

**WHEN THE
COWBOY
RIDES AWAY**

Endorsements

A sweet western romance novel set in south Texas, 1880. I enjoyed the sassy and competent Maggie Gallagher who cares for two orphan children, relations of hers. The complication when Alex Lancaster is found wounded and with a memory loss pulls two strong-willed but likeable characters together. Struggles with witchcraft and intrigues combine with believable relationship conflicts. They must deal with suspicion and mistrust issues when secret, unhappy pasts clash. Good pacing of development of relationships. Appreciated the surprise twist.

—**Janet Chester Bly**,
author and co-author of 32 fiction and nonfiction books

Molly Noble Bull produces another western novel that is so authentic I felt as if I were there in south Texas. I've been there a number of times, and she has the setting perfect. I loved the characters who tugged at my heartstrings throughout the story, and I kept turning pages to find out how it would all end.

—**Lena Nelson Dooley**,
award-winning, best-selling author of over 30 books.

When the Cowboy Rides Away

Molly Noble Bull



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Charlie, Bret, Burt, Bren, Jana, Linda,
Angela, Bethanny, Dillard, Hailey, Bryson, Grant and Grace, Carmen,
Noe, Kathleen, and Kathi.

But to God give the glory.

Author's Historical Notes:

When the Cowboy Rides Away is a western romance novel set in the ranching country of South Texas, near the Gulf coast. This area of Texas was once called the Nueces Strip, named for the Nueces River. It was also called the Wild Horse Desert, and the entire area has a hot and humid semi-tropical climate. Yet some of the largest ranches in the country, if not the world, are located in the area of Southern Texas where this story takes place.

One of those ranches, the famous King Ranch, is said to be larger than the state of Rhode Island. Today it is headquartered in the town of Kingsville, about forty-five miles southwest of Corpus Christi. Twenty-five or so miles farther south from Kingsville is the headquarters of the huge Kenedy Ranch.

Many of the cowhands on these ranches came from Mexico. Even today, some of them and their families practice a kind of religion that combines Christianity and witchcraft. Those who lead those practices are known as *curanderos* (male) and *curanderas* (female).

When the Cowboy Rides Away is a work of fiction, and it is set on a South Texas Ranch in 1880. At that time and even later, it was possible to travel on horseback or on foot from the area where the King Ranch is located all the way to the Rio Grande River without seeing a town of any kind, simply by journeying from one ranch to the next.

The cowboy is fading into American history, along with the frontier spirit that made that time and place so special. However, those who visit South Texas can find it again—if they know where to look.

*And Laban had two daughters:
the name of the elder was Leah,
and the name of the younger was Rachel.*

Genesis 29:16, KJV

Chapter One

Southern Texas

Early May 1880

Somebody was coming.

Maggie Gallagher slowed her sorrel mare. A small dust cloud hung over the north pasture like a puff of smoke. As she continued to eye the trail of sand and dust, it grew larger.

She glanced back at her younger sister. “Hurry up, Sarah. A rider’s headed this way. See if you can get ol’ Short Legs to trot.”

The little red-haired girl covered a yawn with the back of her hand. “I said I was coming.”

“Well, can you get that pony of yours to move a little faster? We need to go on out to the cemetery, leave our flowers, and rush right home. A caller will probably be waiting for us at the house when we get back.”

The main house was over a mile from the ranch cemetery and a mere twenty miles from the Gulf of Mexico—and it was almost always windy there. In fact, wind and South Texas were like many married couples—together but sometimes fighting.

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The morning breeze felt cool on Maggie's face, but that wouldn't last long. By noon the temperature could reach one hundred degrees. Her aunt often said that South Texas was the only spot on earth where the wind could be hot, even in the shade.

She loosened the bow under her chin and pushed back her blue-flowered bonnet. She might as well sit back in the saddle and enjoy herself. It was obvious Sarah was in no hurry.

Maggie thought about the dust cloud she'd seen. She wasn't expecting visitors, but since company appeared to be on the way, she hoped it was Roger. He'd said he might ride into town. On the way back to his place, he often stopped by the Gallagher Ranch to leave Maggie the mail he picked up for her, and she was hoping for a letter from Aunt Violet.



He'd watered his horse in a creek with only a trickle of water in it and crossed a bridge. Now Alex Lancaster guided his black stallion through thick brush, leaving a trail of dust and sand behind. He had to find Dee. Until he did, nothing else mattered.

But his horse needed rest. The animal wouldn't hold up much longer without it, and he'd pushed him relentlessly since he rode north from the border, stopping at creeks and lakes when he found them, sleeping and then moving on again.

Now he wasn't sure exactly where he was. The entry gate said Ranch Headquarters, One Mile, but it didn't include the name of the ranch.

He thought the ranch he was searching for was at least fifty or so miles north of here, but as long as he was in the area, he might as well stop and check. At the least he could water his horse again, and maybe the ranch owner would give him directions.

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Alex could barely see the outline of a two-story house in the distance, but that was enough to keep him moving forward. He would talk to the folks at the headquarters, cool off for a while, and then head out and keep going until he found her.

But would she let him explain what happened? Would Dee be able to forgive him?

Alex blinked, sucking in his breath. Would he ever forgive himself?



Maggie looked back. Sarah kicked her pony with the heels of her black boots, and the paint horse broke into a light trot. At ten, Sarah Ann Gallagher was eleven years younger than Maggie. Yet she still wasn't as comfortable on a horse as Maggie had been at six, nor was she as handy in the kitchen.

Maggie glanced at the clump of spring flowers clutched in Sarah's hand. The bouquet looked slightly wilted despite the colorful blossoms. "Sarah, don't drop your flowers."

"I won't."

"Good. We'll need them if we expect to put some on each of the graves."

Turning her attention from Sarah, Maggie saw that the dust cloud was bigger now. She squinted for a better look. Was she imagining things, or was that a rider on a black horse? Roger didn't own a black horse as far as she knew. Whoever was coming sure wasn't him.



Alex wished he'd bought a straw hat before heading north; his felt one made his head even hotter. Sweat poured down his forehead. He

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pulled out a white cloth and wiped his face and neck, but it wasn't so easy to wipe away memories of what happened in Brownsville, Texas.

He could still see Dee in her white wedding dress and veil, standing beside him in front of God, Pastor Garza, and a few other people. The joy he felt at Dee's cottage in Brownsville on their wedding day would have lasted a lifetime if the pastor had been a real one instead of a wolf in sheep's clothing. Joe Garza was no more a man of God than Alex was a millionaire.

Alex knew common-law marriages were legal in Texas because of the lack of preachers on the frontier, so in the eyes of the law, Alex and Dee were married. But Dee would never be satisfied with anything less than a Christian marriage; neither would Alex.

Alex was no lawman, but he'd thought he was a good judge of character—until Garza robbed a bank in Brownsville the day after the wedding. That was when Alex learned the truth about Joe Garza. Alex got so riled up when he discovered Joe only pretended to be a minister, the bank robbery was the last straw in the hat. Alex had to go after him—lawman or not—and bring the crook to justice.

Alex's jaws firmed just thinking about it. He'd trusted the man and encouraged Dee to trust him. But plainly their marriage wasn't legal in the true sense. Once he realized that, he'd followed the fake preacher-turned-outlaw across the Rio Grande River. Unknown to Garza, Alex hid in the brush while Garza buried the money. Later, after Alex reburied it, he searched the streets of the Mexican village for Garza. But he didn't find him until that night when the outlaw came out of a cantina.

Alex rubbed the small scar on his chin as he recalled that fateful night.

Lively music had blared from inside the cantina. A soft glow came from the lamps that lined the front of the white structure. Garza, in ragged trousers and wearing a wide sombrero, held a bottle in one hand. He'd

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stumbled around, no doubt from too much whiskey. Then he turned, saw Alex, and threw the bottle at him. Alex ducked, and Garza pulled a knife from his belt. A fight followed. Alex's nose was bloodied, but he avoided the knife except for a small cut on his chin.

The next thing Alex knew, he and Garza were incarcerated. Alex was thankful they were put in different cells and later in different prisons; otherwise one or both of them might not have survived three years in a Mexican jail.

Alex had wanted to write to Dee while he was in prison, to explain everything and let her know he intended to return to her. But he wasn't allowed to write Dee so much as one letter. Inmates in Mexican jails had no rights, not even American prisoners who were innocent. Now more than ever he had to find Dee and make amends.

Alex squinted straight ahead. The house was a little closer now but still some distance away. It stood on a rise and looked shiny-white in the blinding Texas sun. He wanted it to be Dee's home, but it wasn't, not this far south. In any case, Alex sensed he had another problem. Someone was watching him.

He gazed around and didn't see anybody. Still he felt somebody was out there. He knew ranchers didn't take kindly to strangers on their land; whoever owned the white house wouldn't either. He could get shot for trespassing, especially after nosing around that cabin.

Alex entered a plowed field. A feeling of foreboding shot through him. He pulled back slightly on his reins and looked over his shoulder. Had he seen something he shouldn't have when he rode over and took a look at the wire fence and then the cabin? Was he being followed now? Or was he just spooked from spending three long years behind bars?

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The black horse and rider Maggie saw earlier seemed to vanish in a burst of cutting wind that whipped the sandy soil all around them. Blinded for a moment, Maggie wiped her eyes and brushed away grains of the whitish sand sticking to her lips. As she opened her mouth to remind Sarah not to hold the stems so tightly, a gunshot reverberated off to their left.

Both horses shied. Sarah grabbed her saddle horn to keep from falling off.

“What was ... what was that?” Sarah asked in a shaky voice.

Maggie jerked around in the saddle, gazing off in the direction from which the rifle blast came. Dust hovered just above the brush-line.

“Don’t worry.” Maggie tried to feign a calm response. “I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about.”

She wouldn’t tell her little sister they might have plenty to worry about. The shot came from the same direction as the dust cloud. If somebody was shooting on Gallagher land, Maggie wanted to know about it. It appeared the gun was fired from the other side of a group of small trees.

One of their ranch hands plowed that part of the ranch yesterday, but Maggie didn’t know who might be there now. The trees obstructed her view.

“It’s probably one of our cowboys shooting at a rattlesnake or something,” Maggie said after a long pause.

She couldn’t share with her little sister that the gunman couldn’t be any of their ranch hands. With the exception of an older cowboy they called Big Lupe, all their men were working cattle on a different part of the ranch now.

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The dust cloud moved away at a rapid speed.

“What’s happening?” Sarah demanded in an unsteady voice.

“Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Maggie was tempted to grab hold of the reins Sarah held and lope back to the house, pulling her sister and the pony behind her. But someone could be hurt out there and in need of help. She couldn’t leave without knowing.

“Why don’t you stay here?” Maggie suggested. “I’ll ride over there and see what’s going on.”

Sarah’s eyes widened and her face paled. “Please don’t! Do you expect me to stay here all alone?”

“I thought you could for a minute while—”

Sarah shook her head. “No! Take me with you.”

Maggie took a deep breath and released it. “All right, but stay behind me.”

They hadn’t traveled more than fifty feet through the tall grass when Sarah trotted Short Legs up beside her.

“Maggie,” she whispered, “do you really think somebody shot a rattlesnake out there?”

Maggie hesitated then decided to speak the truth. “No, I don’t. And don’t you make a sound.”

Sarah whimpered, but Maggie didn’t have time to stop and comfort her.

They skirted the trees; then Maggie saw something, though she wasn’t sure what. A dark object lay in the plowed field beyond the tall grass. It looked too big to be a coyote or a newborn calf.

“What is it?” Sarah whispered.

“I don’t know yet.”

The moment she said it, Maggie knew what she saw was a man in dark-colored clothes.

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Sarah gasped as if she came to the same realization. “Is he dead?”

“I’m not sure.”

Maggie’s heart pounded so loud she imagined Sarah could hear it. She knew better than to become involved in unknown situations, especially with her little sister at her side. Hadn’t her late parents warned her time and again about something like this? But as a Christian she couldn’t leave a wounded man out there in the open. Without attention the poor stranger could die.

Maggie dismounted slowly, handing her reins to Sarah. “You stay right here. And don’t try to follow me over there when I’m not looking, hear?”

Sarah nodded.

Maggie’s hands shook so much she had difficulty unhooking her small quirt from her saddle horn. If only she’d thought to bring a rifle.

Taking control, she gripped the thin leather whip firmly. She’d only planned to be away from the ranch house for a short time. Her late father’s pistol and rifle were heavy and burdensome, so she’d left them behind. She’d never leave the house unarmed again.

The braided leather quirt wasn’t much, but it was the only weapon she had. She felt slightly more confident and crept forward then glanced back at her sister.

“If anything bad happens,” Maggie said, “I mean *real* bad, I want you to hightail it back to the house and ring the bell. Promise?”

“I promise.”

“I’m counting on you, Sarah Ann.”

Terror rose in Maggie’s throat at the thought of what she might find if she moved any closer. After what happened that day five years earlier, approaching any man she didn’t know tied her insides in knots. And there was no way of knowing if this man was dead or alive—or dangerous.

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Oh, she could play the part of a secure person; her role in life demanded it. She was responsible for rearing Sarah and Jon Anthony, her late sister's child. But inside where no one could see, Maggie was soft like melted butter.

She needed to lean on her faith and pray. Somehow simply knowing God had promised to be with her always gave her the courage to continue.

Maggie turned back toward the man on the ground and started walking toward him again. Her heart slammed against her ribs with each step. Out of the corner of her eye, she combed the pasture for any strange movements that might indicate a gunman lurking in the area.

A flock of doves fed on the ground nearby. She took another step, and they scattered. Maggie jumped as if she hadn't expected it to happen. The rustle and white flash of their wings when they soared upward startled her a second time. She looked around cautiously before going on.

Blood. Maggie gasped, digesting the situation. The sight of blood always made her queasy, and she the man's left shoulder was almost covered with blood.

Chapter Two

The wind caught the stranger's hat. Maggie watched it fly through the air as if invisible hands had grabbed it and wouldn't let go. At last the dark-colored Stetson caught on the branch of a tree at the edge of the clearing, dangling in a way that added to the unsettled feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She forced herself to look back at the cowboy. Blood oozed from his shoulder and upper arm and from a big cut on his head. The man wore a brown shirt, dark brown trousers, and cowboy boots. As far as she could tell, he might already be dead.

Maggie wanted to turn around and walk away, but her moral upbringing wouldn't let her. She forced her attention to the unmoving man.

He lay in the middle of the plowed field, his face turned to one side and caked with dirt. Steeling herself, she bent down and searched for a pulse. She found one, but it was weak.

The large bump on the back of his head might have been caused by the plow. It was right next to him, partially buried in deep sand along with two other pieces of farm equipment. Whatever had happened, it was obvious she needed to do something to stop his bleeding before his weak pulse gave out altogether.

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Her white blouse wasn't dirty, but she'd put it on before daylight, so she'd been wearing it for a while now. She needed clean cloth for bandages. She lifted her riding skirt. Her divided petticoat would have to do. She ripped white fabric from the hem and bandaged his shoulder and head wounds as best she could.

Maggie expected to see a horse in the plowed field. She didn't, but horse tracks caught her attention. The stranger must have been riding a horse when he entered the field. But where was the animal now?

She imagined his horse might have bucked at the sound of a gunshot. Deep hoof prints marked a small area nearby. The man probably fought to control his horse until his wounds got the best of him. Without a rider's skill in restraining animals, the horse no doubt raced off somewhere, leaving the injured man behind.

She studied his wounds again. The bullet hit his left shoulder, and he must have hit his head on the sharp edge of the plow as she'd suspected. Neither of these facts explained who shot him.

Somebody was still out there, probably on foot and walking a horse. Who could it be? And why did he or she shoot this man? Maggie paused to consider, but the questions themselves sent a stab of fear straight to her heart.

The wounded cowboy could be an outlaw. The possibility sent a shiver down her spine. Still, as a human being he deserved medical attention. In fact, he needed to see a doctor, but in his condition he might not survive a trip all the way to town in the back of a wagon.

Maggie intended to help the stranger if she possibly could. At the same time, she wanted to make sure her little sister was safe.

"Come here, Sarah."

The child sat on her pony. She didn't move.

"I said, get over here, Sarah. Right now."

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Slowly Sarah nudged her pony forward, pulling Maggie's mare behind her, but she didn't dismount. Her cheeks were colorless, and her shoulders shook. The flowers tumbled to the ground.

"Is he still ... alive?" Sarah asked.

"So far."

Before she died, their mother had taught Maggie some basic nursing skills, but she didn't feel prepared for the task ahead. She'd applied the bandages in an attempt to stop the bleeding, and she prayed she'd done it right. There was nothing else she could do where they were; she needed to get him home.

"Listen to me very carefully, Sarah, because I want you away from here. Now ride as fast as you can back to the house, and as soon as you get there, ring the bell."

She frowned. "Real loud, or ...?"

"Loud." Maggie hooked her reins to the limb of a tree, reminding herself that Sarah was still a child. "The men won't hear the bell because all of them are out in cow-camp except Big Lupe." Maggie did her best to speak calmly and gently. "But their wives and families will hear the bell if you ring it hard enough. Tell them what happened here, and they'll come running." She paused so Sarah could absorb her words. "Any questions?"

"I guess not."

"Then get going."

Maggie turned to check the man's bandages and thanked God when she discovered the blood had stopped flowing. She stood and pulled her blouse loose from the waistband of her skirt. She wiped her hands on the long shirttail hem and let out another deep breath. When she glanced back to check on her sister, she realized Sarah still hadn't moved.

"I thought I told you to go."

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Sarah sat like a stone statue astride her pony. The frozen look in her eyes reminded Maggie of a rabbit an instant before being struck by a rattlesnake. Maggie started to insist that Sarah go on then remembered a few more instructions she'd forgotten.

"When the ranch families get up to the house and you've told them what happened here, tell them to get the wagon."

"Which wagon?"

"The only one that's there, for heaven's sake." Normally patient, Maggie rolled her eyes upward and shook her head. "The other wagon is out in cow-camp with the men."

"I forgot."

"Well, pay attention now because this is real important. I want you to tell the folks back at headquarters to hitch up the mules to the wagon and drive out here as fast as they can. Bring blankets, sheets for bandages, Mama's medicine kit, and...and a gun and plenty of bullets." Maggie studied the quiver in her little sister's lower lip. "Can you remember all that?"

Sarah nodded slowly, though her expression was anything but confident.

Maggie unhooked her reins from the tree. "Now get off that pony of yours and ride my horse. She's faster."

Sarah's eyes went wide again. "But I've never gone that far on horseback by myself before, and—"

"Then today you'll do it for the first time. This man could die if you don't."

Maggie hated putting such pressure on a ten-year-old, but she had to do something to get Sarah to move.

She reached up and took the pony's reins out of her sister's hands. "If you really want a full-size horse like you've been begging for, you'll get off that pony and ride mine." She slipped the narrow

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strips of leather over Short Leg's head and held them. "Come down, Sarah. Now."

The child did as she was told. When Sarah had mounted the sorrel and taken hold of the reins, Maggie handed her the quirt.

"Take this, and use it."

Sarah frowned.

"My mare will run if you make her. So get going, and don't look back."

Sarah's green eyes radiated fear. Yet she pulled the mare's head around in the direction of the house as if she'd done it a million times.

Maggie had coasted on a sudden burst of energy since hearing the gunshot. Her sister's riding success seemed to dissolve that energy. She tied the pony to a bush nearby and sat down by the cowboy. Her heavy breathing came more from the uncertainty of the situation than exhaustion.

She looked back at the injured man. When she saw no change in him, she diverted her gaze toward her sister. Sarah was galloping the mare back to the house, surrounded by a thick cloud of dust and blowing sand.

At least Sarah got away from here.

The cowboy lay on his stomach, looking lean and about Roger's age. A gun belt circled his waist. She felt a little better when she saw his gun still in the holster.

From what little she knew of gunshot wounds, he'd been shot in the back of his shoulder. The bullet must have gone all the way through and out the front. Obviously he'd lost a lot of blood, and he still wasn't moving. But since he was breathing, maybe he had a chance.

It could be quite a while before the wagon arrived. Until then there was nothing more she could do for him.

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She couldn't help but notice his slim body, and his legs were long like a young colt's. Under all the blood and dirt, his skin looked dark, probably from the Texas sun. Then she noticed something else. A bit of white paper protruded from the back pocket of his trousers.

Maggie reached down and pulled out a weathered envelope. The printing looked dim. At first she declared it unreadable but finally managed to make out the faded script.

The letter was addressed to a Mr. Alexander P. Lancaster in care of Juan Villa, Vasite, Mexico. Maggie wondered if the cowboy was Mr. Lancaster and why he lived in a small Mexican village like Vasite. Maggie had visited Vasite once with her father when he went there to buy horses. At the time she was about nine years old. She remembered the ranch owner had a son perhaps eight or ten years older than Maggie. She recalled vividly the smell of burning firewood in the kitchen hearth and the desolate surroundings just beyond the grounds of the big ranch house.

She shoved away the memory to concentrate on the envelope she held in her hands. Printed in small letters in the upper left-hand corner was another name and address: Mrs. Willard Parson, 211 Elm Street, San Antonio, Texas.

Maggie wasn't accustomed to reading mail addressed to someone else, but she needed to learn the cowboy's identity. He certainly wasn't talking, and he could have a family somewhere. She convinced herself it was in his best interest that she learn all she could, so she opened the letter. A three-year-old date was printed in one corner of the page: February 15, 1877. She began to read.

Dear Alex,

You may be surprised to hear from me again so soon, but you did not answer my last letter. I am glad you are enjoying living and working for Mr. Villa on his ranch in Mexico, but I cannot help but be concerned

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about you. After all, you are my only brother, and I am anxious to learn what happened with Dee. I would also like to hear about your trips to Brownsville. I have always wanted to visit there. Maybe now I can. My husband sends his regards. Did I mention that I am in the family way? In September Will and I are looking forward to the birth of your first niece or nephew. Write when you can

Love

Ruth

Maggie gazed off toward the pasture, not really seeing anything. Her mind was too caught up with thinking about Brownsville, for it was there her late sister, Sadie, had lived and taught school before she died. Maggie had always loved Sadie and still did. She'd tried not to judge her, but it hadn't been easy.

The repercussions of what happened in Brownsville would be with Maggie and her family for the rest of their lives. She needed to put her grief out to pasture and concentrate on helping the injured man, but sometimes the past pounced on her when she least expected it.

Maggie started to put the letter back in the cowboy's pocket then decided against it. The thought of reading and keeping somebody else's letter went against her moral code even when she had a good reason for doing it; it was like peeking into a window while the curtains were only partly drawn. Still, she sensed it might be important to hang on to it. And at least now she knew where the stranger came from and the name and address of his sister.

Or did she? How could Maggie be sure the wounded man was Alexander Lancaster? Just because the cowboy had a letter with that name printed on it didn't mean a thing.

The thought bothered her as she glanced down at the injured man again. He hadn't moved; he looked so still and helpless. A lump formed in her throat. If this man was the Mr. Lancaster mentioned in the letter,

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he had kinfolk in San Antonio who cared about him. It was her duty to let them know he'd been shot.

Her gaze settled on the blood again. A wave of what her mother had called a "weak spell" swept over her. She couldn't give in to it. She had too much to do.

A shooting hadn't turned up on the Gallagher Ranch in years, and Roger said the sheriff went on a fishing trip and wouldn't be back for a week or more. What a time for the sheriff to be miles away.

She closed her eyes and bowed her head. If she'd ever needed to pray, it was now. When she finished she opened her eyes.

Maggie stiffened, sensing someone watching. She'd been so caught up in nursing the man, worrying about Sarah, and then praying, she hadn't had time to think much about her own safety. The person who took a shot at the stranger could be waiting for the opportunity to strike again.

Maggie pulled the man's gun from the holster he wore just below his waist. Then she stood, scanning the area. Nothing moved for miles but the wind in the grass and the branches of a few scrubby trees.

Chapter Three

The wagon finally appeared on the horizon. The sun had climbed halfway up the sky, and heat filtered through the clouds like a warm blanket. Perspiration trickled down the back of Maggie's neck. The injured man's Stetson must have blown off its perch, but she found it in the weeds nearby. She still hadn't seen his horse.

On her hands and knees, Maggie hovered over the stranger again, using his hat to fan away the gnats and flies swarming about his head. If he wasn't Alexander P. Lancaster, it might be a while before she learned his true identity, but for the present she'd call him Alex. She had a cousin named Alex and was always fond of the name.

She squinted back toward the ranch and could barely make out the team of mules pulling the wagon. As it moved closer she noticed Lupe Salinas' gray beard as he drove the mules down the ruts they called a road. Concha, his wife, sat beside him. Two other women from the ranch squatted in the back of the wagon. Maggie was glad the three women had come along to help. Without them and their knowledge of nursing, caring for this man might be difficult if not impossible for Maggie to handle.

Once back at the house, Maggie, Lupe, and the other women carried Alex to the downstairs bedroom that had belonged to Maggie's late

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parents. After placing him on the bed, the women washed and dressed his wounds and put a compress on his head. Maggie sent Sarah to relieve her maid, Elena, and to bathe their two-year-old nephew, Jon Anthony.

When Maggie turned and glanced toward the bed, the women were gathered around the stranger. She assumed they had removed the cowboy's tattered clothes and were bathing him. Blushing she shut her eyes and turned away.

"You must go now, *Señorita*," Concha Salinas said in broken English, "until we finish washing the *señor*."

"Will he ... recover?" Maggie asked.

"If there is no poison in him, he should live. The hole, she is clean, and the bullet, he went through his shoulder and out the other side. But the señor is in the sleep of death. And I am not sure he will ever wake up."

Maggie winced. "Ever?"

Concha nodded then went back to supervising the man's bath. Maggie moved toward the door but had no intentions of leaving. If Alex lived, she'd be partly responsible for nursing him back to health, and she needed to learn a lot more than she knew now in order to do it.

The women huddled around the bed, blocking her view. Maggie leaned against the back wall to wait.

When they finished, the Mexican women walked over and stood by the windows. Petra and Juana whispered in Spanish.

Even from across the room, Maggie could see they had dressed him in one of her papa's old blue shirts. She moved closer to the bed for a better look. Instead of giving off the odors of sweat and blood, his skin now had the clean, fresh smell of lye soap mixed with Hooper's Ointment and other medicines she couldn't identify.

Her heart skipped a beat. A man with a face that handsome didn't come along every day, not in these parts. Maggie had her back to the

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other women in the room, and she intended to keep it that way. The last thing she wanted was to let them see her reaction.

His brown curly hair shone in the sunlight coming in from the open window, looking damp to the touch and as thick as Maggie's. His cheekbones were high and well-defined, and he had a square jawline, punctuated by a cleft chin. Since his eyes were closed, she couldn't tell their color, but his lashes were long and black.

Maggie knew he'd be tall and broad-shouldered because of the way he filled up the wagon, but she never expected him to be so young looking. She did her best to assume a bland, unreadable expression and turned back around.

The younger women watched her, amusement gleaming in their brown eyes; almost immediately their smiles turned to laughter. Petra and Juana sang silly songs in Spanish about women who liked good-looking men and told jokes that were only funny in the Spanish language. Maggie found that once they were translated into English, all the humor in their stories vanished, but she'd always enjoyed hearing them—until now.

She glanced down at the wooden floor. Obviously her facial expressions were readable after all. Looking up again she noticed Concha standing apart from the other women.

Concha clapped her hands. "Enough." She motioned for everyone to be silent. "The señor needs rest."

Petra and Juana stopped talking.

Maggie wasn't surprised. Everybody respected Concha and followed her orders because she was the oldest woman on the Gallagher Ranch.

The old woman started to walk off. Then she whipped around, focusing her black gaze on Maggie. "If this man lives, it will be because the Lord doesn't want him to die, no?"

Maggie nodded. "Yes, that's true."

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“Then I think Jesus must have sent you this man, Señorita, to be your *esposo*—your husband.”

“Husband?”

“*Sí*. May you have a long and happy life together, and may he give you many sons and daughters.”

Sons and daughters? On hearing that statement Maggie figured her face must have turned as red as Sarah Ann’s hair. But she couldn’t think about that now. She needed to go out and see how Sarah had managed with the baby.

Before she could leave, Elena poked her head in the door. Two-year-old Jon Anthony slept in her arms. Sarah Ann peeped around from behind Elena.

“Show me the wounded man,” Elena demanded in Spanish.

Maggie swallowed before answering. “Of course, Elena. And will you please remember to talk to me in English in front of Sarah from now on? A South Texas ranch child like Sarah needs to feel comfortable in both languages, and she’s been speaking mostly Spanish lately.”

Elena moved forward. The hard look in her eyes indicated she might resent Maggie’s request, though she said nothing.

Maggie stepped to one side to make room for her. “And Elena, I’ll want you to do most of the nursing for this man.”

Elena grimaced, handing the sleeping child to Maggie. Then she moved over to the bed and peered down at Alex. For an instant Maggie thought she saw a hint of recognition in Elena’s dark eyes, as if she actually knew the injured stranger. Then her expression went blank, and she whirled around and started for the door.

“I want you to stay, Elena,” Maggie said. “The other women have to leave soon to cook for their families. I’ll need your help in here.”

Elena looked over her shoulder. “What about the baby? Who will take care of Jon Anthony when he wakes up?”

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“Sarah Ann can take care of him.”

The servant turned, aiming an icy glare at Maggie. “I will not work in here.”

“Excuse me?” Maggie was stunned. Elena hadn’t refused to follow an order since Jon Anthony was ten days old—the day Elena put lighted candles all around the child’s baby bed. When Maggie ordered her to remove them, she wouldn’t—until Maggie insisted. Elena had confessed she learned this strange practice from her father who was a *curandero*, a sort of witchdoctor. Now, as they stared at one another across the room where the stranger lay, Maggie wanted to know why Elena was behaving so strangely.

“I will not take care of this man.” Elena glanced at Jon Anthony. “My job is to take care of this motherless child.” The look she sent Maggie was filled with anger. “When I first come here, Señorita, you say I clean the house, help with the other chores, and take care of Sadie’s baby boy, no?”

“Yes, but—”

“I no hired to take care of sick people,” Elena said in broken English. “I will not do it. Get someone else to help you in here.”

“There isn’t anybody else. All the other women have husbands and children to take care of.”

Elena shook her head. “I no do it, Señorita. You do it.”

Maggie couldn’t believe what she’d just heard. Elena was often difficult, even stubborn, but never quite *this* stubborn.

If her mother were alive, she’d fire Elena on the spot, but Maggie didn’t have that option. Even a little help from a servant was better than no help at all.

Elena marched out the door, leaving Jon Anthony in Maggie’s arms. She kissed the sleeping toddler on his forehead, trying to pretend Elena’s outburst didn’t matter.

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The other three women left before the afternoon heat rose with the climbing sun. Concha promised to return the next day and clean the man's wounds. Until then, Maggie was on her own.

"Sarah." Maggie forced a smile. "As you can see, the baby's still sleeping. Sit with the cowboy for me and hold Jon Anthony, will you? I need to change clothes and fix dinner. When we finish eating, you can play with Jon for a while and then put him down for his afternoon nap."

"Do I have to?"

Maggie's smile dissolved into a frown. "You know the answer to that. And you'll sleep in Jon Anthony's room tonight."

"Where will you sleep?"

"On a cot in here."

"In here?" Sarah looked dumbfounded. "You're gonna sleep in the room with a man?"

"I most certainly am."

"What would Mama have said if she were ... alive?"

"If Mama were still alive, I wouldn't have to do it. But she isn't, and somebody has to take care of this poor man."

Sarah opened her mouth as if she planned to say something. No words came out.

"Hurry up now, Sarah," Maggie said, "and do what I told you. I have a lot of work to finish before sundown, and you have to help me." As an afterthought Maggie wiggled her nose at her little sister in hopes of making her laugh. It was a sort of game the two sisters had played since Sarah was three.

Sarah neither wiggled her upturned nose nor smiled.

Maggie tried again. "I want to thank you for doing what you did today, Sarah Ann. Riding off like that for the first time was a brave thing to do. I'm very proud of you. Papa would have been proud too."

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Sarah's grin surfaced then, and her green eyes sparkled. "Do you really think so?"

"I know so."

With Jon Anthony in her arms, Sarah sat down in the rocker by Alex's bed and started rocking.

Maggie smiled. Her little sister was not immune to flattery. And Sarah *was* brave—at least on that day. Maggie meant every word she'd said.

That night the moon was full. Maggie sat in the chair by the wounded man's bed, reading several chapters from a mystery novel that had belonged to her late father. It was about a family who lived in a castle in England. Then she read a chapter from the Bible like she did every night. She wondered if she'd be able to sleep.

By midnight the moon was a yellow ball in the middle of the sky. It was almost as bright outside as it was inside before Maggie blew out the lamp. From her cot under the double windows, she could see the bed and the man who slept on it.

Slowly she unbraided her blonde hair and let it fall about her shoulders. Her hair was long enough for Maggie to sit on, with shorter strands curling around her face. She rested her head on the feather pillow and tried to relax.

Her papa had always liked long hair. He'd often said the glitter and shine in Maggie's golden locks gave the stars something to worry about. Yet she'd almost forgotten her nightly ritual—one hundred strokes. She rolled over on her side and reached for a hairbrush on the chest of drawers nearby. But she didn't pick it up.

A white candle in a metal candleholder caught her attention, reminding her again of the time Elena surrounded Jon Anthony's bed with lighted candles—and of the fact that Elena's late father was a witchdoctor. In Mexico he was called a *curandero*, and when Elena first

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came to the ranch, she followed some of the ceremonies she had learned from him. However, once Maggie insisted Elena put those strange practices behind her, she did. At least, Maggie thought she did. Elena had even studied the Bible with Maggie and Sarah a few times. Still Maggie wondered. Was Elena really free of the curandero curse?

Maggie remembered that on the day two years ago, when she saw for the first time what the curanderos do, she was in the hallway and the baby was crying. They never kept a woodstove anywhere near the hallway, yet it felt strangely warm for December.

All at once the smell of smoke caused Maggie to stop in her tracks. It was so strong she could almost taste it, and for a moment she couldn't stop coughing.

She'd prayed the smoke and hot air weren't coming from the baby's room. Then she'd closed her eyes, trembling as another thought formed in her mind.

The house is on fire.

She raced to the open doorway, praying as she went. Fiery lights so blinded her that for a moment she was unable to see the infant's crib. She covered her mouth with her hands. *He's only ten days old!* She hurried inside.

Scores of lighted candles circled the baby's bed. The heat in the room was tremendous. But how did candles get in here?

The baby screamed. She dashed forward, her eyes on the bed. Then she sent up a quick prayer of thanks. Her precious nephew was at least a foot from the flames.

Jon Anthony's baby bottle fell out of the crib, landing on the floor. She glanced down. Another step and the skirt of her blue dress could have caught fire.

Maggie looked around for something she could use to smother the flames. Her gaze found her housekeeper, seated in a chair in the corner.

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“What is the matter with you, Elena? Get over here and help me put out these candles.”

Elena didn't move.

“Are you asleep?” Maggie said in Spanish.

She longed to speak to the servant and the ranch cowboys in English, but Elena didn't know English then. In fact, nobody on the Gallagher Ranch spoke much English since the deaths, not even Sarah.

“Wake up, Elena, and help me.” Maggie reached for the quilt on the top shelf. “You get the other one and do as I'm doing.”

“Do not put out the candles, Señorita,” Elena finally said in Spanish. “They will keep the evil spirits away.”

“What are you talking about? Get up and help me.”

Quickly Maggie extinguished the candles. When the last one was out, she cuddled the crying child in her arms as she realized Elena still wasn't helping, though she was out of the chair and standing a few feet from it.

“I'm going to sit in this chair you're so fond of now and hold Jon Anthony until he stops crying,” she informed Elena. “And I want you to clean up this mess in here. Then we'll talk about why you put lighted candles just inches from the baby's bed.”

Elena stood there for a moment, glaring at Maggie. At last she folded up the scorched quilt and put it back on the shelf.

“And throw away all those candles,” Maggie added.

“No.” Elena whirled around. “They are mine. I will not throw the candles away.”

“Oh, yes you will if you want to keep working for me. You could have set the house on fire with those candles. I want them away from here now.”

“I brought the candles with me from Mexico, and they're very dear to me.” Elena continued to glower at Maggie. “They belonged to my father. He used them when he healed people.”

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“Healed people? The curandero?”

“Sí.”

Maggie would have fired Elena instantly if the servant weren’t such a hard worker, but she needed someone to help with the children. Elena was new to the Gallagher Ranch and didn’t know the rules, so Maggie decided to give her another chance.

“Do you promise never to light those candles again as long as you live here?”

“Sí.”

“All right then, but leave the candles. I’ll put them away. If I decide to let you go, I’ll give them to you then.”

“Thank you, Señorita.”

Maggie noticed something small and white under the crib, something that shouldn’t be there. “Bring me that thing under the bed, Elena. I want to see it.”

Elena stared at her again. Maggie wondered if the servant was going to refuse another request. Then Elena got down on her hands and knees and retrieved the object.

“What is it?” Maggie asked.

“An egg.”

“How would an egg get under the baby’s crib?”

“I put it there.”

Maggie frowned. “Why?”

“The baby’s forehead felt hot. I think he had a fever. I put the egg under his bed to make the fever go away.”

“That must be something else you learned from your father.” Maggie took a deep breath to steady the pounding pressure in her head. “We’re a Christian family, Elena, and we don’t believe in witchcraft. I won’t allow such nonsense in this house. If I decide to keep you on here, you must forget what you learned from the

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curanderos and never practice such evil on this ranch again. Do you understand?”

Elena had looked away, but she turned back and nodded. Maggie still wasn't sure she really meant it.

Ranger, Maggie's hound dog, barked then, bringing her back to the present. She glanced at Alex, and he moved his good arm.

Instantly alerted she sat straight up in bed. In the novel she was reading, the dead man moved his arm in the same way. But of course he'd only pretended to be dead. Was Alex Lancaster awake now, feigning sleep for unknown reasons?

The book was on the table by his bed. Had she allowed a made-up story to cloud her judgment?

Still, if he opened his eyes as the man in the story did and turned his head to stare at her, at least she would finally know whether he was sleeping or playing possum. If need be, she'd stay awake all night in order to find out.

During the next long hour, she sat waiting to see what Alex might do. Her mind conjured up all sorts of reasons not to trust him.

Who was this man, really and truly? He could be anyone. He could be an outlaw. Why else would someone want to shoot him? Maggie forced herself not to dwell on such thoughts.

Alex Lancaster moved again.

Her heart pounded so hard she thought she could feel it through her heavy cotton dress. Concha had placed the cowboy's pistol and holster in the trunk at the foot of his bed, along with other items she'd found in his pockets.

Should she get the gun while she had the chance? Or had she substituted imagination for common sense? A man with injuries as serious as Mr. Lancaster's couldn't actually harm her, could he?

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Maggie moved to the trunk on tiptoes and removed the pistol. It felt cold to the touch. It didn't make her feel invincible, but she felt a lot better with it in her hand.

Somehow she'd managed to retrieve it without making a sound. She thanked God for His help in making that possible and started to cock it...then stopped. If she cocked the pistol, she'd make a noise, maybe loud enough to wake up the man. Still she clutched it firmly in both hands.

"Better safe than sorry," her papa always said.

The man's breathing sounded normal. He snored once or twice. Slowly Maggie began to relax but not enough to risk falling asleep. Still grasping the gun, she sat down at one end of the cot with her back to the wall.

"Dee," he whispered between partly closed lips. "Where are you?"

Maggie tensed. Could this be the Dee mentioned in the letter? What if Alex thought Maggie was Dee and he hated the woman? She positioned her forefinger on the trigger.

He groaned, and she saw his injured shoulder pressed hard against the mattress. He turned over on his right side and went back to sleep, as the pistol grew heavy in her hands.

After a minute or two, she allowed the gun to drop to her side. Later she slipped it under the cot. Her eyelids drooped, and the desire to sleep engulfed her. For a moment the room grew quiet except for the *tick, tock, tick* of the old clock on the wall beside the bed.

Outside night sounds both soothed and haunted her. The wind had changed to the north. Shivering Maggie got up to close the shutters attached to the north window. As she hooked the latch, unpleasant barnyard odors drifted over from the milking pens. Maggie wrinkled her nose then went back to the cot and sat down.

Crickets chirped. A locust called. In the distance coyotes yipped and

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yelped. A chilly wind played and whispered among the live oaks, while Ranger howled back at them all.

She thought Alex slept soundly enough for someone in his condition, but she wouldn't close her eyes until her doubts disappeared.

None of this would have fazed her late sister, Sadie. Why, Sadie could listen to scary stories by the hour without one goose-bump popping out. But Maggie was made from a different mold.

She stretched her legs and told herself she shouldn't fall asleep. But what could be wrong with resting her head on the pillow for a minute?

Slowly her eyes closed.



They fluttered open again. It had to be morning because sunshine streamed in the east window. She blinked and sat up then glanced at the bed.

The man was awake, watching her...with the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Maggie felt trapped, but her fear subsided a little when she noted the gentleness in his hooded gaze.

"Are you an angel?" he asked with a heavy Southern drawl.

"A what?"

"Are you my guardian angel?"

Guardian angel? She eyed the cowboy warily. He looked a little woozy, which might explain why he'd asked such an odd question. His voice sounded weak and non-threatening, but his question baffled her. She wasn't quite sure how to reply.

At last she said, "No, I'm not an angel."

"You're not?"

She shook her head. "No."

He sighed. "Then I reckon I better explain."

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She waited, wondering what he'd say.

"When I first woke up, I saw you sleeping there in your long white apron over your blue dress and your yellow hair all spread out around you, and I figured you must be my guardian angel." He watched her a moment. "So if you're not, who are you?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Who are you?" she shot right back.

"Well, I'm ...". He angled his head to one side. Briefly he fixed his gaze on the wall near the foot of his bed. A strange blank expression appeared on his face, like Sarah's writing slate when nothing was written on it. "You know, ma'am, I couldn't answer that question if my life depended on it."

Chapter Four

Maggie watched Alex from a cot near his bed. Had he really lost his memory? She'd never known anyone who had. Should she reveal the name Alex Lancaster and other facts mentioned in the letter? She paused, giving herself time to think. The mystery novel she was reading warned against it.

In the book a woman lost her memory, and the case sounded a lot like the cowboy's. Maggie concluded it could be dangerous for Alex to learn too much too soon. If only she could talk to Doc Smyth to make sure the doctor agreed with the advice given in the book.

"Do you remember anything at all?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Oh. Well, I'm sure your memory will return very soon."

Maggie considered telling him about the story she'd read but decided against that too. She should probably consult a real doctor before giving him any information.

She studied the bandage on his head. "Are you in pain?"

"My head hurts a little."

Alex looked weak and helpless, despite his tall, well-muscled frame. One arm hung limply over the side of the bed. He seemed to struggle to lift his head and was likely dizzy too. But if he was paralyzed with fear

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and worry, as she'd be if the situation were reversed and she lay in that bed, he hid it well.

Maggie gazed at the small bucket they used as a chamber pot. Concha had set it on the floor to the left of his bed. She should let him know it was there and what it was for, but the thought of actually telling him something of such a personal nature caused her face to warm with embarrassment.

His eyelids slowly closed. Alex needed to go back to sleep, but she hoped he'd be able to answer a few questions first.

"Do you know what happened to your horse?"

"Frankly, ma'am, I don't know whether or not I own a horse."

Of course he wouldn't know. If he didn't know his own name, how would he know anything else? Why had she asked such a ridiculous question?

Alex moved his left arm and flinched. "What happened to me?"

"Somebody shot you—hit your shoulder from behind and it came out the other side."

"Well, I'll be." Alex waited a moment before saying more. "Know who did it?"

Maggie shook her head.

He winced again and sent her a pleading half-smile. "You wouldn't happen to have anything for pain, would you? 'Cause if you do I'd be obliged if you'd fetch me some."

"We keep a bottle of laudanum in the kitchen. I'll go get it." Maggie felt a blush coming on and turned her back to him. "And there's a bucket on the floor next to your bed in case you ... in case you need it."

"Oh, yes. I see it now. Thank you."

Maggie learned Christian values from her parents. Since their death, propriety had become even more important. An unmarried woman with two children to raise couldn't be too careful.

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She looked down, trying to press out a few of the wrinkles from the shirt of her white apron. The style and thick fabric of her blue dress and apron reflected her modest taste and nature, but the garments really looked wrinkled. And why wouldn't they? She'd slept in them all night.

She wished she were wearing something fresh. Maybe she should iron something. She felt her cheeks warm again. Ironing would give Alex more time to do whatever he needed to do with the bucket.

"I have a few things to attend to," she said without looking at him. "I'll leave you alone now. But I'll be back in ten minutes or so with the medicine."

"I'd appreciate it."

She needed to attend to her morning chores once she got Alex settled. Still she was hours behind schedule, and this was the first morning in years she wasn't up and ready for the day by five a.m.

Maggie left the room, returning ten minutes later with the painkiller. She'd changed into a green-print blouse and a green skirt under a fresh apron. Alex was sleeping again. She placed the medicine bottle and the spoon on the lamp table by his bed and studied him for a moment to make sure he was still breathing.

She felt ashamed and embarrassed by what she'd thought and assumed about him on the previous night. At the time the poor man lay unconscious, yet she'd falsely accused him of numerous crimes in her heart with no proof he'd committed any of them.

The memory loss couldn't be easy. Maggie wondered what she might be feeling under those circumstances. Being shot was bad enough, but to wake up in a strange house and not remember your own name had to be awful.

She drifted to one of the windows and looked out. Whoever shot Alex Lancaster was still out there somewhere. Who could it be, and why would someone want to do that?

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The folks she knew who swam the Rio Grande in order to find work in Texas were humble, honest people. She'd never known any workers from south of the border who owned a rifle. Maggie gulped. From experience she knew bad people were out there and were capable of anything.

She didn't want to recall the unpleasant incident again. It had played out inside her head more often than she liked to remember. If there was a way to make those bad memories disappear, she hadn't yet found it.

Five years ago spring had arrived in early March. She remembered the scene vividly—the flowers, the green grass, the birds chirping in the trees, the scent of clean country air. Yet she didn't want to remember

She dipped her dusting cloth in the can of beeswax. If she kept busy, these disturbing thoughts might go away. Maggie rubbed the brownish mixture on the rounded back of the chair by Alex's bed.

But on the morning it happened, she'd had the urge to pick wild flowers and managed to convince Ana Salinas, Concha's youngest child, to pick some too.

Maggie was told a thousand times never to stray far from the main house, but patches of Bluebonnets and other spring flowers in various pastel colors covered the south pasture behind the ranch house. It would be fun if she and Ana got on their horses and rode out there.

They'd worn sunbonnets that day and carried straw baskets to put the flowers in. Maggie had placed a sharp knife for cutting stems in the big center pocket of her white apron. Her mother had warned that bandits sometimes came across the border to rob, steal, and even kill. But she had dismissed the warning, telling herself, *That was then—when Mama was a girl. Texas is safe now. Bandits aren't crossing the border anymore.*

The air was cooler than normal that morning as they walked their horses through the corral gate. Ana had giggled and joked, obviously as excited and ready for an adventure as Maggie.

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The prettiest flowers dotted a field about a mile from the house. Maggie hadn't planned to travel that far, but she felt justified because the Bluebonnets and Indian Pinks had never looked lovelier.

"Let's stop and cut our flowers now," Maggie had said in Spanish. "We won't find flowers any better than these."

The girls let their horses roam free and graze while they gathered their bouquets. Ana chose a spot near the edge of the brush, but Maggie stayed right where she was, wishing the flowers smelled as good as they looked. But they were almost completely odorless.

She was about to reach for a blue blossom when a man, maybe from across the border in Mexico, emerged from the brush. A chill coursed through her, locking out her next breath. Before Maggie could make a sound, the man grabbed Ana from behind, placing a brown hand over her mouth.

Maggie froze, too frightened to scream. When her bay horse trotted up beside her, all Maggie could think about was mounting and riding out as fast as possible.

The man threw Ana to the ground. She screamed, and her horse ran into the brush. Even Maggie's horse shied, but she managed to seize the reins. The bay lifted his front legs and plowed them into the sand. Trembling, Maggie swung into the saddle. She didn't know what she should do next, but she knew she had to do something.

The man glanced at her then peered down at Ana. Maggie couldn't see the look on his face, but she imagined him leering at her friend, like a bobcat sizing up its prey.

Maggie's heart contracted as she guided her horse into a slow walk. Fear of the unknown mixed with rage squeezed her insides. She clutched the knife in the pocket of her apron to make sure it was still there.

Maggie moved toward the man slowly instead of racing away as she so wanted to do. He must have known she was coming, but he was focused on Ana.

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When she was near enough to reach out and touch him, Maggie gripped the knife and yelled with all her strength, “Get up, Ana! Get on my horse. Now!”

The man jerked around and glared at Maggie. The hard yet mocking expression on his face was all she saw. Maggie lunged for him, slashing him any way she could. A deep cut startled her. She’d sliced him from just to the side of his right eye almost to his chin. The man fell back, moaning and covering his bleeding face with both hands.

Maggie helped her friend up into the saddle behind her. “Hold on, Ana. We’re going home.”

The man reached for Maggie’s reins, but the blood running down his face must have hampered his vision. He missed the reins, clutching air instead.

God is good, Maggie thought, kicking the bay as hard as she could. As they raced out of the clearing, she glanced back.

The man had pulled a rag from his pocket and was wiping his face. Maggie turned back and hunched over the saddle as they sped through the underbrush. But she hadn’t felt truly safe until she saw the big white house at the top of the rise.

Alex moaned and turned over in the bed, forcing Maggie’s mind to return to the present. Sometime during the remembering she’d dropped the dusting cloth. Instead of reaching down to pick it up, she gripped the post at the head of Alex’s bed with both hands. She shook her head, willing the memories away.

Chapter Five

She and Ana got away, and some would say the man got what he deserved for attacking them. The cuts to his face must have left scars, but there wasn't time to consider longtime outcomes and repercussions. She'd simply retaliated, using the knife to prevent a greater possible wrong.

The girls were physically unscathed, and she thanked and praised the Lord for that blessing. But what happened in the clearing would remain with them, perhaps forever. Maggie had only seen the man briefly, yet his voice and physical appearance were etched in her mind.

He'd worn a dirty white shirt, tied at the waist, and his nose looked as if it had been broken. He had black hair and eyes, a dark complexion, and as he turned, the scent of garlic and rotting teeth had drifted up to her. Later, when she and Ana were riding away, he'd cursed them in Spanish in a raspy voice she'd never forget.

Maggie thought she'd put the past behind her. Yet somehow what happened while picking those flowers had eventually melded with Sadie's tragedy, the death of her parents, and every other unhappy event in her life. Being alone with Alex in the field while she waited for the wagon had triggered that same helpless feeling Maggie encountered in the pasture five years earlier.

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She glanced at the cowboy then reached down and grabbed the dusting cloth. It was time to get back to work. Like any other human being, Alex deserved the best care she could give him, no matter what he might have done in the past.

Though his southern drawl sounded pleasing to her ears, he didn't talk like a Texan. Alex was probably from the Deep South. Maggie had never been to that area of the country, but two of her uncles had died in Atlanta during the War Between the States. Someday maybe Alex would be able to tell her about some of the places he lived before coming here. To hear him speak with that warm drawl of his and listen to what he had to say would be almost as exciting as actually being there.



Joe Garza emerged from the Rio Grande River, walking barefoot onto the muddy bank on the Texas side. He'd tucked leather sandals into the pockets of his aged trousers, and he was eager to put them on. Sticker-burrs and prickly-pear thorns hid in the underbrush, not to mention rattlesnakes and irate farmers and ranchers with guns.

Had he really been in a Mexican prison only three years? It seemed longer. Joe was a tough *hombre*, at least in his mind. He'd fought other prisoners just to stay alive. Still the prison guards kept asking him why a man as short and thin as Joe got into fights in the first place.

It was true Joe was skinny and small-boned, and eating hardly more than tortillas and water for three years hadn't made him any bigger. Nobody knew about the weak spots underneath his rough exterior, and that suited Joe just fine.

He wondered how he should react when he finally saw Alex again. Acting tough didn't work with Alex Lancaster, but Joe knew how to appear scrawny and powerless if he needed to in order to reach a goal.

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He'd done it dozens of times. He simply let his weak side out and hid the tough hombre.

He pulled out his sandals, dropping them on the damp ground. He wished for a cloth so he could dry off his wet feet, but what did it matter? His shoes were water-logged too. In fact, he didn't have so much as a dry inch on his entire body. Recent rains flooded the river. Even his black hair was soaked, and drops of river-water rolled down his face and shoulders.

Quickly he slid his toes into his leather sandals and headed for cover before someone noticed him.

Joe swam the Rio Grande many times in the last ten years, even wading across during a drought. The *gringos* would call him a wetback. But after doing his time in a Mexican jail, he was a free man. He could have walked across the bridge from Matamoras, Mexico, to Brownsville, yet he chose to swim the river. The fewer people who knew he was heading back to Texas and trailing Alex Lancaster, the better.

Joe ducked his head before stepping into the underbrush beyond the river. The trees were small and grew close together. Shadows, scrubby trees, and brush were all he could see. Still he knew of a ranch not far from the border, and that kept him going. *Tio* worked on that ranch, and though he wasn't Joe's uncle as his nickname indicated, Tio was a childhood friend from Mexico. Joe would be safe there.

He'd tried to think what he would say when he got to the shack where Tio, his wife, and their eight children lived, what lies he would tell them this time. But all he could think about was finding Alex Lancaster and then the money.

A line of small houses where the ranch cowboys lived loomed ahead. Tio lived in the one on the far left, and the last time he swam the river, Joe stayed there.

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If it were nighttime, a light would be shining from an oil lamp near the window, but it was mid-afternoon. Yet he knew someone was there because smoke billowed from a metal tube mounted on the tin roof.

As soon as Joe knocked on the door, Tio welcomed him into his home. However, by gringo standards the dwelling was more of a shack. The last time Joe visited Tio's house, Joe stole money from the sugar bowl. But Tio never believed Joe did it. Tio never believed anything bad about anyone. He was an easy man to fool.

It was a hot day, and in addition to the hot wind that blew through the open windows, the wood-burning cook-stove inside made the house scorching. Even the dirt floor was likely warm. But at least Tio's wife gave him a cup of coffee, leftover tortillas, and a blanket he could spread on the floor that night. And Tio might have information Joe would need for his plan to work.

The next morning Joe got up before the chickens. He and Tio headed for the holding pens where the ranch horses were kept. Joe would need a horse, and he sure didn't intend to buy one. He eyed the horses from a shed near the pens. They looked old and bony, but even an old worn-out horse was better than no horse at all.

Tio told him exactly where the horses were held and how to find the saddle room. He'd also taught him word-for-word what to say to his boss to make sure Joe was hired on as a ranch cowboy. But Joe only pretended an interest in a ranch job so Tio would show him around. He wanted to find Alex Lancaster and get back the money Joe stole from the bank. Once he got his hands on the money, Joe wouldn't need a job. As the gringos would say, he'd be "plenty rich."

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In her room a few minutes later, Maggie ran a comb through her hair and went out to check on Sarah and the baby. Despite Elena's stubborn attitude, Maggie intended to give her a list of duties for the day.

Normally Maggie rang the bell at a little after five and gave the men their daily orders, but today that wasn't necessary. The cowboys were trapping cattle, preparing for the annual spring roundup, and they camped each night in another part of the ranch.

By nine o'clock, Maggie had prepared and served breakfast and soaked most of the breakfast dishes in a big metal pan near the stove. She was pumping fresh water from the hand-pump into a blue china pitcher when her sister put down her fork.

"Maggie, where are you going with our best china pitcher?"

"To take the cowboy some water. And would you please talk to me in English?"

"Oh, all right." Sarah still gazed at Maggie. "Can I go see the cowboy, too?"

"Absolutely not. I want you to correct those arithmetic problems you missed. Then you have to do the next page in your book. Hear?"

Sarah nodded. Then she sighed loudly enough to be heard out in the hallway.

Maggie shook her head. Sometimes she wondered if she was capable of raising two children alone.

Her room waited at the head of the stairs, and the downstairs hallway leading to Alex's room was long and dark. She hurried down the hall, wishing she had a small bell so Alex could ring it when he needed something. Maggie doubted she'd be able to hear if he called out and she

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was in the kitchen. The only bell they had was the big one just off the back porch that they used to call the ranch hands.

Maggie opened the bedroom door and saw Alex sleeping. She put down the pitcher and the cup, went to her mother's desk by the window, and removed a pen and ten or so sheets of writing paper. She couldn't afford to spend the entire day at his side but hated not to be there when he woke up. Until then she'd catch up on her letter-writing.

How many times was she told that a true rancher didn't go to town unless he or she had a good reason? Her late parents seldom made the trip except to buy medicine, supplies, and gunpowder, or to pay a visit to the doctor.

For a while after Maggie dedicated her life to God, she drove into Bayview to attend church as often as she could. But after her late sister blackened the family name, she stopped attending. Some of the town folks persisted in gossiping about what happened to Sadie, and all that hateful talk couldn't be good for Sarah and Jon Anthony.

Besides writing to Aunt Violet, she'd send a letter in care of the address in Mexico that was printed on the envelope. She'd write to Alex's sister in San Antonio, and she'd also write to the sheriff in Bayview. She'd known the sheriff all her life and would feel better if he knew about the shooting. When she finished her letter-writing, she planned to send Big Lupe into town to mail the letters and fetch the doctor for Alex.



Alex woke up shortly before noon, looking somewhat improved. His eyes showed clarity and focus, and his movements and coordination seemed better too.

Maggie smiled for his benefit, though in the last twenty-four hours she'd developed a bad case of nerves. Being around any man she didn't

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know made her uncomfortable, and Alex's injuries multiplied the problem. What if he died under her care? True, the injury to his shoulder would no doubt heal quickly, but head wounds could be another matter entirely.

Maggie wouldn't let herself think about it. She'd feign a cheerful voice to go with the smile, no matter what. "Hope you are feeling better, sir."

"I'm all right."

"Your laudanum is on the table next to you there if you need it."

"My what?"

"Laudanum. You wanted something for the pain."

"Oh, yes, thanks." He gazed at Maggie. "You know; you never did tell me your name. I don't know what to call you."

"I'm Miss Gallagher, the one who found you yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

Maggie nodded. "Today's Friday."

"And the month?"

"May."

"Thank you." He moved his left arm and frowned. "I think I'd like that laudanum now."

"Of course." She rose from her chair and swept across the room. "I put some laudanum in a small medicine bottle and mixed it with a bit of wine. Expect a bitter taste." She poured the liquid into a spoon. "Open your mouth."

He did as she requested, took the medicine, and swallowed. "Thank you, Miss ... Miss ?"

"Gallagher," she reminded him with a smile. "Would you like some water?"

"That would be mighty kind."

She lifted his head so he could drink. His dark hair felt soft, curling around her fingers. "Don't drink too much at a time. Just take a sip or two and wait."

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He drank and paused as she instructed, but then continued to drink until he consumed the entire cup of cool water.

“You know,” he said, “you really are an angel of mercy.”

Maggie felt a frown coming on. To her way of thinking, his comment sounded inappropriate, and she wouldn’t allow Alex or any other man to think she was a loose woman. Maggie straightened her back. She put the cup on a shelf by his bed next to the blue pitcher.

“Would you like something to eat?” Her voice sounded kinder than she felt.

He nodded. “I am kinda hungry.”

“I’ll have my sister bring you a tray.”

A hint of a smile curved his lips. “Is your sister as pretty as you are?”

Her eyes widened at his remark. “My sister’s name is Sarah, and she’s ten years old.”

His smile disappeared. “I’ve offended you, haven’t I? Please accept my humble apology.”

Maggie stood gazing at him. She’d never met anyone quite like Alex and didn’t know what to make of him. At last she nodded. Maybe his forward-sounding remarks were merely his way of covering the anxiety and confusion he probably felt—flat on his back and in a strange house. If her papa were alive and in the stranger’s situation, she knew he’d try to hide his vulnerability at all costs.

She’d give Alex the benefit of the doubt and forget it—this time. But if there was a next time, she’d send him to town, even if it meant a rough ride in the back of a wagon.

Maggie bit her lower lip. “I should go now.”

She almost tacked the word *Alex* at the end of her sentence, yet she’d promised herself she wouldn’t call him by his first name except

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in her deepest and most private thoughts. Not only had the book she read warned against saying too much to a person in his condition, it wouldn't be proper to call a perfect stranger by his given name.

"I have to finish cleaning up the kitchen," she added. "But I'll look in on you again later."

She'd almost reached the door when she remembered the whistle Concha found in the cowboy's pocket. Why hadn't she thought of it sooner? He could use it if he needed to call her. She whirled back around, and her dark green skirt ballooned out around her.

The smile he sent her in response looked warm and friendly and full of life. She had to force herself not to grin back.

Maggie marched over to the trunk, retrieved the small wooden whistle, and placed it in the palm of his hand. "Blow this if you need something."

He fingered the whistle as if in deep thought. "Where'd you get this?"

"From that trunk there. Why?"

"I don't know. It just seems familiar somehow. Reckon I had one like this once?"

"Do you think this means your memory is starting to return?"

"I sure hope so. I'd hate to end up in the loony house for the rest of my life."

Loony house? She chuckled under her breath. Her father had used that very term to describe children who laughed or told jokes at the table, and it had always conjured up mental pictures of a house filled with children, rolling on the floor and laughing.

"Young women are expected to have good morals and be serious-minded," her papa had said. "Only silly young girls giggle all the time."

When she faced Alex again, his eyes twinkled back at her in a way that made her think he wanted to tease the living daylights out of her.

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Then his expression became more apologetic. Maybe he was sorry for being so unseemly earlier.

Her late sister, Sadie, often said that some men were wolves in sheep's clothing. Was Alex a wolf in wolves' clothing?

Their gazes connected again, but Maggie glanced away. After a moment she looked back. He rolled the whistle between his thumb and forefinger, studying her every move.

"How can I ever repay you for all you've done for me? I figure you saved my life yesterday."

She stood in the doorway with her hand on the latch, wondering how to reply. He sounded truly grateful and so tender and kind she wanted to cry. Yet only a moment before, he'd seemed completely different.

A little-boy-lost look came over his face. She felt protective toward him but couldn't give in to such thoughts and feelings. With a ranch and a house to manage as well as Sarah and little Jon Anthony to look after, she simply didn't have that option.

"I'll have Sarah to come in later and read to you." She'd tried to sound soft and melodious, rationalizing that a sick person deserved that no matter what he or she might have done in the past. "My sister does her school work here at home and needs practice reading the Bible out loud."

"Is she the ten-year-old?"

Maggie nodded.

Amusement replaced the tenderness in his blue eyes. "I'm beholden to you, ma'am, and I'll be happy to help your little sister out, as a favor to you. Do y'all look alike—you and your little sister?"

"Actually, I thought Sarah would be doing you a favor." Maggie put her left hand on her hip. "And if you really want to know, we look nothing alike. I'm like my mother's side of the family, and with Sarah's red hair, she looks like Papa's side."

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Why did she keep changing her opinions of this man? Why, there were more sides to him than one of Jon Anthony's toy blocks of wood. If she ever saw all the sides at once, her mind would likely explode like an overripe melon. Yet with all those sides to his personality, she still loved the sound of that southern accent of his.

Texans used *y'all* too. She'd always thought of it as the plural for the word *you*, but when he said it, he made her almost wish she weren't annoyed with him much of the time.

And bless his heart, he looks so helpless—all spread out in the middle of that bed.

She looked closely at Alex again, and he grinned back at her. Why, he wasn't helpless or weak, not at all. He was possibly as strong as a full-grown bull. Having a bump on his head and being shot hadn't slowed him down a bit.

The sudden realization caused her unwarranted sympathy to turn to instant irritation. Was he trying to take advantage of a young woman and two children living alone?

Still staring at Alex, Maggie blew away a blond curl that had fallen across her forehead. "Well, I never," she muttered then spun around and headed for the kitchen.



Alex heard the metallic bangs of pots and pans. He pictured Miss Gallagher's honey-brown eyes flashing as she pattered around the kitchen, dropping utensils and clattering dishes. Obviously her spirit matched her beauty and charm, yet he sensed a sensitive side to her nature that had to be in conflict with all that fire.

Earlier he'd watched her from under his lashes. He'd awakened when she first came in but had pretended to be asleep in order to observe

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her without having to stop and explain himself. The young woman he'd called his guardian angel had seemed upset about something, but even when she glided quickly around the room, he liked the way she moved.

She'd floated on the balls of slender feet, dusting things while clearly preoccupied. Maybe angels lived on a higher plane than the rest of the world and felt energized when they helped people or engaged in some kind of task.

He loved the look of her soft ivory skin when a blush colored it peachy-pink, and he liked the way her nose turned up even when her wide mouth didn't. He was sure he'd never met a golden-haired lady that was anything like her. That much passion was usually reserved for redheads.

Alex tensed. What did he know about redheads and golden-haired ladies? The thought had to come from someplace, but he had no idea where.