



HARLEQUIN

INTRIGUE®

MIDNIGHT RIDER

BIG "D" DADS: THE DALTONS

JOANNA WAYNE



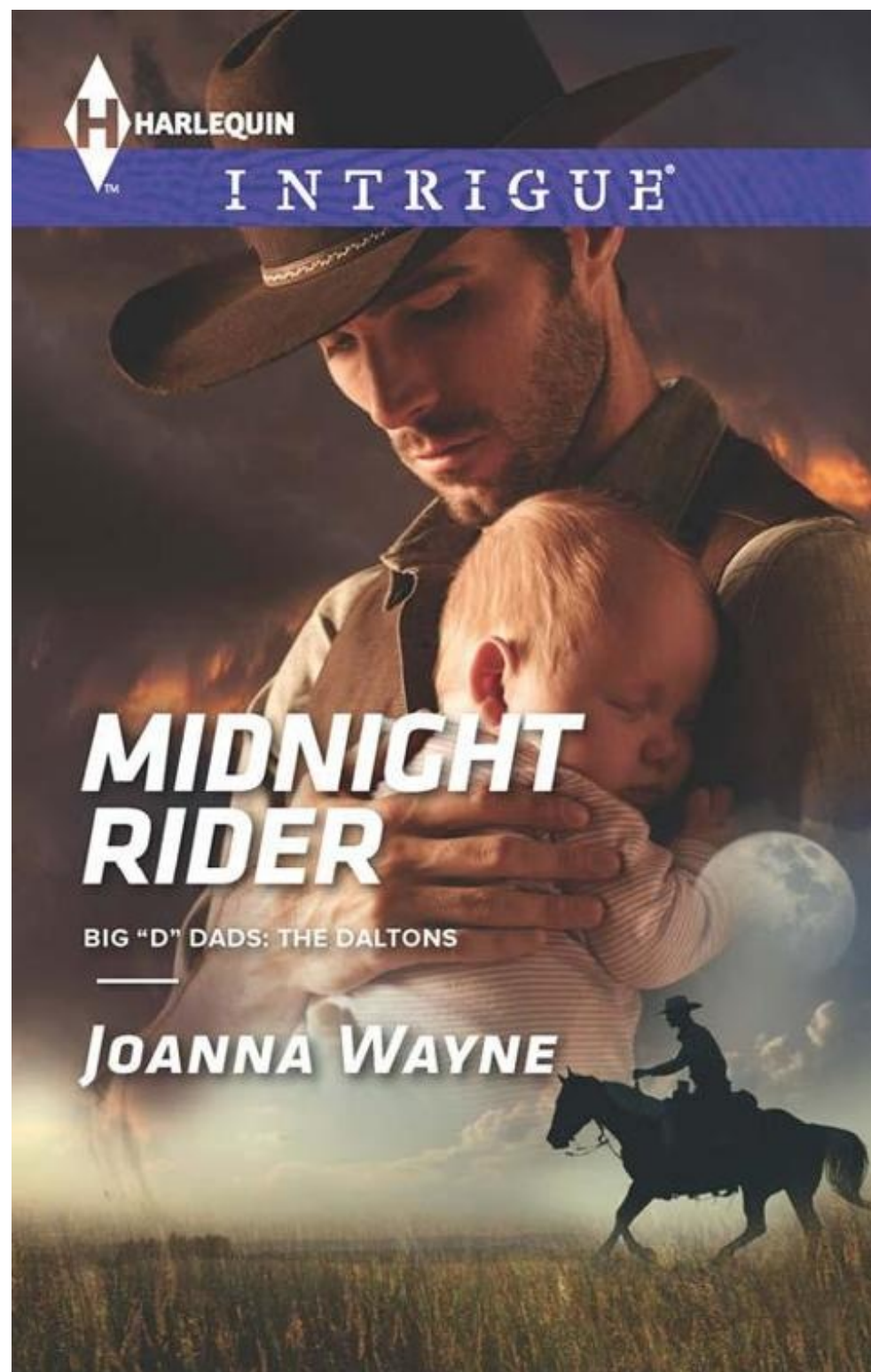
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JOANNA WAYNE



THIS COWBOY WON'T BACK DOWN

Houston homicide detective Brittany Garner just got hit with a one-two punch. The twin sister she never knew existed has been found dead, leaving behind a three-month-old daughter. Brittany's vow to find her sister's murderer, as well as the father of the orphaned infant, leads straight to Cannon Dalton. A bull rider who spends his life roaming from rodeo to rodeo, Cannon has only one mission now: protect the beautiful cop and the child who could be his. Caught in the crosshairs of escalating danger—and his powerful desire for Brittany—Cannon races to stop a desperate killer...and a revenge that's been a long time coming.

Brittany knew she should back away, but her body ignored her brain.

His lips were soft at first, then more demanding. The thrill of their mingling breaths roared through her like fire. The inhibitions that had become part of her being melted away and she kissed him back, letting the heat of him wash through her.

The unexpected hunger for him was primal, untamed. Her arms slid around his neck, pulling him closer as her body arched toward his.

When he had the good sense to pull away, her body went weak.

“Don’t think the doctor would approve of this.” His voice was a husky whisper.

“Probably not,” she agreed, though it wasn’t her physical health she was worried about but her inability to control her emotions where Cannon was concerned. It wasn’t the time or the place. Likely not even the right man, no matter how right it felt right now.

“Good night, Detective.”

“Good night, cowboy.”

MIDNIGHT RIDER

Joanna Wayne

 **HARLEQUIN**[®] INTRIGUE[™]

Joanna Wayne began her professional writing career in 1994. Now, more than fifty published books later, Joanna has gained a worldwide following with her cutting-edge romantic suspense and Texas family series such as Sons of Troy Ledger and the Big “D” Dads series. Joanna currently resides in a small community north of Houston, Texas, with her husband. You may write Joanna at PO Box 852, Montgomery, Texas 77356, or connect with her at joannawayne.com.

Books by Joanna Wayne

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Midnight Rider

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Cannon Dalton—A bull rider and R. J. Dalton’s youngest son.

Brittany “Brit” Garner—Houston homicide detective whom someone wants dead.

Sylvie Hamm—Brit’s twin sister and Kimmie’s mother.

Rick Drummond—Brit’s partner.

Carla Bradford—Brit’s supervisor who plays by the rules.

Clive Austin—A criminal capable of anything.

Melanie Crouch—Recently released from prison.

Marcus and Joyce Dalton—Brit’s deceased parents.

Aidan McIntosh—Marcus’s best friend, before Marcus was instrumental in sending Aidan to prison.

Louise McIntosh—Aidan’s unforgiving wife.

R. J. Dalton—The owner of Dry Gulch Ranch, a dying father attempting to reconnect with his estranged adult children.

The rest of the Dalton Family—

Adam Dalton, rancher; his wife, Hadley; their twin daughters, Lila and Lacy.

Leif Dalton, attorney; his veterinarian wife, Joni; and his teenage daughter, Effie.

Travis Dalton, Dallas homicide detective; his wife, Faith; and her teenage son, Cornell.

Jade Dalton, R.J.’s youngest daughter, still estranged.

Jake Dalton, R.J.’s oldest son, still estranged.

To my twin sisters, Linda and Brenda, and to all my readers from big families who know what it's like
to love, chat, laugh, eat and sometimes cry with a houseful of siblings.

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt](#)

Chapter One

Brit Garner woke to the irritating rattle of her cell phone vibrating against her bedside table. She pulled the pillow over her head and tried to ignore it. It finally stopped only to start again a few seconds later. If this was her partner, she was going to kill him.

She checked the caller ID and then took the call. "This had better be of life-threatening importance, Rick Drummond."

"Not life threatening, but I think you better get down to the morgue."

"What part of 'I'm on vacation with plans to sleep until noon every day' do you not understand?"

"I get it. You've worked your gorgeous butt off the past few months. But I think you'll want to see this."

"I've seen dead bodies before." Too many of them, which was why she needed a few well-deserved days off. A walk in a park or along the beach would do wonders for her state of mind. Time to read a book or visit friends would be heaven.

Her dad had warned her it would be like this.

"Just come down. No work involved. I really think you should see this."

"Why is it so urgent I see this particular body?"

"Just get down here, Brit. I'll buy you coffee and breakfast after."

"A real breakfast. No coffee and doughnut on the fly."

"Anything you want—under ten bucks, of course."

"Splurging and secrecy. You're starting to freak me out. I'll be there as soon as I can throw on some clothes. Not work clothes. I'm on vacation, remember?"

"Hard to forget when you keep bringing it up every ten seconds. Come on up to Autopsy when you get here."

Brit kicked off the top sheet and stretched her legs over the side of the bed. She went to the bathroom, splashed her face with cold water and brushed her teeth. After that she shed her nightshirt and wiggled into a pair of faded jeans and a long-sleeved green T-shirt. A quick brush of her long hair and she was ready.

She'd go to the morgue but, no matter how interesting the case, she wouldn't let Rick sway her jump in. She really needed the time off. And not only to rejuvenate, but also to try to figure out where she'd gone wrong on a very important case.

The colder a case got the harder it was to solve. She'd been working on her father's murder for three years without a decent lead. She had to be overlooking a key element. No murder was perfect.

Less than a half hour later, she was walking into the autopsy section of the morgue. The facilities were state-of-the-art and as familiar as her neighborhood grocery store, though the odors were far more unpleasant.

Her partner, Rick, was standing next to the gray examining table. Her favorite pathologist, Elise Laughton, was at the other side of the table and slipping out of her gloves.

"Looks like she put up a hell of a fight," Elise said. "Evidently she was just no match for the strength of her attacker."

"Cause of death?" Brit asked by way of greeting, determined to stick to the basics.

"You made good time," Elise said, looking up.

"Traffic was light. And as you can see, I didn't bother with makeup since I'm not sticking around long."

Elise shared a concerned look with Rick and then looked back to her. "To answer your original

question, the evidence includes new bruising on the hands and arms and having her throat slashed.”

~~Another morning in Houston. Not that all murders weren't bad, but any detective in the department could handle this, including Rick. There had to be something more going on for him to call her in the morning.~~

“So start talking, Rick, and this had better be good.”

Rick frowned. “Take a look.”

Brit stepped closer for an unobstructed view of the body. An icy chill seeped deep inside her as she studied the victim.

She could have been staring into a mirror. The lifeless victim spread out on the cold metal slab looked exactly like her.

Chapter Two

One Week Later

“How about passing that potato salad before Leif goes back for seconds and doesn’t leave any for the rest of us?” Travis joked.

“Look who’s talking,” Leif said as he handed down the serving bowl. “You’ve been hogging the platter of fried chicken like a starving man.”

“That’s ’cause I had him out baling hay all afternoon,” Adam said. “Nothing like a little ranch work to build up an appetite.”

“Save room for the apple pie à la mode,” Hadley said. “I made it myself and I’ll be insulted if there’s a bite left on a dish.”

“Ice cream!” four-year-old Lacy added. She pushed her plate back. “I want mine now.”

“Me, too,” R.J. said, “but I better clean my plate first. You better eat a few more bites of dinner too.”

R.J. smiled and leaned back in his chair. There was a time not so many months ago that he’d have been sitting at this table all alone. Or passed out somewhere skunk drunk. Now he was alcohol-free and thankful to be surrounded by family. Best medicine in the world for a dying man.

He didn’t have much of an appetite these days, even though his daughters-in-law Hadley and Faith had become dadgum good cooks. His third daughter-in-law, Joni, was too busy being the best dang wife in the state of Texas to spend much time in the kitchen.

Besides, he suspected she might be pregnant. She’d turned green and rushed away from the breakfast table a couple of days ago and she’d developed a little swell in the belly. He wouldn’t ask. She’d tell them all when she was ready.

It had been over a year now since the neurosurgeon had given R.J. the death sentence. A malignant, inoperable brain tumor that would eventually take his life. For some miraculous reason, the tumor had decided to slow down a bit and give R.J. time to enjoy his family—the family he’d never bothered to get to know when he was drinking and carousing like the SOB he’d been for most of his life.

He’d given little thought to contacting his estranged kids until the grim reaper had looked him square in the eye and chuckled. But getting to know Adam, Leif and Travis and their families had given his life more meaning than he’d thought possible. Why, already there had been three weddings on the Dry Gulch Ranch. Fortunately, none of them his. Four weddings were enough for any one man.

Still, with each passing day, the longing grew stronger to connect with his other three children. So far, no luck there. His youngest son, Cannon, was either too resentful or too busy with his bull riding to give R.J. the time of day.

His daughter, Jade, was the baby of the family, though she was in her early twenties now. The only times he’d seen her was when she came to the ranch for the reading of the will. She hadn’t cared much for his requirement that a beneficiary would have to spend a year living on and helping work the Dry Gulch Ranch to get a share in his estate. Hadn’t seemed too pleased that he’d had the reading of the will while he was still breathing, either.

Had let him know it, too, in no uncertain terms. As feisty a hellcat as her mother had been. The ranch had never offered enough excitement for Kiki. Apparently it didn’t for their daughter, Jade, either.

And that left his oldest son, Jake, rich Texas rancher and oilman. The wealth inherited from his mother’s side of the family. Jake had everything a man could want. Fancy cars. Private jets. Gorgeous women half his age draped across him in every picture of him that appeared on the society pages

the *Dallas Morning News*.

Jake had moved on so far he couldn't even see R.J. in his mind's rearview mirror. No doubt his mother had done the same. Stupidest mistake R.J. had ever made was letting her walk away. He wondered what she was like now. He still pictured her as young and beautiful as she'd been at eighteen when they'd married. Best-looking girl in the small country high school they'd attended. Hell, she was probably the best-looking girl in all of Texas back then.

The doorbell rang.

"Are you expecting company tonight?" Faith asked.

"Nope," R.J. said. "Probably a neighbor stopping by."

"I'll get it," Adam offered, already scooting back from the table.

"You just keep eatin'," R.J. said. "I need a little exercise. Old bones get stiff if I sit too long."

He held on to the edge of the table for extra support as he stood. Never knew when one of those dizzy spells would hit. He ambled to the door, taking his time about it. The doorbell rang again.

"Hold your horses. I'm coming."

He swung open the door and stared into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. He took in the rest of the stranger, enjoying the tour. He might be near dead. But just because he couldn't sample the war didn't mean he couldn't window-shop.

"You must be lost," he said, sure he'd never seen the tall, willowy strawberry blonde before.

"Is this the Dry Gulch Ranch?"

"Was the last time I looked at the sign over the gate."

"Are you R. J. Dalton?"

"Yep. You're batting a thousand so far."

"Then I'm not lost."

A baby whimpered.

R.J. followed the sound to a baby carrier resting on the porch, next to the stranger's right foot. The young woman reached down and grabbed the handle, lifting the carrier so that he could see the adorable infant peeking from beneath a yellow blanket. The baby kicked and made a few boxing moves with its tiny fists.

"And who might this be?" R.J. asked.

"This is your three-month-old granddaughter, Kimmie."

"My granddaughter. Well, don't that just beat all?"

"Yes, it does." She pushed the carrier toward him. When he didn't take it, she set it on the floor inside the door.

"Come on in," R.J. urged, opening the door even wider.

"No, thank you. I'm just here to drop off Kimmie."

"What do you mean drop her off?"

"Just that. I'm leaving her in your care."

"You can't do that. I'm a sick man. I can't take care of a baby." Had never done that when he was young and healthy.

"Then I suggest you hire someone to take care of her or call your son Cannon and tell him to stop by and pick up his daughter."

So Cannon was playing around with more than bulls. A chip off the old block. But the old block had made a lifetime of mistakes.

"Why don't you go tell Cannon that yourself?"

"I don't have time at the moment to go chasing down some irresponsible bull rider."

Apparently not time to raise her child, either.

She pulled a business card and an envelope from her pocket. "If Cannon has questions, he can reach

me at this number. Inside the envelope, you'll find everything you need to know about caring for Kimmie."

"I'm gonna need a lot more than some notes."

"Yes, you'll need this to get you started." The woman slid a large canvas tote from her shoulder and handed it to him, as well. "There's formula, bottles, diapers and a few changes of clothing inside."

"You got a momma for her in there, too?"

The woman didn't answer, but he could swear those striking blue eyes of hers were moist when she turned and walked away.

She stopped just before she reached her car. "I play classical music for Kimmie when she gets fussy. It calms her down."

There was a definite quiver in her voice but no hesitation as she got into her car and drove away.

Once her taillights disappeared, R.J. took a look at the card she'd pressed into his left hand.

Brittany Garner, Homicide Detective, Houston Police Department.

Cannon sure knew how to pick them. Gorgeous, sexy and she could handle a weapon. *All good traits in a woman—unless she turned the gun on you.*

R.J. was still staring at the newest addition to the family when his daughter-in-law Hadley joined him at the door. She stopped and stared at the baby. "Oh, my gosh. Look how adorable."

Hadley reached down, unbuckled the baby from her chair and picked her up, all the while gushing baby talk.

"Hello, little sweetie. Did you just drop from heaven and land at our door?"

"Something like that," R.J. said.

Hadley's eyebrows arched. She dropped the baby talk. "What are you talking about? Who is this?"

"Name's Kimmie, or so her mother said."

"Who's her mother?"

"Apparently a lady cop."

"What do you mean apparently? You must know whose baby this is?" Hadley walked to the door and looked out. "Where is her mom?"

"Gone back to Houston, I suspect."

"Without her baby? What's going on here?"

"Supposedly this is my granddaughter."

"Who's the father?"

"Allegedly, it's Cannon, but I bet he's gonna be as surprised about this as we are."

R.J. smiled in spite of the situation. Not the ideal bargaining tool, but it was one way to get Cannon back to the Dry Gulch Ranch. His neighbor Caroline Lambert was right. God sure worked mysterious ways.

Chapter Three

Macabre kicked his way out of the creaky gate with a vengeance that sent adrenaline exploding through Cannon's veins.

One. Two.

The bull bucked wildly. The rope dug into Cannon's gloved hand. His lucky Stetson went flying. Bad omen.

Three. Four.

The crowd's cheers mingled with the thunderous stamping of the bull's hooves and the frantic beating of Cannon's heart.

Five.

Cannon's body shifted and began to slide. Instinct took over. He struggled to hang on, leaning hard, fighting to shift his weight.

Macabre's fierce back hooves propelled the animal's powerful muscles, twisting and spinning the two-ton mass of fury. The rope slipped. White-hot pain ripped through Cannon's shoulder.

He was on the ground. The rank breath of the snorting bull burned in his own nostrils. Flying dirt blinded him. He blinked, covered his head with his hands and rolled away.

Shouts from the rodeo clown echoed though the arena, but the bull didn't back off. It swerved and came back at Cannon.

Cannon rolled in the opposite direction. The crowd gasped in unison as one hoof came so close to his head that Cannon could feel the vibrations rattle inside his skull.

Then the bull turned and went after the clown. Cannon owed Billy Cox big-time.

He picked himself up, grabbed his hat and waved it to the crowd as he scrambled back to safety. Cox was safe, as well. Only then did Cannon check the results.

Seven seconds.

Disappointment burned inside him. One more second and he would have scored big. He'd drawn Macabre, the most vicious of the bulls on tonight's docket. The animal that could have put Cannon on the pay dirt.

Already December, one of the last of the rodeos in what had been a great year for Cannon. Still, he could have used that prize money. Like most rodeo addicts who loved bull riding, the day would come when he'd have to retire. He'd need *mucho* cash to do that right.

What was a cowboy without a ranch?

"Bad luck," one of the other riders said.

"I'd say good luck," another said. "You could have been leaving here in an ambulance tonight."

"Seven seconds on Macabre should be worth ten on any of the other bulls in the chute tonight."

Cannon acknowledged the comments with a nod and a shrug. Nothing else was needed. They all knew the disappointment of losing to a bull.

"Mighty tough way to make a living."

The voice was unfamiliar, gruff, but with a rattle that came with lots of years of living. Cannon turned to see who'd spoken.

Reality sent a shot of acid straight to his gut. As if tonight hadn't already been bad enough.

"What are you doing here?" Cannon asked.

"I came to see my son ride," R.J. said. "No law against that, is there?"

Probably should be. "You've seen me," Cannon said. "Now what?"

"We need to talk," R.J. said.

Cannon wasn't interested in pretending he had any fatherly feelings for a man who hadn't given a damn about him when he could have used his help. And he wouldn't play any part in the old man's search for redemption before he died.

Actually, he'd figured R.J. was already dead by now. Or maybe everything he'd said about the inoperable brain tumor at the bizarre reading of his will had been lies. He wouldn't put anything past R. J. Dalton.

"I know you have no use for me," R.J. continued. "I probably deserve that. We still need to talk. And I have someone you should meet."

"Look, R.J., you had your say at the reading of your will. I wasn't interested then. I'm still not. I don't play games."

"Looks like you were playing a potentially deadly one tonight."

"That's work, not a game. And it's my business."

"So is what I have to tell you."

"Then spit it out."

"Okay. You think I'm a lousy father. I agree. But unless I miss my guess, you're about to get the chance to prove you're a hundred times better at it than I ever was."

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

"You will in a minute. Come with me."

Crazy old fool. Cannon couldn't even begin to guess what kind of absurd scheme he was working now. He leaned against the wooden railing that separated the contenders from the rest of the arena. R.J. ambled off without looking back.

Every muscle in his body complained silently, aches and pain seeping in like the bitter cold of a West Texas winter morning. He craved a hot shower, a couple of over-the-counter painkillers with a six-pack to wash them down.

Then he'd plopped on the lumpy mattress back at the motel. No place like home, and a lonely motel room was as close to home as he'd been since he'd finished his tour of duty with the marines.

But something had brought R.J. clear out to Abilene to talk to Cannon. Doubtful the old coot would just turn around and drive home without saying whatever he'd come to say. Might as well get it over with.

Cannon followed in the direction R.J. had gone. He spotted him a couple of minutes later, standing near the wooden bleachers. A stunning young woman stood next to him, cuddling a baby in her arms.

Surely R.J. didn't have the testosterone to father another child at his age. And even if he had, what would he think Cannon would give a damn?

The woman turned toward him and attempted a smile that didn't quite work. Her gaze shifted from him back to the sleeping baby.

R.J.'s words about his getting a chance to prove himself as a father echoed through his mind. If he thought Cannon was going to raise this baby for him he was nuts. So was the infant's mother.

A more troublesome angle struck him. Surely, R.J. wasn't insinuating Cannon could have fathered this baby.

He studied the woman. Fiery red hair that cascaded around her shoulders. Deep green eyes. Not the woman a man could easily forget, yet she didn't stir any memories for him.

"I'm Hadley Dalton," she said as he approached. "Your half brother Adam's wife. And this is Kimmie." She held up the baby for him to get a better look. The infant stretched and rubbed her eyes with her tiny balled fists, but then settled back to sleep.

So this was Adam's child. Cannon exhaled, releasing the dread and the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Cute baby. You and Adam did well."

"But that's just the thing," R.J. said. "It's not their baby. You're her dad, or at least some woman's."

down in Houston claims you are.”

Macabre’s hooves couldn’t have packed a bigger wallop.

Chapter Four

Cannon took a long swig of the cold beer. It did nothing to ease the shock or to relieve the aches in his joints and muscles. R.J. and Hadley sat across the booth from him in the nearby café where they had gone to finish their discussion. The infant slept in Hadley's arms.

The confusion he'd felt back at the arena was growing worse instead of better. "I don't even know anyone named Brittany Garner. I definitely didn't have a child with her. She evidently has been confused with someone else."

"She seemed pretty sure about her facts when she dropped Kimmie off with us," R.J. said.

"She could be just trying to get money out of *you*," Cannon said. "If she knows anything at all about me, she knows I'm not worth conning."

"She's a detective," Hadley offered. "Surely she wouldn't be working a con."

"Anyone can have business cards printed," Cannon said. "That doesn't prove she's a cop."

"She's a cop all right," R.J. assured him. "Your half brother Travis is a homicide detective himself in Dallas. He had her checked out. She's legit and apparently good at her job."

She might be a detective, but Cannon wasn't convinced he'd slept with her. "How old is the woman?"

"Looks to be in her late twenties," R.J. said. "'Bout your age. Sky-blue eyes. Tall. Thin. Strawberry-blond hair. Damned good-looking if that helps jog your memory."

It didn't. "Awful young for a detective," Cannon commented, not that it mattered. He was twenty-seven himself and he'd already finished a stint with the marines and made a name for himself on the rodeo circuit.

"How old is Kimmie?" he asked.

"Three months, according to Brit Garner," R.J. said.

Cannon went over the basics in his mind. Kimmie was three months old. This was the first week of December. If Kimmie was his, she would have been conceived about a year ago. That would have meant he had to be in Houston last December.

The big Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo was always in March. He'd participated in that, but he didn't recall being in Houston any other time. Of course, he might have passed through on his way somewhere else. He'd have to check his calendar.

He wasn't into one-night stands, but that didn't mean he'd never given in to temptation. He definitely hadn't been in a relationship then, or any time in recent memory. Have a few good times with a woman and she was ready to pick out furniture and run your life.

A one-nighter with a gorgeous Houston detective that he didn't remember. Extremely unlikely.

"You can get a paternity test," Hadley said. "That's the only way you can know for sure if you're Kimmie's father."

"A paternity test." He sounded like a nervous parrot. But he couldn't even begin to wrap his head around the possibility that the baby sleeping in Hadley's arms could be his.

"I hear they're easy to get these days," R.J. agreed. "If you're short of cash, I can front you the money."

"I'm not the father," Cannon insisted, but his stomach had twisted into a huge, gnarly knot.

Kimmie began to stir. She stretched and yawned and then tried to poke her entire fist into her wide open mouth. Hadley moved her to her other shoulder, but the baby continued to fuss.

"She's hungry," Hadley said. "Would you like to hold her, Cannon, while I get her bottle from the diaper bag?"

Hold that squirming ball of life? Not a chance. A puppy, he could handle. But this was a real live baby.

“I wouldn’t know how,” he said.

“I s’pect you better learn,” R.J. said. “Not only how to hold her, but also how to feed her and change her and even bathe her—that is, if she turns out to be yours.”

R.J. was already a believer. Cannon could tell by that knowing look in his eyes even though his pupils were half-hidden by the bags beneath them and the loose skin that drooped over his lids.

Kimmie started to cry. Cannon’s muscles bunched. The prospect of fatherhood struck him with raw fear, the kind of paralyzing fright he’d never felt when climbing atop a bull.

“Maybe you should stay at the Dry Gulch Ranch while you have the paternity testing done,” Hadley suggested. “There’s plenty of room since R.J. is the only one actually living in the original ranch house now. The rest of us have built our own houses on the Dry Gulch now.

“I’d be close enough to help you with Kimmie if you’re at the ranch, but I can’t stay here. Ada and I have two young daughters of our own who need me.”

Stay at the Dry Gulch and then owe his worthless biological father for the favor. The prospect was repulsive. But what other options did he have? He couldn’t walk out of here tonight with a baby in his arms and no idea how to care for her.

He had six days before his next rodeo, time he needed to get over his sore shoulder. But what if the paternity test proved it was his baby. Then what? Drag Kimmie around in a saddle blanket?

The baby had a mother. Detective or not, she’d have to take over the parenting chores until the kid was old enough to at least tell Cannon why she was crying.

Great attitude. If he wasn’t careful he’d rival R.J. for the Worst Father of a Lifetime award.

Cannon finished his beer while Hadley fed the baby. “How many times a day do you have to do that?”

“About every four hours during the day. Kimmie has a healthy appetite. She goes longer between feedings at night.”

“She takes a bottle at night, too?”

“She sleeps through most of the night but wakes up around five in the morning for a feeding. The good news is she goes right back to sleep after that, and usually doesn’t wake up again until about eight.”

No wonder the mystery detective was ready to hand the infant off to him. She was probably sleep-deprived. Only what kind of mother would trust a man like him with their child?

Either Detective Brittany Garner had no idea what he was like or she was one totally irresponsible mother.

“I need to go to Houston and talk to Detective Garner,” he said. “I hate to ask, Hadley, but if you’ll watch Kimmie just for another day or two, until I can get the paternity test and sort all this out, I really appreciate it.”

“You want me to take her back to the Dry Gulch Ranch?”

“Just for a few days.”

“I can manage that.”

“But no more than a few days,” R.J. cautioned. “If Kimmie turns out to be your biological daughter then she’s your responsibility. Yours and the mother who dropped her off like a stray kitten.”

R.J. was a fine one to give advice on parenting. Cannon was willing to bet he’d never in his life changed a diaper or gotten up at five in the morning to poke a bottle at a crying infant.

If the test came back positive—which he was almost certain it wouldn’t—Cannon would at least make a stab at being a dad. There had to be a book that would help.

Sure, parenting by the book. About like a guidebook could teach a man how to stay on a man

bucking bull for eight seconds.

“Are you driving back to Dallas tonight?” Cannon asked.

“We’re flying back,” R.J. said. “Tague Lambert, one of our neighbors, flew us down in his private jet. He’s waiting at the small airport just west of town.”

“So if you’ll just take Kimmie with you, I’ll drive to the ranch when I finish my business with Braxton Garner,” Cannon reiterated.

“You can fly back with us,” R.J. offered. “Get the testing done in Dallas, might even be able to schedule it for tomorrow. Then you can wait until you have the facts to contact Kimmie’s mother. You can use one of the vehicles at the ranch to take care of business.”

“I don’t go anywhere without my pickup truck,” Cannon said, dismissing the offer. The less time he spent around R.J. the better.

The conversation dried up and died while his mind searched for reasons this baby couldn’t be his and why some woman was trying to screw him over.

Once Kimmie had her fill and spit the nipple from her tiny, heart-shaped lips, Hadley set the almost empty nursing bottle on the table and shifted the baby in her arms. “Don’t you want to at least hold her and say hello before we go?”

Cannon shook his head, though he figured it made him look like a jerk. “I’ve never held a baby before. I’m afraid I’d do it wrong and hurt her.”

“You won’t.” Hadley stood and walked to his side of the booth. “Stand up and hold out your arm. I’ll show you how to cradle her.”

He stood, but kept his arms to his sides. “I don’t think I should....”

“Nonsense.” Hadley handed the baby off to him.

He took her reluctantly, standing stiffly while she fit the baby into his arms.

Kimmie’s eyes fluttered, eyes the same general color as his, only lighter. Cannon’s breath caught in his throat.

The infant was practically weightless, but not still. She squirmed and started to fuss as if she knew he didn’t have a clue what he was doing. At least she was smart.

Cannon touched her chin with a fingertip. Her skin was as soft as silk. She made a gurgling noise and kicked and swung her little arms like a wind-up toy.

Her short, chubby fingers somehow caught and wrapped around the one he’d used to touch her cheek. An emotion he didn’t recognize shot through him and settled in his heart.

He had never been more afraid in his life.

* * *

BY THE TIME Cannon returned to his hotel room, the shock had worn off enough that the aches and pains had checked back in. He headed straight for a shower, shedding his clothes as he went. For the first time he noticed the rip in his jeans and the dirt stains blotching his Western shirt.

Stripped naked by the time he reached the bathroom, he glanced in the mirror. The area around his rib cage was already turning an ugly shade of purple.

Macabre was no doubt sleeping comfortably in his stall, probably dreaming of what he’d do to the next sucker crazy enough to climb on his back.

Cannon turned the knobs on the shower until the spray was steamy hot. He stepped in and let the water sluice over his head and run down his aching body.

He closed his eyes, but the relief he’d hoped for didn’t come. Instead, an image of Kimmie rocked his mind. Could she possibly be his daughter? He racked his brain trying to remember his schedule for last December.

Nothing stood out. His life was a steady stream of rodeos and towns he barely saw except for the arenas where the action took place. After years on the circuit, they ran together like gravy ladled over a plate of biscuits and sausage.

He remembered the big events. Dallas. Austin. Houston. San Antonio. Phoenix. Las Vegas. Hell, he even made it up to Montana on occasion. It all depended on the points he needed and how big the purse was.

There had been women. Not that many, but a few. Never married ones, at least not knowingly. And he stayed clear of the underage buckle bunnies who hung around the arenas and flirted shamelessly with any cowboy who'd give them the time of day. Plenty did. They could get a man in big trouble.

More to the point, he kept a supply of condoms handy—just in case.

The way he saw it, there was damned little chance that Kimmie was his daughter.

So why had he felt that quake deep in his gut when Kimmie had accidentally latched on to his finger? Couldn't be because he had some kind of secret longing to father a child.

He had his future all planned out. His winnings from the rodeo were his ticket to making it happen. A kid would put the skids on his dreams faster than a bull could clear the chute.

He should call Brittany Garner tonight and tell her she had the wrong man.

No. Better to see her face-to-face. If he had sex with her, he'd surely remember her once he was looking at her. If he'd been sober enough to get it up, then his brain cells should have been functioning at least at a minuscule level.

He soaped his body, gingerly, especially over the bruised flesh. Then he rinsed and stepped out of the shower. He grabbed one of the bleached white towels from the shelf and wrapped it around his waist.

The dull pounding at the base of his skull that had been playing background drums for him ever since the fall intensified. He took the bottle of extrastrength painkillers from his duffel and shook two into his left hand. He swallowed them with a chaser of water he'd cupped in his hand from the faucet.

Rummaging in his shaving duffel, he dug out a toothbrush and squeezed a roll of minty jell along the bristles. The brushing did little to rid his mouth of the coppery taste that had taken hold the second he'd learned he might be a father.

Fatigue stitched with dread settled in hard as he walked to the bed, dropped his towel to the floor and threw back the heavy spread. Tomorrow he'd make the long drive to Houston. Tonight he had to get some rest.

Sleep came almost instantly. Unfortunately, it didn't last. By four in the morning, Cannon was behind the wheel of his pickup truck, pulling out of the hotel parking lot. Brit Garner's business card was deep in his pocket.

Talk was cheap, especially from a detective who admittedly slept around. A paternity test was all it would take to prove that she was wrong.

* * *

THE CLERK AT the police precinct stared at Cannon, her gaze focused on the angry raw scrape that colored his right cheek. "Are you here to file an assault complaint?"

"No. I'm here to see Detective Brittany Garner. Is she in?"

"The detective is with someone in her office now. What's your business with her?"

"Personal."

The middle-aged clerk leveled her gaze, her features hardening as if she suddenly found his visit threatening or just downright annoying. "Detective Garner is very busy, but give me your name and I'll see if she has time to see you."

“Cannon Dalton and she’ll see me.”

~~The clerk rolled her eyes at him as if he was just another nuisance in her day. “Wait here.”~~

The wait was short. The clerk returned less than a minute later. “The detective will see you now. I’ll walk you to her office.”

He followed the clerk down a narrow corridor, taking a left at the end of the hall. She opened a door and motioned him to go in.

R.J.’s description hadn’t done the stunning woman behind the desk justice. She did look vaguely familiar, but damned if he could place her. Probably reminded him of some movie star or supermodel. She had the body and the looks for either one.

“I’m glad you finally found time to stop by, Mr. Dalton. We need to talk.” Her voice was stern, her manner stiffly authoritative. All cop. Not quite what he’d expected from a woman who was about to say, *Hey, guess what? I had your baby.*

Maybe Kimmie wasn’t her daughter, after all. But surely the Houston Police Department didn’t have the staff to send homicide detectives out to find deadbeat dads.

Cannon let his gaze travel over her while she slid some loose papers into a brown envelope. Striking eyes, the color of a summer sky. Hair was shiny and straight and fell past her shoulders. Long bangs were tucked behind her left ear.

Finally she sat down and told him to do the same. He settled in the straight-backed metal chair across from her desk. He looked her in the eye. Hers were accusing. They matched her smug expression.

“I’m glad you stopped by. This will be much easier to deal with in person.”

“Might have been easier if you’d talked to me before you dumped your kid on R.J.’s doorstep.”

“I didn’t dump. I *delivered* Kimmie to her grandfather since her father wasn’t around to accept responsibility for her welfare.”

“Part of your official duties as a detective?”

“As a matter of fact, it was.”

“And how did you reach the conclusion that I’m Kimmie’s father?”

“Maybe I should refresh your memory.”

“You definitely should.”

“Marble Falls, Texas. Last December. The Greenleaf Bar. Does that mean anything to you?”

Marble Falls. Last December. A resort-sponsored rodeo. He groaned as the pieces started to fall together.

“The woman in Greenleaf Bar was you?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Vaguely.”

He struggled to put things in perspective. That had been a hell of a night. He’d stopped at the first bar he’d come to after leaving the rodeo. A blonde had sat down next to him. As best he remembered, he’d given her an earful about the rodeo, life and death as he’d become more and more inebriated.

She must have offered him a ride back to his hotel since his truck had still been at the bar when he’d gone looking for it the next morning. If Brit was telling the truth, the woman must have gone into the motel with him and they’d ended up doing the deed.

If so, he’d been a total jerk. She’d been as drunk as him and driven or she’d willingly taken a huge risk.

Hard to imagine the woman staring at him now ever being that careless or impulsive.

“Is that your normal pattern, Mr. Dalton?” Brit asked “Use a woman to satisfy your physical needs and then ride off to the next rodeo?”

“That’s a little like the armadillo calling the squirrel road kill, isn’t it? I’m sure I didn’t coerce you

into my bed if I was so drunk I can't remember the experience."

"I can assure you that you're nowhere near that irresistible. I have never been in your bed."—

"Whew. That's a relief. I'd have probably died of frostbite."

"This isn't a joking matter."

"I'm well aware. But I'm not the enemy here, so you can quit talking to me like I just climbed out from under a slimy rock. If you're not Kimmie's mother, who is?"

"My twin sister, Sylvie Hamm."

Twin sisters. That explained Brit's attitude. Probably considered her sister a victim of the drunken sex urges he didn't remember. It also explained why Brit Garner looked familiar.

"So why is it I'm not having this conversation with Sylvie?"

"She's dead."

The words sank in slowly, changing everything. "I'm sorry," he said honestly. The how and why of all of this seemed less important now. A baby would grow up never knowing her mother. A baby that might be his.

He tried to wrap his mind around the new development. The death had to be recent. Kimmie was just a baby. "How did your sister die?"

"She was murdered."

A new jolt shook his system as the situation grew even more disturbing. He muttered a few careless curse words, not out of disrespect but out of desperation. He didn't see how things could get much worse, but from the look on Brit's face, he had a feeling they were about to.

"I get the feeling I should be calling in a lawyer about now," he said.

"Not if you have nothing to hide. You're not currently a suspect in her murder, Mr. Dalton, if that's what you're thinking."

Currently the operative word. "Have you arrested a suspect?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Do you have one?"

"No."

"A motive?"

"It's an open investigation. I can't really discuss the details with you."

"Exactly what can you share, Detective?"

Brit stood and walked around to the front of her desk, propping her shapely backside on the edge of it. Hard-edged, probably tough as nails, but hard to get past the fact that she looked more like a starlet playing a cop than an actual detective. There had to be a story there somewhere.

"What specifically would you like to know, Mr. Dalton?"

"First, how about calling me Cannon? If I am Kimmie's father, then we're practically related."

"Okay, what do you want to know, Cannon?"

"For starters, why would you hand over your niece to a man like R. J. Dalton, or to me, for that matter, since you think I'm such a lowlife?"

She hesitated, then exhaled slowly as if she were giving in against her better judgment. "I'd planned to take that up with you after we have the results of the paternity test in hand, but since you're so eager to discuss details, I guess we can talk now."

"Then we finally agree on something."

Brit glanced at her watch. "Do you mind if we talk over a sandwich? I haven't eaten since breakfast and I need some food and decent coffee."

"Fine by me, as long as I'm not riding to the restaurant in the back of a squad car."

Her full lips tipped into a slight smile. "Not this trip. There's an informal restaurant with quick service just around the corner. We can walk."

“Lead the way.”

Actually he had few hunger pangs growling in his stomach, as well. He'd driven straight through grabbing snacks for munching when he'd stopped for fuel and bathroom breaks.

Snippets of that night in Marble Falls kicked around in his mind as they walked to the café. He hated that his memories of that night were lost in a whiskey fog. Weird considering he wasn't even that much of a drinker. A beer or two every now and then. A six-pack on a bad night.

The night in Marble Falls had been far worse than bad.

Right now he figured he wasn't the only one with questions. And, in spite of Brit's assurances, he figured he was one wrong answer away from becoming a suspect.

That still didn't mean she had her facts right about his being Kimmie's father.

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