

Chapter 1

“Hey, Curt!”

Maggie Malone flinched when the proprietor of Lawton’s general store bellowed across the room on her behalf.

“Curt! This little lady is tryin’ to find the McCain ranch. You headin’ back out there now?”

“Please, I don’t want to trouble anyone,” said Maggie. “I’ll be fine if you can just point me in the right direction.”

“No trouble.” The proprietor spoke for the other man. “Curt’s a foreman at the ranch.”

The man named Curt came into view as he made his way to the counter where Maggie stood. She looked into his eyes, and her breathing faltered. His remote expression was unwelcoming, to say the least. He struck her as someone who didn’t take kindly to strangers and especially didn’t like having one thrust on him.

“I’m not going to the ranch, but I’m heading north,” he told the proprietor while his cool gaze swept over her petite stature and windblown mass of auburn hair.

She assumed the McCain ranch was north because the man she’d asked for directions nodded his head in satisfaction.

“Thanks,” she returned politely, not wanting assistance from a man who obviously didn’t want to give it. “But there’s no need to escort me to the McCains. I don’t have any trouble following directions.”

“The ranch ain’t hard to find,” the helpful proprietor explained, “but there’s a storm brewin’ and a wind blowin’ from the north. It ain’t good to be roamin’ the countryside alone.”

Maggie swallowed more words of protest. She’d lived most of her life in Chicago, so the wind factor didn’t worry her. What worried her was the unfriendly perusal from the big cowboy who stood a foot taller than her five feet and looked at her as though she were an alien from outer space.

His unfriendly attitude left her momentarily at a loss for words, a condition she couldn’t remember experiencing in all of her twenty-six years.

“I’ll follow you out of town and direct you to the ranch,” the foreman said in a deep baritone, his expression never softening. His face was deeply tanned with fine lines about the eyes from squinting in the sun. He had a cleft in his chin and firmly compressed lips. The rest of his features could have been cast in stone, as well.

“I’d appreciate that,” she replied. The cowboy had already turned and was heading for the door. She decided to follow and part ways with him as soon as possible.

“Thank you,” she threw over her shoulder to the man behind the counter as she tried to catch up with her rude guide.

The foreman stopped at the door and waited for her. After shoving his hat down tightly over his forehead, he shifted the grocery bag he carried to his left arm and held the door with his right. Maggie repeated her thanks and did her best to slip past him without

making any contact.

They wind tore at them the instant they left the store. The building afforded some protection, yet Maggie's skirt whirled around her legs. She quickly buttoned her trench coat from neck to hem, trying to tuck in as much of her hair as possible. A handful of it still obscured her vision until she could tuck it behind her ear.

"Is that your car?" he asked, inclining his head toward her small red sports car. She nodded and thought he grunted his disapproval.

"You must be a friend of Tara's," the cowboy surmised, raising his voice to be heard over the sound of the wind.

Maggie dared to look him directly in the eyes. "Tara?"

"Mrs. McCain," he explained succinctly.

Shaking her head, she corrected him. "I've never met Mrs. McCain. I've spoken to her on the phone, but I'm going to the ranch for a job interview, not as a guest."

Maggie hadn't thought it possible, but the cowboy's expression turned grimmer. Maybe he'd hoped she was here for a very short visit. She wondered how he could have taken such an immediate dislike to her. She rarely affected people in that fashion. Everyone liked Maggie Malone. She was a regular Miss Congeniality.

Curt shifted the grocery bag again and gently took hold of her right arm, preparing to walk her to her car.

"That blue pickup truck is mine," he told her, motioning toward the truck parked several spaces behind her car. "Turn right at the traffic light and left at the next intersection. You'll be on the main road. The McCain ranch is twenty miles out of town. I'll follow you for about fifteen miles."

Maggie wanted to tell him it wasn't necessary, but as soon as they both stepped from the protection of the building, they were blasted by a gust of wind that literally took her breath. It slammed her against the cowboy's rock-hard body. Even though they were both wearing coats, she was stunned by the impact of her soft body against his hard one.

Pushing herself from him, she quickly regained her balance with the assistance of one of his big hands. Her expression was apologetic as their gazes clashed.

"Sorry," was all she could manage.

He shook his head as if to dismiss the apology, walked her to her car and made sure she was safely behind the wheel before closing the door with a thud. She fastened her seat belt and watched in her rear-view mirror as he climbed into his truck. The wind had gotten strong enough to make her small car rock so she told herself to quit worrying about the unfriendly stranger and concentrate on getting to her destination before the storm clouds drew any closer.

As soon as she pulled her car from the curb, he followed. She made all the turns he'd told her to make, but the fierce gusts of wind had her weaving dangerously. Maggie gave her full attention to keeping her car on the right side of the road. She was used to strong winds, but mostly in the city. Out here she was getting hit full force from the front and then getting caught in whirlwinds. There was nothing but open range on either side of the highway and no protection from the wind's ferocity. Every few miles she passed a tree with a broad trunk and full, swaying branches. She considered pulling off until the storm passed but the trees didn't look much like a safe haven.

The sky was growing blacker. She could tell they were heading straight into the storm system. A few giant raindrops gradually increased to a heavy shower and then a

downpour. Visibility rapidly decreased, and she strained to control the car. A glance at the odometer showed that she'd only driven ten miles from Lawton, but it seemed much farther.

Hands locked around the steering wheel, her pulse accelerated along with her anxiety. Her body grew taut with tension, and her eyes began to burn from the strain of trying to see beyond the windshield. She was glad for a road sign that warned her of a sharp left turn, but she was unprepared when the powerful north wind caught her broadside. The car rocked violently, and she feared it would actually be flipped over on its side.

Terrifying flashes of lightning began to split the inky darkness of the sky, forcing her to slow the car to a crawl. The sound of thunder reverberated around her and was nearly as deafening as the pounding of her own pulse.

Another gust of wind rocked the car and Maggie decided she wasn't going any further until the storm abated. When she caught sight of a huge tree on her side of the road, she slowed the car. The tree might attract lightning, but the protection it afforded from the wind was preferable to being rolled around the countryside like a tumbleweed. She switched on her emergency flashers and pulled to a stop, sighing with relief as the tree created a partial windbreak.

She'd nearly forgotten the cowboy until his pickup truck pulled alongside her car. He rolled down the window on the passenger side, and Maggie reluctantly opened her window a crack so that she could hear him. Needle-sharp, freezing rain lashed her face and neck as she strained to hear what he was saying.

"You can't stay under that tree," he shouted harshly. "My place is a couple miles down the road. There's another curve that'll head us north again. Follow me and my truck will block some of the wind."

He didn't give her a chance to argue, just rolled up the window and pulled in front of her. She grudgingly put her car in gear and followed.

Visibility did improve a little when she could follow his taillights. As soon as they rounded a sharp right curve, her car stopped rocking so violently. His wide vehicle blocked the worst of the wind, but the rain pelted her windshield relentlessly, and she allowed herself a groan of distress.

How did she always manage to get into these kinds of predicaments? Her family said it was because she was so impetuous, independent, and headstrong, but she didn't know how to be anything else. Besides, how could she have known driving to the McCain ranch would be such a nightmare? Who could anticipate this kind of weather in September?

When the cowboy's brake lights flashed, Maggie realized the truck was turning into a driveway. She drove through a gate and over metal cattle guards. Lightning flashed, enabling her to see the shape of a two-story building about a half mile ahead of the truck. Another gust of wind rocked the car, and her heart leapt into her throat. Stomach rolling, she prayed her car wouldn't do the same before she made it to shelter.

The crunch of gravel beneath her tires gave way to smoother pavement and then her escort pulled into a carport attached to a house. There was enough room to fit her car beside the truck, so she parked beside him.

Safe at last, she shut off her engine and lights then dropped her head against the steering wheel in relief.

“Are you all right?” the cowboy demanded as he pulled open her door and bent down to peer inside. “Did you get hurt?”

She turned her head and found herself looking directly into his ruggedly handsome face and piercing eyes. A shiver raced over her, but she attributed it to the cold, damp air that rushed around her.

“I’m fine, just relieved to be sitting still,” she replied breathlessly.

“We’d better get in the house,” he said, taking hold of her arm and leaving her little choice but to cooperate.

Maggie barely had time to grab her keys and pocketbook before she was pulled from the car and practically carried to the door of the house. The cowboy’s big body absorbed the brunt of the pelting rain, but she was still drenched before they managed to get through the door and onto a closed porch.

“Is this your house?” she asked as they shook some of the water from their bodies.

“Yes,” Curt responded. He wasn’t thrilled with having a female guest — his very first, but he had little choice in the matter. Another couple of miles and her car would have overturned or sunk axle deep in the water beginning to rush across the road.

“You can leave your coat out here to dry,” he told her as he hung his over a hook on the wall.

Maggie nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Her teeth had begun to chatter and she was shivering with cold. Her coat kept most of her dress dry, but her hair, hem line, legs, and feet were soaked.

Curt took her coat and spread it over the back of the only chair on the porch. Then he opened the door to the kitchen and ushered his guest inside where it was a little warmer, but not much.

“I’ll get a fire started in the fireplace,” he told her, noticing how chilled she was. “This way.”

She followed him through the spacious kitchen into an even more spacious living room. Half of one wall was covered with a stone fireplace, and she moved toward it.

Wrapping her arms tightly about her, she looked around the room. Now that she was out of the storm, her insatiable curiosity kicked into high gear. Her main concern was getting warm, but that didn’t stop her from being curious.

The house was obviously still under construction. The air smelled of new wood and sawdust. The walls and hardwood floors were bare, and the only piece of furniture in the room was a big, leather sofa. She’d seen appliances as they passed through the kitchen, but the only other furnishings had been a wooden table with a couple of straight-backed chairs. If he lived here, he must like to rough it.

Maggie wondered if he had a wife and family. She glanced at his left hand as he lit a match and noted that he wasn’t wearing a ring. That wasn’t a guarantee, but it made her feel both relief and chagrin. While she didn’t like the idea of being totally alone with a strange man, she realized she wouldn’t have been happy to learn about a wife, either. Definitely a contradiction in emotions.

As soon as Curt had the fire steadily burning, he turned his attention back to his guest. She had looked small in her coat, but without it, she looked really tiny. Despite the mature, hourglass figure, he couldn’t remember ever seeing anyone with features so small and delicate. Though her stature was slight, her eyes were alight with intelligence, and she didn’t seem to lack self-confidence. She’d battled the Oklahoma elements with an

iron determination that proved she wasn't as fragile as her appearance suggested.

He took the two blankets from the sofa and spread one on the floor in front of the fireplace. Then he stepped close to Maggie and wrapped the second blanket about her shoulders. She shivered, still not speaking, but gave him a warm smile for his efforts.

It made him frown. The smile was innocent and not the least bit flirtatious, yet it sent a current of powerful emotion zinging through him. She smelled sweetly feminine, and he found himself reacting to her as he hadn't reacted to any woman for a long time. He didn't like it.

"You can sit in front of the fireplace as long as you don't get too close. I don't have a screen for it yet."

Maggie nodded, stepped out of her shoes, and pulled the blanket tightly around her shoulders. Then she eased herself to the floor in front of the fire. Her shivering gradually abated, and she felt life coming back into her frozen limbs. She hadn't realized how icy-cold she'd gotten until she began to thaw.

Drawing the blanket closer, she inhaled a clean, woodsy scent that had to belong to her host. There had been a couple of times when she'd been close enough to feel the heat of his body and to smell the unique masculine scent of him. Her sense of smell was acute, and she found unexpected comfort in burying her face in the stranger's blanket.

Maggie couldn't explain, even to herself, why she wasn't alarmed by the unexpected turn of events. She was temporarily content to sit in front of the fire and let the sight and scent of her host penetrate her senses. Her only experience with cowboys was the urban sort, so she'd never met anyone quite like this one.

He had a gorgeous physique; long legs, muscled thighs, flat stomach, slim waist, and wonderfully wide shoulders. Her gaze slowly devoured him while he had his back turned. She couldn't remember ever meeting a man that was put together as beautifully.

"The proprietor of the store called you Curt. Would you mind my asking your full name?" she inquired, watching him as he carefully added a big log to the kindling.

"Curt Hayden." His response was as curt as his name, and Maggie was a bit annoyed when he didn't offer more information or ask her name. She decided not to introduce herself.

"You mentioned this is your house. Do you live here alone?"

He rose and walked to a window. "I live on the McCain ranch most of the time, but I'm trying to get this place finished before winter."

"You're doing all the carpentry work on the house?"

"Yes."

"All by yourself?"

"Yes."

She wasn't one to be put off by a few monosyllabic replies. "You didn't build the whole house by yourself, did you?"

The amazement in her tone drew Curt's gaze back to meet hers. "Some of the ranch staff helped me get it under roof last summer, but it's taken me all year to get the electricity and plumbing finished and the furnace installed."

"You did all those things?" she asked, her eyes wide with surprise. She knew people still helped build their own homes, but she'd never met anyone who had the skills to do all the construction work.

"It's cheaper that way," he said, flipping on a light to dispel the growing darkness.

It was late afternoon, but the sky was midnight dark.

Maggie looked toward the beamed ceiling as the overhead light came on. It had six separate globes attached to a wagon wheel suspended from the ceiling by a heavy chain.

She'd never seen such a fixture, but she liked it. She also liked the open beams of the ceiling, and the second story loft that circled most of the living room. There was an open staircase that curved in a spiral to the second floor.

"You really did all this?" she repeated, amazement widening her big brown eyes.

"Most of it," Curt told her. "The furnace is new, and I haven't used it much, but I'll turn it on. It will get really cold in here before long."

"It's still summertime," she grumbled.

"The heat just makes the storms more violent," he explained, crossing the room and opening the door to a large closet where the furnace was housed.

Maggie heard the hum of the equipment as he turned it on and thought he must be a good carpenter to handle any project that needed to be done. The furnace worked and the lighting seemed to be installed properly. Ranch foreman, carpenter, electrician, plumber? Was there anything the man couldn't do?

On the other hand, the cautious side of her brain suggested, he could be lying to impress her. This might not even be his house. He hadn't used a key and for all she knew, they might both be trespassing.

The clerk at the store had called him by name and told her he was a foreman for the McCains. Of course, they could be in cahoots, kidnapping unsuspecting young women and selling them into slavery. There was no end to the possibilities. There never was where Maggie's imagination was concerned. The fact remained that she wasn't the least bit frightened or uneasy about her host and his lovely house.

"What time were you expected at the ranch?"

His question broke into her thoughts, and she didn't take time to consider her response. "They're not expecting me until tomorrow. I'm a day ahead of schedule, but Mrs. McCain invited me to come to the ranch as soon as I got to Lawton."

As soon as the words left her mouth she cursed herself for being so open with a stranger. She needed more practice at being wary and evasive.

Curt's mouth curved slightly. His guest obviously wasn't one of those people who lied about everything and considered the consequences later. She was just the opposite. Probably too honest for her own good.

"Did you call Tara and tell her you were heading for the ranch?"

This time she hesitated a little, and they both knew why. Still, she couldn't manage a lie. "Do you have a telephone I could use? I'm sure my cell is out of range."

He shook his head. "I don't have a phone, but I have a citizen band radio I use to call the ranch. Do you want me to call Tara?"

Maggie wasn't sure. "How long do you think this storm will last?"

"All night and maybe all day tomorrow."

She wasn't pleased to hear his prediction.

"Will it be safe to go to the ranch later if the wind subsides?"

"Judging by the amount of rain we're getting, the road might be impassable for a while."

"Impassable?"

“The culverts weren’t built to handle runoff from this heavy a downpour. The road floods deep enough in some spots to drown out a car’s engine.”

“And the longer it rains, the longer it will take to subside,” she surmised irritably.

“Right.”

“And it sure doesn’t show any sign of stopping, does it?”

“No.”

“Then I guess there’s not much sense in calling the McCains and alarming them.”

“No,” Curt agreed. “I’ll call and tell them I’m staying here, but they don’t need to know I have company.”

She wondered if she’d be wiser to alert the McCains to her whereabouts. She gave him a steady, scrutinizing look that he returned just as steadily.

“The ranch is like a small town,” he warned. “It’s a hotbed of gossip. If you hope to work there, it wouldn’t be a good idea to let them know you’re spending time alone with me. Even if it is an emergency.”

Maggie understood the logic of his words, but she wasn’t totally convinced. There was absolutely nothing she could do if he decided to violate her trust, yet she still felt the need to offer some sort of protest.

“Do you have a bad reputation with women?”

Her query surprised him. Was she so honest that she expected everyone else to be honest and trustworthy? It might do her some good to be a little less trusting, but he wasn’t interested in teaching her any lessons. He wasn’t interested. Period.

“Any man can give a woman a bad reputation, whether she deserves it or not.”

Which didn’t exactly answer her question, Maggie thought. Still, what could she do but trust her instincts?

“Maybe you shouldn’t mention that I’m here,” she finally agreed, burying her face in the blanket again.

He nodded and headed for his office and the radio.