

Chapter 1

The office was in chaos. Melody Cartman eyed the window ledge with keen speculation and wondered if standing out there might get her a few minutes' reprieve. She glanced toward her newly married third cousin, Logan Deverell, and his beaming wife, Kit, and decided that she couldn't spoil their honeymoon.

"You'll cope," Kit promised in a whisper. "Just tell everyone he'll be back in touch with them next week and that Tom Walker is handling all his accounts until he returns."

"Has he told Mr. Walker that?" Melody asked, acutely aware of Mr. Walker's temper. Tom had started out in New York City, but circumstances had brought him to Houston. Texas, he'd once said, reminded him a little of his native South Dakota. Melody had often wondered if he'd been brought up by a mountain lion

there, because on occasion he could give a pretty good imitation of one.

“Honest.” Kit put her hand over her heart. “I swear Logan spoke to him first this time. I heard him with my own ears.”

“That’s all right then. Honestly he seemed like such a nice man when I first met him. But I took him that client of Mr. Deverell’s and found him involved in giving another client the bum’s rush out the door. Our client and the other client both ran for it, and I was left to face the music. He never used a bad word or the same word twice, but I was three inches shorter when I escaped from his office.”

“Logan is your third cousin. Can’t you call him Logan?”

Melody glanced toward the big, dark man on the telephone in his office. “Not without a head start,” she said finally.

“Anyway, he didn’t volunteer Tom without mentioning it to him this time, so you won’t get your ears burned. Think you can handle everything for a week?”

“If I can’t cope by now, I’ll never be able to,” Melody said, and her brave smile made her look almost pretty. She was a tall woman, very country-looking in some ways, with freckles and a softly rounded face that was framed by long, blond-streaked light brown hair. Her eyes were brown, with tiny flecks of gold in them. If she took the time, she could look very attractive, Kit thought. But Melody wore jumpers with long-sleeved blouses, or tailored suits, and always in colors that were much better suited to the coloring of someone with dark hair and an equally dark complexion.

“You’d like Tom if you got to know him,” Kit told her. “He knocked that man out the door for some pretty

blatant sexual harassment of his secretary. He's only bad tempered when he needs to be, and he's all alone except for a married sister back home and a nephew. He doesn't even go out with women."

"I can see why...!"

"Not nice," Kit chided. "He's a good-looking, intelligent man, and he's rich."

"I can think of at least one ax murderer with the same description. I read about him in there." She gestured toward one of the supermarket tabloids.

Kit's eyes fell to the tabloid on Melody's desk, its cover carrying color photos of a particularly gruesome murder. "Do you actually read this stuff?" Kit asked with a grimace. "These photos are terrible!"

"I thought you were a detective," Melody said. "Aren't detectives supposed to be used to stuff like that?"

Kit smiled sheepishly. "Well, I don't detect *those* sort of cases."

"I don't blame you. Actually I didn't buy it for the grisly pictures. I bought it for this nifty reducing diet. Doesn't it look interesting? You don't give up any foods, you simply cut down and cut out sweets."

"You aren't fat, Melody," the other woman pointed out.

"No, I'm just big. I do wish I were slender and willowy," she said wistfully.

"There isn't a thing wrong with the way you are."

"That's what you think! Actually I—"

A sudden commotion in the hall cut her off. She and Kit turned just as Emmett Deverell and his three children walked in. The kids were wearing costumes left over from their Thanksgiving Day play last month—Indian costumes.

Guy, the eldest, stood beside his father and glared at

Melody. But Amy and Polk, the younger kids, made a beeline for their favorite person in the office.

“Hi, Kit!” they said in unison. “Hello, Melody. Can we sit and watch TV with you for a while?”

“Please?” Amy ventured, looking up at Melody with eyes that were the same shade of green as her father’s. “We’ll be ever so good. Emmett has to get our airplane tickets and Polk and I don’t want to go to the airport. We got to be in the parade in the rodeo!”

“You all look very nice,” Melody told them.

Guy ignored her.

Polk had already turned on the TV and was staring at the screen. “Aw, gee, Big Bird isn’t on right now, Amy,” he said miserably.

Melody glanced at the kids, noticing again how much they all favored their father. Guy came closest. He was tall, too, with a lean face and dark hair. Amy looked a lot like her mother, Adell, except for those green eyes. All the kids had them.

The last time Emmett had been in the office, he’d savaged Melody. The San Antonio rancher hated her and made no secret of the fact. He didn’t approve of her working for Logan, who was a relative of his as well, but by blood, not marriage, as Melody was. Melody had had several days to remember and burn over his attitude. She was through being intimidated by him. He might be almost a generation older than she was, but he wasn’t going to walk on her feelings anymore.

“Amy and Polk want to stay with you while I go to the airport,” Emmett said icily. He didn’t mention leaving Guy, because Guy disliked Melody as much as Emmett did.

Melody cocked an eyebrow, and tried to stay calm. She

was melting with fear inside, but she wasn't going to let him know it. "Am I being asked?" she replied formally.

Emmett's pale green eyes glittered at her. "Yes, if you want the whole ten yards."

"In that case, Amy and Polk are welcome to watch TV while you're gone," she said, triumphant with her small victory.

Emmett didn't like the challenge in her dark eyes, or that tiny smirk. If those kids hadn't been giving him hell all morning, he wouldn't even be here. He was surly with bad temper.

"You won't help them run away or anything?" he asked, with a sarcastic, pointed reference to her part in his ex-wife Adell's sudden departure with Melody's brother, Randy.

He wasn't going to do that to her, she promised herself. She wasn't going to let him play on her conscience. Her eyes settled on the tabloid and it triggered a memory; something Kit had elaborated on since her return from Emmett's house in San Antonio. She smiled sweetly and picked up the tabloid. "Have you seen the latest on that ax murder, Mr. Deverell?" she asked, and stuck the gory front page under his arrogant nose.

He turned green instantly. "Damn you...!" He choked before his mad dash to the restroom.

Melody and Polk and Amy and Kit chuckled helplessly. Guy glared at them and walked out to find his father.

"He has a stomach of glass," Melody pronounced, recalling Kit's revelations about how easily Emmett could be made ill with even talk of gory things. Amazing, for a rancher who was also something of a rodeo star. It was one of many paradoxes about Emmett that would have fascinated a less prejudiced woman. She

took the paper and stuck it into her purse. She could use it as a talisman against future attack by Emmett. “Make yourselves comfortable, kids,” she told Amy and Polk.

“That was a dirty trick.” Kit laughed.

“He deserved it. Nasty, arrogant beast,” she muttered, glaring at the door into the hall as if he were hiding there waiting to pounce. “If he can’t take it, he shouldn’t dish it out.”

Kit was trying not to laugh too hard. Logan joined them, affectionately slipping an arm around his wife. “If we can’t dish what out?”

“Melody made Emmett sick,” Amy volunteered. “Look what’s on educational television, Melody! It’s *Reading Rainbow!*”

“Good, good,” Melody said absently.

“How did you make Emmett sick?” Logan asked curiously.

“Never mind. We women have to have our secret weapons, especially when it comes to people like your cousin Emmett,” Kit told him. “Melody, I’ve given you a number where we can be reached if you need to contact us.”

“I’ll only use it if there’s an emergency,” Melody promised.

Kit smiled at her. “I know that.”

“And don’t let Tom give you fits,” Logan told her. “He’s not a bad man. It was my fault. I should have told him he was being volunteered to handle my clients that afternoon, but I was in a rush to get married.”

“I remember.” Melody chuckled. “It’s okay. I’ll manage.”

“If you can’t, you might turn those kids loose on him,” Logan suggested.

“Don’t give her any ideas. We have to leave, right

now,” Kit said mirthfully, tugging at her husband’s arm. “Take care, Melody.”

“Yes, and don’t let my cousin walk on you,” Logan added. “You’re my secretary, not his paid babysitter. Keep that in mind.”

“I will.”

“So long.”

They walked out the door just as a pale, subdued Emmett was coming back in with Guy at his heels.

“That wasn’t fair,” Guy said angrily, glaring at Melody.

“You kids did it to him,” she pointed out. “Kit told me all about it.”

“We’re family. You’re not!”

“Yes, she is,” Amy argued. “She’s our aunt. Isn’t that right, Emmett?”

He looked even worse. “I’ll be back for Amy and Polk about three o’clock,” he said without answering the question.

“But isn’t she our aunt?” Amy persisted.

“She’s our stepaunt,” Polk told her.

“Oh.” She was satisfied and went back to watching TV. “Do take care of Emmett, Guy, and don’t let him get run over by any buses.”

“I don’t need taking care of,” Emmett muttered. “But she might,” he added with a glare at Melody.

“Watch it,” Logan advised sotto voce. “She slipped that tabloid into her purse.”

“Turncoat!” Kit gasped, hitting her husband’s shoulder.

“We men have to stick together,” Logan told her, chuckling. “In today’s world, there’s nothing more endangered than a male. Any day now, the women’s lib

movement will start passing out hit lists and organizing death squads to wipe out men.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me.” Emmett sighed. “The way it looks, we’re evolving into an Amazon society where men will be used to procreate the species and then efficiently be put to death.”

Melody eyed Emmett. “What an interesting idea.”

“Shame on you!” Kit chuckled. “Honestly, the radicals just get all the publicity. Most women’s libbers just want a fair shake—equal pay and equal rights. What’s so terrible about that?”

“And there are men who are just as prejudiced against women.” Logan drew Kit close. “Haven’t you ever heard of the battle of the sexes? It’s been around since time began. It’s just getting better press.”

“I suppose so.” Melody sighed. “Maybe men aren’t endangered after all.”

“Thank you,” Emmett said tersely. “I’m glad to know that I won’t have to stand guard at my front door to ward off women death squads.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go that far,” Melody advised.

“Wouldn’t you?” Emmett muttered. “And I thought you were a little shrinking violet.”

“More like a Venus flytrap, actually,” she replied brightly. “I thought you were going to the airport to get tickets *home*?”

“Notice how much enthusiasm she put into that question?” Logan asked with pure relish. “And you said women wouldn’t leave you alone. This must be refreshing for you.”

Emmett didn’t look refreshed. He looked as if he might explode momentarily. “Let’s go, Guy. Have a nice honeymoon, you two,” he added to Logan and Kit. “I don’t think much of marriage, but good luck anyway.”

“Our mama ran off and left him,” Amy volunteered. “Emmett doesn’t want to marry anybody.”

“But he must,” Polk said with a serious frown. “Isn’t he always bringing those real glittery, pretty ladies home?”

“Don’t be silly,” Guy said urbanely. “Those are good-time girls. You don’t marry them.”

“What’s a good-time girl?” Amy asked.

“Just the same as a good-time boy, only shorter,” Melody said with icy delight, and she smiled at Emmett.

He went two shades darker.

“Time to go,” Kit said quickly. “Emmett, can we give you a lift? We’re going straight to the airport.”

“Yes,” Logan said, taking his tall cousin’s muscular arm in a big hand. “Come along, Guy. See you in a week, Melody. If you have any problems, call me. And if you could check on Tansy in the hospital, I’d appreciate it. Chris is watching out for her, but you can’t have too many observers where my mother is concerned.”

“Certainly I will,” Melody agreed. “I don’t have much to do in the evenings, anyway.”

“I didn’t think there would be a man that brave,” Emmett agreed.

Melody reached for her purse. Emmett spared her a glance that promised retribution before he made a quick exit with the others.

The chaos began to calm with Logan’s exit. The telephones rang for an hour or two. After that, there were only a few calls and two clients who came in person to ask about their investments. Melody had the figures. It was only a matter of pulling them up—her boss had

given her permission before he left—and showing them to the visitors.

The kids were amazingly good. They watched educational programming without a peep, except to ask for change for the soft drink machine. Melody gave it to them and then listened worriedly for sounds of the machine being mugged. Fortunately there was no such noise, and she settled down to the first peace she'd had all day.

She managed to clear her desk of work before Emmett showed up, late, to pick up the kids.

“Aw, do we have to go?” Polk groaned. “Mr. Rogers is coming on!”

“Yes, we have to go. We're leaving for home in the morning, thank God. Only one more event to go to—night—bareback bronc riding.”

“Isn't that one of the most dangerous events?” Melody asked.

His eyebrows arched under the wide-brimmed Stetson he hadn't bothered to remove from his dark hair. “Any rodeo event is dangerous if a contestant is stupid or careless. I'm neither.”

She knew that already. He was something of a legend in rodeo. He wouldn't be aware that she'd followed his career. She was a rodeo fan, but Emmett's attitude toward her had kept her silent about her interest in the sport.

“Thank you for letting us stay with you, Melody,” Amy said, smiling up at her.

Melody smiled back. She liked the little girl very much. She was open and warm and loving, despite her mischievous nature.

Emmett saw that smile and felt it all the way to his toes. He couldn't have imagined even a minute before that a smile could change a plain face and make it radiate beauty.

But he saw the reality of it in Melody's soft features. Involuntarily his eyes fell to her body. She was what a kind man would call voluptuous, her form and shape perfectly proportioned but just a tad past slender. Adell had been bacon-thin. Melody was her exact opposite.

It irritated him that he should notice Melody in that way. She was nothing to him except a turncoat. She and her brother had disrupted and destroyed his life. Not only his, but his children's, as well. He could easily have hated her for that.

"I said, let's go," he told the children.

"Okay." Polk sighed.

"I'll wait in the hall," Guy murmured. He avoided even looking at Melody.

"Guy hates you," Amy told her with blunt honesty. "But I think you're wonderful."

"I think you're wonderful, too," Melody replied.

Amy grinned and walked up to her father. "We can go now, Emmett. Can I write to my friend Melody?"

"We'll talk about it," Emmett said noncommittally. "Thanks for watching them," he said as an afterthought.

"Oh, it was my plea...sure!" She tripped over a tomahawk that someone had left lying on the floor and ended up on her back. Guy picked up the weapon, and the kids and Emmett made a circle around her prone body. She glared up at them, trying not to think how a sacrificial victim in an Indian encampment might have felt. In those Indian costumes, the kids looked eerie.

"Whose tomahawk?" Emmett asked as he reached down and pulled Melody up with a minimum of strain. His hand made hers tingle. She wondered if he'd felt the excitement of the contact, too, because he certainly let go of her fast.

“It’s mine, Emmett,” Amy said, sighing. She looked up at him, pushing back her pigtails, and her green eyes were resigned. “Go ahead and hit me. I didn’t mean to make Melody hurt herself, though. I like her.”

“I know you didn’t mean it,” Melody said, and smiled. “It’s okay, nothing dented.”

“Next time, be more careful where you put that thing,” Emmett muttered.

“That’s right, Amy,” Melody said, nodding. “Between your father’s ears would be a good place.”

He glared at her. “You didn’t hear that, Amy. Let’s go, kids.”

He herded the children out the door and closed it. Melody sat by herself with no ringing phones, no blaring television, no laughing children. Her life and the office were suddenly empty.

She closed up precisely at 5:00 p.m. and went by the grocery store to get enough for the weekend, which was just beginning. Thanksgiving Day had been quiet and lonely. She’d had a turkey breast, but she and Alistair had finished it off for supper the night before. So she bought ground beef for hamburgers and a small beef roast and vegetables to make stew and, later, soup. She lived on a budget, which meant that she bypassed steak and frozen éclairs. She would have loved to indulge her taste for both. Maybe someday, she thought wistfully...

She fed Alistair, her big marmalade tabby, and then made herself a light supper. She ate it with little enthusiasm. Then she curled up with Alistair on the sofa to watch a movie on television. During the last scene, a very interesting standoff between a murderer and the police, the telephone started ringing. She grimaced, hating the interruption. If she answered it, she’d surely

miss the end of the movie she'd been watching for two hours. She ignored it at first. The only people who ever telephoned her were people who were selling things. But whoever was calling wouldn't give up. It stopped, briefly, only to start ringing insistently again. This time she was afraid not to answer it. It might be Kit or Logan or Tansy or even her brother.

She picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Is this Miss Melody Cartman?" a crisp, professional voice asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Nurse Willoughby. We have a Mr. Emmett Deverell here at city general hospital with a massive concussion. He's only just regained consciousness. He gave us your name and asked us to call and have you pick up his children at the Mellenger Hotel."

Melody stood frozen in place. The only thing that registered was that Emmett was hurt and she'd become a babysitter. She could hardly say no or argue. Concussions were terribly dangerous.

"The children are...where?"

"At the Mellenger Hotel. Room three hundred and something. He's very foggy at the moment and in a great deal of pain."

"He will be all right?" Melody asked, hating herself for being concerned.

"We hope so," came the crisp reply.

"Tell him that I'll look after the children," she said.

"Very well."

The phone went dead before she could ask another question. She stared around her like someone in a trance. Where in the world was she going to put three renegade children, one of whom hated her? And how long was she going to have them?

For one insane moment, she thought about calling Adell and Randy, but she dismissed that idea at once. Emmett would never forgive her. At the moment, he deserved a little consideration, she supposed.

She got her coat and took a cab to the hotel. It was very late to be driving around Houston, and her little car was unreliable in wet weather. Houston was notorious for flooding, and the rain was coming down steadily now.

She asked at the desk for Emmett's room number, quickly explaining the circumstances to a sympathetic desk clerk after giving Emmett's condition and the hospital's number, so that management could check her story if they felt the need to. In fact, they did, and she didn't blame them. These days, one simply couldn't turn over three children to a total stranger who might or might not intend them harm.

When she got to the hotel room, there were muffled sounds from within. Melody, who knew the kids all too well, knocked briefly but firmly on the door.

There was a sudden silence, followed by a scuffle and a wail. The door flew open and a matronly lady with frazzled hair almost fell on Melody with relief.

"Are you their mother?" the elderly woman asked. "I'm Mrs. Johnson. Here they are, safe and sound, my fee will be added to the hotel bill. You *are* their mother?"

"Well, no," she began.

"Oh, my God!"

"I'm to take charge of them," Melody added, because it looked as if the woman might be preparing to have a heart attack on the spot.

A wavery smile replaced the horror on the woman's lined face. "Then I'll just be off. Good night!"

“Chicken,” Amy muttered, peering around Melody to watch the woman’s incredibly fast retreat.

“What have you three been up to?” Melody asked, glaring at them.

“Nothing at all, Melody, dear,” Amy said sweetly, and grinned.

“She just wasn’t used to kids, I guess,” Polk added. He grinned, too.

Behind them there were the remains of two foam-filled pillows and what appeared to be the ropes that closed the heavy curtains.

“We had a pillow fight,” Amy explained.

“And then we went skiing in the bathroom,” Polk said.

Melody could barely see the bathroom. The door was ajar and the floor seemed to be soaked. She was beginning to understand her predecessor’s agile retreat. Days and days...of this. She wouldn’t have an apartment left! And all because she felt sorry for a man who had to be her worst enemy.

“Why are you here?” Guy asked belligerently. “Where’s Dad?”

That brought her back to her original purpose for being there. Emmett’s accident.

She sat down on the sofa, tossing her purse beside her, while she struggled to find the right words to tell them.

“Something’s happened,” Guy said when he saw her face. He stiffened. “What?”

Even at such a young age, he was already showing signs of great inner strength, of ability to cope with whatever life threw at him. Amy and Polk looked suddenly vulnerable, but not Guy.

“Your father has a brain concussion,” Melody told them. “He’s conscious now, but in a lot of pain. He’ll have to stay in the hospital for a day or so. Meanwhile, he wants you to come home with me.”

“He hates you,” Guy said coldly. “Why would he want us to stay with you?”

“Because I’m all you’ve got,” Melody replied. “Unless you’d rather I called the juvenile authorities...?”

Guy’s massive self-confidence failed. He shrugged and turned away.

Amy climbed onto Melody’s lap and clung. “Our daddy will be all right, won’t he?” she asked tearfully.

“Of course he will,” Melody assured her, gathering her close. “He’s very tough. It will take more than a concussion to keep him down.”

“Yes, it will,” Polk said. He turned away because his lower lip was trembling.

“Let’s get your things together and go,” Melody said. “Have you had something to eat?”

“We had pizza and chocolate sundaes.”

Melody could imagine that the elderly lady in charge of them had agreed with any menu that would keep them quiet. But she’d have to get some decent food into them. That would give her something to work toward. Meanwhile, she found herself actually worrying about Emmett. The first thing she was going to do when they got to the apartment was phone the hospital and get an update. Surely Emmett was indestructible, wasn’t he?

She looked at the children and felt a surge of pity for them. She knew how it felt to be alone. When their parents had died, Randy had worked at two jobs to support them, while Melody was still in school. She’d carried

her share of the load, but it had been lonely for both of them. She hoped these children wouldn't have the same ordeal to face that she and Randy had.