

McCloud's Woman

Patricia Rice

Author's Note

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To all survivors everywhere—always choose to live life to the fullest. You never know how much that choice affects the world around you.

One

Slamming down the phone and shoving a wayward strand of hair from her face, the woman in a pristine lab coat glared at the man hunkered over a microscope at the far end of the worktable. “You don’t get it, do you? You just don’t get anything.”

Not immediately responding to his assistant’s outburst, Timothy John McCloud methodically jotted his observations in his notebook. Then, removing his reading glasses, he swung on his stool to cock an eyebrow at her. A V-shaped scar over the bridge of his nose would have created a permanent scowl if it hadn’t also nicked his eyebrow. The inquisitive arch that resulted lessened the impact of the frown.

“I just don’t get what?” he asked cautiously.

“This!” Leona pointed an accusing finger at the stack of cardboard boxes against the wall of the tiny storefront office.

“Burn them, and save yourself the grief.”

Another of those persistent idiots in the Defense Department

must have been on the phone, TJ concluded. Problem solved, he returned to his microscope.

At least Leona had learned to keep the bastards off his back. Tearing the phone off the wall the last time they'd hounded him hadn't been his finest hour, but it had apparently impressed his assistant enough so that she now screened his calls.

“What about *us*? Are those damned boxes more important than our future?” She ripped off her white lab coat and shook it at him to catch his attention.

Reaching for another slide, TJ hoped he'd misunderstood Leona's histrionics. “There is no us,” he clarified, just in case. “You're an employee. I'm the company. If anything happens, I'm responsible.” He chose the more generous interpretation of her declaration. Just because he was on the brink of self-destruction didn't mean he needed to drag any idealistic innocents down with him.

“What about last night?” she demanded. “How can you say there is no us?”

TJ rubbed his forehead. Taking Leona out for coffee a few times probably had been a mistake. He always misunderstood the direction of the female mind. He'd thought they'd had a strictly professional relationship. But letting her ramble on about her dreams of a nonexistent future might have led her to believe

differently. And maybe he shouldn't have kissed her last night when she'd thrown her arms around him. In hindsight, that had been a stupid move on his part, although at the time, it had been a satisfactory distraction.

Given his current state of repressed desperation, though, it was a miracle he hadn't jumped her bones and accepted the consequences later.

He'd had a lucky escape, and he'd like to keep it that way. On his best day, he didn't have the correct attention span to suit women, nor the kind of settled lifestyle they expected. Now that his life had sunk to a new nadir, he didn't need the additional hassle of second-guessing a woman's wants.

TJ started to run his fingers through his hair and knocked his glasses askew in the process. Mentally cursing, he tried to refocus on the skeletal fragment on the slide in front of him.

"Are you even listening, TJ?" Leona shouted. "We could have a good thing here. Doesn't that matter to you? Just burn the damned boxes and get on with life."

An invisible noose constricted his breathing as TJ thought of the of papers in those boxes—papers that should have been shredded months ago. If he believed media hysterics, those boxes had the power to erase all the good he and dozens of others had thought they'd accomplished in these last few years.

He didn't want to believe the media accusations that the family friend who had launched his career had profited from the crimes of war criminals. He should trust Martin, shred the box contents as he'd been ordered to do, and let the hysteria die of its own accord.

But destroying potential evidence went against everything for which he lived.

On the other hand, opening those boxes meant passing judgment on his mentor. He'd done that once to a friend, with spectacularly disastrous results.

TJ liked his career. Forensic anthropology might not be an exciting vocation to some, but studying human remains for judicial evidence suited his methodical, detail-oriented mindset, with the added benefit of fulfilling his craving for justice. He didn't want his career going down in flames for concealing a criminal, or for consorting with one.

TJ couldn't remember ever panicking during the years of traipsing the war zones of Eastern Europe and Africa, but something dark and ugly had taken root the day he'd returned home to open the newspapers—and realized what the notebooks in those boxes could contain.

“Look, just burn the junk, all right?” Angrily, Leona wadded up her lab coat. “No more threatening phone calls. No more hiding out in this backwater to avoid journalists. You're a brilliant

scientist with a staggering reputation. You can work anywhere, demand any price. Why destroy your career for a battle that's already lost?"

Excellent question. He never hired dumb assistants.

TJ carefully annotated his slide label and didn't look up. "I don't betray friends." He dropped the slide into its box and closed the cover. "I'm a private consultant, not an employee, so empty Defense Department threats can't intimidate me. Are you taking an early lunch?"

Leona flung her lab coat at him. Scarcely moving a muscle, TJ let the coat slide off his shoulder, and turned toward the next plastic specimen bag on the table.

"You're only a private consultant as long as someone will hire you," she yelled. "Who the hell will hire you if the entire world thinks you aided and abetted a criminal?"

A very real possibility given the incendiary potential of the boxes. Of course, if he turned them over to the Defense Department, their contents could disappear and never be heard of again. The colonel's mission in the Balkans had been a sensitive one, and the military protected their own.

TJ had spent his career uncovering crimes of war. He didn't want to be party to a cover-up now.

He didn't want to turn the colonel over to the rabid frenzy of

media hounds either.

Dropping out of sight here in the middle of nowhere was a desperate attempt to salvage his mental health— before choosing between friendship and potential career suicide. Destroy the boxes or open them? He lost either way.

“I can pay your wages for the project regardless of my ultimate decision.” Using tweezers, TJ removed a single golden hair from the bag and arranged it on a fresh slide. He ignored the puddle of white cloth at his feet. His focus on his work to the exclusion of all else had incited worse reactions than flying lab coats. If she reached for the other microscope, he’d duck.

“It isn’t my damned wages that concern me,” she shouted. “My father could give us a whole lab, if we liked. We could have a future together. Why can’t you see that?”

If he was a man who laughed, he would, but he wasn’t. He didn’t find much to laugh about these days, although he did see a certain sardonic humor in discussing a future with a man without a life. Years of travel hadn’t left him with much time for anything but work. “The only future I see right now is solving the mystery of these bones. That’s what I hired you for.”

Her lab notebook clipped him on the ear, bounced off his shoulder, and struck the human skeleton hanging from a rack behind him, rattling its bones. TJ sighed and caught the skeleton

stand before it toppled.

“Take your damned bones to bed with you then. That’s the only relationship you’ll ever know.” Leona stalked out of the shabby inner office, disappearing into the even shabbier outer one.

TJ heard the front door slam behind her. With a sigh of regret, he rubbed at the tarnish on the brass canister he’d dug from the excavation site. He wished life could be as simple as it had been in the pre-Civil War days when the canister had been molded: no telephones, no computers, and women who believed men knew what they were doing.

As he leaned over to retrieve the scattered pages of the notebook, a gentle clapping broke the silence.

TJ’s head jerked up, almost slamming into the counter. Bent over, he could only see a shapely ankle accented by red high-heeled mules. Straightening slowly, he absorbed the magnificent apparition magically appearing in his doorway.

The high heels emphasized the curving perfection of long tanned legs, capped by a tight red miniskirt. Eyes popping, TJ looked higher, to a breathtaking figure that could have graced the pages of *Playboy*. Aware of his gaze, the genie posed seductively against the institutional green of his office door.

Damn, was he hallucinating? He should have heard her enter. Hell, her looks should have screamed her entrance. That red

spandex top revealed far more than it concealed, even with the silky transparent shirt thrown over it. Removing his glasses, TJ massaged the bridge of his nose.

He was surprised at himself—he never noticed what women wore. Had a covey of angels alighted, he might have noticed they wore a lot of white before returning to work. His ex-fiancée had pointed that out to him on numerous occasions.

TJ raised his gaze from that distracting body, only to be captured by more fascinating phenomena. Whipped-cream-and-lemon-pie-colored curls bobbed from an impossible heap atop a tan face of delicate angles. Slanted green eyes watched him with amusement as she crossed her arms under her bounteous bosom. Her taunting smile and turned-up nose alone could have halted a rampaging grizzly and morphed it into a drooling teddy bear. The rest of her could roll dead men in their graves and kill live ones in the sheer ecstasy of testosterone overdose.

Why did she look familiar? Startled at that reaction, TJ absently polished his glasses while applying his analytical mind to the puzzle.

“I applaud your ability to defy temptation,” she purred, swiveling her hips as she moved toward him, watching him through eyes gleaming with interest.

Where had he seen her before? She was beautiful enough to be

a movie starlet, but he didn't watch movies, so that couldn't be the answer. TJ couldn't picture her in the army fatigues worn by most of the women he'd met lately, and she didn't look as if she possessed the brains to be on any university staff he knew.

"I don't have time for this," he said aloud, returning his reading glasses to his nose. "Tourist information is down the street." TJ swung around on his stool, presenting her with his back.

"Did all that youthful energy bouncing out of here wear you out?" she asked with a hint of humor. This close, her subtle cologne drifted temptingly between the sharper odors of ammonia and formaldehyde.

Awareness crept across TJ's skin, irritating him far more than Leona's senseless departure. "This is a private office. I'll thank you to state your business or depart."

Common sense told him his libido had taken an inconvenient detour. If he didn't have the patience to figure out the wayward path of an intelligent female mind like Leona's, he'd never calculate the logic of the blond genie glittering behind him. Ergo, there was no point in carrying his annoying fascination any further.

"Timid Timothy," she teased. "That much hasn't changed."

She ran a fingernail down his lab coat, and the part of him with no brain reacted instantly. He broke his pencil lead and cursed.

She laughed, a low, knowing chuckle. "Want a hint? Or shall I

just fling something at you and flounce out like the last one?”

“Flounce, please,” he answered mildly. “Without throwing anything breakable, if you could arrange it.”

The sexy vibration of her laugh shot straight to his groin.

“I see the years have taught you flattery and charm,” she teased. “I suppose there have been so many women in your life, they all look alike to you these days.”

The second statement was as much mockery as the first, although TJ wasn't certain she knew it. He was certifiably charmless, and the only women in his life threw things at him.

Pointed jabs at open wounds didn't improve his humor. “The women I know have more brains than boobs, so their appearance is irrelevant,” he replied, reaching for another slide.

“Oh, I'll get even with you for that one, Tim, just see if I don't.” Her velvet voice slid into a dangerous undertone.

He couldn't concentrate on the slide under his microscope while inhaling an exotic scent with more mind-bending effect than pure opium. Was there something familiar in that warning? “If you're done threatening me, close the door behind you as you leave.”

The air almost buzzed with her reaction, but her reply was bright and cheerful. “Your wish is my command, TJ.”

He sensed more than heard her quiet departure. He couldn't

know her, he swore. He'd certainly remember anyone that stunningly sexy if he'd met them. "Stunning" and "sexy" were not words to describe the intense, intelligent women he'd dated these last years. He looked for brains in women so he could converse with them on an equal level.

He shouldn't have insulted her, though. Obviously, his temper had reached the snapping point, and he'd better resolve his problems soon, before his mind snapped with it.

He very definitely didn't need any more complications cluttering his thoughts, hampering the decision he had to make.

He hadn't been called Timid Tim since grammar school, and only his brothers lived to tell of it. Who the hell was she?

Humiliation still scalded.

Platform heels slapping the hot sidewalk, Mara Simon sizzled down the picturesque oak-lined street of the coastal South Carolina town she'd just arrived in. She hadn't been this embarrassed since tenth grade, when she'd asked a boy to the movies while they were standing in the school office, only to discover the office microphone had been left on. The whole school had heard him laugh at her, and she'd hidden at home for a week. Leave it to Tim to dismiss her as if she were still that unwanted teen. Her cheeks burned.

Timothy John. TJ, as she'd heard the angry twit call him. TJ McCloud. He had changed since high school, but she'd still have known him anywhere. Obviously, though, he didn't know her.

That ought to teach her humility, if she needed any more lessons. She'd spent years believing they'd once had a meaningful relationship—even if it had consisted mostly of long-distance telephone calls for a brief time when they were kids. Tim had obviously forgotten her the instant he'd walked out of her life.

Stopping to elevate her sagging self-esteem, Mara applied her practiced smile to her reflection in a storefront window. Sticking her chin out, she noticed how her red lipstick matched her shirt, and she offered silent thanks to that dress-for-success book. Red was definitely a power color. She still had it together, even if Tim had shattered a few illusions.

She hadn't always had it together. Shy, skinny geeks seldom did.

Admiring the expertly lifted jut of her breasts as she took a deep breath, she recalled Tim's boobs comment. She'd wanted to be angry about it, but it only made her feel as giddy as a schoolgirl that he'd actually noticed she had breasts.

She should be pleased Tim hadn't recognized her, she decided. She'd worked long and hard to become a new and better person, and his lack of recognition proved she'd succeeded.

But he hadn't appreciated what he'd seen. She scowled again.

The last time she'd seen Tim, she'd been a gawky, owl-eyed teenager, and he had towered over almost every boy at the university. All awkward arms and legs from an adolescent growth spurt, he'd been almost as skinny as she. Remembering the muscular breadth of the big man in that office, she could honestly say he wasn't skinny any longer.

She was, but she'd learned to deal with catty charges of anorexia. If he didn't like the way she looked, he could lump it.

Define lump, she muttered to herself, stopping on a street corner and waiting for the town's lone traffic light to change. TJ McCloud still had the power to yank her chain.

Sunlight poured down on her, and she could smell the sea air from here. After the smog of L.A., the fresh air should be invigorating, but the only thing she could focus on was the look on TJ's face when he'd seen her. She might as well have been a fly in his jam. Damn him for reminding her of how demeaning humiliation felt. She'd suffered enough of that for a lifetime.

Sauntering across the intersection with the light change, Mara winked at a teenage boy. Head swiveling to follow her, the poor thing nearly fell over his feet.

My, how things changed. Once upon a time, she couldn't attract the interest of the scrawniest nerd in class.

Other things hadn't changed, though. Even as a gawky teenage boy, Tim had possessed that same dangerously impassive façade he'd presented to her today. She had been the only one in high school to glimpse the cauldron of passion simmering behind the façade. He'd been fiercely loyal, unfailingly generous, and uncompromisingly protective of those he considered friends. For whatever odd reason, he'd considered her brother, Brad, a friend.

At the memory of Brad, Mara's smile faded. She'd have mascara streaking her cheeks if she followed that thought. Seeing Tim brought back the devastating event that had torn her tightly knit family to shreds. Why the devil had she bothered looking him up?

Approaching the quaint B&B where she'd taken a suite, she grabbed an enormous pair of sunglasses from her bag and shoved them on her nose. Mara Simon didn't cry, but Patsy Simonetti, the teenage girl inside, still wept sometimes.

Think good thoughts, dope. She remembered the time a football player had called Brad a fag, and Tim had calmly lifted the two-hundred-pound linebacker, slammed him against a locker, and left him hanging on a hook by the back of his shirt. The memory provoked a smile. Tim hadn't raised a fist, or even his voice, but the effing jocks had left Brad alone from that day on.

Gad, she'd worshipped at Tim's feet that summer. He hadn't

even known she'd existed.

Still didn't, she thought with wry honesty, although there had been those few short weeks. . .

But that led back to unhappy memories again, and she didn't go there anymore. She had a glorious future at her fingertips—one she'd earned by surviving hell—and those teenage days were behind her. She would taunt Tim to get even for his insult, then move on, as they both had before.

She stepped past the overgrown gardenia bush outside the B&B, inhaling the fragrance of a late blossom and admiring the carpet of magenta crape myrtle petals beneath her feet. The driver of the studio's Lincoln Town Car looked up from his newspaper. At her gesture, he laid the paper aside and smoothly rolled the limo up beside her. She did so love the perks of this business. Pity she had to give up most of them when she'd divorced Sid.

"Where's Ian?" she inquired, sliding onto the soft leather rear seat, cooled by the air conditioner. She checked her hair in the mirror and applied a fresh coat of Rogue Rouge as the car purred past the gate and into the street.

"Round the corner, ma'am. Said to stop for him when you're ready." He drove the car past an antebellum mansion shaded by drooping oaks, and down a narrow, crowded alley of brick restaurants and taverns.

The limo rolled up in front of a bar quaintly called the Blue Monkey, and Mara wrinkled her nose. They could be at an oasis in the Sahara, and Ian would find a bar. Her ex said Ian was the best producer in the business, but she'd already learned that meant Ian could connect with anybody, anywhere, over a drink. She buzzed his cell phone, and he swaggered out a few minutes later.

“Hiya, babe. Was it the old boyfriend?” He slid in beside her, tucking his phone into his inside pocket.

Short, suave, and sophisticated, Ian would never be so crude as to reek of beer, but his three-hundred-dollar-an-ounce cologne smelled worse. Mara rolled her eyes behind her dark glasses and picked up her notebook. “Jared’s brother, yes,” she snapped.

She hadn’t seen Jared McCloud in years, either, but he was on the outskirts of the film industry, and her screenwriters had mentioned he had a house near this coastal resort. She’d put two and two together the instant she’d seen Tim’s name in the weekly newspaper. There couldn’t be two forensic anthropologists of the same name, living in the same town with Tim’s brother.

It was a small town. She supposed they’d all bump into each other sooner or later. She didn’t know why she’d hoped for a more enlightening reunion. Must be that damned Patsy part of her, still clinging to teenage dreams of parties and popularity. Still, this way, she could derive some entertainment in wondering how long

it would take for the elusive McCloud brothers to figure out who she was.

Ian gave the driver directions to the beach where they'd be filming, while she studied a map of the area. Sid's scouts had been out here last year, but she'd been in town only a few hours. Time to get to work. "How difficult will it be to haul equipment?" she demanded. "It looks pretty rural from this."

"Last time I was here, they had an unpaved access road a crazy lady blocked with weird contraptions," Ian answered, "but the state film board says that's all been cleared up. We have use of the road, but we have to stay off her property."

Mara grimaced. She was operating with a horrendously tight budget, and lunatics could be expensive. "The beach is public, right? We don't need anything but the state permit?"

Ian idly flipped through the channels on the limo's tiny TV. "Yeah, but the guys in the bar said there's been a hurricane through here since then. Sid should have sent someone to check it out. If the damned beach has washed away, we'll end up hauling sand."

Damn Sid. Her ex had a penchant for ignoring details. Mara swallowed a lump of panic. Ian got paid whether this film made a profit or not. He didn't care how much sand cost. But every penny over budget cut into her share, and she needed every cent of it to

buy out Sid. If she couldn't buy him out. . . she'd have to move back to her mother's place in Brooklyn, right back where she started ten thousand years ago.

Never. She would bring the film in under budget and then some. She'd own the best small independent studio in Hollywood, and then no one could stop her.

The limo rolled quietly over a two-lane causeway connecting the town to the island. Pelicans soared across the Carolina blue sky. Waves lapped against the concrete abutments. Only Georgia pines and oaks broke the horizon. She loved the sun. She could work on her tan while here. She could work on Tim at the same time. She was a free agent now. The divorce was final, even if the financial settlement was iffy.

Smiling wickedly at the thought of freedom, Mara watched out the smoky glass as the limo turned from the asphalt highway onto a sandy lane. A thicket of bushes and palmettos gave the appearance of deserted jungle, but she could see the shimmering copper of a weathervane above a widow's walk on some house in the distance. The crazy lady's? If so, Mara liked her taste. It would be heavenly to sit in that tower, sipping coffee, watching the tide roll in as the sun came up.

The limo slowed to a halt, and Mara slipped off her Ferragamos to wiggle her toes. She should have brought sandals for strolling on

the beach.

“Can’t get no farther, ma’am,” the driver said apologetically.

Thick spiky bushes and dwarf palms lined either side of the road. Erasing the frown wrinkling her forehead, Mara slid her shoes back on and swung her legs out when the driver opened the door.

“Oh, shit,” Ian muttered from the other side of the long black car.

Mara stared in horror at the chain-link fence stretched across the road, blocking access to a towering barrier of sand and debris.

A giant sign shouting WARNING in red letters hung from the rail. Mara stepped closer and read: *This property protected by the federal government. For information, contact TJ McCloud Enterprises.*