

Chapter One

Cynthia Turley was in the middle of cleaning his favorite table when he walked through the diner door. Something about the lean rancher urged her to reach out to him. Maybe it was the fact that he never smiled, or the loneliness in those green eyes. Whatever the case, she always made sure his table was ready when he arrived. She could set her clock by his arrival - eight o'clock every Friday night - in a blue plaid western shirt and battered black cowboy hat.

His tall frame swayed across the room with feline grace. Removing his hat, he glided into the booth. He glanced up at her; the sun darkened face with its thin lips completely devoid of emotion.

"The usual," he said.

She nodded. He wasn't much for conversation. Other than occasional attempts to draw him out, she respected his privacy. She moved to the counter without writing anything down.

"Steak and Potatoes," she announced to the cook, ignoring the stifled snickers of the other two waitresses. Why they found it so amusing that Mr. Cade was a recluse evaded her comprehension. Right now he was simply a customer.

She poured a cup of coffee and delivered it to him - along with a cheerful smile.

"Cold out there, isn't it?"

He shrugged. He never wore a coat and she wondered if he even felt the cold west Texas wind.

She started to walk away, but his adverse response lured her to pause.

"Spring is around the corner."

She smiled again. "It's still two months away, though. I can hardly wait."

He nodded again and turned away, staring out the window while he sipped the coffee. The conversation was over - or so she thought.

When she delivered his meal, he glanced up at her.

"What time do you get off?"

She stared at him. "Nine."

He nodded. "I'd like to talk to you. May I wait here until then?"

She nodded, still regarding him with disbelief.

"Of course."

What would he have to talk to *her* about? If all their conversations in the three months he had been coming to the diner were put together, it was doubtful that they would make a respectable paragraph. On the positive side, at that rate their conversation should be over by five minutes after nine. Then she could walk home in peace. The clattering of dishes, the hectic scramble at lunch, and the incessant

gossiping of her coworkers left her at the edge of her patience at the end of the day. That quiet walk home was her chance to relax - that and a good book.

Promptly at nine, she removed her apron and crossed to the table where Cade sat nursing his fifth cup of coffee. She slid into the opposite bench and let her gaze drop significantly to the cup in his hand.

"You're not going to sleep a wink tonight."

He stared down at the cup absently. "Never has any effect on me."

Somehow that was no surprise. She waited for him to open the conversation, idly wondering if it would be ten before he spoke. Finally she cleared her throat.

"The diner closes at ten."

He glanced up and nodded. "How long have you been working here?"

"Six months - since Dad died. I took care of him for three years - every since I graduated from high school."

He nodded and fell silent again.

She crossed and uncrossed her legs, studied her fingernails and finally decided to prompt him again.

"I understand you have a big ranch west of here."

He gave the usual nod. "Forty miles."

She pursed her lips and whistled softly. "That's a long way to drive for steak and potatoes."

For a second she thought he was going to smile. His eyes flashed with humor, but it was gone before it could reach his lips.

"Do you like working here?" He finally asked.

She shrugged. "The work isn't so bad." When he continued to watch her, she smiled wryly. "I'm not much of a social person I guess."

"I see." He was watching her intently. "You'd be happier taking care of a rambling old house in the middle of nowhere?"

She laughed. "That's not as far out as you might think." She sobered and stared at her hands. "I guess I should go to college and make something of myself. When I was taking care of Dad there wasn't time to take classes and he died owing a lot of money, so I had to sell the house."

Why was she revealing her private affairs to this stranger? She shrugged, her face growing warm.

"I guess those are all excuses. I suppose I'm simply not very ambitious."

His brows lifted slightly and his gaze was direct.

"What is ambition?"

She stared at him. Surely his vocabulary included such a simple word.

"It's ..."

She paused, realizing he was looking for a deeper meaning. She shrugged again.

"I suppose it is different things for different people - dreams or goals."

He was still watching her intently. "So looking after a rambling old house could be an ambition?"

She squirmed under his penetrating stare. What was this thing he had about an old rambling house? She finally shrugged once more.

"I suppose so."

He shifted his attention to the lighted street. Apparently he was merely looking for

companionship - his kind. She was beginning to relax when he launched the question.

“Would you be interested in minding my place?”

She gaped at him. “*Your* place?”

He nodded. “It’s an heirloom of sorts; a big old house - too much for me to take care of and work the ranch as well.” He paused, watching her expectantly. “I don’t know what kind of wages you draw here, but I’d be willing to pay you a hundred a week plus room and board.”

Slowly the facts were beginning to seep through the layer of shock. He was offering her a job as a live-in maid. The wages weren’t all that great, but deducting rent, utilities and groceries from her present salary, it wound up being a good deal more. Was it merely coincidence that her lease would be up next Friday and the landlord was raising the rent? She gnawed at her lower lip. But staying out there alone with a man?

“Are there neighbors near you?”

He shook his head. “I have over three thousand acres. It’s isolated and lonely and I’m gone most of every day. In the winter the landscape is bleak and the house is drafty. The house sits more than a mile off the snow plow route, so sometimes I’m snowed in for a week or so.”

She wrinkled her nose. “You make it sound so attractive. How could I refuse?”

He stared at her for a moment. “Are you accepting the job?”

It was hard to tell whether the sarcasm had gone over his head or he simply wasn’t amused. She sighed.

“Not yet. What would my duties entail?”

His expression was bland – his voice unemotional, as if he were discussing the weather.

“Laundry, dishes - general housekeeping - cooking my meals. I eat breakfast at six in the morning and supper at six in the evening. Sometimes I come in for lunch and sometimes I’d expect you to pack me a lunch. The rest of the time you’re free to do as you please. I have some horses you can ride and there are several creeks, ponds and even a small lake on the land.”

She rested her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in her hands, staring out into the night. The last sentence was the clincher. Riding horses was one of her favorite pastimes, and the country out that way was gorgeous - winter or summer. Best of all, she could save a substantial amount of money for a down payment on her own place. It all seemed to be tailor made to her preferences - all but the part about staying alone in the house with him. Of course, Mr. Cade hardly seemed the seductive type and she certainly wasn’t going to encourage it. Finally she met his patient gaze.

“Let me think about it for a while. Okay?”

His nod was nonchalant.

“Fine. I’ll be in next Friday. If you decide to take the job, have your things ready then.”

He gulped the last of his coffee and stood.

“Thanks for your time.”

With that he turned and left the diner.

The walk home was quiet, but hardly relaxing. In fact, she was so keyed up when she reached her apartment that she decided to call her best friend with the news.

"Mary? This is Cynthia." She said when a familiar voice answered on the fifth ring. "Hey, you'll never guess what happened tonight."

The voice on the other end of the line responded dryly. "You accepted a date."

"No."

"That's as far out as I can get. What happened?"

"You know that man I was telling you about - the one who comes in at exactly eight every Friday night?"

"The good looking one?"

"I didn't say he was good looking," Cynthia said. "I said he had interesting eyes."

"Yeah, okay - whatever. Did he ask you out?"

"No - well, in a way, I guess. He offered me a job out at his place."

A moment of silence preceded Mary's response.

"Let me get this straight. You *are* talking about the guy everyone in town calls the hermit - Russell Cade."

Cynthia grinned. "One and the same. He needs someone to look after his house while he's working the ranch."

After a long pause, Mary's voice sounded concerned.

"Cindy, that's forty miles out in the middle of nowhere. Have you *seen* that house? It looks like something out of a horror movie. Besides, it's *huge*."

"So he says. No, I haven't seen it, but I won't be driving the forty miles every day, either. He offered me a hundred dollars a week plus room and board."

Mary gasped. "You intend to *stay* out there - *alone* with him?"

Cynthia looped the coils of the telephone cord around her finger. "It does sound a little eccentric, doesn't it?"

"Eccentric? It sounds downright scary."

"Oh, he's not mean. He just isn't social. What can you expect out of a recluse?"

"Cindy, I've known Russell Cade since he first moved to this area - since high school. He's as sweet as he can be and I have no doubt his intentions are honorable. But aren't you a little concerned about what people will say? I mean, a pretty young girl living alone with an eccentric bachelor - and what about Russ? Don't you think he might get ideas?"

"You make him sound like an old lecher. Do you know something I don't? As for what the town thinks, I don't care. I didn't grow up around here like you, and I don't intend to spend the rest of my life working at the diner. Not that anyone cares what I do. We're living in the 21st century, Mary. Anyway, I'm not pretty. In fact, I'm tall, skinny and awkward. My mouth is too big and all teeth."

"You'd put on some weight if you'd slow down a little. You do more work than the other two girls put together. Sure, you're thin, but you've got everything situated right. If he isn't blind or dead, I'm sure he's noticed. As for your mouth, people are always commenting on your beautiful smile and how those blue eyes of yours are so full of life. Are you trying to tell me he hasn't even noticed all that?"

"Don't forget the mess of red hair and freckles. I suppose he missed those. Oh, and you know what they say: *Men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses.*"

"Auburn hair - and you barely have enough freckles for *anyone* to notice. Don't get on that kick about how ugly you are. I've noticed the guys eyeing you - glasses and all. Now tell me. What else does the hermit want for his \$100 a week?"

“Oh for crying out loud, Mary. Don’t you think he’s a little old for me? Anyway, he’s about as romantic as a doorstop. All he wants is a housekeeper.”

“Old? Oh yeah. I forgot. He’s almost thirty - like me.” She sighed. “So you’re not the least bit interested in him?”

“Not romantically. If I were, I wouldn’t take the job. Do you think I’m crazy?”

“No, just naive.”

“Why? Because I’m still looking for a guy who doesn’t make me feel like a tease when I won’t sleep with him - or because you think I’ll never find a man like that?”

“Because I think you just did. I don’t know if the years have changed his philosophy, but he used to feel the same way you do. No hanky-panky until after marriage.”

“Good for him, but what does that have to do with me working for him? I’d think that would make you even more comfortable with the idea. Or do you think I’m going to lead him astray? Honestly, Mary. It sounds like you’ve got a case on him. You can have him. All I want is the job.”

The line was silent for a few moments and then Mary let loose with a heavy sigh.

“We’re all only human. We can all be tempted. It’s fine to have high ideals about not going too far, but the reality of it is, it can happen before you realize what is happening.”

“Oh, come on. When you start removing your clothes, naive or not, you’ve got to realize you’re doing something wrong. All it takes is the resolve to stop - provided you actually want to stop.”

“Bingo. Maybe you won’t want to.”

“With Mr. Cade?” Cynthia rolled her eyes in exasperation. “You have nothing to worry about. Even if he were a gorgeous stud, I wouldn’t become romantically involved with my boss. You know how I feel about that sort of thing.”

Mary’s tone became dry again. “I know. You’ve told me a zillion times. But ... Oh, what’s the use? Did you call me to get my opinion or to tell me you’re going to take the job? It sounds like you’ve already made up your mind.”

“I know. It’s just that it sounds so *right*. You can’t imagine how I’ve missed the country. I hate it in town, and the diner is so ... boring. Besides, this way I can save some money. The way things are going now, I’m lucky to save ten dollars a week.”

“How many times have I offered to let you stay with me - free? Even if you paid me half my rent, you could still save money.”

“I know, and I appreciate your offer. But that’s a good way to ruin a terrific friendship. We’ve been all through this a zillion times.”

Silence again.

“Mary?”

“I’m still here. You’d better give this some serious thought. I know you’re attracted to him, but ...”

“The only thing I’m attracted to is his job offer - and the idea of getting out of this gossipy little town.”

“Whatever. Just think it over and don’t jump into something you might live to regret.”

For the next week Cynthia listened to - and even found herself instigating - discussions about Mr. Cade. When picking up her mail at the post office, she often talked to Adrena. Being the only postal employee in a small town, the petite extravert was always ready for conversation. She had an opinion about everything - and an

uncanny habit of being right.

"Nothing today," Adrena said as Cynthia dug in her purse for the box key.

"Again?" Cynthia sighed, abandoning her search. "How are things going today?"

"Same old same old. How about you?"

"Nothing much – as usual."

"You ought to go out once in a while. People are starting to wonder if you don't like them."

Adrena never minced words. Cynthia shrugged.

"You know how I am."

"Yeah," Adrena snickered. "Not much better than the hermit. At least he's coming to town regular now – regular for him."

"He does seem a bit reclusive." Cynthia responded, focusing her attention on a speck of dirt on the counter. "I don't know much about him."

Adrena laughed shortly. "You haven't missed much."

Cynthia looked up at Adrena. "Do you know him?"

Adrena rolled her eyes. "*Nobody* knows Russell Cade. Do you remember that rumor in school? Oh yeah, you weren't around here then. I never believed it anyway. I figured his sister started it because she was jealous of him. I guess his stepfather thought more of him than her. After she got married and moved to Colorado the family information stopped – if you know what I mean. He comes in now and then to get things, but don't talk much." Adrena grinned. "Kind of like you."

Cynthia smiled. "Maybe he'd rather listen than talk."

Adrena stamped a letter. "I guess so. From what I hear, he's pretty ... frugal; I guess would be the best word. Dependable, though. Mr. Catlin at the bank says he's as honest as they come. The ranchers around here say they can always count on him to help when they're in a bind. Even so, I don't know anyone who admits to understanding him - much less calling him a friend. He's a strange one."

"It sounds like he's a respectable person who likes to keep to his self."

"Yeah." Adrena said, wrinkling her nose. "A regular hermit."

"I guess being reclusive is a poor way to make friends." Cynthia shrugged. "On the other hand, maybe it's a good way to avoid trouble."

Adrena tipped her head to the side and studied Cynthia thoughtfully for a moment. "Is that why you don't date?"

Cynthia's face grew warm. "Maybe so. Men can be a trial sometimes."

"Like your father?" Adrena's gaze was probing.

"That was different. My father couldn't do anything about his health."

Adrena lifted her brows and tossed the letter in a slot.

"He could have gone to a nursing home so he wasn't such a burden on his daughter."

"He offered to do that. I wouldn't let him. How could I enjoy myself knowing he was being tended to and surrounded by strangers?"

Adrena nodded. "That sounds like your kind of logic - always thinking of the other person first. Admirable, but you're never going to get anywhere doing that."

"All I want is a small place of my own. Somewhere I can have a garden and maybe a horse. I guess that's my idea of getting somewhere."

"Well, if that's what you want. Go for it. Maybe you could hire on as a nanny at Old

Man Taylor's ranch. He's got two boys that ... well, calling them a handful would be an understatement. Maybe that's not too good an idea after all." She snickered. "I bet if anyone could straighten them out, it would be you, though."

Cynthia caught her breath. "Geez, is my reputation that bad?"

"Bad? I'd like to have your reputation. Your boss says you're the best thing that ever happened to the diner. The guys think you're ..."

"A prude?"

"Conservative would be a good word."

"Dull would be another."

"I wouldn't call you dull, just inactive."

"Well, whatever I am, I'd better get home. It's almost time for you to close up. Have a nice evening."

She left the post office feeling better about Russell Cade than she did about herself. Still, what about the rumor? What could have happened so long ago that people still remembered it? But then, they seemed to remember everything - probably because they kept it revived for entertainment. Where Russell Cade was concerned, the only thing they seemed to have against him was the fact that he provided them no new topics. Good for him.

The conversation with Adrena was comforting, but Mary maintained her viewpoint. She couldn't argue his virtues, but she still insisted that the situation was conducive to trouble. Apparently she found Mr. Cade not only attractive, but also irresistible. Obviously it had been a long time since she had seen or talked to Mr. Cade. That was one facet of the job that didn't trouble Cynthia. Her greatest concern was whether she could manage such a large house on her own. Even the isolation didn't trouble her. Still, there was one question she couldn't ask the townspeople. Why had Cade singled her out for the job? Jennie was the logical choice. The voluptuous brunette was pert and sophisticated. Angie was buxom and plump, but she was a hilarious entertainer. It was a question she'd have to ask Cade.

Everything considered, it was easier to make the decision to take the job than to placate Mary. Eventually Mary accepted the inevitable and even offered the use of an old shed to store everything Cynthia wouldn't take with her. The house was furnished, so she didn't have much to move - just a few pieces of her parent's furniture and some summer clothes. Dad's old truck had been sitting at Mary's since it broke down.

So when Mr. Cade strode into the diner Friday night, Cynthia's clothes were packed and stored in the back room of the diner. Chet glanced at her. He had said his peace Wednesday when she gave notice. He liked Cade, but not the situation.

She approached Cade's table hesitantly. What if he had changed his mind? After all, he was a recluse and undoubtedly enjoyed the solitude of a quiet ranch.

He lifted his brows as she stopped at his table.

"Well?"

She twisted her apron with nervous fingers. "I have my things ready ... but I have a few questions first."

He watched her expectantly so she dove in.

"Why me? There are two other waitresses here."

He glanced across the room at Jennie and Angie. "You seem to enjoy your work -

and you are respectful toward me.”

She tipped her head to the side reflectively. “I suppose I do enjoy the work, and I try to act respectful to all our customers.”

He nodded. “Exactly. Your attitude is professional.”

He waited again and finally lifted his brows again.

“You said several.”

She smiled. “Your answers were all encompassing.”

His nod was brief. “Are you ready to go?”

“My shift doesn’t end until nine.”

He nodded. “Do you have a car?”

“No. I have a truck, but it hasn’t started for a month. I live close enough, so I simply walked. I parked it at a friends’ house.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“I don’t know. One day it wouldn’t start. I bought a battery, but it didn’t do any good. I was trying to save enough money to get it repaired.”

“Well, show me where you’re things are and I’ll take them out to my truck while I wait. Go ahead and order my supper.” He stood and stared down at her. “Have you had anything to eat yet?”

“I ate a while ago on my break.”

She led him to the back room where her things were piled and then resumed her last hour of work at the diner.

Chapter Two

Russell Cade was a meticulous driver. He drove the speed limit - no more, no less. He maneuvered each turn with precision. The dim instrument panel light revealed a strong profile with an aquiline nose and prominent cheekbones. He was by no means a handsome man but his facial features suggested a stolid character. The years had not been kind to him. He looked closer to forty than thirty. That might be the result of too much exposure to the elements. Apparently he spent a lot of time on the back of a horse, riding his range in all kinds of weather - a fact that prompted more than one comment by townsfolk that he had wasted a good college education. Considering his comment about ambition, he probably didn't consider the education wasted. Obviously he liked ranch work better than anything he had studied.

She shifted in the seat and peered into the night. They must be nearing their destination. Her gaze tried to outrun the headlights and then followed the broken line on the highway as it leaped from the dark and shot forward, disappearing under the truck. She rubbed her eyes and tilted her watch crystal around until the light reflected enough to read the dial. Ten-thirty. She yawned. This would be one Saturday she wouldn't have to crawl out of bed and get ready to go to the diner. From now on it would be crawl out of bed and cook, clean and then maybe rest a little. What was the house like? Even Mr. Cade had hinted that it was unusually large. Again she wondered if she had bit off more than she could chew.

The truck turned off the main road and lurched down a long drive. A structure loomed darkly against the lighter horizon. Could *that* be the house? She held her breath as they approached and turned into the circular drive. As the truck came to a halt in front of the house, she stared up at it in awe. Mary was right. It had an eerie atmosphere, almost as if it were leaning over the truck, investigating the new arrival.

She followed Cade up the steps and across the wide porch, waiting as he unlocked the door. He stepped back to let her enter first. Inside was a spacious foyer sporting a long graceful stairway. To the left was a tall narrow window, bare to the coldness of the room. To their right was a doorway into a huge family room. In one corner a piano perched silently, and the embers of a fire still cast a faint glow from a massive fireplace. She shivered, clutching her coat closer. A strong hand gripped her elbow.

"I told you the house was drafty. Here, let me show you where you will sleep."

He led her down a short hallway and opened the first door. Reaching inside the door, he flipped the light switch and the room was flooded with light from a ceiling fan.

"I fixed the door so it locks from the inside." He dug in his pocket and produced two keys on their original ring. "Here are the keys. That door over there is your personal bathroom." He turned abruptly and left the room.

The sting of his cool hospitality was quickly replaced with awe as she turned back to

the room. She gazed at the room in rapt silence. The large room contained some of the most beautiful antique furniture she had ever seen. The wood appeared to be cherry, and although it could use a coat of wax, it still had a deep luster. Instead of a closet, a large wardrobe stood at one end of the room, dwarfing a vanity desk with a large oval mirror. A chest of drawers with copper handles sat beside the bed - and what a bed it was. The carved headboard was beautiful but it was the lace canopy and matching bedspread that caught and held her attention. It was fit for a queen.

"I hope you don't find all this too primitive," Cade spoke behind her.

She swung around and stared at him. "Primitive?"

"The furniture - it was handed down to my mother and she left it to me. It's old, but still in good condition. I recently put a new inner spring mattress on the bed, but the rest of it is exactly as she left it."

"Left it? Did your mother pass away?"

"She died." He answered brusquely and deposited her things in the middle of the room. "Come on and I'll show you around a little before I turn in."

They trekked back down the hallway to the family room and then into a spacious kitchen. The appliances were modern but the cabinets were old and solid. The floor was as clean as the counters. Copper-bottomed cookware hung from hooks on one wall. A small round table and two chairs were placed in a corner near the doorway to the family room, providing a view of the fireplace.

"I eat in here," he said. "I only use the dining room when I have company."

The laundry room was also clean and an old wringer tub still sat in one corner, as though unwilling to completely surrender to modern appliances.

Cade stretched and yawned. "Well, make yourself at home. I'm going to turn in. If you need anything, my room is at the end of the hall. You'll find extra blankets in the entry closet if you need them."

He turned and left the room, his boots clicking across the tile floor and then fading as he moved across the hardwood family room floor and down the hall.

She glanced around the kitchen, knowing she should familiarize herself before breakfast, but feeling uncomfortable about exploring so soon after her arrival. What would he want for breakfast? The best way to decide was to find out what he had in the refrigerator.

She opened the refrigerator - milk, eggs, and bacon - the usual supplies. A little more exploring revealed that the cabinets were stocked with sufficient supplies of dry goods and the potato and onion bins were full. Was there anything Cade didn't do efficiently? The answer came to her so quickly that it brought a smile to her lips. Participate in Conversation.

Returning to her designated room, she hung all her clothes in the cedar lined wardrobe and tucked her personals in the spacious dresser. At eleven she finally crawled into the bed. She was exhausted, and morning would arrive all too soon. She set the alarm and fluffed the pillows, but it did no good to close her eyes. They kept popping back open. Her mind was up, wandering the huge house - and Cade's mind. Why had he suddenly decided he needed a maid - or was it sudden? Could there be truth to Mary's suspicions. No. She couldn't believe that there was any thought of romance going on in Cade's mind. He had probably reached a point that the ranch and house were too much work. Seeing her at the diner probably gave him the idea of

getting help.

She glanced at the door, realizing she had forgotten to lock it. Not that it mattered. If he intended her harm, he would hardly have fixed the door so it would lock from the inside. Of course, he could have had more keys made - in which case, it wouldn't matter if it was locked or not. She thought of the movie *Psycho* and immediately wished she had never watched it. The night was cold and she was cozy in the bed. There was no point in freezing her buns off darting across the cold floor to lock the door. Her eyelids drooped and finally she slept.

The alarm clock buzzed insistently and she reached over to slap the snooze button, squinting at the iridescent hands. Five a.m. She threw the covers back and then gasped. It was miserably cold in the bedroom. Tossing her gown aside, she hurriedly pulled on some sweats and made the bed. Opening her door quietly she carried her shoes to the kitchen before putting them on. Then she lit the oven and washed her hands.

By the time Cade arrived in the kitchen she had biscuits, gravy, bacon and eggs ready. Cade dropped into a chair and immediately began to put away the food. She poured him a cup of coffee and he glanced up at her.

"Sit down and eat."

"I never eat this early in the morning."

Still, she poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table.

"Do you want me to pack you a lunch?"

He shook his head, declining to answer until he had swallowed the food in his mouth.

"I'll be in at twelve."

He sipped at his coffee. "Sandwiches will be fine today. Spend some time exploring the house. Make a list of anything you need and I'll drive into town Monday."

Would she be invited along, or would she be expected to stay on the ranch? Always? She sipped her coffee reflectively and finally found the courage ask him a question that had been nagging her since his offer.

"Mr. Cade, do you mind if I have a friend over now and then?"

He glanced up at her sharply and then frowned. "Russ, or Russell. Don't call me Mr. Cade. It makes me feel old."

He swigged the last of his coffee and set the cup in his plate, carefully placing the flatware across the plate before he continued.

"You may call or have friends over anytime you wish - as long as they don't interfere with your work." He pushed his chair back and stood. "I've got to get going. The sun will be up soon." He lifted his hat from a peg on the wall and shrugged into his coat.

"See you at lunch." And then he left the house.

She finished the dishes and wiped the counters. Last night she had noticed a few clothes in a hamper in the laundry room. As she passed through the living, room she paused and smiled. A fire burned brightly in the fireplace. Cade had been busy this morning.

Removing the laundry from her room, she walked down the hall and hesitated at Cade's bedroom door. Somehow it seemed an invasion of his privacy, but it was part of

the job. She turned the porcelain knob and pushed the door open. His room was also filled with antique furniture, although his appeared to be mahogany. The bed was made and she found his clothes in the hamper. The master bath was tidy, so she left the room and pulled the door shut, breathing a long sigh.

With the laundry washing and the sun peeping through curtainless panes, she set out to explore the house. First she opened the double doors in the kitchen and found the spacious dining room. A long oak table graced the center of the room, its ten carved chairs at attention. A matching china cabinet held fine china, crystal and silverware. The silverware needed polishing and the furniture could use a good dusting. She closed the doors when she left the room, anticipation increasing her pulse. It was such an interesting house.

The long curving stairway invited and she ascended to the second floor. The landing paused at the Y of two long hallways. The floor creaked as she chose the one on the right. Three empty bedrooms were closed off to the heat, as well as a full bath that looked as though it hadn't been used in years. Apparently the water had been shut off up here to keep it from freezing. Retracing her steps, she advanced down the second hallway. Another full bath and two more bedrooms - all empty. As she glanced into the last bedroom, she noticed it had a patio door. Closer investigation revealed a balcony that overlooked the driveway. This room also had a fireplace and a door adjoining the bathroom. She ran her fingers along the smooth marble mantle. What a beautiful room - and empty. Even as the idea occurred that she would rather have this room, she knew she couldn't ask. He had made his choice - suggesting something else would be rude. Still, the rich hardwood floor reflected the weak morning sun in a cheerful manner that spawned reluctance to continue the tour. This would be a good place to come to relax, though - when the weather warmed. She rubbed her arms and left the room.

At the end of the hall, a steep set of stairs led to the attic. The stairs groaned as she climbed and the door squealed as she opened it. A small frosted window allowed light to enter the room that was obviously a storage space for heirlooms. A spinning wheel stood in one corner, partially covered by a dusty sheet, and beside it, a mahogany rocker with a cobbler seat. There was an old treadle sewing machine with carved drawers and even a grandfathers' clock, stating the permanent time of three p.m. Imagine the stories that must lurk in the walls of this house. A large chest invited, and she knelt, touching the lid. Something private - or more interesting antiques? She lifted the lid. Inside were tiny sweaters and booties. Each set was carefully sealed in a clear zipper bag. They looked unused ... his mothers' hobby, or was there a sad story? She closed the lid and ran her fingers across the dull copper latch. It was dusty. This was one place Cade obviously didn't spend much time. She stood and glanced around the room again. Such beautiful things should be displayed in the rooms downstairs. The grandfather clock would look beautiful in the foyer, and the rocker should be in the living room, near the piano. She sighed and left the room, carefully pulling the door shut.

As she descended the long stairway again, her palm caressed the smooth dark wood of the banisters. It was such a beautiful house - and so cold. She rubbed her arms again and headed for the living room, which was now comfortable. The fire was burning down, though, so she added more wood. She stared into the flames, wondering why none of the windows had curtains, and why so many things were left to gather dust in the attic. The floor was cold. Why no rugs? She curled up on the couch and fell

asleep.

Waking with a start, she glanced at her watch. Fifteen minutes until twelve. She leaped from the couch and darted into the kitchen. Her first day and she had fallen asleep on the job. Working as fast as she could, she started a pot of coffee and sliced some ham. As she completed setting the table, the screen door squealed and Cade opened the door. He stomped his boots and shook white flakes from his hat and coat before entering the house

Cynthia poured them both a cup of coffee as he washed at the sink.

“How long has it been snowing?” She asked.

He dried his hands with the towel. “It just started. It looks like it might get bad. Do you have a list yet?”

She blushed. “No, I’m afraid I didn’t get around to it yet.”

He noted her rising color and shrugged. “No problem. I don’t think we need much of anything.” He dropped to a chair and built himself a sandwich. “Did you call your friend yet?”

“No. I didn’t ... I thought ... It’s long distance, you know.”

He shrugged again without looking up. “Keep in touch with people. It gets lonely out here.”

He should know. Which came first, the recluse or the loneliness? She set the coffeepot back on the stove.

“Are you lonely?”

“No.” He took a bite of his sandwich and washed it down with coffee.

She fashioned a sandwich. “Was your mother lonely?”

He glanced up at her, and his mouth twitched. “Yes.”

“What happened to her?”

He swallowed his food. “Eat your lunch.” His attention was back on his food.

Her face felt hot and cold by turns. His cool reproach smarted, but the previous terse answers about his mother should have warned her that it was a touchy subject.

At any rate, he was a recluse and he probably didn’t want a babbling female around. She took a bite of her sandwich and glanced up when he finally spoke, his tone brusque.

“She died of a broken heart. I thought everybody around here knew about the Cade’s.”

“I’m not from around here. I grew up thirty miles to the north.” She paused and her voice took on a sardonic tone. “Where Cade wasn’t a household word,” she concluded.

He glanced up sharply, his gaze searching her face.

She stood, picking up a plate.

“I apologize for badgering you about your mother. I didn’t realize you were so sensitive about it.”

“I’m not sensitive.” The words were curt.

In spite of her irritation, she couldn’t help smiling. Actually there was nothing sensitive about Russell Cade. He was merely a private person - private and unsociable. She knew that when she accepted the job so any complaint at this point would be out of line.

She shrugged. “No, I suppose not.”

He watched her intently for a few moments longer and then turned his attention to

his food. How he did it, she couldn't say, but when he finished his meal, not even a crumb was left on the plate.

He strode to the door, clamped on his hat, shrugged into his coat and left the house without so much as a good-bye. She watched him head for the barn and wondered how he could stand being out in the cold all day. He was probably used to it. The snow was coming down in big heavy flakes now. She rubbed her arms again. Why didn't he do something about this cold house? But he had warned her about the cold - warned her about the snow. Would they be snowed in for a week now? No point mulling over a decision she had already made. The best way to beat the cold was to work up some heat. The first thing she needed to do was the dishes. Then make that list.

An hour later she found herself staring vacantly into the fire again. She shook her head free of pointless thoughts and began dusting. There was enough to do around here and she intended to earn her pay - without supervision. First she dusted the dining room and polished the silverware. Then she began cleaning the family room. Carrying a chair from the kitchen, she stretched to dust the top shelf of one of the bookcases beside the fireplace. A large green book caught her attention. *The Lonely Hills*, by Elizabeth Cade. She removed the book from the shelf and opened it to the dedication page. "*To my only friend, Russell Cade.*" His mother or his wife? She leafed through the book, looking for a clue.

The screen door squeaked and the kitchen floor complained as someone crossed it. Cade? She stared at the kitchen doorway, waiting breathlessly for the person to appear. When Cade finally stepped through the doorway holding a cup of coffee, her breath escaped in a long sigh.

"I wasn't sure who came in."

She lifted the book to replace it and he noticed the cover.

"Were you reading that?"

Her face felt hot again. "No... Well, yes. I glanced through it." Was he angry?

He eyed her sardonically. "You're welcome to read anything in the house. It isn't necessary to cover up your interest."

She shoved the book back into its place and gave the shelf a last swipe, curbing her tongue as she dismounted the chair. She lifted the chair and ignored his offer to carry it to the kitchen for her. He was outspoken and direct, but why did it sound so much like he had caught her in a lie?

He followed her to the kitchen. "Are you angry with me?"

She scooted the chair under the table and tossed the rag in the hamper. "Does it matter? I'm here to do a job."

He was quiet long enough to rouse her interest, and she glanced up to determine the cause of his silence. He was lounging against the kitchen doorway, staring down into his coffee cup. Finally he glanced up and met her gaze.

"It matters."

She turned and rested her hands on the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

"Look, Mr. Cade."

"Russ," he interrupted irritably.

She lifted her palms in resignation. "All right, Russ. All you have to do is lay down the ground rules. If you don't want to talk about your mother, we won't. But if I'm supposed to avoid the subject, don't act like I'm in the middle of some deceitful act

when I try.”

He was clearly surprised. “What makes you think the topic of my mother is ...” He stopped mid-sentence and shrugged in resignation. He strode across the room and poured his coffee in the sink. “All right. It’s a subject I’d rather not discuss. Not because she did anything wrong, though. I hold myself responsible for her death.”

The statement was an open invitation but she was several conversations wiser now, and waited for him to volunteer the rest of the story. But he obviously considered the subject closed, and remained silent. So on to something else.

“The book I was holding. Did your mother write it?”

He nodded. “That and a couple dozen others. She had a short career as a writer.” He rinsed his cup and turned from the sink. As he strode across the room she chanced a last remark.

“I’ll try not to be so inquisitive.”

He stopped and turned, frowning down at her.

“There’s no harm in a healthy curiosity. It’s flapping jaws that get people into trouble.”

She stared at him. “Do you think my jaws flap too much?”

His expression became sour. “I can get into enough trouble without people squeezing imaginary insults out of my words.” He turned and headed for the family room door again. “I’m going to take a warm shower. Do you think you could scare us up a warm snack?” He didn’t wait for an answer.

She glanced at her watch. Three. Warm snack? What kind of snack could she whip up in fifteen minutes? She mused through the kitchen cabinets, her attention settling on the can of cocoa. That would do, but what about something to eat with it. Maybe her favorite would work. It was worth a try. She turned on the broiler and buttered some bread.

When Cade came into the kitchen she placed a cup of hot chocolate and a saucer of cinnamon toast before him. He quirked a brow.

“An interesting combination. Smells delicious.”

She smiled. “I hope you like it. It always hits the spot for me on cold days.”

He tasted the toast and nodded approvingly. “One thing you should know.” He glanced up at her. “I don’t think you could find anything I wouldn’t like. I enjoy variety and I’m not afraid to try anything new, so just cook what you like.”

They finished the snack in silence. Afterward he took a book from the shelf and retired to his room. The living room floor could use a mopping and then it would be time to start supper. A glance out the window revealed that the snow had piled up to four or five inches. Was Cade weathering out the storm? The wood box was looking skimpy. Where did he keep the rest of the wood? She wandered through the house, peering out the window until she spotted a small shed. That was probably it. Donning a heavy coat and some rubber boots that she found in the entry closet, she battled the storm to the shed. Opening the door, she found her assumption correct. The shed was piled high with wood. She leaned over and picked up a block of wood.

A yellow ball of hissing fur flew past her. She dropped the wood and screamed before she realized it was only a young cat. She stumbled to the door. “Here kitty kitty.”

But the cat had no intention of coming near her. “Are you hungry?” She called to him as he hunkered down beside a rose bush with a few brown leaves clinging to it. He

stared at her suspiciously.

She shrugged and went back for an armload of wood. Had the cat been locked in the shed, or had he found a way through the old walls? She piled one arm high and closed the door. If he couldn't get in the shed, he'd probably find some other place to stay warm. She crunched through the snow back to the house and removed her coat and boots before entering the living room.

Cade leaped from the couch as she entered.

"Here. I'll get that." He took the wood from her arms and dropped it into the wood box. "You don't need to be carrying heavy things and getting out in this weather. I'll do it."

"It's all right. I enjoyed the fresh air and I even found a potential friend. Did you know you have a cat in the wood shed?"

He made a face. "He comes in through a hole in the floor. I guess I'll have to put something over it. The offspring of some stray, I guess."

"Well, at least you won't have mice in the woodshed."

She watched as he added more wood to the fire and stirred the coals up with the poker. "Do you ever feed him?"

Another sour look. "You start that and he'll hang around for sure."

She dropped to the floor in front of the fireplace and crossed her legs. "I take it you don't like cats."

He squatted beside the fire. "I take it you do."

She shrugged. "It's your ranch. If you don't want me to feed it, all you have to do is say so."

He jabbed at the fire a few times. "I don't care. If you think he'll make good company, go ahead and feed him." He stood and returned the poker to its holder. "Just don't try to tame any of those black kitties with the white stripes down their backs."

She stared up at him. He was obviously making a joke, but she would never have guessed it from the expression on his face. He looked so tall, standing over her that way. She shifted her attention to the fire and rubbed the beginnings of a crick from her neck. Working for Cade might not be as dull as she had first thought.

Chapter Three

In the next month, her schedule became routine. Once the floors had been waxed and the furniture polished, the house sparkled - in an empty kind of way. The work was rewarding, though, as the house began to take on a homey atmosphere. If only there were some curtains on the windows and rugs on the floors.

The house wasn't the only thing changing, though. Both occupants were gaining a healthy glow - and gaining was the operative word. Cade had put on enough weight to take the hollows out of his cheeks, making him look a good ten years younger. As for Cynthia, her cheeks weren't the only things filling out. All her dresses now fit snugly across the bust, and even her skinny legs were beginning to have some attractive curves. Some of the money she had saved would have to go into new clothing - and soon.

Cade was slowly emerging from his shell, but the cat was still as wild as ever. Scraps from the table coaxed him out even during the daylight hours - but only when she stepped back into the house. She watched from the family room window as he wolfed the food - a habit that had prompted Cade to dub him Scruffy. It was another indication of that underlying humor. If only he would smile with something besides his eyes.

The weather grew intermittently warmer and on one of those sunny warm days, Cade invited her to pack a lunch and join him in a ride on the ranch. The idea was especially welcome, as she had become so organized that cleaning took no more than half the day.

Cade selected a bay mare for her and then reluctantly surrendered the duty of saddling. When Cynthia finished tightening the cinch and lowered the stirrup, she turned to find him watching her. His eyes expressed approval and the thin lips twitched in what she had grown to accept as a smile - fleeting as it was. She wrinkled her nose at him.

"I know. I'm slow."

"The job is done - and done correctly."

That was as close to praise as she was likely to get from him and she smiled her appreciation. Tucking a toe in the stirrup, she swung up into the saddle. Cade mounted a gray gelding and they headed out across the treeless hills.

After nearly an hour of riding, they descended the steep walls of a draw and followed it to a small valley. Protected from the harsh winter storms, the valley was already lush and green. The valley was speckled with healthy Angus cattle. Here and there, calves frolicked with each other, kicking their heels in the air and bellowing their delight at the balmy weather. The adults ignored them, grazing contentedly on the deep grass.

They rode through the herd, which paid little attention to their passage. The animals were sleek and their black fur shined in the sunlight. Cynthia leaned over as they drew

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