toward the door. “The only thing I want from you is the money I’ve earned. ‘Nice’ doesn’t suit you, Spencer. Don’t strain yourself.”

Gil blinked as if he’d been slapped and watched her disappear into the night. The moon had slipped behind a cloud, swaddling the area beyond the barn in inky blackness. He debated the wisdom of chasing her down. But before he could make up his mind, he saw a light appear in the cottage. Then another. He stood a moment where he was, until he noticed a colored square lying in the hay where the child had slept. It was a book—a horse story, he saw as he picked it up. From the school library. The book had been checked out only today.

Guilt swamped him. There were many reasons Gil had fought for sole custody of his sons. A major one—with which the judge had agreed—was that Ginger’s job with the rodeo necessitated her jerking the twins from school to school.

In firing his farrier today, he'd just sentenced that sweet dark-eyed little girl to the vagabond life he hadn't wanted his own boys to suffer. Gil dropped the book back on the hay bale. Damn Mrs. Robbins for being what she claimed. And damn Rafe Padilla for hiring her in the first place.

CHAPTER THREE

GIL SPENT the next hour with his mare, and the girl's library book mocked him the entire time. Damned if he wasn't forced to admit Mrs. Robbins had done a damned good job—which didn't mean that another farrier wouldn't have been just as astute. But...she'd also homed in on Night Fire's problem, something his previous farrier had missed.

It didn't matter, he argued. Throwing a woman—especially a pretty one—out on the range with a bunch of randy cowboys was asking for trouble. Take, for instance, Kyle Mason's experience at the neighboring Drag M. Last year he'd hired a woman cowpuncher and bragged to anyone who'd listen about being the area's first equal-opportunity rancher. Far as Gil knew, there'd never been a fight among Drag M hands till Maggie Hawser came on board. After, they'd had plenty. More accidents, too. Not that it was *all* Maggie's fault. And not to say she wasn't a good hand. Some of the men admitted they'd spent so much time mooning over her they'd gotten careless.

But lovesick cowboys were only half the problem. Maggie'd up and married the clerk at the feed store. She left Kyle shorthanded in the middle of branding. Drag M wranglers moped around for months and spent weekends in town raising hell.

Come to think of it, there'd been an unusually large number of Lone Spur horses throwing shoes this last week—meaning Gil's

headaches had already started. It was a good thing Ben had sent Rafe out with the notes from the twins' teachers, or he might not have come in yet and learned what his manager had done.

Those notes spelled more trouble. Of a kind Gil didn't want to think about tonight. Giving Shady Lady's neck a final pat, he went back to the house and upstairs to bed.

IN THE MORNING at breakfast Gil contemplated the best way to tackle the twins' teachers' concerns. As usual when his mind wrestled with a dilemma, the boys' yammering passed right over his head. Suddenly, as if through a fog, Gil heard Dusty gloating about a "neat trick" they'd pulled on Melody's mother last night. That got Gil's attention.

"Sneakin' out to put those bats in Mrs. Robbins's bedroom after she went to the barn was easy as eatin' pie, wasn't it Rusty? I wish we coulda seen what happened when she went to bed. Buddy Hodges said bats always get tangled in girls' hair. I bet Melody's mom screamed up a storm." Dustin laughed around the mouthful of pancake he'd stopped to shovel in.

Gil choked, spewing coffee over his place mat as his second son wiped a milk mustache from his upper lip and ventured, "I think we shoulda waited, Dusty. That was a good supper she fed us."

"So? She wouldn't have if Melody hadn't bugged her. She didn't want us there. I could tell."

"Hold it right there." Gil raised a hand, then slammed it on the table as he gazed in horror from one boy to the other. "I can't

believe what I'm hearing. You two know bats carry rabies."

Dustin looked smug. "We didn't touch 'em, Dad. They came from Rafe's bat trap. We opened the box and shook 'em out in her room. Same as we did that old bull snake we put in her bed last week."

Gil counted to ten under his breath, then he exploded. "Remember that rabid coyote I showed you last year? We discussed how painful treatment is for our horses. I assumed you knew it'd be as bad or worse for humans."

Dustin stuck out his lower lip. "Men are smart 'nuff to not get bit. Can we help it if girls are stupid?"

Livid, Gil rose over his sons. Grounding them for life was too lenient. Through a haze of anger Gil heard his white-haired houseman bang a cupboard door and grunt. "Spit out what's on your mind, Ben. It can't get much worse."

"Time somebody teaches them knot-heads some respect," he said. "Lord knows they don't listen to me. It's a cryin' shame, the shenanigans they pull on folks. I tell you, Gil, I'm too old to be kickin' the frost out of kids meaner than oily broncs." In cowboy lingo he'd likened the twins' need for discipline to breaking a bad horse—which, Gil knew, laid Ben's feelings squarely on the line. He loved the twins.

So, the lady had told the truth, Gil fumed. No doubt the teachers' notes regarding disrespect in the classroom were on target, too. Had he closed his eyes to behavior he should have seen all along? Well, they were open now. Gil wadded his napkin

and threw it on his empty plate. Stalking around the table, he grabbed both boys by the shirt collars, marched them into his office and kicked the door closed. “Sit. We’re going to have a frank talk about how men treat women.”

Ten minutes later Gil slumped in his chair. The upshot of the twins’ half of the conversation was that they held some pretty unflattering opinions of the opposite sex—which they claimed to have gotten from him. Gil was stunned to learn his bitter divorce had translated as a total disregard for *all* women. “Boys... I don’t hate women. Just where, I ask, would the world be without women?”

“Shorty Ledoux says a man don’t need women or schooling to work horses,” Dusty informed his dad sullenly, quoting one of Gil’s best but crustiest old wranglers.

“Dustin.” Gil smacked a hand on his desk top, making both boys jump. “Nothing is less true. It takes a college degree in agriculture or animal husbandry or both to successfully operate a ranch the size of Lone Spur. Moreover, whether or not we have women on our ranch, men treat them with respect wherever they are. Your behavior toward Mrs. Robbins is inexcusable. I’m angry and disappointed.”

Rusty started to sniffle. Dustin blustered. “Well, gol dang, Buddy Hodges says we don’t need women no way, no how.”

“I beg to differ with Buddy. Maybe it’s time we sat down and addressed the whole subject of the birds and bees.” Gil jumped up and paced the length of his office.

Both boys turned red and wiggled uncomfortably in their chairs. Gaze locked on his toes, Dustin again spoke first. "Buddy told us where babies come from. He 'splained exactly what happens in the mating barn." The boy rolled his eyes. "Me'n Rusty made a pact. Ain't neither of us ever gonna get married. All that gruntin' and squealin' is pure disgusting."

Gil's jaw sagged. Tugging at his earlobe, he stomped out to get a cup of coffee and look for Ben. The old wrangler was nowhere to be found. Sly old dog. Gil remembered he'd been thirteen when he and his dad had a man-to-man chat. Thirteen had been too late, but damn—nine—they were still babies.

Determined to meet his obligation head-on, he returned to the office and took the bull by the horns, so to speak. But after stumbling through generalities as best he could while the boys fidgeted and asked to be excused to go to the bathroom three times each, Gil gained a new respect for his father, who hadn't pussyfooted around the subject of sex. Nor did Gil doubt that Buddy Hodges had been more graphic in his portrayal. Gil only hoped he'd corrected some of Buddy's gross misconceptions.

Weighing each word, Gil realized it was damned uncomfortable trying to explain the more heartwarming aspects of sex when it'd been so long he'd almost forgotten them himself. As it turned out, his sons understood a whole lot more about the mating ritual than Gil wanted to imagine. They apparently also knew that a couple of women in town had boldly invited their dad to sleep over. And that friends had tried to set him up for

more than dinner a few times when he'd gone out of town on business. It appeared the twins had thrown a monkey wrench in some of those trips by developing planned illnesses. Why, the little devils—Not that Gil would have indulged in any one-night stands with virtual strangers, but he'd believed the boys sick on those occasions. The thought of how easily they'd manipulated him made Gil a little sick.

He plodded through the rest of his explanations and finally touched on a gentleman's code of conduct before calling a halt to their chat. Then he sent the boys crying to their room as punishment for the episode with Mrs. Robbins and the bats. "And there'll be no TV for a week," he shouted up the stairs. "When I get back from assessing the damage caused by those bats, I'll draw up a list of chores. Maybe work will keep you out of mischief." Their door slammed midsentence.

Damn. He'd never spanked his kids and didn't intend to start now. Anyway, their most effective punishment was to be confined indoors on nice days; they hated that more than anything. They took it even harder if he happened to be home. As a rule Gil didn't believe in retroactive punishment, but this time he'd make an exception. And they'd better believe he meant business.

Gil plucked his Stetson from the hat rack. Normally he found it best to take care of all unpleasantness at once. Like it or not, he had to go see the Robbins woman. Hell, he'd stood at the barn door last night and watched her walk into that cottage—into who

knew what kind of mess while he'd cogitated over some damned library book. The book. Gil snapped his fingers. What better excuse to go calling this early?

Shifting the book from hand to hand on the short walk to the cottage, Gil worked out his speech. Something he hadn't counted on was finding his ex-farrier outside on her hands and knees weeding a colorful profusion of fall flowers. He stopped short of the picket fence as his stomach fought his morning coffee. No one had planted flowers at the Lone Spur since his mother passed away—the year he turned sixteen. Without her constant loving care, the gardens had withered and died. Until now, Gil hadn't realized how much he'd missed the bright colors or the sweet aroma that used to greet him.

The sight before him hit Gil hard and stole what little defense he had mustered on behalf of his sons. “You’re wasting your time,” he growled, slipping through the gate. “If the drought doesn’t get them, the deer that feed here at night will.”

Liz jerked around in surprise. She hadn't heard his footsteps. Removing her gloves, she wiped a bead of sweat from her brow. Lord, he *did* have a cleft in his chin. How had she missed seeing it last night? It softened his straight eyebrows and angular features. The effect had Liz throwing up her guard. “Not to worry, Mr. Spencer. I won't charge you for the plants or for the spring bulbs I already planted.” She stood and dusted the knees of her jeans. “Have you brought my wages?”

“Uh...no.” Gil took off his hat and moved from one foot to

the other, remembering the book. “Your daughter left this in the barn. I didn’t think you’d want to lose it...By the way, is she all right?” He squinted at the door. “I, uh...Is that her I hear crying?”

Liz glared at him. “Yes.”

“Not from a bat bite, I hope. God, I’m sorry. I just got wind of the twins’ latest escapade. Rest assured, Mrs. Robbins, they will pay. We’d better quit jawing, and I’ll drive you to town. A bat bite is nothing to fool with.”

Lizbeth plucked the book from his hand and marched up the porch steps. “Melody slept through my awardwinning bat dance. She’s sobbing her heart out because I finally told her we’re leaving.”

Once again Gil suffered remorse. No matter how hard he tried to shelter his sons from the fallout of his divorce, their lives had changed. But the twins probably still had more continuity day to day than Melody Robbins did tagging after the damned rodeo.

Not given to snap decisions, Gil made one. “Stay,” he blurted. “Through the school year at least. I’ll hold off putting out feelers for a new farrier until mid-May.” Considering where they’d left things yesterday, Gil thought his offer generous.

“What?” Spots of red blazed on Liz’s cheeks. “You propose that I let Melody make friends, and then you have the nerve to suggest I put her through this again in May? What’s really behind your benevolence, Spencer? Are all the good farriers taken?”

“I haven’t checked. Look, I’m trying to do the decent thing.”

“A belated attack of conscience?” Liz laughed. “Touching, I’m

sure. But all I want from you is my pay. And I'd appreciate cash."

"Dammit, the offer's got nothing to do with conscience. I sure as hell won't beg you to stay." He didn't know why he'd weakened in the first place. Insufferable woman!

It didn't help Gil's mood to have three of his best wranglers ride in off the range just then and pounce on him, all three willing to plead Mrs. Robbins's case. How they'd heard so quickly that he'd fired her Gil hadn't a clue. Sometimes he thought ranch gossip traveled on the wind.

"Check out the shoes she made for Firefly, boss. This dang horse always shuffled before," exclaimed Clayton Smith, one of Gil's steadiest hands.

However, Gil noticed that today even Clay had on his Sunday shirt and that he kept darting shy glances toward the farrier. In her favor, she didn't comment or do anything to solicit Clayton's endorsement.

It was obvious to Gil that Yancy Holbrook had also slicked himself up for this occasion. Gil almost choked on Yancy's cologne when the man brought his gelding over for Gil to inspect shoes he claimed Liz had fashioned to fit a slight deformity.

The third wrangler in the trio wasn't any big surprise. Luke Terrill was a flirt, a ladies' man, although not as blatant as Macy Rydell. Today, however, Terrill sported a fresh haircut, a newly trimmed mustache and laundry-creased jeans. Though he spoke last, Gil pegged him as the ringleader in today's mission. Luke got right to the point.

“The lady forges a fine shoe, boss. But more important to us lonesome wranglers, she’s a dang sight easier on the eyes than any farrier we’ve ever had. Fire her, and some of us might just mosey on down the road, too.”

It was a matter of pride with Gil that he had the reputation of treating his hands fairly. Plus, he paid aboveaverage wages. Cowboys lined up to work here. The Lone Spur rarely had an opening because the men he hired usually stayed. He didn’t take kindly to being backed into a corner over an administrative decision.

Gil smoothed a palm down the nose of Luke’s strawberry roan. “I’d hate to lose you, Luke, but it’s your choice. My CPA’s got the ranch checkbook in town this week. You wanta pick up your gear and meet me at his office in a couple of hours, I’ll cut you a check. Same goes for anyone else who’s got a hankering to leave.”

From the way Luke turned white, then red and back to white again, it was clear he’d hoped to bluff his way past Gil.

The tension between the two men grew and spread to the others. Even the horses shifted restlessly. Liz knew the gauntlet had been thrown. She blanked her expression, wishing Luke hadn’t put her in the middle. Although, in all fairness, Spencer had given the men wiggle room to keep their jobs and still save face.

On the rodeo circuit, where men’s egos were bigger than their hat size and belt buckles combined, a challenge of this nature

always ended in a brawl. Liz had learned to keep quiet. Too many times she'd seen situations in which a woman tried to mediate, only to have a fist fight erupt. She reached for the screen door. Let them bay at the moon. By nightfall, she'd be history here. Unexpectedly the door flew out of her hand and Melody hurtled out. She threw her arms around her mother's waist and sobbed. "I saw you and Mr. Spencer talkin'. Didja tell him we don't want to leave, Mom? Say please. You told me 'please' always works."

Liz's heart wilted. Dropping to one knee, she gathered Melody into her arms. "Honey..." she said brokenly. But no explanation made its way to her tongue. *Talk about egos.* Gil Spencer had offered a reprieve and she'd turned him down flat. True, it had only been for nine months, but that was nine months in which to check out other jobs in the area. Liz hadn't really considered Melody's feelings when she'd thrown Spencer's offer back in his face to salve her own pride. Now she had to eat her words.

Straightening, Liz lifted Melody's chin. "Dry your eyes," she said in a voice that carried. "Mr. Spencer brought back the library book you left in the barn. And...he asked me to shoe some horses in the east pasture. Hurry, go saddle Babycakes. I doubt he's one to pay his farriers to stand around."

The wranglers were quick to jump on the out Liz provided. Crowding Gil, they asked why he hadn't said in the first place that he'd rehired her. The three men lost no time making tracks out of Liz's yard. If Gil hadn't been so dumbfounded, he might have laughed.

Liz let Melody work through her excitement without comment. She felt Spencer's eyes boring holes in her back and heard him dusting his Stetson rhythmically against his lean thigh. She didn't turn to meet his gaze until Melody had dashed off to the barn to saddle her pony. Actually Liz waited another moment to see if the cadence of the tapping changed from irritation to resignation. It didn't. So she fixed a smile on her lips before facing him.

Tap, tap, tap. "What happened to 'not on your life'?"

Liz tossed her head defiantly. "I changed my mind."

"I don't recall asking you to shoe any horses in the east pasture." *Tap, tap, tap.*

She shrugged. "They're from your remuda. Rafe assigned me the job on Thursday."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Was a slower rhythm better? Unsure, Liz stood her ground. Lo and behold, the tapping stopped, and she felt the muscles in her jaw relax.

"Did Rafe also tell you we have a ridge runner raiding mares up that way?" Gil stopped messing with his Stetson and put it on.

Liz tensed again, knowing a ridge runner was what breeders called a rogue stallion. "No. But he said the horses I'm supposed to shoe are all geldings. I'll be driving my pickup, and I doubt a stallion would bother Melody's pony."

"Wild stallions are totally unpredictable. Dangerous. Plus, we've got a marauding cougar staking his claim in those foothills.

He kills just to be killing.”

“Are you trying to scare me, Mr. Spencer? It’s dangerous going to bed at night, what with all the snakes and bats that find their way into the cottage.”

Gil tugged at his hat brim to hide his discomfort. So, Mrs. Robbins had a dry wit? A trait Gil liked in the men he hired. Why, then, did the fact that she possessed a sense of humor bug him? “Well,” he said gruffly, “since I’m here, I may as well go ahead and flush those critters out of your bedroom.”

Liz stepped back to accommodate his large frame, which suddenly dwarfed her small porch. “What critters?”

“The bats. I assume you shut the door and slept elsewhere last night.”

“You assumed wrong. I shooed them out the window with a broom. You think I wanted bat poop on my new rug and newly papered walls? Even at that, I was up washing and scrubbing till nearly four. Who knows what germs bats carry? I’m surprised you’d allow the boys to handle them. They might have been bitten.”

Picturing her going after bats with a broom prompted Gil’s lazy smile. Irritation at her insinuation that he condoned the twins’ nocturnal activities made it slip. “To quote Dustin, boys are too smart to get bitten. I won’t mention his thoughts on girls, but it’s another reason the boys are spending a Saturday morning in their room. I don’t *allow* them to do things that are harmful or disrespectful.”

Liz barely heard his words. She'd gotten hung up on the brief peek at his smile. What a shame he didn't let it surface more often. If he did, she thought, there'd be nothing a woman could refuse him. Some men smiled with only their lips. Some let it reach their eyes, and that was better. A very few had killer smiles that came from the heart. Corbett had been one, and so, apparently, was Gil Spencer. However brief that grin, it left Liz weak at the knees. A funny flutter in her stomach drove her to sit down on the old porch swing.

"Mrs. Robbins...is something wrong?" Gil asked, abruptly breaking off his explanation concerning his theories on discipline.

"Wrong?" Liz blinked at him, her eyes sort of distant and unfocused.

"Here comes your daughter on her pony. Maybe you should reconsider making that run to the east pasture today. It doesn't sound as if you got much sleep."

Liz tore her gaze from his face. "I'm fine." She stood and walked to the end of the porch, away from him. She was about to suggest that Melody ride in the cab and lead the pony behind the pickup, when Gil spoke quietly from behind her.

"I believe I'll saddle up and ride out that way, too. It's been a while since I checked fence along the river."

Melody reached them in time to hear his statement. "Oh, goody. Can the twins come? They said there's a place on the river to catch crawdads." She flashed Gil a shy smile. "My mom won't

let me swim less'n I'm with a grown-up."

It had been on the tip of Gil's tongue to say the boys would have to miss the fun. But all at once he wondered if he couldn't teach them more by being a role model than in leaving them alone to stew. "Right she is, young lady. If the boys led you to believe I let them go alone, they fibbed." He ran one hand through his hair. "I *was* going to make them stay home—but I've changed my mind."

Melody glanced at her mother. "Is it okay if I take my swimsuit then?"

Lizabeth hesitated, still thinking resentfully about the Lone Spur's owner tagging along. She'd bet dimes to doughnuts that he planned to hang over her shoulder.

"I promise there'll be no bats or snakes or skunks, Mrs. Robbins," Gil said in a calm voice. "And the river at that point is only knee-deep." He looked up at the lowriding sun. "We'll have frost on the pumpkins before long. You might want to take a suit and dip your own toes."

"I'm going up there to do a job," she said stiffly. "When I'm on company time, shoeing horses is all I do."

Gil backed off, touched the brim of his hat and nodded curtly. What had he been thinking to suggest she join them? He certainly didn't want to give her the impression that he mixed business and pleasure. Or that he was in the habit of letting women intrude on his outings with his sons. Once, he *had* included a woman. His wife. Too late he'd learned that she wasn't interested in spending

any time alone with her husband and sons. “You two go on ahead.” He stepped off the porch and didn’t look back.

Liz saw by the way the light went out of Melody’s eyes that she was disappointed. However, the arrangement suited Liz. The less time she spent around any of the Spencers, the better. “We don’t need company to have fun, Mel. Take a book and a doll like you always do. I’ll fix a lunch for us to eat down by the river.”

“But I want to swim and catch crawdads with the twins.” Melody’s eyes brimmed with new tears. “I didn’t mean to make Mr. Spencer mad.”

“Sweetheart!” Liz hurried down the steps and clutched her daughter’s knee. “It wasn’t you. What I said more than likely reminded Mr. Spencer that he’s the boss, and I’m just a hired hand.”

“So?” Melody continued to look stricken.

“Well, ah...honey. I don’t know how to explain social hierarchy to you. When you grow up, you’ll understand.”

“If it means you and me always got to be alone, I don’t wanna understand. The other day at school we hadda learn how to spell ‘family.’ My teacher showed pictures of moms, dads and kids. Gretchen Bodine don’t got a mom or dad. She’s got two grandmas, two grandpas, three brothers and a sister. That’s a family, too, Miss Woodson said. And...and I want one!”

“Melody Robbins. We’re a family, you and I. And we have Hoot, don’t we? He already sent you a postcard. Honey, I thought you understood why I can’t give you brothers and sisters—

because your daddy's in heaven." Liz tried a new tack. "You finally got a kitten. And we've got our own house. That's a start, Mel."

"But I'm gonna be a pumpkin in the Halloween play," the girl blurted. "Families get to come. Not kittens. Not Hoot. He's gonna be at the rodeo in Kilgore."

"I'm afraid you lost me somewhere, honey. How did we get from crawdad hunting with the Spencer twins to your Halloween play?"

"Rusty and Dusty don't got no mom, and I don't got no dad. We could be a family. The boys liked your cooking. And their dad loved your cookies."

"Oh, no!" Liz gasped. She hadn't had an inkling that such an idea lurked in her daughter's head. "Melody, baby, you can't just pick up stray people like you do stray kittens and make them part of your family."

"Why not?" A tear caught in thick lashes, then trickled down a round cheek.

"Well, because...because..." Liz puffed out her lungs and expelled the drawn breath on a sigh. "Because you just can't. And whatever you do, promise me you'll never bring up this subject with Mr. Spencer or his sons."

"But how will they think of it on their own? Boys only ever think about horses and food and stuff like that."

"Never, Melody. Is that understood?" Liz pursed her lips.

"All right. But gee whiz."

“Never!”

“O...kay. But will you make enough sandwiches for them? On your homemade bread? And take the rest of the cupcakes. Please, Mom.”

“Melody Lorraine. I can see the wheels turning. You will not lure the Spencers with food. Where on earth are you getting this nonsense? Certainly not from me.”

“Am I in trouble?” The child sniffled. “You only call me Melody Lorraine when you’re really, really mad.”

Liz threw up her hands. “No, I’m not mad at you. I just want to make sure you know I’m dead serious about this, Mel.”

“All right. But jeez!” With that, she slid off her pony and plunked down on the porch steps to wait, chin in hands.

Thinking it best to let matters drop, Liz went inside and slapped together some sandwiches. She made enough for five people, but she used store-bought bread. The cupcakes needed to be eaten, so she did put them in, as well as a big package of trail mix. If she had her way, she’d feed the Spencers sour green apples. Or maybe not. She liked to cook, and the boys had certainly scarfed down supper last night. Liz didn’t know whether the twins lacked a mother through divorce or through death. Either way, it wasn’t their fault. How could she begrudge lonely children a simple meal? She knew all too well what loneliness was like.

She secured the house, then put the picnic basket and a jug of cold water in the cab of the pickup. Although she gave Melody a

head start, she still had to drive slowly. The pony had short legs. That was probably why the Spencers caught up with them well before they reached the river. Markedly subdued, the boys both muttered apologies of sorts.

Dusty and Rusty rode a matched set of well-gaited buckskin geldings. They were small, but not as small as Melody's Welsh pony. Gil Spencer rode a powerful bay gelding, instead of his injured mare.

The three children met and galloped off in the lead. Gil tipped his hat to Liz and cantered past without saying a word, even though she had her pickup window rolled down. She was so busy admiring the way he sat a horse that she almost broke an axle driving across a rocky arroyo. Darn, but she was a sucker for the way a man—a good rider like Gil Spencer—looked on his horse. He had an easy fluid grace that Liz considered the trademark of a real cowboy. The gelding recognized his mastery, too. He responded to the slightest touch of his rider's heel or knee.

The boys, now, were learning, and they were perpetual motion in their saddles. She could see daylight between rump and saddle. Liz grinned to herself. Melody was the more polished rider by far. She could handle a bigger horse. Deserved one.

The salary that went with this job was more than adequate to provide for their needs, and maybe there'd be enough left over each month to start saving for a couple of really nice horses.

Speaking of horses, off to her left, ankle-deep in grass, stood thirty or so buckskins, the sleek well-proportioned animals that

put Spencer's name in the horse breeders' registry. Liz slowed her pickup to a crawl. The land they'd just gone through was barren and dry. These grassy knolls, outlined in a patchwork of fences, had obviously been seeded and irrigated. She'd guess it hadn't been an easy matter to pump water uphill from the river she could see winding through the stand of cottonwoods far below.

Gil noticed that she'd slowed almost to a stop. Turning, he galloped back. "Is everything okay? You crack the oil pan when you bottomed out back there?"

Just as Liz thought—nothing got by Gil Spencer. For that reason she didn't make excuses, only laughed. "For a few seconds I wondered that myself. But my pickup's running fine. I'm just admiring the scenery. Your irrigation setup took some ingenious engineering."

Gil thumbed back his hat, rested his forearm on the saddle horn and surveyed the pasture all around him. "I'm afraid I see five years of backbreaking work—not to mention buckets of money that both my dad and Ginger accused me of pouring down the drain."

"Ginger?" She'd noticed a bitter edge in his voice when he said the name. Liz knew someone named Ginger—but no, it was too much of a coincidence to think she'd be one and the same person. Maybe his dad's second wife? "A wicked stepmother, I presume," she teased lightly.

His eyes glittered angrily. "You presume wrong," he said, surprising the gelding when he choked up on the reins and

wheeled him on a dime. Sod, damp from a recent watering, flew from the gelding's sharp heels and stuck to the pickup's windshield as Spencer cantered off. In the field the horses stopped eating and whinnied nervously. Liz sat in her idling pickup. "What in heaven's name was that all about?" she wondered aloud. Obviously it'd been a mistake to tease him about Ginger—whoever she was. But if Gil Spencer thought his terse remark would end her curiosity, he didn't know human nature very well. Although not prone to gossip, Liz did like to know what made people tick. She was intrigued by the little mysteries of life; she was also patient and content to bide her time.

Catching up to the children, Liz insisted Melody join her in the fenced-off pasture where three geldings grazed. No matter how cleverly the boys and her daughter cajoled her, Liz had no intention of allowing Melody out of her sight.

"I should be able to shoe two of those horses before lunch. Melody and I will meet you fellows at the crawdad hole. We'll share our sandwiches if you point out where you'll be."

Gil had dismounted to check a fence post nearby. "We don't expect you to feed us," he said. "But you're more than welcome to join us at the river. See that tall weeping birch?" Liz turned the way he pointed. "My grandfather planted two of them as seedlings," he added. "Grandmother wanted to build a home there when the trees got big enough for shade."

"What happened to change her mind?" Liz asked, assuming they built the Spencer ranch house.

“First big rain, and the river flooded the valley.”

“Oh. Did it wash out the second tree? I only see one.”

“It died when I was a boy, during the seven-year drought. Granddad packed water all the way out here from the house, and still he lost one. Even though they’d given up the idea of building here, they still planned to be buried at the foot of those old trees.”

“So, are they? Buried under that tree, I mean?”

Gil shook his head and stared down at the solid gold key chain he’d absently pulled from his pocket—a gold spur linked by the arch of a golden horseshoe. Diamonds winked from the spur’s rowels. His grandfather had entrusted Gil, rather than his own son, with the keepsake. He’d made Gil promise to look after the ranch he so loved—as if he knew his only son wouldn’t. To Gil, the key chain symbolized the heart and soul of the Lone Spur. “It’s almost impossible to bury someone on private property,” he said in a low voice.

“Yes. Corbett’s rodeo buddies wanted him buried beneath that chute. I was relieved when the funeral home refused.” Brushing a sudden tear from her eye, Liz hurriedly pressed a hand to Melody’s shoulder. “Come along,” she urged softly, “I have work to do. Run and tell the boys you’ll see them later.”

Gil watched the woman gather her tools and stride toward the horses to be shod. *Tears? At this late date?* He couldn’t say why it annoyed him to see proof that she grieved for her husband, that she’d loved him.

It more than annoyed him, it made him damned

uncomfortable. Because Lizbeth Robbins didn't seem to fit his image of rodeos and their hangers-on.

And, thanks to his wife, he knew plenty about those.

CHAPTER FOUR

AFTER LIZ FINISHED checking the hooves of all three horses, she started with the one that was hardest to fit. Rafe had told her cold-shoeing was the only method the previous farrier used. It was certainly cheaper to use ready-mades, but Liz had been taught by an old-timer who believed that a foot shod properly and at regular intervals would remain sound for the life of a horse. Forming a shoe to fit exactly corrected a multitude of problems and extended the animal's work life.

Liz slipped a lariat over the first horse and led him to a big oak tree. Its spreading branches provided shade and a relatively clean work space. From the notations Rafe had made on her clipboard—indicating each animal's identifying features and markings—she determined that this horse was called Sand Digger. Back at her pickup, Liz wrote his name on a three-by-five card, dated it and briefly listed what she intended to do. Then she placed the card in a recipe box, which would eventually include every horse she worked on, with the cards filed in date order. She believed in shoeing at six-week intervals, eight at the most, unless the animal threw a shoe. Good records were something else Hoot had insisted on, and another thing the Lone Spur's former farrier apparently hadn't felt was important. She was virtually working blind on these animals.

Gil trotted up just as Liz fired her forge. "Starting lunch?"

She slipped on her apron and gloves. "It's barely nine-thirty. Don't tell me your breakfast has worn off already?"

His gaze slid from its inspection of her trim figure to where his sons were energetically throwing a football. "I'd barely poured my coffee when our breakfast conversation turned to bats. Food was forgotten." He glanced at Melody, who played quietly in the pickup's cab with a family of plastic dolls. "Is she always so placid?"

Liz looked up from gathering her nippers, blade and rasp. Laughter bubbled spontaneously. "Rarely. She's trying to impress me so she can go catch crawdads later. Beneath that sweet exterior lies a total tomboy. You'll see."

Gil adjusted his hat. "That's good. Maybe my sons'll learn some respect. They seem to equate female with inferior."

"Imagine that," Liz said dryly. Then before he could take exception, she turned and made her way back to Sand Digger. Thanks to her sixth-sense antennae that were attuned to Spencer, Liz knew the moment he dismounted and followed her. Ignoring him, she arranged her tools carefully, then walked Sand Digger in a circle to check his gait. She reminded herself that a lot of owners preferred to watch their horses being shod. But for some reason it grated on her nerves to have Gil Spencer hunkered down beneath the tree, relaxed as you please. Evidently he hadn't spied on his other farriers. If he had, his animals might be in better shape. Sand Digger favored his right front foot. On closer inspection, Liz discovered that the last nails had been driven in

crookedly.

“Something wrong?” Noticing her frown, Gil stood and removed his hat.

“What? Oh, nothing.” She repeated the procedure with the other hooves and found the same crooked nails in all but one.

“You frown at nothing?” Gil tilted back his hat and sauntered over to take a look. By the third hoof, he whistled through his teeth. “Damn!”

“You swear at nothing?” Liz restrained a smirk.

“That jerk!” he exploded. “I had no idea...” Off came the Stetson again and he began the signature *tap, tap, tap* on his thigh. “I fired him because I smelled liquor on his breath. I don’t tolerate anyone drinking on the job.”

“I guess you didn’t follow him around and check his work.” She shrugged.

He paused in the middle of tapping; an expression of surprise then chagrin furrowed his brow. “Look, ten years ago my pop’s weakness for alcohol nearly lost us the ranch. I sold off all but thirty horses, dropped everyone from the payroll but Rafe, and the two of us put in twenty-hour days, seven days a week, to dig this place out of bankruptcy. There weren’t enough hours in the day. We handled breeding, training, shoeing, built fence, mucked stalls—you name it. Now I have twenty men on my payroll. All experts.”

“Twenty men and one woman,” she said. “And as an expert I recommend you let this horse run barefoot and riderless for

about six weeks.” She flipped her rope off Sand Digger’s neck and walked back to change the information on his card. “I don’t drink, and I drive a very straight nail, Mr. Spencer, so you won’t need to check up on me, either. Maybe you can take that extra hour or so a day I’ll be saving you and spend it with your kids.”

Gil stiffened. She’d hit a raw nerve. Ginger complained to anyone who’d listen that he’d neglected her in favor of the ranch. Neglect was a big issue in the custody hearing, even though Gil had hired Ben and cut back to ten-hour days. Little by little, as the boys grew and spent more time with him out on the range, he’d let longer hours in the saddle creep up again. But he didn’t neglect his sons and he didn’t need some woman looking at him with sorrowful calf eyes, suggesting that he did.

“Are you fixin’ to fire me again?” Liz drawled softly, wishing he wasn’t such a hard man to read. She could see he’d worked up a head of steam but honestly didn’t know why. “I only meant you can trust me to do a good job of shoeing.”

Gil stared at her neat array of tools. The card she’d been writing on fluttered to the ground. He picked it up, realizing at a glance that if all her records were this precise, she was definitely telling the truth. “Guess I’m kind of touchy when it comes to my family,” he said gruffly, handing her back the card.

Liz filed it and filled one out for the next gelding, Coppertone’s Pride. Named for his perfect all-over tan, she reasoned—and then her mind flipped back to what Melody had said about her teacher’s pictures of family. Mom, dad, kids. It

seemed grandparents were acceptable, as long as there were two. But one parent and child? Apparently not. By Miss Woodson's definition, she and Melody weren't a family. But *of course* they were, the same as tens of thousands of other single-parent families in the world. Liz would have to have a talk with Miss W. She needed a new supply of pictures.

"C'mon, boys," Gil called. "Mount up. Time to check fence." He squinted at the sun. "We'll mosey toward the river about noon," he told Liz.

"Do we hafta go with you?" The boys stopped tossing the football. "Riding fence is boring. Can't we stay here and play? We brought a Frisbee, too."

"No. Remember, I said idle hands make mischief."

"Aw, Dad. We said we were sorry."

Gil turned back to Liz, giving an apologetic shrug. She wasn't sure if he was asking her to let them stay or if he was irked at having her witness a little family discord. "I'll keep an eye on them if you'd like," she murmured discreetly. She didn't want to be accused of aiding and abetting dissension.

His sudden grin was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. "Thanks. I'll put the fear of the Lord in them so they won't cause you any trouble. Riding fence *is* boring. Someday they'll accept that it's part of the job. Now they're at the age where anything short of calamity is boring."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I get so sick of hearing that word."

“You, too?” He laughed. “I always picture girls playing quietly with tea sets and dolls. Like Melody there.” He gestured over his shoulder at the pickup.

Liz pointed out a fact he’d obviously missed. Mel had left the truck to join the twins and had just delivered a punt that sent both boys running back into the dry wash.

Gil was still shaking his head when he mounted up and rode north along the fence row. He’d been right to bring the boys along. Being around Melody and Lizbeth might be the best way for them to learn some genuine respect for women.

Liz appraised the way his soft blue shirt stretched taut across his broad shoulders and narrowed snugly down to lean hips that rocked gently against a tooled leather saddle. Heat struck her like a blast of hot wind. She jerked sideways, assuming she’d let the forge get too hot. In fact, the fire burned low and steady. Annoyed by her own response, she coiled her lariat and went to separate Coppertone’s Pride from his companions.

His feet were well shaped and symmetrical. Liz finished the easy shoeing just as the three children charged up, begging for water. She poured them each a generous cup from her jug. “Your faces are red as beefsteak tomatoes. Why don’t you go sit in the shade of that old oak to drink these?”

“I’m ready to jump in the river,” one of the twins said. “What do you s’pose is keeping my dad?”

Liz checked her watch. “He hasn’t been gone an hour. He said noon. It’s not quite eleven.”

“We don’t have to wait for him,” the twin with the reddest face declared.

“Oh, ho,” Liz chuckled, thinking he was baiting her. “Guess again, young man.” She’d almost called him Dustin, but caught herself in time as she wasn’t certain.

“We don’t gotta mind you, do we, Rusty?” the boy said, deliberately crushing his plastic glass beneath the heel of his boot.

So, it *was* Dustin. Instinct had served her well, Liz thought smugly. When it came to confrontations, she noticed he most often led. But this time, Rusty ignored his challenge. “You’re absolutely right, Dustin,” Liz said quietly, walking over to pick up his flattened glass. “The rules you have to go by are the ones your dad set down before he left. And only you and Russ know how he’ll react if you break them.” She walked past him to toss the plastic pieces into the box lid. Unfurling her lariat, she deftly roped the third gelding, Little Toot. At this moment Liz felt it described Dustin Spencer. With his flashing go-to-the-devil eyes and pouting lips, he was a little toot, all right.

“Hey, that was cool,” Rusty exclaimed, running to meet her as she returned with the dun-colored gelding in tow. “Will you teach me how to throw a rope like that?”

Liz cast a surreptitious glance toward his surly twin. Dusty’s head was down and he was digging a furrow in the dirt with a boot heel. She’d bet the contents of her lunch basket that he didn’t want any part of her teaching.

"I'm not sure how long it'll take to shoe this horse." She patted the soft nose as Little Toot nibbled her collar. "There are several lariats behind the pickup seat. Melody can explain the basics. If I have time before your dad gets back, I'll be glad to show you some simple rope tricks." She pointed. "See that old stump?" It looked as if it'd been sheared off by lightning. "That's how I learned and how I taught Melody. You practice roping stumps by the hour."

Rusty let out a whoop that scared the horse. "Sorry," he muttered, dashing after Melody. "C'mon!" he yelled to his brother.

"I don't want some dorky girl teachin' me to rope," Dustin declared loudly. "Shorty said he'd show us how before the next roundup. Let's wait."

Rusty's steps slowed. He glanced back at his brother, then at the rope Melody offered him. Hunching his shoulders, he turned and raced Melody to the stump.

Good for you, kid, Liz thought as she bent to her task. Still, she did feel for Dusty. Tough guys took a lot of falls before they learned. Especially the ones who used stubborn pride as a defense mechanism. This child came by the trait honestly; Gil Spencer wore pride like a suit of armor. Rusty was the anomaly here. More open. You could even call him sweet. Liz hammered the first white-hot piece of metal into the proper curve and cooled it in the bucket of water. She'd have to be careful not to treat Rusty with more affection, she told herself. Who knew better than she

that pride was sometimes all that protected a fragile heart? So many times she'd picked up a pen to write her parents. At least four times she'd slipped Melody's picture into an envelope. She'd thought that maybe if this job panned out...But now, of course, it wasn't going to last. Yes, she knew all about stubborn pride.

And Dustin Spencer showed no sign of relenting. Liz watched him slam rock after rock, hard as he could, against a rusted coffee can. She stayed silent, knowing there was nothing she could say to him.

She was driving the final nail into Little Toot's fourth shoe when Gil Spencer galloped toward them from the north, his horse blowing hard. "Hurry," he called. "You guys saddle up and follow me if you want a treat. The rogue stallion has his herd grazing just up the draw. It's a sight, I'll tell you."

All three children sprang into action. Rusty dropped the rope he was using and raced his brother for their tethered mounts. Melody coiled her rope and his and carefully returned them to the pickup. "Is it all right if I go?" she asked her mother.

"Go ahead. I'll stay and pack up. The engine noise would probably scare him off before we got within range." She wanted to go, though. Liz had never seen a true wild horse.

"It's not far," Gil said, riding up beside her. "Come on, ride with me." He leaned from the saddle and stretched out a hand.

Liz felt her eagerness fade in a rush of embarrassment, even though she'd made her living working with men since Corbett died. She'd learned to sidestep advances and had developed a no-

nonsense handshake, but it had been more than six years since she'd slid her arms around a man's waist. And, Lord, when you weren't intimate with the man, what did you do with your hands? Just now Liz tucked them in her back pockets and gave a little shake of her head.

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