



DIAMONDBACK

A Taylor Madison mystery - #1

By Elizabeth Dearl

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Dedication

To Joe, who made it all possible. I love you.

A huge thank you to Jude Pittman who read each chapter the moment I produced it and provided encouragement and feedback.

Chapter One

MY VOLKSWAGEN WHEEZED in weary protest as it encountered yet another rise in the road. Houston's terrain is as flat as a sheet of paper, not counting a man-made incline or two on the freeway system, and the ancient little car was never going to forgive me for introducing it to the hills of west Texas. The transmission groaned as I downshifted and began the climb, my ears popping from the slight change in altitude.

On the passenger seat, my backpack stirred, and Hazel presented a quivering nose.

"Not dinnertime yet," I informed her, and the nose withdrew, twitching in disgust.

The setting sun shimmered against the asphalt, glancing off the beer cans and tin foil strewn along the roadside. This section of highway evidently hadn't been "adopted" by any civic-minded group. I was beginning to wonder if anyone besides me even knew it existed. It had been at least an hour since I'd passed another car.

I had made an interesting discovery during my five-hundred-mile journey. Desolate stretches of road had a charismatic effect on my right foot. The lonelier the landscape, the harder my foot pressed the accelerator, as if to hurry me back to human companionship. The two speeding tickets in my glove compartment convinced me that cops out here in the boonies had discovered the phenomenon long ago and made use of it to pad the coffers of tiny towns with names like *Rising Star* and *Pancake*.

A sign flashed by:

PERDUE 10 Miles

LUBBOCK 54 Miles

Lubbock is farmland, as flat as Houston, and it amazed me that Perdue was surrounded by craggy hills, rising out of nowhere with startling suddenness.

I nudged the backpack and a tiny black nose emerged inquiringly. “Tell me something, Hazel. Have I lost my mind? Why am I doing this?”

She yawned.

“Never mind. Go back to sleep.”

Floor it, suggested a reasonable little voice inside my head. Just keep on going right through Perdue, all the way to Lubbock. You can sell this old rattletrap for a few hundred, hop on a plane....

“Sell my car?” I shouted. The voice had overstepped its bounds. I had worked odd jobs all the way through high school to earn the money for my precious VW, and I’d keep it long enough to be buried in it, if I had my way. It had been my graduation gift to myself, and buying a used car had left enough money to pay for my first semester at U of H. So, what if it was fourteen years old? I patted the dashboard fondly. It had, in fact, been my only graduation present. Mom hadn’t even bothered to show up at the ceremony.

Something long and dark slithered into the road ahead, and I reacted before I realized what it was. Jerking the steering wheel sharply to the right, I stomped on the brake. The car careened sideways into the ditch that constituted the road’s shoulder and lurched to a halt. A cloud of red dust billowed up through the rust holes in the floorboard. I coughed. Hazel sneezed.

Still shaking, I turned in the seat to peer behind me. The snake was squirming into a tangle of brush on the opposite side of the road.

“Lovely countryside,” I muttered, and turned the key.

The engine stuttered and caught, sounding as cranky as I felt, but that was as far as the matter went. The steering wheel moved awkwardly and apparently no longer held any influence over the tires.

I squinted through the bug-smearred windshield. Straight ahead, a large sign informed me that I had reached: Perdue City Limits, Pop. 2,948.

“Well, at least we made it to our destination,” I told Hazel, who sneezed again. Gathering my backpack and windbreaker, I stepped out into the red dust.

I had spoken too soon. By the time I reached the first indication of civilization, I was wishing for a fur coat (and to hell with Greenpeace). If not for the intervention of my neighbor, George, I probably wouldn’t have tossed the windbreaker onto the front seat, so anxious had I been to set out on this idiotic quest before sanity could take hold. But George, bless his heart, had reminded me that the entire state of Texas doesn’t share Houston’s near-tropical climate. The temperature had hovered in the mid-eighties on the morning I said good-bye to the house

where I'd grown up. Here, I'd guess it to be in the lower fifties at the most, and a strong north wind pushed me along, whistling down my collar.

The jacket's thin nylon pockets offered little protection; my fingers were already numb by the time I reached the dubious shelter of Forman's Gas Station—which, by all indications, had been closed since circa 1939. The two gas pumps would have brought a fortune in an antiques auction, and I had to wonder how the building itself had managed to remain standing. The wood was weathered and cracked, silver with age, and the entire structure tilted precariously. A well-aimed spitball would have toppled it.

"Okay, Hazel, what now?" But Hazel, curled in the bottom of my backpack and snug in a nest of tissue, didn't offer a reply. I resumed walking.

By the time I reached the true outskirts of Perdue, my ears ached, my eyes burned, and my breath came out in solid little chunks that shattered as they dropped to the asphalt.

I pushed my way into the first building I saw, which turned out to be Hope Feed and Hardware. A wave of deliciously warm air caressed me like a lover, and I made a beeline for its source: a cast-iron, wood-burning stove that squatted comfortably in one corner of the room.

When the scuffed, wooden floorboards creaked beneath my sneakers, a bald head popped up from behind the counter.

"Sorry, miss, I'm gettin' ready to close."

I tried to answer, but all I could manage was the sound of chattering teeth.

"Why, you poor kid!" The man was at my side in a flash, hustling me closer to the stove. "You just sit yourself down in that old rocker-- atta girl--and I'll pour you a nice, hot cup of coffee. Cream and sugar? No? Here, now, put your feet closer to the stove, unless you think them fool plastic shoes will melt. Haven't you youngsters ever heard of boots? Good pair of leather boots'll last a lifetime. And what kind of coat is that for winter? Dadburn plastic clothes...."

Throughout this nonstop monologue, he had settled me into the wooden rocker, eased the backpack off my shoulders, tucked a quilt around my knees, shoved another log into the already blazing fire, and poured coffee from a battered tin pot simmering atop the stove. I took a swig of something that tasted like the liquid derived from boiling old tires. It was heavenly.

He pulled up a stool and sat. "Now, then, suppose you tell me what you're doing wandering around in a blue norther, and dressed for a spring picnic?"

"Car broke down." I was relieved to find some feeling had returned to my lips. "I walked here from out near the city limits sign."

“Jeez Marie, that’s two, three miles! Why didn’t you stop at old Jack’s gas station? You had to pass right by it to get here.”

“I did. No one was there.”

He shook his head. “Jack’s been feeling poorly lately. He’s gonna have to hire someone if he wants to keep the place going. That, or sell it.” He chuckled. “Can’t shut it down, for sure. Only gas station in town.”

“Great,” I mumbled. “So, who’s going to fix my car?”

“Oh, Jack don’t fix cars. He only pumps gas. When he’s open, that is. You need Roger.”

“Roger?”

“Yeah. He’s got an old pickup rigged for towing, and he’s real handy with tools.”

I sighed. “Roger it is, then. Could you call him for me?”

“Nope, Roger ain’t got a phone. Oh, now, don’t pull a face. We’ll get your car fixed up. On your way to Lubbock, are you?”

“Uh, no. Actually, I was on my way here.” I didn’t explain further, not sure how much I wanted to tell a total stranger, even one who had probably saved me from frostbite.

My host brightened. “You came for the festival, I’ll bet! You’re early, though. The hunt don’t start till tomorrow.” He winked. “Officially, that is, though between you and me, I know a few early birds getting a little head start on the proceedings. Cheatin’, some would say.”

I had lost the thread of this conversation fairly early on. “I don’t know anything about a festival. I came to...visit my aunt.”

“You got kin in Perdue? I’ll be. How come I’ve never seen you around before? I know most everybody here, lived here all my life. Tell you one thing, I never saw hair that color.” He covered his mouth with one hand. “Guess I shouldn’t have said that. Nothing wrong with hair color in a bottle, and none of my business, anyway. Just trying to place your looks, was all. What did you say your name was?”

“Taylor Madison.” I figured an introduction might stop the questions. I had heard the hair color comment too many times throughout my life to be offended by it. My hair is pale blonde, almost white. I’ve even been asked, once or twice, if I were an albino.

He shook my proffered hand. “Rude of me not to have said so before, honey. I’m Hank Barton. I own this place.” He gestured proudly around the store, which was stacked with sacks of feed, seed, and manure, and crowded with items ranging from gardening gloves to a small John Deere lawn tractor parked near the door. A couple of miniature rabbits watched me from their

cage, and I was glad Hazel couldn't see them. I had never put her to the test but, after all, it was in her genes to chase rabbits.

"Barton? I thought it was Hope's Hardware."

Hank laughed and pulled a handkerchief from the chest pocket of his overalls to mop his bald pate. He moved away from the stove a bit, and I would have done the same if I could have gotten untangled from the tightly tucked quilt.

"Hope, not Hope's," he explained. "That was my granddaddy's little joke. He started this store back when Derrick County was barely a scattering of dirt farmers and sheep ranchers. Said he didn't know if a hardware store out in the sticks would ever turn a profit, but he could always hope."

"Well, it's obviously been a success, Mr. Barton."

"Call me Hank. Here I've been jabbering away, and you've got places to go. Wish I could drive you myself, but my wife took the car tonight. I know! Stay put while I make a call. Have some more coffee."

"Thank you." Now that I was warm, no amount of torture could have induced me to drink more of the awful brew. "Do you mind if I smoke?" I had quit for almost two years, but the first thing I'd done after reading the letter was go out and buy a pack.

"Why should I mind?" He handed me an old-fashioned glass coaster to use as an ashtray, then left me alone. I took advantage of his absence to scoot the rocker away from the stove and sneak a peek at Hazel, who was still sound asleep in her makeshift burrow. I could hear Hank talking on the phone but couldn't make out what he was saying.

"Sheriff's on his way," he said cheerfully upon his return. "Won't take him long. He's right across the street."

I gaped at him. "The sheriff?"

He shrugged. "Sure. Perdue don't have a taxi service, you know. Sheriff's the next best thing. I reckon if he can drive old Mrs. Archer to the grocery store once a week, he can sure tote a pretty little gal to her aunt's house." He peered at me. "Who'd you say your aunt was, again?"

Why was I hesitating? "Tessa Potter," I told him. "Do you know her?"

"Why, of course I do! Everybody knows Tessa and Wood." He examined me more closely, then slapped his knee. "Gosh sakes, that must mean Sarah had a kid. Well, I'll be. No one's heard a peep out of her since she high-tailed it to Houston—when? Must be nigh onto thirty years ago. How's she doin'?"

"She's dead," I said flatly.

“I’m right sorry to hear that.” He looked over my shoulder and waved at someone. “There you are, Miles! Gettin’ sneaky in your old age. I didn’t even hear the door open. This young lady needs...Miles? Hey, you all right?”

I turned, locking eyes with a tall, middle-aged man wearing a brown uniform. His angular face had been tanned to a permanent bronze by the west Texas sun, but at the moment, he somehow managed to look pale.

“Lordy, Miles, sit down before you fall down.” Hank went into his bustling routine again, finding a clean mug and pulling the stool closer to the fire.

The sheriff made his way to the stool and sat. After a moment, he blinked and shook his head.

“I’m okay, Hank, so stop fussing. No, I don’t want any of that melted tar you call coffee.” He turned back to me and stuck out a hand the size of a catcher’s mitt. “Miles Crawford, Miss...?”

“Madison. Taylor Madison.” I watched the hand swallow mine briefly before dropping back into his lap.

“Sorry about the dramatic entrance. I’m getting over the flu, and on top of that, I haven’t eaten since breakfast.” He summoned a weak smile.

“Then you ought to be at home. I’m sure I can find someone else to drive me.”

“No need. I have to pass right by Tessa’s house on the way to mine.”

“How about that, Miles?” Hank broke in. “Sarah Ross’s little girl, can you believe it? She says her mama’s passed away, though. Now, that’s a shame. Was it her heart or something? She couldn’t have been but forty-five or six.”

“She was forty-nine.” I began extricating myself from the quilt. “It was a hit-and-run accident, not an illness. Mr. Barton—I mean, Hank—how can I thank you? You saved my life.”

Hank grinned. “Hardly that. Now, you get you some good boots and a heavy coat, hear?”

“I’m sure she’ll take your advice, Hank.” The sheriff nudged my arm. “If you’re ready, Miss Madison?”

“Taylor, please. I’m ready.” That was a lie. Blue nother notwithstanding, the worst still lay ahead of me.

I had expected a patrol car but was instead helped into a bright red Toyota sedan. The sheriff had left the engine running, and a warm interior greeted me.

“My county car’s in the shop,” he explained as if he had read my mind, tossing a tan felt Stetson into the back seat to make room for me.

“Roger’s?” I asked. “Speaking of that—”

“Yeah, Hank told me you needed a tow. Tell you what, give me your keys. I’ll drop you off at Tessa’s, then track Roger down and get him to pull it in tonight.”

“Great. Listen, there’s a laptop computer shoved under the front passenger seat. Could you make sure it’s locked up somewhere?”

The sheriff stopped for a red light (the only one I had seen so far, so perhaps the only one in town) and glanced at me. “Locked up?”

“Well, it’s pretty valuable.”

“This isn’t the big city, Miss Madison. Lots of folks around here still leave their doors unlocked. But I’ll make sure your little computer is safe.”

“Thanks,” I said, feeling somehow rebuked.

After only a few blocks, the sheriff pulled into the driveway of a two-story house. I couldn’t make out any details in the dark, but a front window shed muted light. At least someone was home.

The sheriff cleared his throat, and I realized I had been gazing at the house for quite some time. I opened the car door, surprised when he got out as well.

“I’ll walk you to the porch,” he said, and I nodded gratefully. This was going to be harder than I had expected.

“I thought they lived on a ranch,” I said, as we climbed the front steps. I was beginning to shiver again, though I was pretty sure it wasn’t from the cold wind this time.

He nodded. “They just moved into this place about six months ago. Wood had a stroke, and Doc wanted to get him into town for a while, closer to the clinic.”

I felt an unexpected flare of concern for someone I’d never met. “Is he all right?”

“Getting along. The physical therapy seems to be helping. He can walk with a cane now.” His expression remained impassive in the dim light, but I knew he had to be wondering why I wasn’t aware that my uncle had been gravely ill. “Well?”

I started. “Well, what?”

“You might try ringing the bell,” he suggested.

The front door opened while my finger was still on the button. A plump woman peered out at me, one hand lifting to shove a dangling hairpin back into her gray bun.

“Yes?” She noticed the sheriff and gave him a puzzled smile. “Why, hello, Miles.”

I waited for him to respond, but he obviously felt his duty had been done by bringing me here, and he was now ready to throw me to the wolves. In fact, I couldn't figure out why he hadn't already beat feet for his Toyota.

"I'm looking for my aunt." The goosebumps on my arms were hatching goslings. "Tessa Potter," I added when she didn't reply.

The woman's dentures threatened to pop out of her mouth. "Tessa has a niece. I had no idea. My stars, you think you know a person! Well, come on in, child. Haven't you got enough sense to wear decent clothing in weather like this? Miles Crawford, why on earth didn't you lend the girl your jacket? And here I thought you were the last remaining gentleman in the state. I've never seen the like. Poor thing freezin' to death, and you stand there like a bump on a log. There now, Tessa will be home in a bit. I'm mindin' Wood while she runs to the grocery store. Are you comfy?"

During this incredible speech, she dragged me into the living room, settled me into a gigantic wing chair so close to the fireplace that I could feel the fine hairs on my arms singe, and bustled off to fetch a pot of tea. The sheriff, drawn along in our wake, sat down in a matching chair. I leaned closer to him.

"Is she, by any chance, related to Hank?" I whispered.

Crawford snorted a laugh. "That's Mabel Donnely. She's a retired nurse, and Doc recommended her to help out with your uncle."

"Oh." The fire crackled through another silence. "Thanks for bringing me, Sheriff Crawford, but you really don't have to stay."

Before he could reply, Mabel returned, lugging a loaded tea tray. "You'll stay too, won't you, Miles?"

"Wouldn't turn down your famous tea, Mabel."

I swear he shot me a satisfied smirk. Obviously, even the high sheriff wasn't immune from small town curiosity.

"Tessa's niece," the nurse marveled, plunking herself down on the sofa. "I've known the woman for twenty years, and you think she'd mention a niece. Where are you—oh, my God!" To my amazement, she was climbing the couch like a tree, her screams coming in breathless little bursts.

Baffled, I turned to Crawford. He was watching my backpack, his eyebrows almost disappearing into his hairline. I followed his gaze, suddenly certain what I would see.

Sure enough, a furry little face had poked its way from beneath the flap, and Hazel's bright eyes were taking in her new surroundings. Mabel's screams intensified.

"A rat!" she shrieked. "Don't sit there like a lump, Miles Crawford. Do something! Shoot the filthy thing!"

"Don't you dare!" I shouted, torn between indignation and hilarity. Mabel would have made a great go-go dancer in her younger days, the way her rubber-soled nursing shoes trounced that couch.

Easing Hazel from the pack, I cuddled her protectively. "She's not a rat, she's a ferret. She won't hurt you, Mabel, I promise."

"What in blue blazes is going on in this house?" came a voice from the foyer. We all froze, Mabel in mid-bounce, which must have been difficult.

My aunt stood in the archway.

Oh, yes, I knew she was my aunt, despite the fact I had never laid eyes upon her until that moment. Her resemblance to my mother was astonishing. Same petite frame, same light brown hair, though Tessa's held far less gray than Mom's had. I got to my feet, absently handing Hazel over to Crawford.

Mabel, somewhat recovered now that the sheriff had the "rat" in custody, clambered down from the sofa, smoothing her dress.

"Tessa, dear, look who came to visit! Why didn't you ever tell me you had a niece?"

Tessa dropped the grocery sack. It hit the tiled floor, something inside tinkling as it broke. She held out both hands, not in welcome, but rather as if she were making a sign to ward off evil.

Mabel's mouth dropped open and she rushed to gather the scattered groceries. "Guess you're as surprised as I was, aren't you? I'll just put these things away for you, Tess, while you sit down and have tea with your pretty niece."

"Thank you, Mabel," Tessa said quietly. "Is Wood all right?"

"Sleeping like a baby," Mabel assured her and hurried out of the room, cradling the dripping bag.

Ignoring me for the moment, Tessa picked up the teapot with a hand that trembled noticeably, splashed some tea into the cup Mabel had been using, and downed it like a shot of bourbon.

"Get out of my house," she ordered in a low, deadly tone. "Right now."

She didn't stay around to make sure I obeyed but disappeared up the staircase. Crawford dragged me out the front door before Mabel could emerge from the kitchen to find out what was going on.

Mercifully, the sheriff didn't ask me any questions. He just drove, jacking the car's heater up to the hellfire setting in an attempt, I'm sure, to stop my trembling. Hazel wormed her way up to my shoulder and I nuzzled her gratefully, her long whiskers tickling my chin. Eventually, I came to realize that we had passed the same lighted church steeple at least twelve times.

"Sorry," I said. Whatever that meant.

Crawford turned down a residential street, where he found a place to pull over to the curb. We sat there for a while, listening to the whoosh of the heater and Hazel's occasional chattered comment.

"Want to tell me what that was all about?" he asked finally.

"I have no idea. And I'd rather not speculate right now, if you don't mind." I noticed that his car's ashtray had been used, so I felt safe in digging out my cigarettes. He pushed in the lighter for me when I couldn't find my matchbook, and I rolled down the window, letting the cold air wash over my cheeks. "You know, I've spent all my time in this town either freezing or roasting. Don't you people know what happy medium means?"

"A cheerful psychic?" he suggested, deadpan, surprising me into a weak laugh.

"We can't sit here all night, Miss Madison. You'd better at least tell me what's next on your agenda."

"What are my alternatives?" I returned, taking a drag of smoke.

"Well, there's always the bus station, but that might present a problem with your car. Tow charges from here to Houston would be pretty steep."

"True." I tossed the glowing butt out the window, wondering wearily if he'd charge me with littering. I damn sure wasn't going anywhere without my car but didn't see any reason to inform him that I wasn't planning to leave at all until Tessa answered at least one question. "Okay, then, would you mind dropping me off at a motel?"

"I wouldn't mind at all, except for one minor thing. Perdue doesn't have a motel."

"Perfect. Where do people stay when they visit this godforsaken place?"

"We have a boarding house."

"Fine."

"Afraid not. It's all booked up for the festival."

The damn festival again. Didn't take a lot to get the local yokels excited, I thought sourly.

“This is about the only time of year that we get any tourists,” he went on. “The boarding house fills up fast, and then a lot of the citizens like to rent out spare rooms to catch the overflow. Works out pretty good for everyone. The homeowners get a little extra cash, and the tourists get home-cooked meals. ’Course, a lot of the tourists nowadays bring motor homes or trailers. We’ve got a big area set up out near the auditorium for camping.”

“Darn, and I left my motor home parked next to the mansion. What you’re telling me is, there’s no room at the inn. Any of the inns.”

He pulled away from the curb. “I think we can find you something.”

I was puzzled when he parked in front of Hope Hardware, but kept my mouth shut and followed him inside.

Hank greeted me like an old friend and started nodding even before Crawford had finished his request. “Sure, I’ll set up a rollaway bed in that little storeroom upstairs.” He turned to me. “Will that be comfortable enough?”

At that moment, I probably would have agreed to sleeping on a bed constructed of rocks and cactus. “Sounds great.”

Crawford managed to suppress the dozen or so questions he must have been dying to ask me and took his leave. I trailed Hank up the stairs.

The room he opened was at the end of a long hall and might have measured eight by twelve feet if you removed some of the junk stacked along the walls. It had a single window overlooking the rear of the store, and an extra door that led, Hank informed me, to the bathroom belonging to the small apartment next door.

“My grandparents lived there when they started the store,” he told me as he bustled around, setting up the bed, finding an old brass floor lamp to put beside it, and plugging in a space heater. “My wife and I have a real house now, so I rent the apartment out. What the hey, a little extra money never hurts, and I’ve got a good tenant. Nice and quiet, no wild parties.” Hank peeked at his watch. “He’ll be working until midnight at least, so feel free to use the bathroom.”

It wasn’t until he’d gone that I realized he hadn’t asked any questions either, though he must have been wondering why I hadn’t stayed with my ‘kinfolk.’ I could see I’d have to shake the notion that small town folk are genetically unable to subdue their natural nosiness.

I fed Hazel from the Ziplock bag of dry cat food in my backpack, spread out a few layers of newspaper for her to use as a potty, then ran myself a tub full of hot water. After prudently making use of the hook and eye lock on the door that led into the apartment next door, I eased myself into the clawfoot tub and finally allowed myself to think. Tessa’s reaction had shocked

me, but it really shouldn't have. The letter I'd found certainly made it clear that she and my mother hadn't been on good terms. She probably didn't even know Mom had died. Who would have informed her? After all, I hadn't known Tessa existed until the week after the funeral.

I felt myself slipping into a doze and stood to towel off before I drowned.

Hazel had climbed onto the sheets and was curled into a ball next to my pillow. I left her there, drifting into sleep with her musky scent in my nose.

Chapter Two

THE SUN SLANTED in at an outrageously early hour. As I tried to tug the sheets into a position that would block the light, excited voices from outside lured me to get up and take a peek out the window. Okay, so who said only small-town folk are born with the nosiness gene?

A tiny wood-framed house, badly in need of paint, squatted on the lot behind the store. Children of all sizes spilled out the back door, like clowns from a trick circus car. I had to wonder how they all managed to sleep in that house. Sardines in a can sprang to mind.

A broad-shouldered man—obviously the brood's daddy—followed on their heels, brandishing a pole that looked something like a golf club, with a loop of heavy wire at one end and some sort of trigger built into the handle. The children all carried burlap sacks and the oldest, a boy in his teens, also toted a five-gallon gas can. Daddy flipped open the cargo hatch of a rusted station wagon and the munchkins piled in, clutching their odd treasures and squabbling for pride of place. The teenager caught sight of me at the window. He waved. I waved back, and watched the wagon leave a plume of red dust as it took off down the street.

Since my luggage was still in the car, wherever that might be, I'd just put on the jeans I'd worn the day before. Fortunately, my backpack contained a clean set of underwear, and I added a bra beneath the t-shirt I'd slept in, thinking to at least spare the citizens of Perdue my usual undignified jiggling. After giving Hazel another helping of food, some water, and a fresh layer of newspaper, I left her free run of the little room. Her cage was also in the car, but since ferrets don't chew furniture or sharpen their claws, I figured Hank's property was safe enough.

The store hadn't yet opened for business. I exited through a self-locking door in the back and made my way up the alley to the main street. Turning south, I noticed that, while there was still a nip in the air, the gale of the night before had settled down to a breeze. My windbreaker succeeded, finally, in living up to its name.

The Investor's Bank of Perdue shared the block with the hardware store. Across the street, the town's central square was occupied by the county courthouse, a hulking three-story building

fashioned from native rock and embellished with elaborately carved gingerbread trim. It looked like a piece of architecture conceived by Frank Lloyd Frankenstein. The one charming touch was a gigantic brass bell that replaced the more usual clock at the top of the central tower. I wondered what type of event would occasion its ringing.

At the corner, I had a choice to make. I could continue straight across, which would deliver me to the offices of the Derrick Gazette, Your Weekly Source of County News. Or I could jaywalk on the diagonal, which would put me at the door of Lucy's Café--Good Food.

No contest. I couldn't even remember the last time I had eaten.

A skinny redhead stepped from behind the counter and offered me a booth. I declined, preferring to perch on one of the counter's high stools where I could take advantage of the heat wafting from various griddles and toasters. I took a grateful sip of the coffee she set before me, the steam from the mug thawing the tip of my nose. Most of the booths and stools were occupied by flannel-shirted men, most likely farmers. The waitress and I were the only females present.

She topped off my coffee. "You're the one Sheriff Crawford picked up yesterday, aren't you?"

I ignored the awkward phrasing that made it sound as if I were a conquest he'd made at a singles bar. At least, I hoped it was only awkward phrasing.

"Yes, that was me. Could I have one of those bear claws?"

The waitress put one on a plate for me—the pastry was freshly made and still warm—then resumed wiping the already spotless counter right under my nose. "Honey, how on earth can you use that much bleach without turning your hair to straw?"

I took this as an attempt on her part to make conversation, so I obliged. "I take it you're Lucy?"

"Lucy?" She looked puzzled.

I pointed to the mirrored wall behind the counter, where the name of the place was etched in gold lettering.

She chuckled. "Reckon I forgot that you're a stranger. Lucy was the lady who started the cafe, but that's been twenty years or so. I'm Rita."

"Nice to meet you. But why didn't you change the name?"

"You'd have to ask Fred about that."

I fortified myself with a sip of coffee. "And who is Fred?"

“He owns the place now. Before that, it was Lottie Simpson, but she tried serving tea and cookies instead of real food, so she didn’t last long. And before Lottie, it was a pool hall, but they couldn’t serve beer since this is a dry county, so none of the guys would hang around.”

“I get the picture. Simpler to leave the sign alone.”

She grinned, displaying widely spaced teeth. “That’s about it. ’Scuse me, I’ve got customers.”

I finished my pastry, watching in the mirror as she escorted a chubby couple to a booth and handed them menus. Noticing an old chrome-and-glass jukebox in one corner, I slid off the stool, digging some change from my pocket. The couple greeted me as I passed, and I remembered to return their polite words. These people were making me feel like a city snob.

The jukebox selections proved that Perdue was slowly, and probably unwillingly, easing out of the mid-fifties. Madonna and M.C. Hammer shared space with singing sensations on the order of Little Jerry Haggerty and the Dixie Swans, the Homer Tiddle Fiddle Band, and the immortal Nelson Sludge. I settled for an old Linda Ronstadt ballad, unwilling to sample Nelson Sludge, but equally unwilling to offend the clientele.

Dropping in a dime--a dime? I’d have to check out the nearest pay phone and see if it still had a nickel slot--I turned to find myself eyes-to-Adam’s apple with Sheriff Crawford. For one blinding moment, I thought he was going to ask me to dance. He stepped back to peer down at me, his pure white hair glistening in the light of the overhead fluorescents. At five-foot-ten, I wasn’t used to men being so much taller than me, but Crawford had to be at least six-five. His color was healthier than it had been the night before, but his pale eyes were cradled by dark circles as if he hadn’t gotten much sleep.

“We meet again.” He winced a little as Linda crooned an impossibly high note. “Can I buy you a cup?”

“Only if there’s coffee in it.” I followed him to one of the red vinyl booths, where Rita refilled our coffee mugs and took his breakfast order.

I looked up from stirring cream into my coffee and caught him watching me. “Fly on my nose?”

“What? Oh, sorry. I was thinking how much you remind me of Tessa.”

“No kidding.” In a pig’s eye. I was about eight inches taller than my aunt, blonde to her brunette, angular where she was curved. “And I’ll bet you thought Laurel was Hardy’s twin brother.”

“Come again?”

I shook my head. “You were obviously trying to flatter me, so thanks. Speaking of thanks, I think I forgot last night. To thank you, that is. For dragging me all over town.”

He kept his gaze on the table. “Not a problem.”

Rita showed up with his plate of pancakes, waving the coffee pot over my already brimming mug. I caught her sleeve as she turned away. “I don’t suppose you could use an extra waitress in here?”

Her mouth dropped open. “You? Honey, you wouldn’t want to work here. Lordy, I go home at night with my bottom pinched raw. Besides, old Fred is as tight as a Tupperware seal. I only get minimum wage because he rakes off half my tips.” That seemed to settle it, and she hurried off to dispense more coffee to the farmers.

Crawford had paused with a forkful of pancake halfway to his mouth, and syrup was drizzling down his tie. I dipped a paper napkin into my water glass and handed it to him. He shoved his plate out of the way and dabbed at the stain. “You weren’t serious, were you? About wanting a job here?”

I shrugged. “A job’s a job. I’ve been a waitress before, among other things.”

“But you do have a job back in Houston, don’t you?”

“Sort of. I think I do, anyway, but as pissed as my agent is at me right now, it doesn’t bode well for the future. She was dead set against me taking this trip. See, I have a shot at a hardback sale, but the publisher wants the entire manuscript.

“Under the circumstances, I’ve tried to get her to let the paperback house have this one, too, so I could get my advance on the basis of the first three chapters, but Annie’s being stubborn. She doesn’t seem to care that I’m broke. Tyrant.” I sighed. “And I really am flat broke at the moment. I’ve had a lot of unusual expenses lately. Like my car, for example.” And my mother’s funeral, I added silently.

He cocked his head. “So, you’re a writer?”

I nodded. “Mystery novels.”

“Madison. Taylor Madison. My God.” He gaped at me. “Maddy Taylor? Are you Maddy Taylor?”

“That’s my pen name.”

“Well, I’ll be dipped in hog fat! Maddy Taylor. I’ve read all of your novels.”

I didn’t quite know how to respond to that. The phrase ‘all of your novels’ made me sound as prolific as Stephen King. “I’ve only published two so far.”

“Good, then I haven’t missed any.” He picked up his fork and mashed his pancakes thoughtfully.

“Sheriff, I’d like to talk to you about something,” I began, when a new voice cut in.

“Sorry to interrupt your breakfast, Sheriff, but Mrs. Gleason is in the office, and she’s spittin’ blood.”

I stared. I couldn’t help it.

Blonde men have never attracted me, maybe because of my own coloring. Two blondes together tend to look like escapees from a cheerleader convention. But this one was so drop-dead gorgeous that I found myself wiping my chin, checking for drool. “Spitting blood?” I repeated stupidly.

He smiled. My God, he even had dimples. “Ever see a horned toad when it’s mad?”

“I’ve never seen a horned toad when it’s happy,” I admitted. “What’s a horned toad?”

“Looks like a bumpy gray lizard,” Crawford put in. “They shoot blood out of their eyes when they feel threatened, but most people think they spit it. Taylor Madison, Deputy Lester Forman.”

“Meetcha,” he said amiably, extending a hand. I shook it absently, still appalled by the thought of blood-spitting lizards.

“What’s got Dora Gleason’s tail in a twist?” Crawford asked.

“Same as last year. Snake hunters on her property.”

The sheriff sighed and wiped his mouth, sliding out of the booth. “Would she rather live with the snakes? Don’t answer that. I’ll go talk to her. Everything okay at the festival grounds?”

“So far, so good. Cal was helping ’em hang the banner when I left. Craft and food booths are all assembled, tanks are filling fast. Everything should be ready for the official opening on Friday.”

“We’ll have to increase overnight security to make sure kids stay away from the tanks. You and Cal work out a schedule. Speaking of Cal, what’s he doing out there already? He didn’t get off duty until two this morning, did he?”

Lester shrugged. “We’re all workin’ overtime, Sheriff. We’re one man short, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” Crawford donned his Stetson and looked at me. “Miss Madison give me half an hour or so to get rid of the Gleason woman, then come by the office, if you will. I haven’t had a chance to talk to you about your car.”

“Sure,” I said. “But what’s all this about hunting snakes?”

“Lester looks like he could use a cup of coffee. I’ll let him tell you.” Giving his hat brim a final tug, the sheriff left.

Lester took the seat Crawford had vacated. “Best assignment he ever gave me.”

Rita hustled over with the coffee pot, then lingered, adjusting the sugar bowl and creamer so he wouldn’t have to strain his arm reaching for them, pulling a fresh napkin from the dispenser to wipe an already clean spoon, offering him a slice of apple pie, on the house. No? How about cherry? He finally shooed her away.

Her less-than-subtle flirtation gave me the opportunity to study him more closely. I discovered that his nose was a shade too long, his green eyes were set a tad too closely together, and his chin was on the weak side. I was relieved. Perfection is disconcerting.

“Snakes,” I prompted as he added an ice cube from his water glass to his steaming coffee.

“Yeah. Mrs. Gleason is sorta anti-social, doesn’t want the hunters or anyone else on her land. Including, I suspect, Mr. Gleason.”

“But why would anyone want to hunt snakes in the first place? I’d think it would be a lot healthier to run in the opposite direction.”

He laughed. “You’re probably right, but this time of year, everyone hunts them.”

I looked at him blankly.

“Don’t you know about our festival?”

“I’ve heard people talking about it, but what’s that got to do with snakes? Isn’t it just a little county fair, or something?”

“It’s that, too, but more.”

I leaned back, lighting my first cigarette of the day, and waited for an explanation.

“The Rattlesnake Festival is our big annual event, modeled after the one they hold in Sweetwater every March. We chose April so there wouldn’t be a conflict with the tourists, since a lot of folks go to both. Ours is a lot smaller than theirs, but we attract a decent-sized crowd. Good for the local economy.”

I wondered if I had stumbled into one of those backwoods religious cults. “And you hunt snakes?”

“Sure. The locals started this morning.”

“I see.” A horrible suspicion occurred to me as I remembered the munchkin family I had watched through the window. The weird golf club, the burlap sacks. I told Lester about it, and he nodded.

“Yep. What you do is find a likely spot for the rattlers to be holed up, and spray gasoline into the den to flush ’em out. Folks used to smoke them out, but that can be dangerous when it’s been dry, and gas fumes work even better. That pole you saw is used to catch them alive. The wire is looped around the snake’s neck, then tightened using the trigger.” He shrugged. “Drop the critter into a sack, and that’s all there is to it.”

I thought about asking how you determined where a snake’s ‘neck’ was but decided against it. “Great fun, huh?”

“A lot of people think so, but it’s also a form of self-preservation. Ask any rancher how many sheep, especially lambs, he loses every year to rattlers.” He squinted at me. “In case you’re a card-carrying environmentalist—we get our share of protestors—I’ll tell you right now that we don’t even put a dent in the rattlesnake population. Those little buggers breed faster than rabbits.”

“Hooray for them,” I muttered, and picked up my windbreaker. “I’d better go see what the sheriff found out about my car.”

He looked amused. “If I promise not to talk about snakes anymore, can I walk you across the street?”

“Only if you solemnly swear,” I warned him. Snakes and blood-spitting lizards! Made Houston’s muggers and junkies seem tame. If I owned a pair of ruby slippers, I would have tapped the heels together right then and there.

I peeled off my jacket before we were halfway across the street. The bank boasted a digital clock/thermometer below its sign, and I was surprised to note that the temperature had climbed into the upper sixties.

“Good thing that norther blew by,” Lester said. “The snakes might have gone back into hibernation if it had stayed cold.”

So much for promises. “Fine Boy Scout you’d make,” I grumbled.

“Sorry.” But his grin stayed in place. He led me around to the back of the courthouse, where a door was marked: Derrick County Sheriff’s Office.

Inside, a skinny redhead was seated at an L-shaped counter that took up one corner of the outer office. At first, I thought it was Rita, and was trying to figure out how she’d gotten here ahead of us when Lester called out a greeting. It was a boy who turned away from the typewriter—a kid, maybe eighteen years old—and I hardly needed an introduction to know that Billy Jackson was Rita’s brother.

Billy lisped a shy, “Hello,” and glanced out the window. “Hey, Les, isn’t that Paula?” I followed his pointing finger and saw a young woman climbing down from the cab of an old pickup truck.

Les frowned. “What’s she doing here? ’Scuse me, Taylor. I’ll be right back.” He hurried out the door, intercepting the woman before she was halfway up the walk.

“That’s Lester’s wife,” Billy informed me, and my budding fantasies crumbled.

I studied her through the window glass, but all I could really determine was that she was petite, dark-haired, and wore sunglasses so big they barely balanced on her tiny nose. Because she was standing in direct sunlight, I could also see she was wearing far too much makeup for someone her age, pale foundation applied with a heavy hand. I’ve never understood why some women think more is better. A door near the desk opened, and Sheriff Crawford appeared, his hand cupping the elbow of a woman who had surpassed mere obesity long ago. Her entire collection of chins waggled as she glared up at him.

“This is your last chance, Sheriff. Either they stay off my property, or they’ll feel the sting of my daddy’s shotgun. I haven’t forgotten how to use it.”

“You put up those No Trespassing signs like I told you, and we’ll handle it from there, Dora. Don’t put us through the expense of widening the cell door.”

She gaped at him for a moment, then broke into rolling guffaws. “Was that a threat, Miles?”

“Call it a friendly warning.”

“I shoulda married you instead of that old coot, Wally. He never took me dancin’ again after the wedding, that’s why I got so fat.”

“I’ll see you at the festival dance,” he told her seriously. “Save one for me.”

“Hell, I’ll save ’em all for you!” She laughed her way out the door.

Billy shook his head. “You’ve put your foot in it now, Sheriff. She’ll hold you to it.”

“Small price to pay for preserving the peace. Besides, maybe it’ll make Wally jealous enough that he’ll take up dancing with her again. Hi, Ms. Madison...be right with you.”

He moved to close the door and caught sight of the pair outside. “Well, hey, Paula!” he called, and ambled out to join them.

People-watching is one of my favorite hobbies, but it’s a lot more interesting if you can eavesdrop, too. I settled back in my chair and was idly contorting a paper clip into the outline of a pig when Crawford burst back inside, Les in tow.

“We had an agreement, Lester,” Crawford was saying. “You swore you wouldn’t miss any more classes. I think you’d better step into my office so we can talk about this.”

When the door closed behind them, Billy and I were left in awkward silence. He got busy with a bottle of correction fluid, and I pretended interest in the decor of one of the two holding cells.

“Would you like to sample the view from the inside?” someone drawled in my ear. I jumped.

“Who the hell are you?” An impertinent question, since he was wearing a county uniform and obviously belonged there more than I did. But I hate people sneaking up on me.

His dark eyes assessed me. I thought it odd that clean-cut Crawford let him get away with wearing his hair so long he was able to draw it into a stubby ponytail.

“I’m Deputy Sheriff Cal Arnette,” he answered solemnly. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“I have an appointment with Sheriff Crawford.”

“I’ll get him for you.”

Billy swiveled in his chair. “Uh, Cal—”

“He’s occupied at the moment,” I informed the newcomer frostily. “I don’t mind waiting.” Which was a lie. Billy and I both flinched as angry voices rose from the back room.

“I see.” Arnette settled himself on a corner of the big desk. “You’re new in town, aren’t you?”

I was torn between irritation and laughter. Laughter won.

“Do you realize you sound like a bad script from a spaghetti western? Next, you’ll be telling me that this town ain’t big enough for both of us, and to be on the noon stage outta here.”

He crossed one booted foot over the other and graced me with a thin smile. “Not at all. And what was your name?”

Billy apparently felt the need to step into the fray. “Miss Madison, Cal. I forgot her first name, but it’s something kinda weird.” He blushed to the tips of his ears and looked at me in mute horror.

I smiled. “That’s okay, Billy. It’s definitely an unusual name. Would you please tell the sheriff that I had to leave—”

At that moment, the door to the inner sanctum swung open and Lester slouched out, closely followed by Crawford. The younger man looked sullen as he hurried out the door.

Crawford watched him go, then gave Arnette a light slap on the shoulder. “How’s it going, Cal? Sorry about the overtime. Taylor, I’m glad you’re still here. Y’all been introduced?”

“Sort of,” I muttered.

“Fine. Come on back. Cal, why don’t you put on a pot of coffee?”

The sheriff’s cubicle was crowded with furniture and reeked of pipe smoke, despite the open window beside his desk. Rusty filing cabinets hunched in a corner, and an old army cot stood against one wall.

“I sometimes spend the night here if we have a prisoner out front,” Crawford explained, noticing my interest. “Saves wear and tear on the deputies. Especially now, since I’m shorthanded. Nelson picked a hell of a time to retire, right before the festival.”

I shuddered. “Lester told me about your, ah, annual event.”

“Didn’t appeal to you, huh? Well, it’s not as bad as it sounds, and it sure pumps up the county economy.” He pushed a paperback book aside to reach for his humidor, and I noticed the title. *Cat Among the Pigeons*.

“You’re a Christie fan?”

“Devoted. Dame Agatha and I are old friends. You?”

“For as long as I can remember. But—”

Crawford leaned back in his chair, tamping tobacco into his pipe. “I seem more the Robert Ludlum type, is that it? Sex, blood and guts?” He considered me for a moment, holding a flame to the pipe bowl and puffing smoke from one corner of his mouth. “Critics today claim Christie’s work was sadly lacking in any real literary quality. Beats me. She concocted some good puzzles, don’t you think? And what I admire most is the ability she had to bring her characters to life. Some writers, even well-respected ones, never quite pull that off.” He lifted one white eyebrow. “Take your novels, for instance.”

I tried not to feel immediately defensive. “What about them?”

“Your characters are terrific. Shirley? In the last one? Oh, yeah, I’ve known women just like her. That was tough to do without turning her into a stereotype, but you pulled it off.”

I relaxed a little. “Thank you.”

“Far as I can tell,” he continued, “the only problem you have is with cops.”

I fumbled out a cigarette and lit it, squinting at him through our mingled smoke. “You didn’t like my cops.” It wasn’t a question, and I really didn’t expect, or want, an answer.

“Who the hell would like your cops?” he asked. “Arrogant, stupid bastards. Did a cop steal a candy cane from your stroller or something?”

”I don’t have anything against the police.” My defenses were melting into genuine concern. “Is that really the way they come across? No one ever mentioned it before.”

“Maybe most people see us that way.” He leaned back a little further, the chair tilting precariously. “Which brings me to my proposition.”

I smiled a little. “Hey, I’m a Houston girl, remember? Should I reach for my Mace?”

“Keep it in your pocket...it’s not that kind of proposition. What I’m trying to do is offer you a job. Temporary, of course.”

I blinked. “Me? What kind of job?”

“Deputy sheriff.”

Chapter Three

MY FINGERS SPASMED, and the cigarette dropped to the floor. I made a dive for it.

“Deputy?” I panted, rising from beneath his desk.

“Why not?”

“There’s a long list of why nots. I’m not qualified, I have no training. Good Lord, you can’t pin a badge on a virtual stranger.”

“As the high sheriff, Ms. Madison, I can deputize the grade school janitor, if I’ve a mind to. In fact, I did just that last year at festival time. He, um, doesn’t care to do it again.”

“Why not?” I asked suspiciously. “Did a snake bite him?”

Crawford laughed. “Nothing like that. Come on, Ms. Madison, how about it? You said you needed a job, and I could sure use the help right now.”

I didn’t know what to say.

The sheriff tapped ashes into the trashcan. “You think it over and let me know, but soon, okay? I really think you might enjoy it, and you just might learn something about cops that would help with your future novels.”

Belatedly remembering why I had come to his office, I opened my mouth to ask, but he beat me to the punch. “By the way, your Volkswagen has a broken axle, among a few lesser problems. Roger estimates between eight and nine hundred dollars.”

I groaned. I thought of Mom’s funeral expenses, which had wiped out my paltry savings account; of the soft real estate market in Houston, which meant it would probably be months before I found a buyer for her house; of Annie’s outright refusal to send me an advance until I’d coughed up the final three chapters of my latest work. And, most important, I considered my absolute determination, deranged though it might be, to remain in Perdue until someone—if not Tessa, then someone else—could answer one very pressing question for me. I had worked a lot of odd jobs over the years, first to put myself through college, and then to cover expenses while I peddled my first novel. Freelance reporting, census taking, delivering phone books, telephone

soliciting for a dance studio. Name it, I had done it. But I had never been a cop. Well, why the hell not?

I sighed. “This deputy job. How much does it pay, and where do I sign up?”

Beaming, Crawford swore me in before I could change my mind.

Arnette brought in two cups of coffee as the sheriff dug a spare badge out of his desk drawer. Crawford instructed him to stick around for a few minutes, pending assignment, and the deputy nodded, curiosity oozing from every pore. When he’d shut the door again, the sheriff gazed out the window for a moment as I pinned the star to my t-shirt.

“Do I get a uniform?”

“Probably not,” he said distractedly. “Ms. Madison—”

“Come on, aren’t we past that stage by now? It’s Taylor.”

“Okay. Taylor, then. Up to now, I’ve done my best not to poke my nose into your business, but I think the time has come for you to tell me what brought you to Perdue.”

“I explained that last night.”

“Yeah. And I was with you last night when your aunt tossed you out of her house, remember?” He leaned across the desk. “I’ve known Tessa Potter since fifth grade. Wood, too. Neither of them has ever mentioned having a niece. Granted, Tessa and I had a falling out some years ago, and it was only about six months ago that we started patching things up. We’re pretty good friends now, in fact. But she’s never said a word to me about you.”

I took a breath. “My mother—”

“I called her Sadie,” he put in. “She and Tessa were only two years apart in age, and I was a year ahead of Sarah in school.” He cracked a grin. “Now, I’d have been lettin’ down the male species if I hadn’t gotten to know the two prettiest girls in Perdue.”

Still trying to decide how much I wanted to tell him, I stalled with a question. “You said you and Tessa had a falling out. What about?”

He suddenly became very busy refilling his pipe. “Sarah.”

I choked on my coffee, which was preferable to drinking it. It wasn’t as bad as Hank’s, but it would still gag a maggot. “Mom? What about her?”

“I dated her in high school. Matter of fact, we went steady our senior year.”

“Really?” This was fascinating. Mom had never talked about her youth. I tried to picture my stern, irascible mother as a giggly teenager, wearing this man’s class ring on a chain around her neck, smooching in the back seat of his Chevy. “I take it you broke up. What happened?”

He flushed. “Tessa. She, um, grew up.”

I took a sip of the gruesome coffee to hide a smile. “I get it. Bratty little sister fills out. It’s an old story.”

“Is it? Well, it wasn’t to me. Took me totally by surprise.” He sighed. “Poor Sarah was so hurt. And furious with Tessa, as if she’d deliberately stolen me away.”

“Well, did she?”

“Hell, no. Tessa was so mad at me for breaking Sarah’s heart that it was two years before she’d have anything to do with me. Sarah had moved away right after graduation, and Tessa blamed me for that, too.”

“Could that be it? God, I never would’ve imagined something so trivial.”

He cocked his head. “What are you talking about?”

I dug in my backpack for the letter and handed it over without another word. I could have quoted it to him verbatim, I had read it so many times in the past week.

Dear Sarah,

I find it hard to believe that the tiny infant I once held in my arms is now a grown woman. I have no doubt you’ve been a perfect mother, just as you’ve been perfect in every other aspect of your life. Oh, dear, that sounded like a snipe, didn’t it? Guess we’re getting too old for sibling rivalry. I’m enclosing another check. Please don’t send this one back. The ranch is doing very well, and Wood never stints on my spending money. Use it to buy her something nice for a graduation gift. If she’s planning to go on to college, let me know, and I’ll send more to help cover the tuition. I have a right to help her, Sarah. Your pride is misplaced if you use it to deprive Taylor of the monetary assistance I can so easily provide.

I wish you would write to me, but please, can’t we drop the old argument? I’ll come to Houston any time you like, but the two of you simply cannot come here. Not now. Why can’t you understand?

Send a picture of Taylor, would you? She must be beautiful. You and I were certainly pretty at that age, and her father is a very handsome man.

Oh, Sarah, can’t you stop holding grudges? We could be close again, if only you’d let go of the past.

Your sister,

Tessa.

Crawford handed the letter back to me, his expression unreadable. “This was dated ten years ago.”

I nodded. "My eighteenth birthday. Mom must have torn up the check or sent it back. I scratched for every penny, all the way through college." He nodded for me to go on, so I did, feeling the secret's weight easing from my shoulders as I finally shared it with someone else. "After Mom died, I was packing up her things so I could put the house on the market. I've helped her keep up the payments for years, but I knew I wouldn't be able to swing it on my own. I found this letter tucked under the lining of her jewelry box. What's baffling is why she didn't throw it away, if she really hated Tessa so much."

"Maybe she wanted you to find it. Someday."

"Maybe." I doubted it.

"So, you came to meet an aunt you never knew you had, is that it?" I had the strange feeling that he was hanging on my every word.

"Not really," I said. "I came to find out from Tessa who my father is. It's obvious from the letter that she knows."

"You mean you don't?"

I shrugged. "Mom wouldn't talk about him, except to say he had abandoned us while I was still in diapers." I took a deep breath, striving for calm. "You said before that you and Tessa had become friends again. I hate to ask, but do you think you could find out why she won't talk to me?"

He was shaking his head. "Already tried. I phoned her this morning to get the scoop on what that little scene last night was all about."

"And?"

"She hung up on me. Twice."

I felt the anger rising again. "Damn it, Sheriff, I have a right to know his name, don't I? Don't you think I'm entitled to at least that much? I have no idea what Tessa's problem is, and at this point, I'm not sure I care. But she'll tell me what I came to find out, or I'll stay in Perdue until we both rot."

A knock at the door interrupted whatever he might have been about to say, and Billy stuck his head in. "Scuse me, Sheriff, but Cal needs to be goin', and you'd told him to hang around."

"Thanks, Billy. We'll talk later, Taylor. Come on."

Billy seemed pleased when Crawford told him the news. "You're mighty pretty for a deputy," he told me.

I smiled at him. "Thank you." I trailed him into the front office. "So, Sheriff, do I wear jeans or what?"

“Better keep your shirt on, too,” advised an amused voice at my shoulder. “We have decency laws in this town.” Damn the man, always sneaking up on me.

“Cut it out, Cal. Jeans are fine, Taylor, but I can’t let you carry a handgun yet.”

“Yet?” I wasn’t sure I was thrilled by the prospect, now or in the future. I had researched guns for my work but had never so much as held a real one in my hand.

Crawford misinterpreted my reaction. “Don’t get me wrong. You’re a real deputy, and you’re entitled, but I’d rather wait and let Cal take you out practice shooting a little first. He’s a certified instructor.”

“Glad to, boss,” Cal said.

“Uh, yeah, great.” I wasn’t sure I wanted to be around Cal with a weapon in my possession. The sheriff was already shorthanded.

“So, Cal, how about taking Taylor out for a tour of the festival grounds? Get her used to the idea. We can’t have our newest deputy fainting away at her first sight of a snake.”

“Thanks heaps,” I mumbled.

The patrol car was a nondescript beige sedan with an old-fashioned red bubble set on top, like a large maraschino cherry. Inside, a metal grill separated the front seat from the back, and the mingled odors of urine, sweat, and vomit permeated the upholstery. I immediately rolled down the passenger side window.

“Damn,” Cal muttered as he got behind the wheel. “I hate this car.”

I couldn’t say I blamed him.

“Is there a 7-11 nearby?” I asked as he eased into the street. “I’m out of cigarettes.”

“Nearest 7-11 is in Lubbock, but I’ll swing by Posey’s.”

Posey’s turned out to be a small grocery store situated in a prime location at one corner of the square, its interior an odd blend of modern convenience and old-time general store. Bright fluorescent lights illuminated most of the nooks and crannies, but the cash register was of the hand-crank variety. A sleek freezer section was well stocked with frozen pizzas and Lean Cuisine entrees, but the canned goods were lined up on floor-to-ceiling shelves behind the counter. A metal display bin was crammed with Mars Bars and Snickers, while a row of huge glass jars lined the countertop, brimming with gumballs, rock candy, and soft taffy wrapped in twists of waxed paper.

An elderly woman perched on a high stool near the cash register, her nose buried in a tattered paperback entitled *Lust’s Naked Passion*. She looked up reluctantly as we came in, nodded at Cal, then examined me unabashedly, her beady eyes taking in my badge. Her interest

in me was demonstrated by the rapidity with which she slammed shut the book, not even bothering to mark her place.

Cal obliged with introductions.

“Call me Bo,” cooed Bonita Posey. “I’ll be eighty-two next Monday.”

“Congratulations,” I offered. Cal was engrossed in a display of corn nuts, leaving me to my own resources.

“You’re supposed to say that I simply can’t be that old,” Bo informed me. “Everyone else does. Trying to stay on my good side, you know. I hold a lot of folks by the short hairs around here.”

I was startled into a laugh, and she cackled along with me, a large wart on her chin bobbing.

“Well, you don’t look a day over eighty, and I’d like a pack of cigarettes, please.”

She shook a gnarled finger at me. “Shouldn’t smoke. It’ll kill you.” Scrabbling beneath the counter, she produced a pack of unfiltered Camels and lit one, blowing a perfect smoke ring. “How old are you, gal? Twenty-three?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“I reckon you’ve got a few years to go. What brand?” As she placed my choice on the countertop, I gave in to an irresistible impulse and requested a can of green beans. Cal looked up in surprise, but Bo nodded briskly and produced a long-handled hook. Quick as a cat’s sneeze, she snagged a can from the top-most shelf. It toppled obediently, and she made a neat left-handed catch.

“Wow,” I marveled. “A genuine can of corn.”

“Beans,” Cal pointed out, looking confused.

Bo’s cheeks crinkled like withered apples. “Obviously not a baseball fan,” she said, cocking a thumb at Cal. “But you are, right, sweetie?”

“And Bo knows baseball,” I joked.

We gave each other a delighted high-five, then I paid for my purchases and followed Cal back to the car.

“Crazy old lady,” he muttered, starting the engine.

“She’s not, though, is she? I’ll bet more than a few people are scared of her.”

He smiled. “Bo is what you might call a powerful influence around here.” He pulled away from the curb. “Doesn’t hurt that she probably has more money stashed away in her sock drawer than the local bank has in its vault. What the hell was all that about corn?”

I shook my head pityingly. “I’ll bet you’re a football fan, aren’t you? Well, ‘can of corn’ is a baseball term, referring to a pop fly that’s easy to catch because a player doesn’t have to run for it. The ball just seems to fall straight down into his glove. The phrase originated from the method of retrieving stock in old county stores.”

“I get it.” Cal shook his head. “You’re one strange woman, you know that? Hang on, now. I’m taking a shortcut.”

From that announcement, I expected a back road. A foolish notion. We had reached the outskirts of town, and even as he spoke, Cal jerked the steering wheel sharply to the left, hurling us into an open pasture. I hastily fastened my seat belt, but that didn’t prevent my teeth from chattering like demented chipmunks as the car jounced across the rutted field. Before I could catch my breath to scream at him, we had left the pasture behind. Cal touched the brake imperceptibly, then swung onto a narrow path, unfortunately coated with loose gravel. We hit a pothole roughly the size of the Grand Canyon, and my teeth caught the edge of my tongue. I yelped, but the sound was drowned out by the rattle of gravel against the hubcaps. Cal grimaced fixedly, probably clamping his own teeth together, but obviously enjoying my terror. I flashed back to grade school and a boy named Jimmy Hollister who had dangled a rubber spider, hoping to hear me squeal, and wondered if males ever outgrew this particular brand of macho insensitivity.

Determined to provide as little entertainment as possible, I pried my eyes from the treacherous road ahead and concentrated on the plastic charm hanging from Cal’s key ring. It was bouncing against the steering column with almost clockwork regularity, and I hoped that watching it might send me into a blissful hypnotic state. It might have worked, too, if the picture painted upon the charm had been anything besides a rattlesnake. Honestly, these people were obsessed with reptiles.

With a final squealing of tires, Cal whipped onto a paved surface and brought the patrol car to a stop, grinning Jimmy Hollister’s grin, silently daring me to have hysterics.

“More fun than a roller coaster,” I said lightly, unbuckling my seat belt and opening the door. “Is there a Ferris wheel, too?”

It was as if I had passed a rite of initiation. Something eased between us. “Matter of fact, there is.” He pointed.

And so there was, its brightly colored cars suspended motionless in the morning sunshine. Beyond, a sea of canvas tents billowed, interspersed with more rides: a carousel crammed with

newly painted horses, an Octopus, a Whip. It wasn't Astroworld, but it was far more than I had expected of a festival hosted by a county the size of Derrick.

"I told you, it's a big tourist draw," Cal said, as if he'd read my thoughts. "We get folks from as far away as Maine."

"You're kidding." I was still gawking. "What in the world is that?" I indicated an unusual building off to our right. Constructed of rough-hewn stone and timber, it looked like a cross between a fort and a medieval insane asylum.

"We call it our county auditorium, for lack of a better label. Perdue's founder had a town meeting hall in mind when he built it, but now it's used for everything from little theater productions to V.F.W. meetings. I'll take you through it later. Let's go check out the grounds first."

The field that served as the festival site was surrounded by a tall chain-link fence, but the double gate stood open. I could smell cotton candy and something else, unidentifiable, but delectable. People looked up from their various tasks as we passed, a few waving at Cal, most studying me with undisguised curiosity. Cal ducked into one of the larger tents and I followed. As soon as I stepped inside, the elusive aroma that had beckoned surrounded me in tempting waves, reminding me that I had skimped on breakfast.

A stubby man with a prickly gray crewcut stood behind an immense kettle of hot oil. As we watched, he lifted from it a wire basket filled with crisp nuggets of fried chicken, which he dumped into a bowl lined with paper towel. I edged closer, inhaling the ambrosial fragrance. My stomach growled softly.

Cal sniffed appreciatively. "Starting a little early, aren't you, Dave? No tourists until day after tomorrow."

The man chuckled. "Testing out a different recipe. The wife wanted to try some new spices." He wiped his glistening forehead with a wadded handkerchief and peered at me. "Who's your companion? Is that a badge she's wearin'?"

"Sorry. Dave Underwood, this is Taylor Madison. The sheriff hired her to help out during the festival."

"He what?" Underwood roared. "Of all the damn fool notions—beg pardon, miss." He was obviously asking forgiveness for the 'damn,' not for his sentiments. "A woman's got no business in police work. Has Miles flipped his lid?"

Cal remained unperturbed. "We're starting off a brand new century, Dave. If you have any objections, take them up with Sheriff Crawford. In the meantime, I'll volunteer to be your first

guinea pig.” He grabbed a napkin from a stack and helped himself to a piece of the chicken. “Want some, Taylor?”

My raised consciousness was still reeling from Underwood’s outrageous proclamation, but I reached greedily for the food anyway. I could defend my sex later, after demands of the flesh had been satisfied. One bite convinced me that, male chauvinist or not, Dave Underwood could have put Colonel Sanders out of business in a week. Boneless and tender, the chicken had a light aftertaste, not unpleasant, that reminded me of fish. Must have been one of the wife’s new spices. I reminded myself that the master chef had referred to his spouse in the same manner he might have mentioned a power saw he owned and tried to think less kindly of him. But I took another bite of the wonderful chicken anyway.

Cal polished off his piece and reached for another. “Where did you get the meat?”

Underwood was mixing more batter. “Oh, the skinners started early this year.”

“Who are the Skinners?” I mumbled to Cal with my mouth full. “Local chicken farmers?”

He frowned at me for a moment, obviously puzzled, then his eyebrows shot up and I was uneasy to glimpse a flicker of Jimmy Hollister’s devilment.

“Snake skinners, honey,” Underwood informed me before Cal could decide how best to enjoy the revelation. “I usually have to experiment with the meat we have left in the freezer, but what you’re eating was fresh-killed this very morning. Better that way.”

I muttered something and rushed for the tent flap, one hand pressed hard over my mouth. Cal’s laughter and Underwood’s surprised exclamation drifted after me.

“That was a dirty trick,” I told Cal after a visit to one of the porta-cans. The cup of Coke he handed me was welcome, but I made it clear it wasn’t sufficient apology.

“C’mon, Taylor, I really thought you knew. Besides, it’s not like I poisoned you.”

“It isn’t? Last I heard, rattlesnakes were poisonous.”

“Venomous,” he corrected. “Toadstools are poisonous. The meat you ate wasn’t either one. Now, cheer up. Want to check out some of the crafts booths? I’ll bet you’d like that.”

I clutched the paper cup so hard it crumpled, resisting the urge to fling its contents at him. “I probably would at that,” I replied with deceptive calm. “Crafts couldn’t possibly offend the little lady’s sensibilities, could they?”

“Okay, I had that coming. Don’t pay any mind to Underwood, by the way. The sheriff’ll set him straight.”

Slightly appeased, I allowed him to show me some of the booths. None were yet in actual operation, but the proprietors were more than happy to show off their wares while getting a close-up glimpse of Derrick County's newest novelty: a female deputy.

Shaking offered hands and acknowledging introductions, I browsed through belts, hatbands and boots fashioned from rattlesnake skin. There were also bracelets, earrings, barrettes and chokers. Wallets and bolos, money clips and cigarette cases, dog collars and cufflinks.

One wizened little man—the winner, he informed me proudly, of the “largest snake” trophy for three years running—offered to take me on a hunt.

“I’ll show ya all the best hidey-holes,” he confided, as Cal smothered a smirk. “You got a snakebite kit yet? Shame on you, Cal. Here ya go, missy. A little present from old Arnold.”

I turned the object over in my hand. It was a cylinder made of reddish-brown rubber, rounded on both ends.

“Open her up,” Arnold urged, and I gave it a twist. It separated into two pieces, and I began to cautiously explore the items crammed into the hollow core: a small razor blade, a length of surgical gauze, a tiny vial of antiseptic, a sterile bandage.

“Hang onto that, little gal,” Arnold told me solemnly. “It might save your life someday.”

Cal was tugging at my arm, but I ignored him. “I don’t understand. What’s all this for?”

Arnold dribbled tobacco juice into a Styrofoam cup and squinted at me. “Let’s say a rattler up and bites you on the leg. First thing you gotta do is stop the poison from spreading, right? That’s what the gauze is for. Tie it above the wound, nice and tight. A turn-ee-kit, see?”

“Then, to get the poison out, you use the razor to make an X-shaped cut on top of the fang marks. It’s best if you got someone with you to suck out the venom, but if you’re alone, you can’t always reach the spot yourself. That’s where the container comes in handy.”

He took half of the rubber cylinder away from me and squeezed it, pressing its mouth against my forearm before releasing the pressure. When he pulled it away, it had left a quarter-sized hickey on my skin. “See there? Pretty good suction, though not as good as a human mouth. It’ll get most of the stuff out, though. Splash on a little of this junk,” he continued, indicating the vial, “slap on a Band-Aid, and you’re good as cured.”

“Thanks, Arnold,” Cal put in, snatching the kit and stuffing it into his pocket. “I promised to show Taylor the pits, and then we have to get going. See you tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” I repeated weakly and allowed Cal to drag me away. Once we were out of earshot, he propped me against the side of a vacant booth and, digging the kit from his pocket, tossed it into a nearby litter barrel.

“Hey!” I protested. “I might need that!”

“If a snake bites you, Taylor, what you need is a hospital. As fast as you can get to one. Those stupid kits have caused more permanent injury to people than snakes ever have.”

“How?”

“Well, for one thing, slowing down the blood flow is a good idea, but a badly applied tourniquet will stop it, and you don’t want to do that. For another, you definitely don’t want to cut the wound. It’s likely you’ll end up damaging a tendon or a nerve. Shit, I wish we could outlaw those hokey kits, but the tourists love them.”

I must have still looked skeptical because he grabbed my shoulders and gave me a little shake. “Forget all the western movies, Taylor. People don’t fall down and die just because a snake bites them. A rattler never injects all its venom in one bite, but even if you take multiple strikes, you’ll have at least an hour to get to a hospital, usually more. Now, would you like to see the snake pits, or not?”

I agreed more readily than I would have an hour before, having grown used to the sight of the leathery skin. Besides, I felt the need to dispel my reputation as a naïve city slicker.

The gigantic steel stock tanks were set up in the largest tent, and I heard the noise while we were still some distance away. I shuddered but kept walking. Cal held the flap open for me, then led the way to the nearest tank. I peered cautiously over the edge.

In case I was beholding a preview of Hell, I sent up a silent vow to lead a better life. The long bodies slithered over and around and under each other, filling my ears with the rasping of rough skin. Cal poked a long stick into the midst of the writhing mass and several snakes coiled defensively, their tails whipping into action. The resulting sound was nothing like a baby’s rattle, as I had vaguely expected, but more like the buzzing of an overloaded electrical circuit.

As if from far away, I heard Cal explaining that these were Western Diamondbacks, directing my attention to the diamond-shaped markings that decorated their hides. I pried my fingers from the rim of the tank and turned away, desperately seeking something else on which to focus my attention.

“What are those people doing?” I asked, pointing out a group huddled on one side of the tent, their backs to us.

Cal took my arm. “Come on and see. It’s an interesting procedure.”

I hung back. “They’re not skinning...?”

“No, no. C’mom.”

I succeeded in wedging myself into the crowd, and by the time I saw what was going on, I was trapped. As I watched in helpless horror, a man reached his gloved hand into an aquarium and pulled out a writhing snake. I recoiled, bumping into the spectator behind me.

“He’s fixin’ to milk it,” someone whispered in my ear.

“Like a cow?” I squeaked. It made perfect sense, at that. What more appropriate beverage to accompany fried snake than a nice, cold glass of snake’s milk?

“Naw, it’s not really milk. It’s venom. He’s takin’ the venom.”

“Why?” I was whispering, too, as the man hooked the snake’s fangs over the rim of a wide-mouthed vial.

Cal had made his way to my side and took over the explanation. “The venom is sent to research facilities, toxicology labs. They use it, among other things, to produce antivenin.”

“Oh.”

The milker spotted us. “Howdy, Cal. Want a turn?”

Cal chuckled. “Not today, Charlie, thanks. I’ll pump a few later on in the week, okay?”

Charlie nodded and began squeezing a point somewhere behind the reptile’s head. Translucent fluid dribbled into the container. I closed my eyes.

BY SIX THAT evening, Cal correctly deduced that I’d had enough of snakes for one day and offered to take me back into town for a harmless hamburger. But the instant he started the engine, a frantic voice began babbling over the radio.

“Unit two. Base to unit two. Aw, c’mon, Les, where are you?”

Cal sighed and keyed the mike. “This is Cal. What’s up, Billy?”

“Cal? I thought unit two was Lester’s.”

“Not today, it isn’t. What do you want?”

“I want Lester. No, I mean, the sheriff wants Lester. He’s been lookin’ for him all over.”

“He’s not here,” Cal replied. “Two, out.”

“Aw, Cal, wait a minute. Don’t you know where he is? Sheriff Crawford is mad about something, and if he doesn’t find Les, he’ll be mad at me instead.”

“I’m not Forman’s keeper, Billy. Now, I’m turnin’ off the radio and goin’ to get some dinner. Two, out.” He punched a button, cutting Billy off in mid-squawk.

Somehow, I doubted this was recognized radio procedure, but the sarcastic comment died on my lips. Cal was taking a nice, paved road back to town, and the last thing I wanted was to summon up an irritated Jimmy Hollister.

The café was packed. Rita, still on duty, looked exhausted as she cleared a table for us at a recently vacated booth in the rear corner. Merle Haggard, never a favorite of mine, twanged a cheatin' song from the jukebox. I scanned the menu while Rita rested one hip on the table edge in an attempt to give her feet a brief respite. I recognized the pose from my own waitressing days and was glad I had accepted Crawford's offer instead of pursuing a job here.

"Hey, Cal, have you seen Lester tonight?" Rita asked. It seemed a casual question, but Cal reacted violently.

"Goddammit, no, I haven't!" he roared, slamming the menu card against the tabletop. "Why does everyone seem to think I keep the guy in my back pocket?"

Rita's eyes blazed. "I know you're jealous of him, an' I can't say as I blame you. He's gonna beat the pants off you in the election, and you know it." She snatched up our menus. "Bein' a fancy college boy don't make you better than the rest of us, Cal Arnette. Might do you good to remember that. Lester may not have your schoolin', but I never heard him curse at a lady neither. I'll just bring y'all a coupla burgers, so you can eat 'em quick and make room for someone else to sit." She marched off, quivering with indignation.

"Well," I said, after a moment. "So much for small town life being boring."

Cal's glower faded. "Sorry. I shouldn't have started that. I get so blasted tired of trying to keep track of Lester."

"I don't get it. Why should anyone have to keep track of him?"

"Beats me." Cal sighed, shredding a paper napkin. "All I know is, every time I turn around, Crawford is asking me to check up on the golden boy."

"What election was she talking about?"

"Sheriff's election. Crawford's decided not to run again in November."

I fished out my cigarettes, and he pushed the ashtray toward me. "So, you and Lester are going to face off, is that it?"

"Maybe. We've both talked about it."

"Oh. Well, good luck, I guess."

Cal grimaced. "Luck won't have much to do with it. Most likely, whoever Crawford decides to back will win. As far as the people around here are concerned, he can do no wrong. Anyone will tell you he's the best sheriff Derrick County has ever had."

Rita stomped up to the booth and practically threw our plates at us. "No dessert? Good." She left.

I picked up a rather soggy french fry and ate it. "So, who's he going to support?"

Cal salted his burger and dumped catsup on his plate. “He says he hasn’t decided yet, but that’s a lot of crap. He’ll choose Lester.”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

“For one thing, Crawford and Lester’s dad have been friends for years. You’d think they shared custody of Les, the way Crawford looks out for him. More practically, Les has a year’s seniority on me, and that would count for something in any department. Besides, Lester is more the clean-cut, all-American-boy type. A Crawford clone.”

He took an angry bite of burger. After he’d chewed and swallowed, he swiped his mouth and shook his head. “No, that was unfair. Crawford doesn’t care that I’m half Mexican. But Lester was an M.P. in the U.S. Army, and I was a law student. I think the sheriff’s idea is that Les has been heading for this profession from the beginning, but he thinks I’m just settling.” He smiled tightly. “Copping out, so to speak.”

“Are you?” I asked bluntly.

His brown eyes met mine squarely. “No. I wasn’t cut out to be a lawyer and having this job has only confirmed that. I’ve come to believe that law enforcement is more important on a basic level than the slice of the justice system you experience in a courtroom. I really believe I’d make a better sheriff than Lester, and I don’t mean for that to sound as conceited as it does. I also think I might have a chance at winning an unbiased election.

“What I really wish is that Crawford would stay out of it and let each of us run our own campaign. But that’s not going to happen. The people expect him to have a say in his replacement, sort of like a king passing his crown to the favored prince.” He sighed and took a sip of water. “Okay, enough about that. What’s your secret?”

“Secret?”

“I haven’t asked questions all day, but it’s really beginning to bug me. You show up out of nowhere and all of a sudden—bang! You’re hired on as a deputy. I’m pretty darn sure you’ve never been a cop before. Thought at first you were just a tourist who’d had some bad luck, but even Crawford wouldn’t hire a total stranger.”

I had to smile a little at that, since it was, after all, virtually what he had done.

“I heard it was something to do with Tessa Potter,” he went on.

I blinked in surprise.

“C’mon, Taylor, it’s a small town, as you’ve pointed out to me at least a dozen times today.” He chuckled. “Besides, I ran into Mabel Donnely this morning while she was setting up her crafts booth.”

“And what did she tell you?”

“Not much, but enough to put a good whet on my curiosity. So, spill it. Clear up the mystery.”

“Long story. Maybe I’ll tell you some other time.”

Cal shrugged and polished off the last bite on his plate. “Whatever.” He checked his watch and sighed. “I’ve got to see if Les made it back by the office. He’s still got my patrol car, and I want it back, damn it. His stinks like a cesspool.”

“So, why did he take yours?”

Cal rolled his eyes. “Because his stinks like a cesspool, why do you think? He ‘borrows’ mine every chance he gets...easier than cleaning his own. Want me to drop you off somewhere?”

“Thanks, but I can walk. It’s a nice night, and I guess I don’t have to worry about being mugged in a place like this.”

He groaned. “I hope not. I know who’d have to write the report.” He tipped an imaginary hat and ambled away. I noticed he’d dropped enough money on the table to pay for both meals plus a generous tip and thought about telling Rita there was obviously a gentleman lurking somewhere inside the man.

I kept my walk to the hardware store brisk. The night was growing colder, and I supposed I was going to have to break down and buy myself a decent coat. Or, maybe going back to Houston would be an even better idea.

Hank was closing the store when I arrived. He looked up from tallying the day’s receipts and gave me a friendly greeting.

“Sheriff dropped these by for you.” He lugged my suitcase and my laptop from beneath the counter. “Told me you’d hired on. Good for you!” He handed me a key. “This fits the back door. Don’t want you to be locked out if I’m not here. Deputies work some strange hours.”

I was touched, not only that he was so concerned with my convenience after I had practically thrust myself into his keeping, but that he would trust someone he barely knew with a key to his store.

“I reckon Tessa must’ve been tickled pink to see you,” he went on, and I heard the subtle question.

I couldn’t take offense. Poor man, he had to be confused, since he obviously hadn’t yet spoken to Mabel Donnelly. I also couldn’t think of a way to answer, so instead, I offered to pay rent for the room.

“Shucks, now, don’t be silly. It’s just a dusty old storeroom, not the Holiday Inn.” He looked at his watch. “Well, I’d best be gettin’ on home. The missus has dinner on the table by now.”

Bless him, he knew how to take a hint.

Hazel was glad to see me but didn’t seem overjoyed. I had a feeling she had spent a delightful day, exploring every piece of junk in the room. She loved squeezing into tight places. I replenished her food and water, then sat on the wide windowsill for a time, stroking her soft fur and looking out over the lights of Perdue. They didn’t stretch very far into the distance, and I could sense the miles of uninhabited blackness beyond. I shivered, suddenly feeling lonely and very far from home.

Footsteps sounded out in the hall, and I heard the rattle of a key in the lock. My neighbor was home. A few minutes later, I heard a phone ring, and was struck by an idea. I forced myself to wait a decent interval, not wanting to interrupt the call, then crossed through the bathroom and knocked on the adjoining door.

“Excuse me,” I called, “but I wondered if I could borrow...”

The door was yanked open. Cal Arnette looked every bit as startled as I felt.

“What the hell?” we said in unison.

“Don’t tell me this is where you’re holed up.” Cal had already removed his uniform shirt and seemed to suddenly realize that. He hastily closed the door part way, but not before I had gotten a delicious glimpse of a very nicely tanned and muscled chest.

Dirty old lady, I scolded myself, trying to remember why I had knocked in the first place.

“You wanted to borrow something?” he prompted. “A cup of sugar? Five bucks? My rubber boots? Give me a hint.”

“Your phone.”

“Oh. In that case, you’re in luck. Hang on a second.” The door closed, and when it opened again, he had pulled on a Texas A&M T-shirt.

He stepped back and I eased past him into a small living area. Neater than I would have expected of a bachelor, but borderline shabby. The plaid loveseat clashed with a floral-patterned armchair, and one leg of the scarred coffee table was braced with a paperback book.

Cal pointed to the phone. “Help yourself. I’ve got to go back out for a few minutes.” He yawned hugely. “Sorry...I’ve gotten maybe seven hours of sleep in the last forty-eight, and I have to be at the festival grounds by six a.m. tomorrow. Some men are coming out from Lubbock to finish setting up the rides.”

“Oh, should I be ready then, too?”

“Naw, one guy can handle this. Get some rest while you can ’cause things around here’ll really be hopping over the next few days.”

“Don’t you mean slithering?”

He winked, then left.

I retrieved my laptop and got the modem hooked up to the phone jack.

Sitting on the floor with the little computer balanced in my lap, I typed out a three-page e-mail message to my agent, Annie, letting her know what I had gotten myself into. She would probably laugh all the way through it, thinking it served me right, but it felt good to share it with her, just the same. I wasn’t quite so alone anymore.

A quick check of my Internet directory showed that the number printed on the phone would allow me to dial a Lubbock access number without incurring long distance charges. “I thank you, and my maxed-out credit card thanks you,” I mumbled, keying in the number. Through the laptop’s speakers, I heard the rapid beeps of dialing, the whirring of a line ringing somewhere, a click, and the reassuring tone-then-static of a modem finding its soul mate.

Afterward, I even managed to work on chapter fifteen of my latest endeavor for an hour or so, before succumbing to my sagging eyelids and curling up on the lumpy little rollaway next to Hazel.

I didn’t sleep well. Either the bed had shrunk, or I had grown a few inches taller. Hazel, who kept trying to dig a nest in my stomach, wasn’t any help.

Needless to say, I was cranky as hell by the time I awoke to the shrill ring of a phone. Cal’s phone, I realized groggily. It kept ringing, and the pillow I clamped over my ears didn’t help at all.

After twenty rings, I staggered through the bathroom and pounded the adjoining door with both fists.

“Damn it, Cal, are you going to answer that?” The phone rang again. And again.

I finally remembered what Cal had said about getting to the festival grounds before six o’clock this morning. The phone was still jangling in that frantic way phones seem to develop when no one will answer them, so I twisted the doorknob, not really surprised to discover Cal hadn’t bothered with the lock on his side and lunged at the noisy beast.

“What?” I shouted into the receiver. Miss Manners would have been highly offended by my complete disregard of telephone etiquette.

“Christ, Cal, what took you so long? You’ve gotta get over here right away. Oh, God.”

A slight lisp clued me in to the identity of the caller.

“Billy, this is Taylor. Cal’s not here.”

There was a slight gasp at the other end of the line. “Ms. Madison? What are you—?”

I am by no means a morning person, but even in my presently foggy state, I grasped what the boy must be assuming. But Billy was already babbling again, so an explanation would have to wait.

“Whoa,” I told him. “Slow down, I can’t understand what you’re saying. Who’s Miss Stenson?”

I heard him take a deep breath, and when he spoke again, it was more slowly, though his tone remained urgent.

“Dorothy Stenson. She’s the sheriff’s housekeeper. She—she...”

“Spit it out, Billy!”

“She says he’s dead! She says Sheriff Crawford is dead!”

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