

A
STRANGER
TO LOVE

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This edition published by
AWritersWork.com

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First published by Silhouette
NEW YORK

The Bardville, Wyoming Trilogy:
A Stranger in the Family
A Stranger to Love
The Rancher Meets His Match

VRW HOLT finalist

To Cathy and John,
who encouraged me
to dive in
from the start.

Chapter One

Sheriff Tom Milano glared at the computer.

He was too old for newfangled machines. He oughta be fishing or two-stepping with Rita. He stabbed one of three keys with an arrow aimed up. Words on the screen jumped and disappeared.

"Gol'durn it!" Rita didn't like him talking rough, but the following torrent constituted an avalanche of backsliding.

"Sheriff?" His open door framed the balding head and right shoulder of Deputy Russell Kasper. "Rita called."

Guilt jumped on him faster than a fly on road apples.

Kasper added, "Said there's a disturbance at Jessa's."

Sheriff Milano frowned. Rita worked as a clerk at Jessa Tarrant's sundries shop.

"What kind of disturbance?"

"Didn't say. Just said they had a situation—that's what she called it—and you oughta get over there."

Milano stood and grabbed his hat. "See if this contraption will spit out that report on paper."

"But the whole idea—"

"You heard me. Deputy."

"Yes, sir."

Tom Milano settled the well-worn hat into the groove in his gray hair and set out to restore the peace of Bardville, Wyoming.

* * * *

"Let me get this straight," Sheriff Milano said. "Jessa, you were in back in the office with the door closed, while Rita was working the register. That right?"

Jessa Tarrant nodded. What did this matter? Who was where had nothing to do with what had happened or

what would happen.

"And you were picking out things in the store, uh, Mr.—" The sheriff peered at his notes as if checking the name of the tall, lean man before him, though Jessa would wager a month's receipts Tom Milano knew exactly the identity of this man propping one hip against the wall, looking entirely at his ease. "Grainger?"

"Yes."

"Picking out some things, huh? You've got quite a collection there," the sheriff said with a nod to the full basket on the floor. "Why is that?"

"My nephew and I are staying at the Westons' for a few weeks." The sheriff's eyes went to the third person before him, a sullen-faced boy of about twelve. As far as Jessa could gauge through the mirrored sunglasses he wore, Cully Grainger didn't spare the boy so much as a glance. "Flew in today. We need some things."

"Westons' place, huh?"

The sheriff's vague question and the silence that followed were an implicit request for more information. For a long moment, Jessa thought the other man wasn't going to comply. Sheriff Milano waited with no sign of impatience or irritation.

The tight line of Cully's lips eased and one side lifted in the smallest, most reluctant of grins.

"I'm a friend of Boone Smith's. Came here last summer when he was visiting the Westons. Came back for the wedding."

As the sheriff damned well knew, Jessa thought. She shifted to her other foot and recrossed her arms at her waist. Tom Milano had been at the wedding of Boone Dorsey Smith and Cambria Weston ten months ago and at their combination belated reception and going-away party last October before they spent the winter in North Carolina.

Even if Cully Grainger hadn't been Boone's best man and among only a handful of guests from beyond Bardville, he wasn't someone you forgot.

He was nearly six foot four and rangy, with thick hair the color of walnuts. He moved slow, talked slower, and the sun could rise in the time it took his grin to take full effect. He presented an aura of supreme, imperturbable calm. Except for his intense blue-green eyes. And those he generally kept hidden behind mirrored sunglasses.

He hadn't kept them hidden the night of the going-away party. The night he'd insisted on driving her home. The night he'd invited himself in for coffee, and she'd said okay. The night she'd made one mistake, then almost made a much worse one.

She shifted her feet. "Sheriff, none of this matters, because I won't—"

"Hold on there, Jessa. From the way I hear it, with you in back and Rita up front, neither of you could rightly see what happened. Let me hear from Cully."

"When we first came in, I went down that aisle." Cully tipped his head toward the row of shelves behind him. "There were six of those fancy red pocketknives on the top shelf. While I picked out supplies, I heard Travis in that aisle. I heard scuffling, like objects rubbing against each other."

Jessa followed the direction of the sheriff's gaze to the bottom shelf, which held containers of cleansing powder.

The once-neat row looked like a line of soldiers about to allow the enemy to break through—or like a line of containers jostled by a shoe pushed among them so someone could stand on the shelf to reach higher.

"Then I heard rustling. Like plastic."

On the second-to-the-top shelf, kitchen gloves, each pair enclosed in plastic, had tumbled from their usual neat stack.

"When I came around to see what was happening," Cully continued, "Travis was in the aisle, just taking his hand out of his pocket. There were five pocketknives on the top shelf. I asked Travis what he had in his pocket. He said nothing. I could see there was something. I asked again. He said nothing again. I decided to find out

for myself. He had this."

Cully opened his hand to reveal a four-inch-long red-cased pocketknife, with enough gadgets and tools to replace a drawerful, and a price proportionately high. Because tourists liked the knives, they were among the few luxury items Jessa stocked.

She automatically took the end of the pocketknife he held out. He didn't immediately release the other end. She glanced up. He seemed to be staring at the knife. His face was unreadable. The sheriff cleared his throat, and Cully dropped his hand.

"That doesn't mean this knife came from here," she said. Something in her kept pushing to prove the boy's innocence. She didn't bother to wonder what it was.

"The price sticker is from your store," Cully said.

She gazed at the knife in her hand and the sticker that carried the name "Nearly Everything" along with the price. She wished she could make it disappear, along with the boy who tugged at her sympathies and — especially — the man who tugged at something else.

The sheriff looked from the pocketknife to the shelves to the boy and back to the man.

"You're a noticing sort, aren't you?" he said to Cully. "Heard you're in law enforcement back East."

"I was."

"Not now?"

"Not now."

Beneath Cully's even confirmation, Jessa caught an undercurrent. Boone and Cambria hadn't said much, but she'd gathered Cully might be leaving public police work. Though it hardly mattered. No matter how far from a uniform he got, anybody could see this man would forever be a cop inside. Look at how he reacted to his own nephew.

Sheriff Milano grunted an acknowledgment. "Know anything about computers?"

The question surprised Jessa, but Cully showed no reaction. That figured. He wouldn't care for the muddle

of emotions, especially not emotions like surprise or confusion.

"Some."

"Good." The sheriff nodded, but returned to the main topic. "So, then what happened?"

"I asked Rita to call the sheriff's office so you could make an arrest."

Tom Milano's eyebrows rose until they disappeared under the sweat-stained band of his hat. "He's your nephew, didn't you say?"

"He stole."

The sheriff breathed out through his nose. Rocking back on the heels of his worn boots, he turned slightly to face the boy.

"What's your name, son?"

The boy didn't look up. "I'm not your son."

"You're right there, but you got a name. What is it?"

"Travis."

"Okay, Travis, you heard what your uncle here—" the boy curled his lip "—had to say. What've you got to say?"

"Nothin'."

Sheriff Milano didn't miss a beat. "He says you were taking this pocketknife. That so?"

It could be, Jessa thought, that Tom Milano had encountered this adolescent reaction a time or two before in his career. She allowed herself the first sliver of amusement she'd felt since she'd spotted Cully Grainger's long strides bringing him toward her store and had developed an urgent need to do work in back.

"So what. I wanted it. I took it."

"So *what* is it doesn't belong to you. It belongs to this lady here. And she works hard to put things in her store so people can buy them and she'll make a living."

"Big deal."

The sheriff looked from the boy's sullen face to Cully's set jaw to her. "You want to press charges, Jessa?"

Her arms tightened over where her white cotton

blouse tucked into her khaki slacks. "No."

"It's your duty," Cully said flatly.

Jessa stared at him, seeing only the reflection of herself in his glasses. She looked shrunken and insignificant in the mirrored lenses. Like the child she'd once been. "I won't press charges."

"Then I will."

"He's a *boy*," she protested. "What is he—twelve years old?"

"What age do you suggest he start learning right from wrong?"

The calm, cool words felt like slaps against her face. Long remembered, and hated.

You're old enough to know right from wrong.

The sheriff cleared his throat. "Well, this being a first offense—"

"It's not," Cully interrupted without emotion.

"That so?" Milano looked at the boy thoughtfully. "Been causing trouble, have you? Got your ma and pa down to the police station to get you out of trouble?"

Jessa thought she caught a flicker of movement behind Cully's sunglasses, as if he'd closed his eyes.

"My father's dead." Travis spit out the words like a punishment. "And my mother can't be bothered, since she's panting after *darling Darryl*—"

"Travis." Cully's single word sounded a warning.

The boy didn't heed it. "And cops are all—"

Cully's hand shot out and grasped the boy's shoulder, not hard, but enough to turn them face-to-face.

Jessa didn't breathe as man and boy stared at each other, the man's eyes hidden, the boy's brimful of fury.

The muscle at the side of Cully's jaw flexed, then his hold eased. Travis jerked his shoulder free. He leaned against the shelving, a posture of complete indifference, except for his hands clenched into fists.

"Jessa—" Tom started.

She shook her head emphatically. "I won't press charges."

She sensed curiosity behind the sheriff's professional calm. Most shop owners wanted shoplifting punished. But she had no obligation to explain. Her reasons were personal, and she didn't owe anyone an explanation. Including Cully Grainger, whose mouth and forehead were drawn tight in a frown.

"Well, here's how I see the situation. We got us a juvenile accused of shoplifting. He didn't leave the store, so that makes it a little shaky. But we got a witness saying he had the property hidden. And we got the suspect not denying the situation. Now, if the shop owner pressed charges—"

"I said—"

"I heard you, Jessa. I'm just telling you, hypothetical like, that if a shop owner pressed charges, most likely the boy would go on juvenile probation. They'd set him to doing chores for the county. Weeding that flowerbed by the Welcome To Bardville sign, or dusting those magazine stacks at the library Wanda's always going on about. Maybe they'd put him to work mowing and such on county property under Harry Banks. Fact, I think that's most likely, because Harry's been griping even fiercer than Wanda."

Jessa frowned. "Harry Banks hates kids. He's notorious. Yells at them all the time. You must have heard the tales. Why, he chased Will Randall with a shovel one time for cutting across the library lawn, and there's no nicer kid than Will."

Tom Milano scratched his jaw. "True enough, but Harry's been the board's squeakiest wheel a good, long time, so I suspect he's first on their list for oil—or elbow grease in this case. So that's the official way," the sheriff went on, "if a shop owner or a concerned citizen pressed charges and we did this official like. Another possibility is to let the whole thing drop." He questioned Cully with a look.

"No."

It was as final as a word could be.

"Didn't think so," Milano said philosophically. "So, what I'm aiming for is something in the middle. A compromise, you might say."

The look of bright expectancy he focused on Cully, then Travis, then her, didn't fool Jessa. Tom Milano was as crafty as they came.

"Like what?"

"Like the boy works for you instead of the county. This episode doesn't go on the books, so to speak, but the boy doesn't go sailing off like he's innocent as a newborn babe, either."

Jessa eyed Travis. He wore a faded T-shirt several sizes too large over baggy jeans. Beneath a turned-backward baseball cap his hair had been shorn short in the front, with a straggle of longer hair at the back. The little she could see of his thin face as he stared at the floor revealed a turned-down mouth and a pugnacious chin.

He'd be more hindrance than help, since she'd have to explain and supervise everything. That happened with any new employee. With this boy resenting every second he spent here, it only promised to be worse. Having him around would be like having a black cloud in the store.

Or like gazing into a twenty-year-old mirror.

If only Cully would change his mind . . .

She turned to him, and knew there was no chance.

His jaw was as pugnacious as his nephew's and his mouth, while neutrally straight, was as firm as an unshakable resolve.

She knew that look.

For all his slow talk and outwardly easygoing ways, this was a man who divided his world into right or wrong. Inside the law or outside. Saint or devil. Nothing in his world would dare to skip from one side to the other and back. Not even a twelve-year-old.

She knew that kind of man.

And she knew what it felt like to be a child ruled by

that kind of man.

"How much would he work here?"

Tom beamed at her, but the expressions of the other two males showed no sign of lightening.

"I'd say you and Cully need to work that out between you. Why don't I take Travis off your hands awhile? I'll show him 'round the sheriff's office and the town a bit. Rita can mind the store so you two can go off someplace quiet and talk. Maybe the cafe. Or there's a nice place out on the highway to Sheridan that Rita and I—"

"I don't think that's a good idea—"

Jessa's start on an objection was overridden by Cully's low voice. "I haven't said I'd agree to this."

"Why on earth not?" she demanded.

Instead of answering, he focused on the sheriff. "It shouldn't be a reward for stealing."

"I'd say whether it's reward or punishment depends on what you and Jessa come up with."

After a moment of strained silence. Cully turned to her. "You want to do this? It'll be a pain for you."

"Do I *want* to? No. But considering the alternative that your bullheadedness—"

"*Will* you do this?" The impatient words contradicted a slight easing around his mouth.

"Yes."

* * * *

"Seven days a week?" Jessa tossed her hands up. "You're crazy. Cully. The kid won't have any time for fun."

"I didn't bring him out from North Carolina to Wyoming for fun."

"No, you brought him out here as punishment. I just don't understand why."

They stared at each other across Jessa's sun-drenched living room. At least she stared at him, and she presumed he stared back. She considered demanding he take off the sunglasses, except she knew from experience that his eyes could be more unsettling

than the mirrored lenses.

She couldn't reconstruct all the conversation that had sent her and Cully here. Tom had been suggesting places that would have made the thing seem like a date; she'd countered by proposing they talk in the shop's back office. There had been comments about it being small and not very private, and all of a sudden she'd been backed into a verbal corner of either saying outright she didn't want Cully Grainger in her house, or giving in as graciously as she could. She gave in.

"I brought him here hoping to make up for a lot of years when he never had to face the consequences of his actions."

"I thought you said you wanted to teach him right from wrong."

"That, too. But considering some of the stuff he's done, there might not be time to wait for him to learn that. So first thing is to make him know if he does wrong, there are consequences."

Jessa looked at Cully, sitting there so at ease on her couch, and desperately wanted to think him smug and rigid. He'd walked into her living room and gone unhesitatingly to the couch, where he'd sat only once before, one night last fall. This time he'd dropped his jeans-covered fanny in the very middle of the three navy-and-yellow floral cushions. If she'd sat on the couch they would have been nearly hip to hip, like two lovers side by side.

She not only hadn't sat on the couch, she'd bypassed the upholstered chair at right angles to it and taken the straight-backed chair by the door.

That didn't seem to bother Cully any. He spread his long arms along the couch's back in a posture of relaxed possession. His body language screamed a man settling in and not about to be easily ousted. The disquiet she'd felt since that first glimpse of him deepened.

"Why'd you bring Travis here?" she demanded.

"Why not? Nice place. Lots of open space. Get him

away from the troublemakers he's been hanging out with."

"You could have done that in North Carolina. Taken him to the mountains where you and Boone grew up, where there are people you know, who know you. Why didn't you do that?"

"Boone knows me. Cambria, too. And the Westons know me some. They're here. You looking for a reference?"

She didn't answer. Because he clearly wasn't going to tell her what she wanted to know. Why hadn't he gone home when he'd faced trouble with his young nephew? It hinted at a vulnerability in him she didn't want to see. Vulnerability could be contagious.

Oh, yes, she wanted to think him smug and rigid. Except Cambria and the Westons would not have taken to anyone—best friend of Boone's or not—if he were smug and rigid. Besides, she kept hearing something in his words that prevented her from dismissing him so easily. Almost as if he were afraid. For Travis? Of what?

There might not be time to wait for him to learn . . .

"More iced tea?" she asked abruptly.

Before he could answer, she'd started for the kitchen.

Cully followed.

At the narrow doorway, she turned and blocked his way. "I'll be right back." She didn't bother to sound cordial.

"You forgot the glasses." He held up the two he'd collected.

"I'll use fresh ones."

"No, thanks. I don't want any more tea." He stepped forward, and she could either back up or be a heck of a lot closer to him than Mrs. Palmer had allowed in eighth-grade dance class. She backed up.

He went on in, with her trailing behind. The narrow opening in the U-shaped kitchen seemed even narrower than usual with Cully in it.

He looked around the small area, his gaze seeming to

rest on the green glass bottle on the sill with the impatiens cuttings she hoped would root, on the glass apothecary jars she used as canisters, on the vibrant geranium print of the hand towel looped over the oven door handle, on the white-painted metal cabinets and worn countertops. His circuit brought him face-to-face with her.

"It's nice."

She'd forgotten he hadn't seen this part of the house last fall. Only the living room. And the threshold of her bedroom.

She didn't want him in her kitchen. She didn't want him in her house. She didn't want him reminding her. Not of that night last fall, not of a more distant past, not of impossibilities.

"Thanks. It's nothing like the one Boone and Cambria designed for their new house up the mountain. That's going to be great, especially with the baby coming."

Nerves kept the spigot on her mouth open full throttle.

If she talked fast enough and long enough she'd forget how Cully had held her, kissed her. Forget how she'd felt when she'd told him to leave, and he'd turned away and left her at her bedroom door. Forget how many times she'd wondered what would have happened if she *hadn't* told him to leave.

"It's a good thing Cambria got past those rough early months. She could hardly stand to hear the word *kitchen*. much less think about designing one. But she sure got over that. She's been knee-deep in how-to and design books. I told her I didn't want to hear another word about triangular work stations or appliance ports or under-cabinet lights. Cambria showed me the plans and brochures. It's going to be great. Terrific." Finally, she stemmed the rush of words, ending with an anticlimactic, "But this is fine for me."

He didn't answer immediately. She grimaced. Perhaps he was making sure he wouldn't be run over by another freight train of words.

"It's a lot like the kitchen we had when I was a kid," he said slowly. "Only a lot cleaner."

There it was in his voice again, the note she couldn't pin down. The one that made him too human for comfort.

Then, before she could try to isolate that note and define it once and for all, he was speaking again. This time with no hidden notes.

"You're doing Travis no favors by being soft on him."

Impatience flared in her, and she welcomed it. It was so much simpler than nerves and memories and questions. "Neither are you by being so hard on him."

"He's got to take responsibility. He's got to learn his actions have consequences. Or he's headed for big trouble."

"And you've decided you're the one to teach him, huh?"

He didn't blink at her sarcasm. "His father's dead. His mother gave up. Said he was incorrigible. His grandparents aren't an option." She wondered if he hesitated only to draw a breath or from another cause. "That left me."

"So St. Cully came to the rescue, riding in on his white horse and taking over. Is that how you see it?"

"I see a kid whose father died and whose mother can't be bothered because she won't risk the kid screwing up her new life. That's how I see it."

He turned his back to her and with a quick motion up-ended the glasses. The only sound was liquid and ice cubes hitting the sink.

Jessa stared at his broad shoulders, taut under the plain white fabric of his shirt.

She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, trying to erase the picture of an emotionally deserted boy his words had called up all too quickly. She knew the kind of pain Travis must be feeling. She understood it. Hers was an older pain and not as deep, perhaps, but still sharp, and very personal.

Face it, there's no way you can walk away from Travis

Grainger.

She flopped back so her shoulders pressed against the refrigerator. Okay, she'd do what she could to help Travis. And she'd do her best to get along with Cully in order to accomplish that. She would also be careful. Very, very careful.

Air came out of her in a long stream. She opened her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"What for?" He seemed to stare out the window over the sink.

"The St. Cully crack."

"Forget it."

"It was uncalled for. I apologize."

"Don't." He turned slowly and propped his hips against the edge of the sink, his hands at either side of him. "And don't go ducking behind that ice wall again, Jessa."

His deep voice speaking her name seemed to reverberate on her nerve endings, especially the ones up the back of her neck and into her scalp. *Careful. Very, very careful.*

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"The hell you don't." The words had no heat, yet plenty of underlying steel.

"I'm simply trying to be polite instead of—"

"Instead of being honest," he said, supplying his own ending. "I don't want your apology, and I don't want your politeness. What I want is honesty. And I know you're capable of it. Remember, Jessa, I've seen you when that mask slips all the way off. Or nearly all the way off."

She'd known it was a mistake to have this talk at her house. It was sure to stir memories of the only other time he'd been here. Memories like those filtering heat through her blood and urgency through her breathing.

She could ignore his reference to that night, or she could face it head-on. He wanted honesty? Fine.

"I'd had too much wine."

His low voice sliced at her with a harsh edge.

"Or not enough."

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