



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

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

She squinted back toward the ranch and could barely make out the team of mules pulling the wagon. As it moved closer she noticed Lupe Salinas' gray beard as he drove the mules down the ruts they called a road. Concha, his wife, sat beside him. Two other women from the ranch squatted in the back of the wagon. Maggie was glad the three women had come along to help. Without them and their knowledge of nursing, caring for

this man might be difficult if not impossible for Maggie to handle.

Once at the house Maggie, Lupe, and the other women carried Alex to the downstairs bedroom that had belonged to Maggie's late parents. After placing him on the bed, the women washed and dressed his wounds and put a compress on his head. Maggie sent Sarah to relieve her maid, Elena, and to bathe their two-year-old nephew, Jon Anthony.

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

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

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

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

Maggie winced. "Ever?"

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

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

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

Even from across the room, Maggie could see they had dressed him in one of her papa's old blue shirts. She moved closer to the bed for a better look. Instead of giving off the odors of sweat and blood, his skin now had the clean, fresh

smell of lye soap mixed with Hooper's Ointment and other medicines she couldn't identify.

Her heart skipped a beat. A man with a face that handsome didn't come along every day, not in these parts. Maggie had her back to the other women in the room, and she intended to keep it that way. The last thing she wanted was to let them see her reaction.

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

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

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

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

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

Petra and Juana stopped talking.

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

The old woman started to walk off. Then she whipped

around, focusing her black gaze on Maggie. "If this man lives, it will be because the Lord doesn't want him to die, no?"

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

"Then I think Jesus must have sent you this man, *Señorita*, to be your husband."

"Husband?"

"*Si*. May you have a long and happy life together, and may he give you many sons and daughters."

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

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

"Show me the wounded man," Elena demanded in Spanish.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sarah Ann can take care of him."

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

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

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

"Yes, but—"

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

"There isn't anybody else. All the other women have husbands and children to take care of."

Elena shook her head. "I will not do it, *Señorita*. You do it."

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

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

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

The other three women left before the afternoon heat rose

with the climbing sun. Concha promised to return the next day and clean the man's wounds. Until then, Maggie was on her own.

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

"Do I have to?"

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

"Where will you sleep?"

"On a cot in here."

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

"I most certainly am."

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

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

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

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

Sarah neither wiggled her upturned nose nor smiled.

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

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

"I know so."

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

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

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

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

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

Her papa had always liked long hair. He'd often said the glitter and shine in Maggie's golden locks gave the stars something to worry about. Yet she'd almost forgotten her nightly ritual—100 strokes. She rolled over on her side and reached for a hairbrush on the chest of drawers nearby. But she didn't pick it up.

A white candle in a metal candleholder caught her attention, reminding her again of the time Elena surrounded Jon Anthony's bed with lighted candles—and of the fact that Elena's late father was a witchdoctor. In Mexico he was called a curandero, and when Elena first came to the ranch, she followed some of the ceremonies she had learned from him. However once Maggie insisted Elena put those strange practices behind her, she did. At least, Maggie thought she did. Elena had even studied the Bible with Maggie and Sarah a few

times. Still Maggie wondered. Was Elena really free of the curandero curse?

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

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

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

The house is on fire.

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

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

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

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

Maggie looked around for something she could use to smother the flames. Her gaze found her housekeeper, seated in a chair in the corner. "What is the matter with you, Elena? Get over here and help me put out these candles."

Elena didn't move.

"Are you asleep?" Maggie said in Spanish.

She longed to speak to the servant and the ranch cowboys in English, but Elena didn't know English then. In fact nobody on

the Gallagher Ranch spoke much English since the deaths, not even Sarah.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Healed people? The curandero?”

“Si.”

Maggie would have fired Elena instantly if the servant wasn’t such a hard worker, but she needed someone to help with the children. Elena was new to the Gallagher Ranch and

didn't know the rules, so Maggie decided to give her another chance.

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

"Si."

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

"Thank you, *Señorita*."

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

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

"What is it?" Maggie asked.

"An egg."

"How would an egg get under the baby's crib?"

"I put it there."

Maggie frowned. "Why?"

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

"That must be something else you learned from your father." Maggie took a deep breath to steady the pounding pressure in her head. "We are a Christian family, Elena. We don't believe in witchcraft. I won't allow such nonsense in this house. If I decide to keep you on here, you must forget what you learned from the curanderos and never practice such evil on this ranch again. Do you understand?"

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

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

Instantly alerted she sat straight up in bed. In the novel she was reading the dead man moved his arm in the same way. But

of course he'd only pretended to be dead. Was Alex Lancaster awake now, feigning sleep for unknown reasons?

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

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

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

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

Alex Lancaster moved again.

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

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

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

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

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

The man's breathing sounded normal. He snored once or twice. Slowly Maggie began to relax but not enough to risk

falling asleep. Still grasping the gun she sat down at one end of the cot with her back to the wall.

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

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

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

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

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

Crickets chirped. A locust called. In the distance coyotes yipped and yelped. A chilly wind played and whispered among the live oaks, while Ranger howled back at them all.

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

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

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

Slowly her eyes closed.

THEY FLUTTERED OPEN AGAIN. It had to be morning because sunshine streamed in the east window. She blinked and sat up then glanced at the bed.

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

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

"A what?"

"Are you my guardian angel?"

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

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

"You're not?"

She shook her head. "No."

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

She waited, wondering what he would say.

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

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

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