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Family man?

THE TOUGH GUY AND THE TODDLER

DIANE PERSHING

**MEN
IN
BLUE**

"I suspect you have a lot more sensitivity than you let on,"

Jordan said lightly.

Dom looked toward the ceiling. "Here we go. The woman trying to see more of the 'female' side in the man than is really there. Listen, I do my job, I drink my beer, I go to bed. End of story."

"Joe Average

藏书章

"You got it.

"Do you watch sunsets and wonder about how God created such a beautiful sight?"

"On occasion. Is that such a big deal?"

"It just means you're not as average as you'd like me to think you are."

Dom held up his hands in mock surrender.

"Okay, okay, I'm deep as a damned well. Satisfied?"

Jordan laughed delightedly. "It's all an act, isn't it? This whole poker-face, tough-guy thing of yours."

"Oh, no." Dom moved closer. "Trust me, it's not an act...."

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THE TOUGH GUY AND THE TODDLER

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DIANE PERSHING

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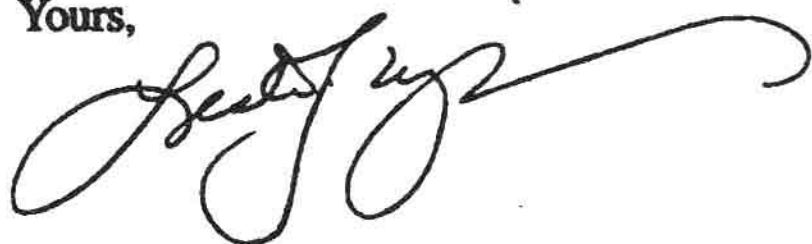
Dear Reader,

Spring always seems like a good time to start something new, so this month it's Marilyn Pappano's wonderful new Western miniseries, **HEARTBREAK CANYON**. *Cattleman's Promise* is a terrific introduction to the men of Heartbreak, Oklahoma—not to mention the women who change their lives. So settle in for the story of this rugged loner and the single mom who teaches him the joys of family life.

Unfortunately, all good things must end someday, and this month we bid farewell to Justine Davis's **TRINITY STREET WEST**. But what a finale! Clay Yeager has been an unseen presence in all the books in this miniseries, and at last here he is in the flesh, hero of his own story in *Clay Yeager's Redemption*. And, as befits the conclusion to such a fabulous group of novels, you'll get one last look at the lives and loves of all your favorite characters before the book is through. And in more miniseries news, Doreen Roberts continues **RODEO MEN** with *A Forever Kind of Cowboy*, a runaway bride story you'll fall in love with. *The Tough Guy and the Toddler* is the newest from Diane Pershing, and it's our **MEN IN BLUE** title, with a great cop hero. Christine Scott makes the move to Intimate Moments with *Her Second Chance Family*, an emotional and memorable **FAMILIES ARE FOREVER** title. Finally, welcome new writer Claire King, whose *Knight in a White Stetson* is both our **WAY OUT WEST** title and a fun and unforgettable debut.

As always, we hope you enjoy all our books—and that you'll come back next month, when Silhouette Intimate Moments brings you six more examples of the most exciting romance reading around.

Yours,



Leslie J. Wainger
Executive Senior Editor

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Books by Diane Pershing

Silhouette Intimate Moments

While She Was Sleeping #863

The Tough Guy and the Toddler #928

Silhouette Yours Truly

First Date: Honeymoon

Third Date's the Charm

DIANE PERSHING

cannot remember a time when she didn't have her nose buried in a book. As a child she would cheat the bedtime curfew by snuggling under the covers with her teddy bear, a flashlight and a forbidden (read "grown-up") novel. Her mother warned her that she would ruin her eyes, but so far, they still work. Diane has had many careers—singer, actress, film critic, disc jockey, TV writer, to name a few. Currently she divides her time between writing romances and doing voice-overs (you can hear her as Poison Ivy on the "Batman" cartoon). She lives in Los Angeles, and promises she is only slightly affected. Her two children, Morgan Rose and Ben, have just completed college, and Diane looks forward to writing and acting until she expires, or people stop hiring her, whichever comes first. She loves to hear from readers, so please write to her at P.O. Box 67424, Los Angeles, CA 90067.

To my advisers:
Brian Banks, L.A. County Sheriff's Department,
and Kathy Bennett, L.A.P.D.
Thank you both for your insight and patience.

Chapter 1

“And on the KRAD radio weather front,” the voice on the car radio chirped, “it’s another sunny day in southern California, temperatures up to eighty-four in the valleys, while the rest of the country is shoveling itself out from under snowstorms. Hey, are we lucky or what?”

As she changed lanes to pass an elderly woman in a slow-moving sedan, Jordan found herself wondering how radio newscasters and disk jockeys managed to keep talking with that upbeat, smiling cadence. To her, they all sounded like happy robots.

As though the newscaster had read her mind, he changed to a more serious tone. “This just in! Police in Inglewood have asked for your help.”

A female voice, much less polished, came on the radio. “Be on the lookout for a white male, age twenty-six, driving a dented light blue seventy-nine Chevy Malibu, license plate number two-four-five eight-eight-two. The suspect has kidnapped a small child, who is still in the car, which was last seen in the vicinity of Airport and Seventy-ninth Street. Call

nine one one if you spot the car, but do nothing else—the driver of the car is believed to be armed and dangerous.”

The cheerful announcer came back on. “And now a word from...”

But Jordan was no longer listening. A kidnapped child, she repeated silently, as she sped along the freeway. How horrible. How frightened the child must be. And the mother. The chill of remembered fear rippled through her for both of them. Even without knowing any details, Jordan imagined what the child's mother must be going through—the terror, the worry, the guilt. She would be praying now, hoping against hope that everything would turn out all right. She might also be asking herself what she could have done differently, better, sooner, so that this might not have happened to her baby.

The same questions Jordan had asked herself this past year.

“The poor woman,” she said aloud, shaking her head, so lost in remembrance that she almost missed the fact that El Segundo Boulevard was the next off ramp. “Silly woman,” she muttered, meaning herself this time. Sometimes she got so caught up in sorrowful reflection, she forgot to pay attention to what was in front of her.

She managed to steer her Land Rover to the right lane and made a smooth exit off the freeway, then turned right as she'd been directed and headed west, toward the ocean. She was on her way to the home of a woman who wanted to sell her extensive wardrobe. Some of the clothing might do well at Riches and Rags, the resale boutique where Jordan worked.

As she passed a large complex of run-down looking apartments, a car shot out of an alleyway, pulled in front of her and sped up, dark gray exhaust filling the air. At first she was too busy swerving and braking for the details of the car to register, but when they did, her heart leaped to her throat. It was a light blue Chevy Malibu, the same model she'd just heard about on the radio.

Too much of a coincidence, she told herself. That kind of thing doesn't happen.

But, on the other hand, why not? Someone would spot the car eventually and call it in. Why not her?

What had been the license number? "Twenty-four something?" she said aloud. Swallowing a small rush of fear, she stepped on the accelerator, gaining on the vehicle until she was close enough to read the rear plate. Two-four-five eight-eight-two. Was that the number they'd given on the radio? How could she be sure? And was it important that she be sure, or should she report it anyway?

The child, she reminded herself. The most important thing was the child. Jordan peered through the Chevy's rear window, but all she could see was the back of the driver's head, which seemed to be a man's. Where was the child? Was he small enough to be sitting in the passenger seat and not be seen? Was he lying on the seat? In the trunk? Dropped off somewhere already? Injured? Dead?

"No," she admonished herself. She could not afford to let her mind drift into obsessive what ifs, not with a child's life on the line. Trembling with the effort at self-control, she picked up her car phone and called 911.

After she reported what she'd seen, Jordan was thanked crisply and told to do nothing more. She was to go about her business, to cease following the car. The authorities, she was assured, would take over.

But as she disconnected the car phone, Jordan knew she couldn't do that, not yet. What if they didn't get there in time? What if they were too late to save the child? She needed to keep the Chevy in view. Just for a little while, she told herself. Until the police showed up. Without doing anything foolish or heroic, she promised herself.

Her hands gripping the steering wheel, Jordan kept her distance and followed the light blue vehicle along El Segundo for several minutes as it headed west all the way to Vista del Mar, the wide street that bordered the ocean. When it turned down a narrow road, she did, too, finding herself on a winding path that had been designed for a single car only.

She heard the whirring blades of helicopters and looked up. Several of them were ahead, flying over the shoreline. Police. Thank God. But others, too. The media were also out in full force—Channel 6 News Now! was written on the side of one.

The circus had already begun, she thought sourly. Good news for the kidnapped child—rescue was on the way. However, not good news for her. She knew that circus all too well. And it could get out of hand all too quickly.

Jordan told herself it was time to leave, to get out of everyone's way. To do that, she needed to turn around. She was headed toward a rise, over which the light blue car had just disappeared, when the sound of sirens made her stomp her foot on the brake before she reached the crest. Several police vehicles came careening behind her on the narrow path. There was no room for her to turn around or, it seemed, for anyone to pass her.

Whirring helicopter blades, honking horns, flashing lights, the incessant whine of the sirens—it was all too much to tolerate. Jordan put up all her windows, slammed the gear into Park and stayed put, having no choice. She clamped her hands over her ears. The noise. Dear lord, it was unbearable.

One police car swerved around her, siren screaming, through the dry brush on one side of her and over the hill. Another followed, doing the same thing on the passenger side. Two more pulled up behind her, and men and women came rushing out, running toward the hill, paying no attention to her.

Whatever was about to happen was out of her eyesight, as her vision was still blocked by the rise. Part of her wanted to leap out of her car and see what was going on. But, no, she told herself. What she needed to do was to stay put, keep out of the way, let the professionals do their job. As her heart beat a furious rat-a-tat-tat, Jordan remained in the same position for what seemed an eternity. Please, she prayed silently, let the child be all right. Let him survive this, so his mother doesn't have to go through the soul-destroying pain of losing him.

After a while, Jordan heard what sounded like instructions being given over a bullhorn, followed by silence—except, of course, for the noise of the whirling helicopter blades. She pressed the button to lower one window a fraction so she could hear better but remained safe in the cocoon of her car, safe for the moment from the noise and potential violence on the other side of the hill.

When she heard a male voice yelling, "Come out with your hands in the air!" Jordan tensed and waited for gunshots. But when seconds rolled by without any, she began to hope.

Then came the piercing sound of a child wailing in fear.

Jordan's clenched hands tightened. Oh, God, was the child okay? Had the man hurt him? Safety be damned. She had to leave the car, had to know!

She had turned off the ignition, unhooked her seat belt and was about to open her car door when a loud tapping on her windshield startled her. She looked up to see a man glaring at her with a stern expression on his face. He wore dark wrap-around sunglasses and was dressed in a rumpled tweed sports jacket, white shirt and loosened tie. His hand gestured for her to roll down her window.

Who was he? she wondered, a fresh wave of panic washing over her. Where had he come from? She had no idea, but she wasn't taking any chances. Pressing the door lock switch, she shook her head. She saw his mouth tighten, then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a wallet, flipped it open and showed her a badge. Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, it said. He repeated his instruction to roll down her window.

She pressed the button and lowered it a couple of inches. The man—the plainclothes policeman, she supposed he was—came over to the driver's side and said gruffly, "Excuse me, ma'am—"

"How is he?" Jordan interrupted.

The officer seemed startled. "How's who?"

"The little boy. Is he okay? Did the kidnapper harm him?"

The man stared at her, or so it seemed—it was hard to tell what went on behind those sunglasses—for a moment, then said tersely, "She's fine."

"She?" Jordan repeated. How strange, she'd been so sure the child had been a little boy. Which made sense, of course, she thought sadly, a lot of sense.

"Didn't you hear the sirens?"

Jordan glanced up, startled. The officer had been talking, and she'd been drifting again. "I'm sorry," she said. "Yes, of course I heard them."

"Then why didn't you get out of the way? You interfered with a police pursuit." She noted the hint of a New York accent, in the dropped Rs, in the way he spoke too rapidly, punching his words like fists.

"I know that," she said, trying to explain. "I'm the one who—"

"You put yourself," he interrupted her, "and the kid in danger by hanging around. What if there'd been gunfire?" His tone remained neutral, almost impersonal, but she could sense the cold anger behind it.

She was being attacked and didn't care for it in the least. "But there wasn't gunfire, was there? Besides, I couldn't get out. I mean, it all happened so fast, I was—"

"Fine, whatever," he interrupted with an impatient wave of his hand. "I could cite you for this, you know." She might not be able to see his eyes behind his dark wraparound sunglasses, but there was no missing his barely banked temper. "Why don't you get this tank of yours out of the way now, all right?"

Tank? Her top-of-the-line Land Rover? Tank? That did it!

She threw open her car door, causing the officer to step back quickly to avoid being hit. She scrambled out, slammed the door and faced him, her hands propped on her hips. He had three or four inches on her, but she looked him straight in the eye. "Listen. I don't know your name or what your rank is, but your attitude needs some work."

The details of his face were clearer. The hair was thick and dark and curly, badly in need of a trim. The sunglasses rested on a nose that was crooked and looked as if it had been broken more than once. He had olive skin, the shadow of a dark beard and a wide mouth. A scar cut across the right side of his full upper lip, now lifted in a sneer. He was older than she was but probably not yet forty.

His hands were fisted at his sides. "My attitude, as you call it, is a hell of a lot better than you deserve. Now, if you don't mind, I got work to do. Your car is blocking us and needs to get out of the way right now." More than anything, he reminded her of a boxer. Or a gangster. A thug. Not the well-

groomed, clean-cut policemen she saw around her neighborhood.

"You're blocking *me*, in case you hadn't noticed," she fired back her answer. "What do you suggest I do? Sprout wings?"

At that moment, a younger, dark-skinned man, also in a sports jacket but not appearing in the least bit unkempt, came hurrying to them. Resting a hand on the angry one's shoulder, he said, "Hey, Dom, my man, take it easy, okay?" He shifted his attention to Jordan and smiled. "Nice work, ma'am. Thanks for calling nine one one, Ms—"

"Carlisle," Jordan said, pleased to be talking to someone other than this ape for a moment. "Mrs. Carlisle. And you're welcome."

The one called Dom took in a ²breath. Obviously he'd just realized the part she'd played in the child's rescue and—she hoped—deeply regretted his bad manners.

She directed her attention to the younger one. "All I care about is that the little girl is safe."

"She is."

"May I see?"

She didn't wait for permission. Brushing past the one named Dom, she climbed the few steps to the top of the rise and surveyed the scene below.

The sparkling waters of the Pacific spread out from a rocky, weed-strewn beach. The Chevy was parked at an angle, both its passenger and driver's doors wide open. Nearby, a sobbing little girl had her arms around the neck of a uniformed female officer. A skinny man, his hair caught in a ponytail, his hands cuffed behind his back, was being led to a waiting police car.

The child was safe, Jordan thought, offering thanks and letting down the tight ~~knot~~ of inner tension she'd been sustaining. Sometimes it worked out.

Dom felt *real* stupid, and he hated feeling stupid. Jaw tight, he glared at Mrs. Carlisle's back, his gaze unconsciously raking over the slim, tall shape of her. She was about five-eight, he figured. Skinny, too, model skinny. Which meant she probably either starved herself or threw it up, the way they all did.

She had sleek, short, stylishly cut auburn hair and wore a cream-colored blouse tucked into matching pants. Silk and expensive, for sure. Earlier, when she'd sat in the car, he'd observed the thin face, the hollowed cheekbones, the designer sunglasses. Her hands on the steering wheel had been perfectly manicured; a huge rock and matching wedding ring on the third finger of her left hand, a hand that had never known a day's work. A new Rover, a state-of-the-art car phone, a cream-colored leather bag on the seat. Money. Rich bitch type, he thought, haughty and condescending.

Man, he knew the kind. Working out of West Hollywood, he was right next to Beverly Hills, and he'd had it about up to here with spoiled women whose chief complaint was that the gardener's truck was parked two inches too close to her driveway or that a homeless person had dared to actually walk down her street. In Beverly Hills he had to rein in his temper and assume the poker face he'd used today with Mrs. Carlisle. But his feeling of disgust didn't change, whatever shape his facial muscles took.

The woman turned, glanced at him (dismissively), then turned to Steve Fenoy, his partner. "Please tell your surly friend to take his bad temper out on someone else," she said in a low-pitched, husky voice. "I ought to report him."

"Go on," Dom retorted. "It won't be the first time."

"Don't tempt me."

"Dom," Steve said under his breath. "Cool it."

Dom kept glaring at Mrs. Carlisle, and she glared right back. She stood tall, her small, high breasts outlined by the silk of her blouse, her hands on her narrow hips. Some of the gold strands in her hair glinted in the late afternoon sun.

"Dom, my man," Steve warned again, and this time Dom heard him and knew his partner was right. He'd been more than rude. Hell, he'd dumped on the woman.

His excuse was he and Steve had been cruising nearby, at the tail end of an overtime shift, and Dom had been way past tired, getting onto downright exhausted, when they'd heard the APB. So they'd responded. Between the chase, the tension about the kid and the fear that a civilian would get caught in

a crossfire, he'd unloaded on the handiest thing around him—Mrs. Carlisle—before he knew he should be awarding her Good Samaritan of the Month.

Now he'd have to apologize. Damn.

He'd always hated saying he was sorry. When he was a kid and the priest or his mother would make him apologize, he usually had to punch a wall or something afterward to relieve the sense of frustration.

Okay, he told himself, he wasn't a kid anymore. He'd apologize for barking at her. But still, why *had* she hung around after calling in the sighting? She been told not to, damn it; that was SOP on 911 calls. Was she some sort of thrill seeker? Publicity hound? Most of the helicopters were from the local news teams. Even now, vans filled with reporters and cameramen were on their way, about to come screeching to a halt behind the police vehicles, which were still behind the hunter green Rover. Maybe Mrs. Carlisle got off being in the spotlight.

If she wanted the spotlight, she was about to get it.

But he still had to apologize. Get it over with quickly, he told himself. As the saying went, Just do it.

He walked up the small incline, all the while muttering a curse under his breath. When he faced her and saw her tightened mouth, he knew his volume hadn't been low enough.

He held his hands up, palms out, in a placating gesture. "Okay, listen, Mrs. Carlisle," he said gruffly. "I, uh, shouldn't have been rude like that. It was all the tension from the car chase, and I let off steam."

The woman removed her sunglasses and stared at him assessingly. A fringe of dark lashes surrounded eyes of an unusual color, a translucent light green. They struck him, somehow, as being sad eyes, old eyes. There were shadows beneath the lids that all the expensive cosmetics in the world couldn't hide. She had flawless skin and a great mouth, with a bow in the center of the full upper lip. Dom felt his stomach knot up as the realization kicked in—Mrs. Carlisle might have been a pain in the ass, but man, was she something. Not just groomed and pampered and carefully made up to look her best, but naturally, heart-stoppingly beautiful.

“Anyhow,” he went on, his voice suddenly hoarse, “I’m sorry.”

“Well... I was tense, too,” she said.

“Yeah, it gets like that.”

He shuffled his feet, not sure what to say next, but was saved from having to decide by the sound of shouts coming from below. The news media had arrived in full force. Van doors slammed. Orders were barked, cameras and microphones positioned.

Dom cursed under his breath again. “Here they come. The vultures.”

Mrs. Carlisle’s eyes followed his gaze, then they widened in horror. “Reporters? Oh, no!” As she shook her head, he sensed panic emanating from her in waves.

“What’s the matter?”

Instead of answering him, she ran down the hill toward her vehicle. He followed, heard her say, “I have to get out of here.” She turned and gazed at him, her hands clasped together tightly against her chest. “I don’t want anyone to know I’m here. Please. I need to get out of here, but I’m blocked in.”

Dom studied her for a moment, but there was no reason to doubt her. There was real anxiety there, like the fear of a cornered animal. Why? he wondered, but there was no time to dwell on his question. He made a quick decision. Hell, he owed it to her.

“Steve,” he said briskly, ushering the lady to the passenger side, “tell the guys to keep Mrs. Carlisle’s name out of it as long as possible. Do what you can. I’m taking the lady home.” He opened the door and said, “Get in. I’m driving.”

“But—” She seemed confused.

“You want to get out of here? I’ll make it happen. Got it?” With no further hesitation, she got in. He slammed her door and hurried to the driver’s side. “I’ll call in later for a ride,” he told Steve as he slid into the seat.

“But how will you—” the woman asked.

“Seat belts,” he said, buckling his. “Leave it to me.”

He gunned the exquisite machine, expertly maneuvered it between two police vehicles, then headed up and over the hill