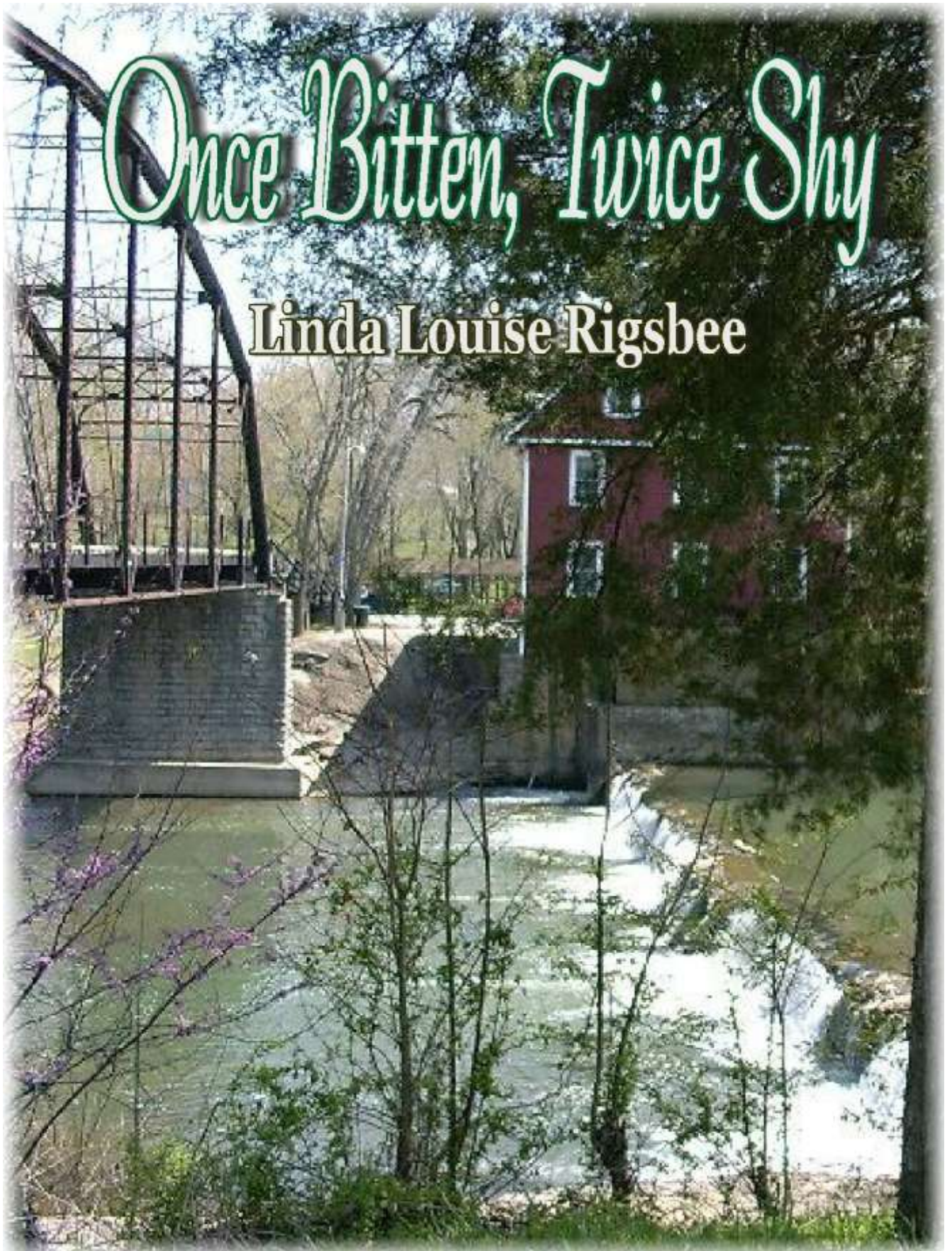


Once Bitten, Twice Shy

Linda Louise Rigsbee



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Prologue

He poured carbonated red grape juice into a long-stemmed glass and set the bottle back in the refrigerator. With the glass in one hand and the letter in another, he sauntered into his office. The handwriting on the letter was neat and feminine. Taking a sip of the wine colored liquid, he sat the glass in a coaster on the smooth mahogany desk and dropped the letter beside it. The room was too warm. Every time the weather got cold outside, other residents in the complex cranked their heaters up and then he had to adjust his own thermostat. He removed his jacket, folding it carefully and placing it over the back of the visitor's chair. Loosening his tie, he dropped into the leather office chair and picked up the envelope. "Alexander Mathew Barnett," he read aloud. His laugh was little more than an expulsion of air. Only in the last year had his sister started writing, and it was always stiff and formal. At least she was willing to communicate now. No doubt the opening of dialog was due to her roommate. Carmen must be quite a woman to inspire such admiration from Katie. He'd like to meet her sometime. He pulled out a drawer and selected a wooden handled letter opener with gold inlay. Slicing the end of the envelope open with one smooth movement, he placed the letter opener back where it belonged and shoved the drawer shut. Pressing on the sides of the envelope to open the end, he blew into it, exposing the letter inside. As he plucked the letter out, a picture fell on the table, face down.

"*Carmen at the fair,*" was written on the back of it.

He flipped it over as he opened the letter. One glance led to a double-take and then he abandoned the letter. He sat up straight and picked up the picture, whistling in admiration. Blond curls framed one of the prettiest faces he had ever seen. The smile with those full lips was sad, sweet and somehow innocent. She was squatting beside a goat, one knee lower than the other.

He leaned back in his chair, the letter forgotten as he studied the girl in the picture. She looked to be about twenty-two or three. In his mind's eye, he had pictured her much older – probably because of the way Katie spoke of her. A girl that young didn't usually have much common sense.

The swell of well developed breasts peeked from a tank top that might have looked suggestive on someone else. This lady wore it with the finesse of a duchess. In modest shorts, her legs were smooth – shapely, without the sharp angles of a muscular build. Slim ankles and lean upper thighs gave her the look of a model. And yet, according to Katie, she ran a budding goat dairy on a run-down farm in Northwest Arkansas.

He tossed the picture on the desk and leaned forward to pick up the letter. Yes, he definitely wanted to meet her.

According to Katie's letter, kidding season was almost on them and they were getting the barn ready. She said they were working their tails off. He grunted. If he knew Katie, Carmen was probably doing most of the work outside. Katie wasn't lazy, but she didn't like getting dirt under her fingernails. She'd make some man a nice housewife one day.

Once again she was inviting him to visit, but this time she said Carmen had offered

to let him use a room upstairs. They were a long way from the nearest hotel and Katie wanted to see him as much as possible. That didn't sound like Katie. When she left his apartment, all she took was a suitcase full of clothes. She even left his picture on her nightstand – a final insult that still stung. At the time she had told him if she never saw him again, it would be too soon. Granted, she was in the middle of a tantrum, but two years had passed without a word from her except notification when their aunt died. She had been cool toward him at the funeral, but that may have been due to the fact that she was grieving. Then a few months later she had sent the first letter, saying that she had a roommate and was working on a farm. That was a shocker. Well, she would turn 21 in a few months and her inheritance would be available. She could buy her own place then.

He carefully folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope. Retrieving the glass of grape sparkly, he picked up the picture and leaned back in the chair. There he sat for a while, sipping the juice while he studied the picture again. Something about her stirred his insides in a way that he thought might never happen again. Once before he had felt that way about a woman and she had literally left him waiting at the altar while she ran off with another man. Katie said it was because he was so controlling. Maybe she was right. Maybe he would never find a compatible mate. So far he'd managed to chase two women off before he reached thirty.

He tossed the picture back on the table and drained the glass. He wasn't going to go through that pain again. No woman was worth that. He stood and took the glass to the kitchen. Rinsing it, he placed it in the dishwasher and shut the door. A quick glance around the kitchen revealed sparkling clean countertops. Sterile was the word that came to mind. That described his life right now. Between college and work, there wasn't much time left for anything else.

He turned, starting for the living room, and then stopped. Retracing his steps to the office, he retrieved the picture. Striding back to the kitchen, he deliberately removed the caduceus magnet and centered the picture on the refrigerator door – eye level. Smiling, he anchored it with the magnet. A man could always dream.

The doorbell demanded his attention and he answered the door to find a tall young man standing in the hallway.

"So, where are you going on your vacation?" The younger man said with a big grin.

"Come in, Gerald," Alex responded dryly as he stepped aside to allow the lanky salesman into the room. "Forced vacation . . . isn't that an oxy-moron?"

Gerald walked into the room and favored Alex with a wry smile. "You're the only person I've ever known who has had to be forced to take a vacation." He strolled into the kitchen and glanced around. "Not a speck of food in sight."

Alex chuckled. "There's some sandwich stuff in the refrigerator. Help yourself."

Gerald stopped with one hand on the refrigerator door, his attention fixed on the photo.

"What's this?" he said, leaning down to examine it. "Wow!" He moved the magnet and plucked the picture from the door.

"My sister's room mate," Alex said, removing it from his hand and replacing it on the refrigerator. "What you're after is *inside* the refrigerator."

Gerald grinned at him. "Private stock, huh?"

"No, I've never met her."

Gerald opened the refrigerator door. "Why not? Didn't you say your sister has been asking you to visit?" He piled ham, sandwich spread, lettuce, a tomato and bread in his arms and allowed the door to shut on its own. "What are you waiting for?"

“She has a boyfriend.”

Gerald piled the food on the table and looked up at Alex. “Your sister or her roommate?”

Alex pulled out a chair. “Both. Shove some of that food over here.”

Gerald got a couple of plates from the cabinet and two knives. “Who’d think mighty-might would let a little thing like a boyfriend stop him.” He shoved a plate and knife toward Alex and then sat down.

The nickname had been given him by three other salesmen at the office. It wasn’t that he was so small. They were simply very tall – all well over six feet. Still, his tenacity was what had inspired the name, not his size.

Alex built a sandwich without responding.

Gerald stood and grabbed the picture from the refrigerator again. Sitting back down, he examined it.

“Maybe I’ll go visit your sister. I might get lucky.”

Alex reached over and snatched the picture from his hand, tucking it into his shirt pocket.

“Don’t talk about her that way.”

Gerald put his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his hands. “I wasn’t talking about your sister.”

Alex gave him a level look. “I didn’t think you were.”

Gerald grinned. “Well, well. You might not know it yet, buddy, but you’re hooked.”

Alex gathered his sandwich and lifted it. “My life is complicated enough,” he said, and took a bite out of the sandwich.

They ate in silence for a while and finally Gerald spoke, his tone conversational.

“So when are you leaving?”

Without looking up, Alex responded. “In a week or so, I guess. It sounds like they could use some help.”

Nothing more was said about the subject.

After Gerald left, Alex showered and changed into jeans, a western shirt and square-toed boots. Tucking the picture in his shirt pocket, he left the apartment and drove straight to the stable. There he saddled Ed and rode out to the exercise field. He did some of his best thinking in the saddle.

Chapter One

Carmen Pullock hunkered down into her heavy chore coat and scooted her chair closer to the potbellied stove. The wooden chair legs grated against the rough hardwood floor, echoing off the bare walls of her sparsely furnished living room. She clamped a rubber boot over a new knothole in the floor. Another place for a tin can lid. Not that it could keep the cold outside. The frigid air would simply sneak under the house and ooze up through the cracks in the floor. A rug would help, but it wouldn't stop the wind from climbing the insulationless walls or seeping through the gaps around the mopboards. Winters in Northwest Arkansas were usually mild, but this was the coldest in her memory.

"Happy Birthday," she muttered bitterly. Nothing seemed to be working out lately - not the dairy, and certainly not her love life.

The stove popped an angry protest about the growing flames and she flinched. The cantankerous old piece of junk. It would be another hour before the room was warm enough to hide her breath. Meanwhile, the wind whistled around the eaves and rattled the plastic covering on the windows, persistently seeking a port of entry. The ancient farmhouse needed repair - or a demolition crew. Neither of which she could afford. The house and eighty wild acres of Arkansas hills and hollows she had recently inherited represented her total wealth. Well, almost. But every dime spent on the house meant that much less she could invest in the dairy - and the dairy was the one thing that stood a chance of stimulating her anemic savings account. If the dairy didn't prove profitable, she would have to go back to Wal-Mart. Working for someone else wasn't her idea of a career. Besides, if the dairy went belly up, it would please Josh too much.

A door slammed down the hall and Katie sprinted into the room, hugging herself. Her words were barely comprehensible through chattering teeth as she leaned over the stove.

"Wh. . .en d. . .d. . .id it . . . t go out?"

"Huh? Oh, the stove?" Carmen made a face. "I don't know. I was so tired last night I didn't even wake up to add wood. I had to break an icicle off my lip this morning when I woke up."

Katie giggled. "Only you would think of such a thing." Blue eyes sparkled like sapphires in her round face, and a dimple danced at the corner of her generous mouth. She leaned down; peering through the soot smudged glass on the stove door. "It looks like it's starting to burn good." She straightened and spread plump hands out toward the stove. "Alex sure picked a fine time to visit, didn't he?"

There was no *good* time for Katie's brother to visit, but this had to be the worst. Frozen water pipes and unheated bedrooms had to be something new for a wealthy socialite. Surely Katie must realize he would be slumming it - and why. Carmen grabbed a chunk of wood from the box and jerked the stove door open. She tossed the fuel in and slammed the door before sparks could hop out on the stove pad.

"If he had the sense God gave a goose, he'd stay in Houston until spring."

Katie rolled her eyes. "Spring will be too late to witness the kidding. Anyway, he studied veterinary medicine for three years. All that education might come in handy if we have trouble."

Carmen eyed Katie sourly. "That was nearly seven years ago. I imagine he's forgotten half of the information, and the other half is probably outdated. I don't want him practicing on my hand picked stock. I can't afford to loose any of them at this point. If we need help, we can hire a real vet."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Carmen, they're goats, not race horses." At Carmen's sharp look, she shrugged. "Anyway, we could use a man around the place for a while."

Alex wasn't likely to be much help with the farm, but it wouldn't do any good to argue the point with Katie. Let her find out when he arrived. Carmen ran bluntly manicured fingers through her cropped off curls as her tongue explored a new crack in her dry lips.

"Josh is all the help we need, and he's right down the road." Actually, Josh was more than she needed, and Katie was more than she could afford.

Katie gnawed on her lower lip and let her gaze shift to a watermark on the yellowed wallpaper. "Yeah, but you two haven't seen much of each other lately, and . . ."

"That's what I thought," Carmen interrupted caustically, and gave the wood box a swift kick. "You're trying to play matchmaker again, aren't you?"

Blue eyes flashed in a face staining quickly with red. "Of course not. I told you it was *his* idea to come up to see me."

Carmen pushed away from the warming stove and stood. "And if you'd gone down there one of the zillion times he's invited you in the last two years, he wouldn't feel obligated to come up now."

Katie scowled. "I wish you'd get out of this black mood you've been in lately. Last month you said it would be fine if he came up for a visit. Don't you think it's a little late to back out now? He's probably already on the plane."

Carmen took a deep breath and let it out slowly. How could she explain her mood to Katie when she had so little understanding of it herself? At any rate, Katie was right. It was too late to change her mind now - and what difference did it make why Alex was coming? At least he was finally making an effort to see his sister - and Katie was actually excited about his visit. Didn't they know how fortunate they were to have each other - to have *any* family? She headed for the door, tossing a grumpy reply over her shoulder.

"I'm not backing out. But he's going to miss the telephone and television -- and that tiny bedroom upstairs isn't exactly the Hotel Hilton."

Katie rolled her eyes. "Oh Carmen, just because he's wealthy doesn't mean he's a preppie." She shrugged into her coat. "Anyway, I suppose I owe him something for the three years he bossed me around. Especially considering the way I deserted him after graduation."

Carmen paused with her hand on the doorknob. Inviting Alex to visit this farm sounded more like a payback than a gesture of appreciation.

"I know you think he was high handed about it, but as your guardian, it was his responsibility to encourage you to get a good education. After all, didn't you say your parents left a will dedicating money for that purpose? You said he quit college to take care of you. Obviously he thought . . ."

"I cheated him out of his chance at a good education?" Katie cut in defensively.

"Obviously he thought family ties were more important than education," Carmen persisted. "Anyway, there's nothing stopping him from finishing school now if he's still interested in becoming a veterinarian. The truth is, he probably likes being a salesman,

and why not? He travels all over the world and makes enough money to do it in style. He has everything.”

Katie contemplated Carmen with eyes wiser than her twenty years. “Not everything. Money can’t buy love.”

Carmen sighed impatiently. “Neither can poverty.”

The last thing she wanted to hear this morning was how poor little Alex had been jilted at the altar. Alex had a lot going for him. If he was having problems finding a virtuous mate, fault more likely lay in a character flaw than his looks - as Katie had so often implied. Being ugly as a mud fence hadn’t stopped Alex from becoming a financial success. And being attractive hadn’t improved her life much. Carmen jerked the door open and gasped at the rush of frigid air.

“And he doesn’t have to do chores in all kinds of weather,” she concluded with a shiver.

They darted outside and closed the door before the room lost the little warmth it had gained. The wind yanked Carmen’s hair with icy fingers. She pulled her hood up against its furious roar. Ahead of her, Katie stepped off the wooden porch into the ankle high snow and followed the trail Carmen had broken earlier on her trip to light the stove in the dairy. The sun wouldn’t be up for another hour, but the block walls of the dairy loomed clearly in the white landscape. The snow crunched under their feet and the icy wind carried Katie’s words back in a cloud of steam.

“I didn’t run off just because he wanted me to go to college, you know. I left because he’s a smothering mother hen. Always telling me what to do - ordering me around. That may be your idea of an ideal relationship, but I had to get away from him if I was going to have a life of my own.”

Carmen took a few extra steps to catch up with Katie’s stride. A life of her own? Katie had gone directly from Alex to her Aunt Polly. When her aunt had died, Katie had moved in with Carmen. It was hard to imagine Katie conducting her life without the help of others. No wonder Alex concocted this ridiculous trip to coax Katie back to Houston. He had his work cut out for him, though. Katie might have been brought up by a socialite, but she was all redneck now. There was only one thing Katie treasured more than the farm. Bill Carlson, co-owner of Carl & Son’s Feed Store. Fortunately, Bill was equally smitten with Katie. Yeah, sometimes it actually worked out that way. Carmen eyed Katie coolly and responded in a dry tone.

“Being bossed around isn’t my idea of marital bliss. I don’t want to be completely dominated. I know it’s an archaic idea for a woman to want the man to wear the pants, but I’m entitled to my opinion the same as you and Lori. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be cherished and protected. For the right man, I’m willing to turn over the running of the farm and become his helpmate. After all, it worked for Mom and Dad.”

Katie laughed without humor. “Yeah, but your mother and father were from a different generation. Being subservient is taking a backward step for women.”

Carmen shook her head. “I have no intention of being subservient - and how is that taking a backward step, anyway? I think it was a backward step when women started stooping to the morals of men.”

Katie breathed a heavy sigh of resignation. “All right, all right. Do me a favor and don’t climb back up on your soapbox. Anyway, you don’t know what it’s like to have a bossy brother. Then again, you did have Josh. Obviously he isn’t as overbearing as Alex.”

“Give Alex a break. Being left in charge of your kid sister when you’re not much more than a kid yourself isn’t a fair test. I don’t know anything about your brother - except the fact that he got you through school. Considering the things you say you did,

that was an accomplishment in itself. Josh never had to deal with anything like that. He appointed himself as my big brother . . . when we were still toddlers, I think. The worst of it is, now he thinks he has some kind of claim staked on me. The way I figure it, he's more in love with the idea of having a woman worship him than he is with me. Sure, he says he wants a woman who doesn't work out of the home, but he thinks she should spend all her time doing housework and raising children. I didn't get a degree in animal husbandry so I could sit in the house knitting booties."

They paused in front of the dairy door and Katie stared down at Carmen in surprise. "That's a strange thing to come from your lips. I thought having children was your greatest dream."

"It is, but it isn't my only dream. I haven't given up on that horse ranch dream yet. The trouble is; Josh doesn't care what I want. That's obvious by the way he acts about the goats. Do you know he actually gave me an ultimatum? Either the goats or him."

Katie jerked on the dairy door and the crack of frozen boards echoed in the pregnant silence. She stared at Carmen. "Imagine that," she finally said dryly. "I wondered what you two weren't talking about. If it's that important to him, why don't you just sell the goats? I'm the one who talked you into this goat dairy business."

"It isn't about the goats." Carmen threw her hands in the air. "Oh, never mind." Why did she waste the breath discussing this matter with Katie? Much as she liked Katie, they were miles apart in their opinions and dreams. She ducked under Katie's arm and entered the dairy.

Katie followed her into the dairy and closed the door against the wind. "If you're so displeased with Josh, why don't you shop around some?"

Carmen laughed shortly. "Like Josh would let me. Anyway, none of the guys are interested - and if they were, Josh would see to it that they became *uninterested*."

Katie stared at her. "You sound like you've given the idea a lot of thought." When Carmen didn't respond, Katie shrugged, "Anyway, there are plenty of guys interested. You are right about one thing, though. They figure Josh is tough competition - but do you really think Josh could scare them off if they knew you were interested?"

Who else was interested? Not that it mattered. She wasn't much in the mood for shopping around anyway. As a matter of fact, she was starting to think that her idea of the right man was nothing more than a pipe dream. Was she setting her sights too high? She sighed heavily.

"There aren't plenty of guys around here." She shrugged. "All of which is neither here nor there. The last thing I want is to have men fighting over me."

"Oh, great. Then stay single the rest of your life. You've got a good start on it now."

Carmen blinked. "I'm only twenty-five. What about your brother? He's what - thirty-five? He's not married yet. Harp at him for a while. Give me a rest."

"He's not quite thirty. And anyway he's not interested in getting married. You are. If you keep on waiting, you're going to be having children in your fifties, like your parents. That's why you're alone now." Katie shook her head in dismay. "What's so terrible about Josh, anyway? He just happens to be the most eligible bachelor in Benton County. Not to mention the best looking man I've ever laid eyes on. Lori's been drooling over him for years. If you don't want him, why don't you throw him back so she can have a chance at catching him?"

It wasn't that she didn't want Josh. But shouldn't there be magic in his kiss? Sure, she loved him, but not in the wild and crazy way girls did in the romance stories. Maybe that kind of love didn't exist. Or maybe that kind of excitement existed only in newfound relationships. She and Josh had always known each other. No, that wasn't

the only problem. Josh wasn't exactly the romantic type - nor was she. Still, it sure would be nice to have someone open doors, send flowers, and compliment her on a nice dress or a job well done. Why couldn't Josh express his feelings for her in some way besides jealousy?

Carmen jerked her arm out of the coat sleeve. "Josh wants to wear the pants, but he doesn't have much respect for a subservient woman. He says women should stay home and watch the kids, but I've heard him talk about some of the girls that do. He says they're too lazy to work."

Katie shrugged. "Some of them are. They got married so they wouldn't have to work. It's different with you. You have the goats."

Carmen slammed her hands on her hips and raised her brows at Katie. "And he wants me to get rid of them. I rest my case."

Katie sighed. "So help him with his farm, start your horse ranch. What an opportunity! When you combine your property with his, you'll have over two hundred acres."

Carmen groaned. "Are we talking about a marriage or a dynasty?"
Carmen wiggled out of her coat and hung it on the rack. Why couldn't Katie understand that there was a principle involved? Josh didn't know about the horse ranch, and she wasn't about to tell him - not as long as he was holding the goats over her head like a club. For all he knew, the goats were her greatest dream. If he was so determined to crush that dream, how could she trust him with her future happiness?

"You know," she continued as she scooped grain into a stanchion, "it really galls me that Josh is always encouraging Lori with her work, but he never misses an opportunity to belittle mine."

Katie tossed her coat at the rack and watched anxiously as the pole danced around the concrete floor before settling down.

"Oh, I wouldn't take it personally. He can understand a career in real estate. Goats are a mystery to him - not to mention an embarrassment. Everyone teases him, you know - Josh and the goat lady. You know how he hates to be cut out of the herd."

"I know, and that's another thing that bothers me. What's wrong with being different? Everyone admires a person who does their own thing - as long as it's cool." She strode across the room to the stainless steel sink. "I'm going to make this dairy a success if it kills me." She turned on the faucet, plunging her hands under the icy stream of water and gasped. "And it just might."

Katie joined her at the sink. "You're so competitive. Which is more important? Proving you can make this dairy profitable, or enjoying your work?"

Carmen caught her breath and stared at Katie. "I enjoy my work. And I'm not competitive. I'm conscientious. If you're going to do a job, you might as well do it right."

Katie took the towel from Carmen's hands. "Do tell," she responded dryly. She wiped her hands and tossed the towel on the counter. "All the same, you'd better take a good, long look at what you're thinking about giving up."

Carmen picked up the towel and hung it on the rack. "I'd be less than honest if I said the security Josh can offer wasn't tempting - that and the idea of having an instant family. His folks were there when I was born and they're like second parents to me, but I'm not going to marry Josh because I'm lonely and poor."

Katie opened the barn door and let four goats into the dairy. They sprinted across the floor and leaped up to the elevated platforms, poking their soft muzzles into the stanchions to gobble the grain. Katie glanced at Carmen.

"So what kind of man are you looking for?"

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