

Chapter Twenty

Just outside Bakersfield, Lucas decided he really did need a substantial breakfast. He'd fixed himself a peanut butter sandwich before he'd hit the Interstate from the rest area, but he was still hungry. I'll stop at this Diamond B and get a bite, he told himself.

He'd almost finished his huevos rancheros and was about to ask the waitress for his check when a hand grabbed his shoulder.

"Hey, trucker, what'cha thinking about so hard?" It was Dan, his grin alight below his brown western hat.

"Hey, Hopalong, what are you doing here?"

"The usual. Taking a few broncs around some of the smaller rodeos," Dan pulled a chair out and sat down at Lucas' table.

"You're staying out of trouble, then," Lucas grinned back.

"Have to. Say, how's that romance of yours going, with - was it Lanie?"

"Melanie. It may have some staying power," Lucas said, shaking his head at Dan's inability to remember names. "I'm sorry things didn't work out for you and Dee Ann. She's a sweet kid."

"I guess it wasn't meant to be," Dan said. "You both have to be on the independent side for it to work," he added, in a gruff voice.

"Yeah. Want some coffee?"

"Sure. Say, Lucas, changing the subject, but I've been hearing talk around the corrals that Bull Dozier is mad at you again."

"No kidding. Has he said why?"

"Rumor says he's got a new woman on the truck, but that she's got the hots for you. Name's Jessie, I think."

"No, it's Josie. She just doesn't give up, does she?" And he told Dan about the trap she'd planned at the Albuquerque Diamond B. "She's a match for Bull, all right."

"He means to get ugly this time, old friend," Dan said

earnestly. "Try not to tangle with him."

"Tangle with him? I owe him a favor!"

"For what?"

"Running off with Josie. Now if only they'd decide to go trucking in Alaska, maybe, or Australia..."

Dan snorted. "Hell, if anybody thought there was a chance of getting rid of Bull that way, we'd take up a collection. He's always bad news."

"Where are they now?"

"He's hauling those Brahmans of his to all the little rodeos in Oregon. That's how I heard about him and his threats against you. He says he's going to kill you if you don't leave his woman alone."

"I'd never contradict a lady, Dan. But since Josie's no lady, I can tell you that she's the one who's been after me. I'm not interested in that little vixen"

Dan laughed; then grew serious again. "Okay, Lucas. But be careful. Watch your back."

Lucas and Melanie talked for several hours each night that week. On his return to San Diego from Bakersfield, he'd decided to stop in Santa Fe Springs and get the trailer's liftgate serviced. "Then I'm deadheading on to San Diego," he'd said one evening.

"Deadheading?" Melanie interrupted. "I didn't know you were into Oldies Rock."

"No, no, no," Lucas answered, pretending exasperation. "Deadheading means I'm running with the trailer empty, to where my next load is waiting."

"I wish you were here."

"No, it'd be better if you were here," he countered. "I'm going nuts from boredom. I've already paid all my bills by mail, I've vacuumed the entire truck, not just the sleeper, and I've read every book I brought with me."

Melanie laughed. "Then you can come here and take my job for a while. Three big project deadlines all hit this week, and for a while we couldn't find the old photos Pat needed to finish her special two-page spread on New

Orleans. We turned the office upside down looking for them - one of her friends had loaned them to her from an old family album, so they were irreplaceable. Oh, and two of my queries got 'sorry, not interested' letters back."

"Sorry about the turn-downs. Sounds like a lively day at the office, though."

"It'd be more lively if you were here," she tried to change the subject. Why did I even mention my writing, she asked herself. He's not interested in that. I bore myself talking about it. "You could go trick-or-treating with Mac next week. He says he wants to go one more time before he's too old."

Lucas laughed. "And what is the intrepid - if decrepit - Mac the Bulldog going as?"

"I guess he got the idea from when we were kidding around on the truck this summer, you know, with the 'Olde English' bit. He's going as a knight in armor - but he had me sew a bulldog to a felt flag for his 'colors.'"

"Oh, he's Sir Mac, the Bulldog, then," Lucas chuckled. "That's my trucker-in-training! What a kid. Wait'll I tell Dan Mac picked a bulldog over a horse. Are you and Anna dressing up too?"

"No, silly. We are definitely too old. We're taking Mac to the neighbors' houses and then to the school carnival. It's a fund-raiser for new playground equipment."

"I know what you ought to go as."

"What?"

"A witch."

"Gee, thanks, Lucas. Why not just tell me I'm an old hag and have done with it?"

"That's not the reason. I think you've put a spell on me."

"Oh, that's a great idea. I should be able to turn you into a frog, then, if you don't do my bidding."

"No, not in these modern times." Then Lucas made croaking noises. "You just can't do spells like that any more."

Melanie giggled. "Drat. Well, I tried. Think you