



One Lucky Cowboy

By Carolyn Brown

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Book 2 of the Lucky trilogy

From *New York Times* and *USA Today*-bestselling author Carolyn Brown comes a contemporary Western romance filled to the brim with sexy cowboys, gutsy heroines, and genuine down-home Texas twang.

Jane Day is on the run from a former fiancé who's out to kill her. In Wichita Falls, Texas, she meets Nellie Luckadeau, a spitfire of an old lady who desperately needs someone to work on her ranch. But Nellie's drop-dead gorgeous grandson "Lucky Slade" is sure he can spot a con artist a mile away. He's determined not to let some upstart like Jane fleece his granny.

When his signature intimidation methods don't convince Jane to leave, he pours on the charm to make her spill what she's up to. She's happy to play along, but she's not going to let this hot, hostile cowboy run her off his land when all she needs is a lucky break...

Fans of Linda Lael Miller and Diana Palmer will thrill to this exciting story of a cowboy hero who learns to trust his heart.

Lucky Series:

Lucky in Love (Book 1)
One Lucky Cowboy (Book 2)
Getting Lucky (Book 3)

Praise for Bestselling Contemporary Western Romances by Carolyn Brown:

"An old-fashioned love story told well... A delight." -*RT Book Reviews*, 4 Stars

"Sizzling hot and absolutely delectable." -*Romance Junkies*

"Funny, frank, and full of heart... One more welcome example of Brown's Texas-size talent for storytelling." -*USA Today Happy Ever After*

"Alive with humor... Another page-turning joy of a book by an engaging author." -*Fresh Fiction*

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Editorial Review

Review

"I eagerly anticipate the next installment in the Lucky Trilogy. ONE LUCKY COWBOY is a great read, and I look forward to more from Ms. Brown!" - ***Romance Reader at Heart***

"This is not your mother's western romance! Jam-packed with catfights, reluctant heroes, spirited old ladies and, of course, a chilling villain, Brown's plot-driven cowboy romance is set against the background of ranching life and will earn a spot on your keeper shelf. 4 Stars" - ***The Romantic Times***

"Carolyn Brown takes her audience by storm... I was mesmerized with each turn of the pages." - ***The Romance Studio***

"The characters are lovable... they add the extra umph to these books that keep me coming back for more. I love me some Luckadeau men." - ***The Book Binge***

"A great story with hints of blinding passion and biting repartee between the heroine and hero. " - ***The Long and Short of It Reviews***

"There is just something about a cowboy that I just love... a very enjoyable read." - ***Randi Romance Reads***

"If you like cowboys and a ton of sass with your romance, you don't want to miss *One Lucky Cowboy*." - ***Drey's Library***

"Wonderful characters, seamless writing, and a firecracker romance has Carolyn Brown at the top of her game. " - ***Wendy's Minding Spot***

"Brown delivers another great cowboy romance! With devil-may-care characters, exciting plot twists, and outrageously silly sayings." - ***Love Romance Passion***

"All-in-all, I found *One Lucky Cowboy* to be very entertaining. " - ***I Loves 2 Read***

"All of the Luckadeau men are H-O-T! " - ***Cheryl's Book Nook***

"Funny and sweet with a hero and heroine that had me laughing at their banter and their mutual distrust of each other, *One Lucky Cowboy* proved to be a pleasant read." - ***Leslie's Psyche***

" Brown's *One Lucky Cowboy* captivated me from the instance I picked it up. " - ***Literary Escapism***

"Word of warning -- you will not be able to put this one down." - ***Fresh Fiction***

About the Author

Carolyn Brown is a New York Times and USA Today Bestselling author who has published more than 60 books. Born in Texas and raised in southern Oklahoma, Carolyn and her husband now make their home in the town of Davis, Oklahoma.

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Chapter 1

Slade tried to intimidate the petite, dishwater blonde with a glare meant to drop her stone cold dead on the spot. Even if it didn't work, she'd know exactly how he felt about the situation and that he wasn't buying into her act. The fair-haired con artist with pecan-colored brown eyes would be gone in twenty-four hours and that wasn't a threat; it was a solid promise. He might have just lost the first battle with his grandmother, but he'd be damned if he would lose the whole war.

Jane didn't blink when she and the tall, blond cowboy locked eyes. She needed a place to hide for six weeks and this was perfect. If he thought he could run her off, he had cow chips for brains. The opportunity had dropped in her lap at the bus station like an answered prayer from heaven. She could endure his cold accusations and he could damn sure live with the situation for a few weeks. She'd stay out of his way as much as possible. She'd just seen how the evil male brain worked, and it was scary.

Nellie Luckadeau, Slade's grandmother, could have danced a jig in a pig trough half full of fermented slop. Never had she seen Slade so angry. He was the cold, calm, collected, and slow-moving cowboy who never had a temper fit. She'd begun to think he'd never feel anything again and suddenly he was ready to chew up railroad spikes all because she'd brought home a stray, homeless girl. Well, praise the Lord and pass the biscuits, her prayers had been answered.

Slade shifted his big blue eyes to his grandmother. "I can't believe you drove to Wichita Falls. I told you I'd be here as soon as I could."

"Ellen wanted to get home this afternoon and she'd have missed her bus. Damned near did anyway, what with the wreck and all. Don't get your underbritches in a wad. I drove. I backed out into a car. I've got damned good insurance that'll pay for the damages and if I didn't, I expect I could handle the amount. I was lucky to be sittin' there when Jane got off the bus. Now I've got a driver and you can get on back to your ranchin' and quit your bellyachin' about me hiring her. She told me on the way from Wichita Falls that this was her lucky break. Well, I reckon it's mine, too. And if you'll admit it, it's your lucky break because damn it all, Slade Luckadeau, you don't have to worry about drivin' me anywhere long as she's here."

"She's not a driver, she's a con artist. I bet Jane Day isn't even her name. It's so close to Jane Doe that she probably picked it from the air when you asked her. It doesn't even show any imagination. She's here to swindle you, Granny. Wait and see. She'll end up with everything you own before she leaves." He stormed out of the house. His boots sounded like bolts of thunder and his spurs jingled like a wind chime as he stomped across the wooden porch.

"Don't worry about him, Jane. He's just got a burr in his britches. He'll get over it. Let me show you to your room. But before I do, look me in the eye and tell me you aren't a con artist," Nellie said.

Jane took a step forward, looked up, and met the tall older woman's eyes. "I am not a con artist. I'm not here to rob you of anything. I just need a place to stay for a few weeks. I'm grateful for the job and I'll work like a mule."

"That's all I need to know," Nellie said. "Follow me."

Jane picked up a stuffed duffel bag and carried it through a living room that looked seldom used, a dining room with a long table that could easily seat a dozen people, a den where most of the living went on by the look of the well-used, overstuffed sofa and recliners, and down a hallway. She would never have guessed she'd end up on a ranch south of Ringgold, Texas when she left Greenville, Mississippi two days before. But she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Like she'd said, she'd work like a mule for six weeks and

then go back home to settle matters.

"Old house started out as a two-bedroom frame back in the beginning," Nellie said. "My husband's father built it for his new wife. Then the kids came along and they added this wing with an extra three bedrooms. When my husband bought out his sibling's interest in the ranch and we got married, he added another wing for us. It's got a sitting room and a bedroom. Sitting room turned into his office and my sewing and quilting room pretty quick. My boys lived on this wing the whole time they was growing up. We saved the original two bedrooms for guests. Slade lives in this room."

She motioned toward a shut door. "Here's where you can toss your belongings and sleep at night. Reckon the rest of the time I'll keep you busy. Make yourself at home and get settled in. We serve up three meals a day. We'll start dinner in an hour. That's for the whole work crew. Part of the deal we've always made on the Double L: a good salary and dinner at twelve sharp. Supper is flexible depending on what's going on. If Slade is cutting hay, we might not eat until eight or nine. If he's able to get in early, it's around six. It's not as big as dinner because the help all goes home to their families. Just the three of us at that time. You. Me. Slade. Sometimes my sister, Ellen. She spends a lot of time over here. Ignore Slade if he gets testy."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be out there in an hour to help you," Jane said.

"Might want to stretch out. Don't reckon you got much sleep on that bus, did you?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't. And thank you," Jane said.

"And no thanks due. You'll work for the money I promised you and you'll have a room and board as long as you want to stay here." Nellie shut the door.

Jane threw herself on the full-sized bed, laced her hands behind her head, and stared at her surroundings. It had definitely been a boy's room at one time. Cranberry and ecru plaid curtains hung at the window. A piecework quilt using the same colors covered the bed. The iron headboard and footboard had been painted a soft buttery yellow. A mirror hung above a six-drawer dresser with family pictures arranged from the larger eight by ten sizes at the back down to small ones in the front. The light tan carpet had been replaced recently and still looked new. The walls were painted a soft antique white but were bare.

She glanced at the door. No lock. She shared a wing with the abominable grandson, Slade, with no way to keep him from sneaking into her room and smothering her to death at night. At least she would know there was a possibility she'd be dead by morning and it wouldn't come as a total surprise from the hands of the man she'd promised to love forever amen.

Tired beyond words, she couldn't be still. She popped up and opened the duffle bag. Three pair of jeans, three T-shirts, a dozen pair of underpants, three bras, two pair of Nikes, and a few pair of socks. She had the whole thing unpacked and put away in one empty dresser drawer and the closet in less than ten minutes. She could easily make do with that much for the next few weeks. If she needed anything for a special occasion, she could always purchase it with the money she'd be paid each Friday night.

That almost brought a smile to her face. Who would have thought a week ago that she'd be working for a hundred dollars a week plus room and board? It would have been the biggest joke in the whole state of Mississippi. Ellacyn Jane Hayes working on a ranch for a tiny fraction of her normal salary, without her fancy clothes, cars, and credit cards.

She dug around in her purse for her cell phone to call her best friend Celia and whined out loud. She had vowed she wouldn't miss her bank account or the credit cards she'd been wise enough to leave behind, or

even her business, if she could just be safe. But she really, really did miss that cell phone.

"Damn you, John," she mumbled. She missed her friend, Celia, even more than all the clothing in her closets, more than the laptop computer that she relied on so heavily, even more than chocolate.

She'd thrown the phone out the window somewhere between Dallas and Wichita Falls when she found the tracking device hidden under the battery flap. Finding it had been a fluke. She'd dropped the phone on the floor and the back fell off. When she picked it up, she recognized the little shiny metal thing immediately. She'd slung the phone out the window into the tall grass along the roadside and berated herself for all the expensive subterfuge she'd already sacrificed. The plane ticket from Jackson to New York hadn't been cheap and had eaten up most of her cash. She'd left her Cadillac in the airport parking lot and taken a taxi to the bus station, where she'd bought a ticket to Dallas. No one would look for her on a bus.

She'd written a note that she had gotten cold feet and was on her way to New York for a few weeks to think things through. John would have gone there immediately if it hadn't been for that damned cell phone tracker. Oh, well, it had happened and it couldn't be helped. Now she was as safe as possible, hidden away on a ranch near Ringgold, Texas, population one hundred according to the history lesson Nellie had provided on the drive from Wichita Falls to the Double L Ranch.

She pulled the curtains back and got a view of Black Angus cattle just outside the fenced yard. Farther out she could see Slade on a horse rounding cattle into a huge semi truck. It was definitely a working ranch and Slade was a bona fide cowboy. He cocked his head toward the house and she dropped the curtain faster than if it had been on fire. Surely he couldn't have seen her, but that glare he'd settled upon her when he found out his grandmother had picked her up in the bus station like a stray puppy was enough to give her cold chills. On second thought, those blue eyes could most likely see well enough through trees, cattle hind ends, and glass windows to fry her where she stood.

To say that Slade was angry was the understatement of the century. He'd never been so mad in his whole life. Not even the day his mother shoved him crying out of the car and disappeared with her new husband in a cloud of Texas dust. Granny had no business driving more than thirty miles to Wichita Falls to the bus station in the first place. All she had to do was exercise a little patience and he'd have taken Aunt Ellen to catch the bus back to Amarillo. Damn it all, he'd have taken time to drive the feisty old lady all the way to Amarillo, if Granny would have given him a chance.

But oh, no, she had to take matters in her own hands and get behind the wheel even though she couldn't see jack shit. It had been a year since the doctor had told her about the macular degeneration and said she wasn't to drive anymore. Slade should have taken her license away from her then, but he'd thought she had more sense than to endanger her own life as well as others. Well, he'd been wrong but he'd see to it he had that license in his possession before nightfall. And that little blonde was going right back to the train station come morning. He'd never liked brown-eyed women and he could see through a con from a mile away on a foggy day.

Heat rose up from the ground in waves but he didn't notice it or the sweat pouring down his back, soaking the chambray shirt in big wet circles. It was June in north Texas and sweat was part of life.

"What you so mad about? Never seen you act like this," Vince Johnson asked. His father was the foreman of the Double L Ranch and the tall, gangly young man had worked for Slade in the summers since he was barely big enough to sit a horse.

"Granny drove to town, backed into a car, drug home a stray woman, and is acting like nothing happened," Slade said.

"It's the woman that's making you the maddest. Granny has driven to town before. She's had accidents before and you've never gotten in a snit like this."

Slade turned his horse to gather in another bull without answering. Damn kids these days. What made them so wise, anyway? He didn't remember being that smart when he was sixteen. So what if it was the woman that brought on the fury? Granny had no right to hire live-in help without consulting him. They had always talked things over, hashing through the pros and cons until an agreement was reached.

He pulled a bottle of water from his saddle bag and drank long and deep, frowning at the house the whole time. He'd never liked being reminded of his vulnerability where his mother was concerned and he'd hated the idea of being blindsided. Not that Jane Doe or Day or whatever fictitious name she pulled out of her ass was anything like his mother, who was a tall, gorgeous blonde and could put Marilyn Monroe to shame. Pretty enough to be a model. Trashy enough to entice men. Smart enough to know the difference between rich and poor men. These days she had her nails and hair done in Los Angeles and the line of ex-husbands was longer than his arm.

Jane Day was pretty in an impish sort of way. She had dirty-blonde hair cut in layers from her chin to her shoulders, big brown eyes with perfectly arched brows, and a wide full mouth that would appeal to some men but reminded Slade too much of the pouting Marilyn look. It was that mouth that reminded him of his mother and brought on the memories.

The resemblance ended there, though. He would give credit where it was due and admit she had some redeemable qualities in that short little body with a waist so small he could span it with his big hands. After all he wasn't blind. Nor was he dumb. The woman was after something, and she wasn't finding it on his ranch.

Jane found Nellie in the kitchen. A large pot of beans simmered on the back burner of the stove. Cornbread was in the cast-iron skillet ready to pop into the oven.

"You know anything about cooking for a dozen hungry men?" Nellie asked.

"Little bit. What can I do?"

"Got any skill at a Mexican casserole to go with those beans and cornbread?"

"I could do that," Jane nodded.

"Hamburger meat is in the fridge."

"Chips?"

"In the pantry right over there. You'll find everything else you need in there or in the fridge. Better make two pans full or they'll be whining about still being hungry."

"Dessert?"

"Get some frozen peaches out of the freezer. I didn't have time to make anything sweet this morning," Nellie

said.

"How about some warm brownies to go with the peaches?"

Nellie's smile erased a few of the wrinkles around her mouth and deepened those around her blue eyes. "I knew I'd hired the right person."

Evidently that's who Slade had inherited his piercing blue eyes from—only Nellie's had softened with age. Jane couldn't imagine her shooting daggers like her grandson. When he was as old as Nellie, his eyes still wouldn't be soft. He'd be able to pierce steel instead of heal broken hearts and melt butter.

"Slade came to live with me when he was eight years old. That was twenty-two years ago, six months after my son, Thomas, died in a car wreck. Thomas was so smart it was just plumb scary. Finished high school over in Nocona when he was sixteen and had his first college degree before he could even buy a beer. Wound up with a doctorate in engineering and worked down in Dallas. He wasn't just smart. He was downright pretty. Looked a lot like Slade, only Slade has that tough angular look to his face that his Daddy didn't have. Yes, ma'am, Thomas was intelligent in everything but women," Nellie talked as she worked.

Jane listened.

"If I'd been picking a wife for him the one he got wouldn't have even been on the far bottom of the list. But he was damned and determined that he loved her. I called it the Knight-in-Shining-Armor syndrome. He thought he could ride in on his intelligence and save her. She was dirt poor, pretty, and didn't have two good brain cells in her head. They made it ten years before he died. Six months later she called me from a pay phone on the way here. Said she was bringing Slade to me to raise. She couldn't look at him without thinking of Thomas and besides she was getting married again."

"Oh, my," Jane mumbled. She didn't give a royal rat's ass that Slade Luckadeau hadn't had a perfect little life. She was the hired help, not his future psychiatrist.

"Hey, you're pretty good at stirring up those brownies. You got the recipe in your head or something?"

"Yes, ma'am. My momma taught me to cook. She said I needed to learn everything from the kitchen to the barn from the ground up," Jane said.

"I sure enough did the right thing when I hired you. God really did give me a lucky break when you got off that bus this morning."

Jane slid the brownies into the preheated oven and went to work on the casseroles. They'd follow the brownies into the oven in thirty minutes and be steaming hot when the crew came in from the hayfields for lunch. Cooking was her hobby and she was good at it. After all, she'd had the best teacher in the world for sixteen years.

"You want me to set the table while they're cooking?" she asked Nellie.

Nellie shook her head. "They'll eat out on the deck. Come on and I'll show you how to set things up for them."

"Why don't they eat at the table?" Jane asked.

"It'd take a week to fumigate the house with that much man-sweat coming inside. Winter time we only have a skeleton crew. They eat in the house. Rest of the time they eat on the deck. Besides, they like it that way. If

they was to come inside and get all cool, it would give them a heart attack to go back out in the afternoon heat."

She led the way through sliding glass doors in the kitchen nook out onto an enormous deck. The deck covered the entire space between the two wings that made the U-shaped, one-story ranch house. Yellow and orange marigolds, purple, pink, and white petunias, multicolored lantana, violet vinca, and red impatiens splashed color around the deck. Two ancient pecan trees and a hackberry provided shade for the yard and the deck.

Nellie opened two doors to a closet on the north side of the deck. Disposable plates, cheap cutlery, jelly glasses, and rolls of paper towels were all neatly arranged. "This is kind of like the tail end of a chuck wagon. Designed it myself years ago when I got tired of hauling everything in and out every day. We use paper plates but I've never learned to like plastic forks, so I bought some cheap stainless at the dollar store."

She handed a stack of divided Styrofoam plates to Jane and motioned toward an eight-foot table covered with a vinyl cloth. "We set it up buffet style on this table. They help themselves. We'll need bowls today for the beans and peaches; better open two packages. There's a blue plastic caddy I put the silverware in. Glasses go on the table with ice already in them. Four pitchers of tea, two of lemonade and two of water go down the middle of the table along with jars of picante sauce and salt and pepper shakers. It's a constant job keeping the liquid in the pitchers. They come in here with a big thirst after working all morning. Most of them carry a half-gallon jug of some kind that they'll refill before they head out again, so we'll make lots of tea and lemonade."

"How many glasses?"

"Twenty-four."

Jane whistled under her breath.

"Shame, ain't it? Used to take fifty men to do the work in the summer but with all this new-fangled equipment and those big, round hay bales, we get by with less than half that. Don't know if we're saving money or not. Equipment requires more upkeep than men."

"But it sweats less," Jane said.

"Smart as well as handy in the kitchen. I think I might be goin' to like you, Jane Day," Nellie said.

Slade heard the dinner bell sounding across the fields and rode his horse to the edge of the yard, where he tethered it to the fence. He pulled off his leather gloves and headed for the pump to wash his hands and face. The cold well water felt good but did nothing to appease the turmoil still rolling about in his heart and soul. Besides being upset with his grandmother, now he'd have to listen to Kristy whine and bitch about another woman in the house. While he dried off on a long length of paper towels, he sighed. Kristy had been looking for a job ever since she got laid off over at the leather factory in Nocona. She was going to pitch a real hissy fit when she found out Granny had hired someone right off the street and not her.

"You sick?" Vince asked.

"Might as well be," Slade answered.

"Can I have your share of the brownies?"

"Granny made brownies?"

"No, she said that new girl-the one she hired over in Wichita Falls this morning-made them. If you're too sick to eat, I'm layin' claim to your share."

"I'm not sick to my stomach but I'm going to be sick of listening to Kristy," Slade answered honestly.

"Well, shoot. They're fresh out of the oven and smell like heaven," Vince said.

Jane watched two dozen men wash up, dispose of their paper towels in a big trash can beside the pump, and load their plates and bowls to the brim with lunch. They sat at three eight-foot tables covered in the same red-and-white checked vinyl as the buffet table and talked about the work they'd gotten done as well as what they planned to do until dark.

"Slade, you need anything from the feed store or anywhere else in Nocona? I'm having Jane drive me over for groceries this afternoon," Nellie asked above the drone of the men's voices.

Slade shot Jane another mean look and nodded. "Sure, I'll make a list for the feed store, and would you go by the flower shop and send Kristy half a dozen roses? Sign the card, Just thinking of you, Slade."

Jane stiffened to keep from shuddering. How many times had John sent her roses with a similar note? In the six weeks they'd dated before he proposed she'd had fresh roses all the time. One vase-full scarcely had time to wilt before another arrived at her desk. In her mind roses meant a first-rate con job, not love.

Slade held up a tea pitcher. "This needs a refill."

Jane reached to take it from his hand. He held on tightly and whispered, "Pack your bags when you get back from the grocery store. I'm taking you to Wichita Falls as soon as supper is over."

"In your dreams, cowboy. You didn't hire me and you can't fire me."

"I can make you miserable."

Everyone stopped talking and silence filled the yard. Even the birds stopped their singing and the crickets were quiet.

"I've been made miserable before and by full-fledged professionals. I reckon compared to them you're just an amateur."

Vince chuckled. "I think you met your match, Slade."

Heat that had nothing to do with the thermometer crept up Slade's neck. "Why would you stay somewhere that you're not wanted?"

"Just call it determination. Nellie hired me. When she's dissatisfied with my performance she'll fire me and I'll leave. What you think or don't think of me doesn't matter a damn bit to me."

"Whew, she's spunky. You make these brownies?" A short Mexican man piped up right next to Slade.

Her eyes and face softened when she looked away from Slade. "Yes, sir, I did and the casseroles. Tomorrow we're having turkey and dressing with pumpkin pie for dessert."

"By the way, I'm the foreman of the Double L. Name is Marty. And if he fires you, honey, you come talk to me. I'll hire you right back."

Slade snorted. "Looks like I'm outvoted by a whole passel of fools."

"Enough bickering," Nellie said. "Jane is here to stay as long as she wants. If she proves out to be as good as I think she is, I'm thinkin' of going to Ellen's out in Amarillo for a week. So put that in your pipe and smoke it, Slade."

He rolled his eyes. Kristy would really go up in flames at that idea. Him alone in the house with another woman—that should throw ice on their budding relationship. They'd been dating for six months and he'd been entertaining notions of taking it to the next level. Granny wasn't real happy with that idea, but he was thirty years old and he wanted a family. Kristy came with two little girls. He'd have a jump start with those benefits.

He threw up his hands in defeat. "Have it your way but you're going to find I'm right when it's all said and done."

The men finished eating, threw their dirty plates and bowls in a trash can at the end of the buffet table, put the cutlery in a plastic dish pan, and lined the glasses up beside it. They claimed chairs, a spot of shade under the hackberry and pecan trees, or chaise lounges and shut their eyes—all but Slade, who toted the dishpan into the house.

Jane and Nellie each carried half a dozen glasses, waitress style, and followed him. The wind shifted and Jane got a solid whiff of Slade in all his musky, sweaty glory. She understood fully why Nellie wouldn't want two dozen like that in her dining room. It would take months to clean out that much testosterone. She wasn't sure there was that much air freshener on the market.

Nellie set the glasses down and headed back out to cart the bean pot inside.

"I'm serious. I'm not teasing. I do not want you here. It's going to complicate my life beyond words," he said.

"I'm here for six weeks. Sorry if it makes your life less than perfect," she said.

"She's paying you a hundred dollars a week. I'll write you a check for a thousand to leave tonight," he said.

"No thank you."

"Two thousand. Name your price."

"You don't have enough money to make me leave."

"Why?"

"That is my business. I'm staying right here for six weeks and then I promise I'll get out of your way. And darlin', don't worry about me causing a problem with you and your precious lady friend. I've sworn off all men for eternity. I'll tell her that if you want me to."

"What makes you think there's a lady friend?"

"The way you are actin' tells me there is. A woman would give you hell if another woman moved in on her property. Bring her around. I'll tell her I'm damn sure not a threat."

He pointed his finger at her. "You stay away from Kristy."

She slapped it away. "Don't be issuing orders. I'm not here to cause trouble. You stay out of my way and I'll be damn sure I don't get in yours. I'll tolerate your piggish ways and you can pretend I'm just a slave girl. I don't care how you handle it, but I'm not leaving."

Slade narrowed his blue eyes until they were little more than slits. "You are running from the law. That's why you're calling yourself Jane Day. What did you do?"

"Believe what you want. I've got to help Nellie. Conversation is over."

"I'm calling the sheriff of Montague County and seeing if you are wanted anywhere in the state," he said.

"Want me to dial the number for you?"

"You're bluffing."

"Then call my bet and see if the sheriff of Monty County has a thing on me," she threw over her shoulder as she disappeared through the doors.

He took a cell phone from his shirt pocket and dialed the familiar number. He'd grown up with the sheriff. They played poker the first Friday of every month together. Jane Day would be sitting in jail in an hour.

"Hey, Charlie, this is Slade. Got a little favor to ask. Granny hired a woman going by the name of Jane Day. Just picked her up at the bus stop in Wichita Falls this morning and come dragging her home like a stray pup. Please tell me you've got some warrant on her so I can get rid of her."

"Give me a minute," Charlie said.

Slade heard typing on keys and background noise of the deputies coming and going from the sheriff's office.

"Sorry old buddy. Haven't got anything new on anyone for the past three weeks. Did get a fax this morning about some rich broad over in Mississippi who might be headed this way. She run out on her wedding the night before the big ceremony. Her stepdad says it's not like her and he's afraid she might have been kidnapped. Her name is Ellacyn Hayes though. Twenty-four years old. Description says she's..."

Slade butted in. "That couldn't be this woman. She's working for a hundred dollars a week and room and board. This lady looks like she'd be pushing it to be nineteen and there's no way she's some rich broad from Mississippi. She don't have that kind of accent and she's wearing faded jeans and a T-shirt. Rich woman wouldn't be dressed like that. I figured her for a runaway from east Texas and was hoping she'd robbed a bank or a liquor store."

"Sorry old pal. How's things going with Kristy?"

"Fine until now. She's going up in smoke when she hears there's a woman living here."

Charlie chuckled. "Women! Can't live with 'em and it's against the law to shoot 'em."

"You got that right."

"Who are you talking to?" Nellie asked as she and Jane toted in leftovers.

Slade snapped the phone shut. "Charlie."

"This ain't a poker night," Nellie said.

"Would that be the sheriff of Monty County?" Jane raised an eyebrow. It was all she could do to keep from bolting and running. John would find the phone. He was such a smooth talker he'd have the sheriff out with a posse hunting her down for him.

"Montague County, not Monty," Nellie said.

"Yes, it was the sheriff. He's one of my friends." Slade narrowed his eyes and slowly went from her toes to her hair. Jane was certainly not a rich runaway bride. But kidnapping might be an option in the game. He could hire someone to nab her and keep her the six weeks she kept mentioning, then turn her loose. Whatever they would charge would be a small price to pay.

"Why were you talking to Charlie?" Nellie asked. "Slade, you weren't asking him about Jane, were you?"

"Yes, I was and it appears she's not wanted by the law. Only person they've got anything on right now is some runaway bride from over in Mississippi. Charlie says her father is looking for her." He watched Jane carefully but she didn't move a muscle; just kept running water to wash up the glasses and cutlery from dinner.

"You reckon your father is looking for you?" Nellie asked.

"My father died when I was ten years old. I don't suppose he's looking for me on this side of the Pearly Gates," Jane said honestly.

"Okay, Slade. Enough is enough. I don't give a damn what Kristy thinks of my decision to hire Jane, if that's what is sticking in your craw. The woman rubs me wrong anyway and she'd want to bring those two little girls to work with her every day and they don't do anything but whine about being bored. Besides she can't cook and I don't want to listen to her constant prattle when she drives me. Jane works for me. She doesn't work for you."

Nellie put the leftover beans in the refrigerator. Slade made a gun with his forefinger and thumb and shot an imaginary bullet at Jane while his grandmother wasn't looking. Jane pretended to catch it in her hand and toss it in the dishwater as she turned her back on him.

It wouldn't be as easy as she'd thought that morning when she sat down beside the elderly lady and caught the first lucky break since she'd run away from a deadly situation. The sheriff had already been warned to be on the lookout, so there was no doubt that John had located the cell phone. He'd turn over every stone between Wichita Falls and Heaven itself to find her. After all, he'd put six weeks into the venture and, even without the life insurance policy, she was worth thousands of dollars to him. Even more to her stepfather, Paul Stokes.

"Did you ever stop and eat dinner?" Nellie asked.

Jane's gag reflex went into fast gear at the thought of swallowing food. "No, but I'm not hungry."

"You're a big girl. You know where the groceries are. Eat when you get hungry. Heat ruins my appetite sometimes, too. But that casserole was so good today that I forgot all about the temperature. We'll get on over to Nocona and pick up groceries soon as you finish up with those dishes. I usually just wash up the dinner ones by hand and put the breakfast and supper ones in the dishwasher and run it before I go to bed."

"Thank you. I'm glad you liked my cooking. You sure about turkey and dressing tomorrow?"

"Yep. I want the boys to eat good to make up for just beans and casseroles today. Working men need lots of real food."

"Is Nocona where the county seat is located?"

"Heavens no. It's the biggest town in the county with around three thousand people. Montague is the county seat. Little bitty place that was bigger than Nocona at one time. What makes you ask?"

"Just wondered."

"You never have been in this part of Texas have you? Where are you from, Jane?"

"I was born in El Dorado, Arkansas."

"You want to tell me how you got to Wichita Falls and why you took me up on my job offer?"

"Not really."

"Well, that's your business. You ever want to talk about it, I'm right here. You don't, I could care less. You about done?"

"Just a few more glasses. And thanks, Nellie."

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