

CATHERINE PALMER

FATAL HARVEST



LOVE INSPIRED
INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Chapter One



Matthew Strong bit the curlicue off the top of his dipped, vanilla ice-cream cone. A shard of chocolate shell came loose and dropped right onto his jeans pocket. He glanced at the Princeton University recruiter in the driver's seat beside him. The man's gray eyes were focused on the turn into Jaycee Park, so Matt flicked the melting chocolate onto the floor of the brand-new Cadillac.

He wished he looked older than sixteen. If he'd known these two men were going to take him out of class today, he might have gone to a barber. As it was, his curly black hair fell well below his ears and over the collar of his shirt. He had on his blue-and-gold striped tie, as usual. His mom had given it to him before she died. He wore the tie every day, and the mustard stain below the knot was impossible to conceal. That, along with the blob of chocolate on his jeans, made him look like a food-fight casualty.

"A perfect score on the ACT," the recruiter said for the second time since they'd left Artesia High School. The man was

solidly built and had a blond crew cut. His immaculate red tie stood out against the pin-striped gray of his suit. He drove toward a pair of handball courts that had been built between the empty running track and the deserted softball diamond. “For a sophomore to perform so well is amazing.”

Matt eyed his cone, wondering if he should attempt another bite. Why hadn’t he ordered a sundae in a plastic bowl? Still, this wasn’t too bad a deal. He had gotten out of his trigonometry class and had been treated to ice cream from Dairy Queen. In return, he would spend the next hour listening to this man and his colleague in the backseat tell him how great Princeton was. They’d probably show him some brochures and give him a pep talk. They’d go on and on about how much they wanted him to enroll and how many scholarships they could offer.

For a couple of months now—ever since he had gotten his ACT results—Matt had been flooded with phone calls and letters from universities. He wasn’t too surprised at the score. One of his counselors told him he had the highest IQ ever recorded in the school system. These Princeton men were the first two college recruiters who had actually shown up looking for him, but he expected more would follow.

He would have liked his father by his side to help the conversation along. Matt could talk for hours about things that interested him—computers, logarithms, Latin grammar, the shifting of the earth’s tectonic plates. Feeding the world’s hungry filled his thoughts these days, and he was hard at work on a plan to accomplish that goal. But small talk? Forget it. For chitchat at school, he relied on his best friend, Billy Younger, to fill in his fumbling silences. But Billy was still in class, and Matt’s father was never around. He’d be out on the ranch right now, plowing or feeding cattle or something.

“So you’re interested in computers,” the driver said. He

pulled the Cadillac to a stop behind the solid concrete wall of the handball court. “We understand you’re able to do some interesting things with a computer, Matthew.”

“Yeah. Especially since I met Miss Pruitt. She’s my computer tech teacher.” Matt pulled on the door handle and stepped out. At least this way, the chocolate bits would fall onto the ground instead of his jeans. “She doesn’t have the latest hardware at school, but her software’s okay. The main thing is, she knows the technology.”

“Is this Miss Pruitt the one who helped you hack into the Agrimax mainframe?”

Matt paused at the unexpected question. “Uh...no, I didn’t...” The two recruiters took a step closer, their eyes trained on his face. “I sent some e-mails.... How did you know about Agrimax?”

“Did Jim Banyon give you those e-mail addresses, Matthew?”

The second man laid a hand on Matt’s shoulder. He was tall and beefy, with an acne-scarred face and a football player’s thick neck. “Answer our questions, boy.”

“What do you mean?” Matt stiffened as the man backed him into the cold gray wall of the handball court. “Questions about my college plans?”

“About Agrimax.”

“It’s a food company. A conglomerate.” Was this some kind of a test? Why did Princeton want to know about his research on feeding the hungry? How had they found out what he was doing?

“Agrimax is one of the world’s top three suppliers of food,” Matt rattled off, breathless and nervous, feeling like he was at a Scholar Bowl competition. “They have a global network of growers, processors and retailers. They own hundreds of smaller companies, and they—”

“Who gave you access to the Agrimax mainframe?” The beefy man’s grip tightened on Matt’s shoulder. “Was it Jim Banyon?”

This wasn’t what he had expected at all. Recruiters were supposed to lure you with nice offers, weren’t they? Suddenly tongue-tied, Matt swallowed hard.

“Did Jim Banyon give you those e-mail addresses?” The blond man shoved him hard into the wall. His shoulders hit the concrete, and he gasped. “Answer me, kid.”

“Addresses for the Agrimax executives? No, I—I got those myself. I opened a database. But not the mainframe. I don’t hack, sir. I would never break into anyone’s private computer system. You can tell Princeton that I—”

“You’re writing a term paper. Where did you get your information?”

“How do you know that? Did you hack me?”

“We’re doing the asking! Who told you about Agrimax? The genetic developments. The terminator genes. The cloning.”

“It’s all on the Internet. Anybody can—”

“Do you know Jim Banyon?”

“Yes, sir. He has a ranch near Hope. He used to work for Agrimax before he retired.”

“What information did he give you?”

Matt stared down at the cone in his hand. The vanilla ice cream was oozing between the cracks in the chocolate shell and running onto his fingers. “Excuse me, sir,” he said. “You’re from Princeton, right?”

“Yeah, right.” The blond man smirked at his companion. “Maybe he’s not so bright after all. Look, kid, somebody downloaded a lot of data from the Agrimax mainframe. Technology. Patented information. Secret formulas. Was that you?”

“I told you I would never—”

“Shut up and answer the questions.” The beefy guy grabbed a handful of Matt’s hair and yanked his head to one side. Matt jerked in pain, and his cone fell to the ground. “Who has the information?”

Matt’s mouth went dry. *Think. Think.*

“Answer me, kid!”

“I don’t have it,” he mumbled.

“Who does?” The scarred face came closer. “Does Banyon have it?”

“I don’t have it! I promise.”

“Who’s got it?”

The man slammed Matt’s head against the concrete. Bright lights swam before his eyes. He thought he was going to vomit. Or pass out. He tried to breathe.

“Search him!” the blond barked.

The beefy man grabbed Matt’s arm, swung him around and pushed him up against the wall. With one foot, he kicked Matt’s legs apart.

Like a policeman. Like someone trained.

The man was going through his pockets now, taking out the keys to his pickup and then shoving them back. His wallet. They thumbed through it. Thieves? The men studied his driver’s license, credit card, student ID. Then they jammed the wallet into his pocket.

“He’s clean.” The beefy man turned Matt again, one hand pinning his chest to the wall. “Somebody in this armpit town stole our data. Did you take it, boy? Or was it Banyon? Did he give it to you? Answer me!”

“No,” Matt managed.

“No, what?”

“I don’t have it!”

“Where is it?”

Matt couldn't breathe. He was going to die. "I—I don't have it."

With a roar of anger, the man grabbed Matt's shirt, swung him away from the wall, and then hurled him full force into it. His head smashed against the concrete. The sky flashed a brilliant white. His knees buckled, and the shining light faded to blackness.

"I'm starving."

The familiar bulk of a teenager leaning into Cole Strong's refrigerator could be only one person.

"Hey, Billy," Cole said as the kitchen door banged shut behind him. "Josefina made tamales yesterday. Zap yourself a few of those."

"Thanks, Mr. Strong." A celery stick in his mouth, Billy Younger straightened with the plateful of tamales and a jug of milk. He nudged the refrigerator door shut with his heel as he headed for the microwave oven. "You should have seen what they tried to pass off as lunch today at school. A pretzel with cheese sauce! Can you believe that? Matt and I talked about ditching trig and driving over to the Bell, but we didn't do it."

"You guys better not ditch trig." Cole set his Stetson on the counter and reached for an apple from the bowl. He had been plowing since lunch. The spring had been unusually wet for Southeastern New Mexico, and now, in early May, he was behind. "You both have your sights on Harvard, MIT or Stanford. Can't get into those places if you ditch your high school classes."

"Yeah, Mr. Strong, but you know Matt. He's gonna get in wherever he wants to go." Billy took the steaming tamales out of the microwave. "A couple of college bigwigs were at school today wanting to talk to him. Probably trying to convince him to skip his senior year." He shook his head. "So

where is Matt, anyhow? We were gonna meet after school and go to Dairy Queen to talk about the mission trip to Guatemala. My dad doesn't want me to go. I waited for Matt, but he never showed."

Cole glanced down the long hall in the direction of his son's bedroom. It was unlike Matt to back out on anything he'd planned with Billy. The two sixteen-year-olds had been best friends since kindergarten, and nothing could separate them—not peer pressure, girls, sports or even their increasingly divergent interests in life.

"Hey, Matt!" Cole barked down the hall. "Billy's here. You better come get a tamale—they're going fast."

Billy paused in wolfing down his snack and gave a wide grin. "Yeah, Matt," he shouted, his mouth full, "you stood me up, dude! What's with that?"

When his son didn't answer, Cole headed toward the bedroom. In the rambling adobe house that sat at the center of his large ranching and farming operation, terra-cotta Saltillo tiles kept the floors cool in summer and warm in winter. He trailed one hand along the undulating whitewashed wall.

"Matthew?" The door was open, and Cole stuck his head in. As always, his eyes took in a jumble of comic books, telescopes, computer equipment, dirty clothes, athletic shoes and empty pizza boxes spread over every square inch of his son's large bedroom. Matt claimed that he alone fueled the orange soda industry. As evidence, empty cans lay scattered around the room. Trails of ants scurried into and out of the open tab holes.

Josefina had flatly refused to continue cleaning Matt's room. She even made a half-serious vow to quit her job if Cole ordered her to set foot in his son's domain. She adored the boy and had worked for Cole since his wife died eight years earlier. But as she liked to say, "I got my limits, Mr. Strong."

Scanning the room to make sure he could distinguish boy

from junk, Cole shook his head. “He’s not here, Billy,” he called. “You sure you just didn’t miss him at school?”

“No, sir, he was not there. I waited fifteen minutes.” Billy joined Cole in the doorway. “I figured those college recruiters messed with his head. You know how Matt gets rattled by stuff like that. And he’s been so weird lately anyway, with that research paper he’s doing. Weirder than usual, I mean.”

From anyone but Billy Younger, this statement would have made Cole bristle. He realized his son was different, but he wished others weren’t so aware of it. Reading easily by age three, Matthew had also excelled in math and science. But the boy’s social skills were worse than poor. Shy, gawky, nervous, Matt didn’t help himself by regularly obsessing over one thing or another. Though he was a good-looking kid, with his mother’s dark hair and his father’s blue eyes, he had never been on a date and could claim only one close friend.

“What’s the paper about?” Cole asked.

“You haven’t heard him talking about it?”

“I don’t think so.”

Cole felt uncomfortable not knowing his son’s activities, but he had a ranch to run. Taking control after his own father’s death, Cole had barely saved the operation from bankruptcy. Now profitable, it had been cited by journalists and lawmakers as one of the finest examples of a family-owned ranch in the state of New Mexico. But the hard work had taken its toll on Cole’s relationship with Matt—not that there had ever been much to build on.

Cole had acknowledged long ago that he and the boy had little in common. When they ate together, dinner was a mostly silent affair. When they went on a road trip, Matt hid behind a pair of sunglasses and the headphones of his portable MP3 player. In church these days, Matt sat with Billy and the rest of the youth group. Summers were no better. Matt spent all

his free time parked in front of his computer, and unless it related to ranching, such current technology bewildered Cole. There had never been a strong relationship between father and son, and now it was almost nonexistent.

“He’s writing about food or something,” Billy said, wading into Matt’s bedroom—as if walking across old issues of *MacWorld* and *PC Gamer* were perfectly ordinary. He approached the tangle of cords and computer equipment piled on his friend’s desk. “It’s like world hunger, you know? The term paper is for English, but we get to choose any subject we want. So Matt gets this idea from Miss Pruitt, who’s like his guru. She teaches computers. Miss Pruitt is cool, though. She goes on all these mission trips with her church. And she really feeds the hungry.”

“I haven’t met Miss Pruitt.”

“She’s intense.” He leaned over Matt’s computer and pressed a key. The screen switched from a pattern of morphing colored shapes into a field of text. “You don’t want to take her classes unless you like to work. She expects a lot out of you, but Matt’s into that kind of thing. He’s always going in there and talking to her.”

“Does he have a crush on her?”

“A crush!” Billy laughed, and Cole realized the term was a little out of date. “No, sir, you don’t get a crush on Miss Pruitt. I mean, it’s not that she’s ugly, okay? She’s just...wow, she’s intense. That’s all I can tell you.”

He peered at the screen. “This is it. This is the first draft of Matt’s term paper for English. It’s about how these huge food companies are controlling the world.”

“What?” Cole frowned. “Food companies doing what?”

“Come on, Mr. Strong—you sell all your beef to Agrimax, don’t you? And your chile goes to Selena Foods, which is owned by Agrimax. Your alfalfa? Who gets that?”