
Best Kept
SECRETS

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SANDRA BROWN

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By Sandra Brown

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It wasn't so much the cockroach that made her scream as the chipped fingernail. The cockroach was small. The chip was a dilly. On her manicured nail it looked as deep and jagged as the Grand Canyon.

Alex swatted at the cockroach with the laminated card that displayed the motel's limited room service menu. The reverse side advertised the Friday night Mexican buffet and The Four Riders, a country and western band currently performing in the Silver Spur Lounge nightly from seven till midnight.

Her swipe at the cockroach missed by a mile and it scuttled for cover behind the wood veneer dresser. "I'll get you later."

She found a nail file in the bottom of the cosmetic case she had been about to unpack when the metal clasp had wrecked her fingernail and the cockroach had come out to inspect the new tenant of room 125. The room was located on the ground floor of the Westerner Motel, three doors down from the ice and vending machines.

Once the nail had been repaired, Alex gave herself one last, critical look in the dresser mirror. It was important that she make a stunning first impression. They would be astonished

when she told them who she was, but she wanted to create an even stronger impact.

She wanted to leave them stupefied, speechless, and defenseless.

They would undoubtedly make comparisons. She couldn't prevent that; she just didn't want to come out on the short end of their mental measuring sticks. If she could help it, they would find no flaws in Celina Gaither's daughter.

She had carefully chosen what to wear. Everything—clothes, jewelry, accessories—was in excellent taste. The overall effect was tailored but not severe, smart but not trendy; she exuded an aura of professionalism that didn't compromise her femininity.

Her goal was to impress them first, then surprise them with what had brought her to Purcell.

Until a few weeks ago, the town of thirty thousand had been a lonely dot on the Texas map. As many jackrabbits and horned toads lived there as people. Recently, town business interests had generated news, but on a comparatively small scale. By the time Alex's job was done, she was certain Purcell would capture newspaper headlines from El Paso to Texarkana.

Concluding that nothing about her appearance could be improved upon short of an act of God or very expensive plastic surgery, she shouldered her handbag, picked up her eel attaché case, and, making certain she had her room key, closed the door to room 125 behind her.

During the drive downtown, Alex had to creep through two school zones. Rush hour in Purcell began when school dismissed. Parents transported their children from school to dentists' offices, piano lessons, and shopping centers. Some might even have been going home, but the sluggish traffic and clogged intersections indicated that no one was staying indoors that day. She didn't actually mind the stop-and-go traffic. The delays gave her an opportunity to gauge the personality of the town.

Black and gold streamers fluttered from the marquee outside Purcell High School. The caricature of a black panther snarled at the passing cars on the highway and temporary letters spelled out POUNCE PERMIAN. On the field inside the stadium, the football team was working out and running plays. The marching band, its instruments flashing in the sun, was rehearsing Friday night's halftime show on a practice field.

The activity looked so innocent. For a moment, Alex regretted her mission and what its outcome would most likely mean for the community. She dismissed her guilty feelings quickly, however, when she reminded herself why she was here. A harvest of rejection, as well as her grandmother's harsh accusations, were stored in her mind if she ever, even for a second, forgot what had brought her to this point in her life. She could ill afford the slightest sentimental regrets.

Downtown Purcell was almost deserted. Many of the commercial buildings and offices facing the square were closed and barred. Foreclosure signs were too plentiful to count.

Graffiti was scrawled across plate-glass windows that had once been filled with enticing merchandise. There was still a hand-lettered sign on the door of a deserted laundry. Someone had scratched out the *r*, so that the sign now read, 3 SHI TS/\$1.00. It crudely summed up the economic climate in Purcell County.

She parked in front of the county courthouse and fed coins into the meter at the curb. The courthouse had been built of red granite quarried in the hill country and hauled by rail to Purcell ninety years earlier. Italian stonecutters had carved pretentious gargoyles and griffins in every available spot as if the amount of decoration justified the expense of their commission. The results were ostentatious, but gaudiness was one of the edifice's attractions. Atop its dome the national and Texas state flags flapped in the brisk north wind.

Having worked in and about the state capitol of Austin for the last year, Alex wasn't intimidated by official buildings. She took the courthouse steps with a determined stride and pulled

open the heavy doors. Inside, the plaster walls showed peeling paint and signs of general disrepair. The aggregate tile floor had faint cracks in it that crisscrossed like the lines in the palm of an ancient hand.

The ceiling was high. The drafty corridors smelled of musty record books, industrial-strength cleaning solution, and an overdose of perfume that emanated from the district attorney's secretary. She looked up expectantly as Alex entered the outer office.

"Hi, there. You lost, honey? I love your hair. Wish I could wear mine pulled back in a bun like that. You have to have real tiny ears. Wouldn't you know it, I've got jug handles sticking out from the sides of my head. Do you put henna on it to give it those reddish highlights?"

"Is this District Attorney Chastain's office?"

"Sure is, honey. Whatcha need him for? He's kinda busy today."

"I'm from the Travis County D.A.'s office. Mr. Harper called on my behalf, I believe."

The wad of chewing gum inside the secretary's cheek got a rest from the pounding it had been taking. "You? We were expecting a man."

"As you can see . . ." Alex held her arms out at her sides.

The secretary looked vexed. "You'd think Mr. Harper would have mentioned that his assistant was a lady, not a man, but shoot," she said, flipping her hand down from a limp wrist, "you know how men are. Well, honey, you're right on time for your appointment. My name's Imogene. Want some coffee? That's a gorgeous outfit, so high-fashion. They're wearing skirts shorter these days, aren't they?"

At the risk of sounding rude, Alex asked, "Are the parties here yet?"

Just then, masculine laughter erupted from the other side of the closed door. "That answer your question, honey?" Imogene asked Alex. "Somebody prob'ly just told a dirty joke to let off

steam. They're just bustin' a gut to know what this hush-hush meeting is all about. What's the big secret? Mr. Harper didn't tell Pat why you were coming to Purcell, even though they were friends in law school. Is it something to do with ME getting that gambling license?"

"ME?"

"Minton Enterprises." She said it as though she was surprised Alex was not familiar with the name.

"Perhaps I shouldn't keep them waiting any longer," Alex suggested tactfully, sidestepping Imogene's question.

"Shoot, just listen to me running off at the mouth. Did you say you wanted some coffee, honey?"

"No, thank you." Alex followed Imogene toward the door. Her heart started beating double-time.

"Excuse me." Imogene interrupted the conversation by poking her head into the room. "District Attorney Harper's assistant is here. Y'all sure are in for a treat." She turned back toward Alex. One set of eyelashes, gummy with navy blue mascara, dropped over her eye in a broad, just-between-us-girls wink. "Go on in, honey."

Alex, bracing herself for the most crucial meeting in her life, entered the office.

It was obvious from the relaxed atmosphere that the men in the room had been expecting another man. The moment she crossed the threshold and Imogene pulled the transomed door closed, the man seated behind the desk sprang to his feet. He ground out a burning cigar in the thick, glass ashtray and reached for his suit coat, which had been draped over the back of his chair.

"Pat Chastain," he said, extending his hand. "'Treat' is an understatement. But then, my good buddy Greg Harper always did have an eye for the ladies. Doesn't surprise me a bit that he's got a good-lookin' woman on his staff."

His sexist remark set her teeth on edge, but she let it slide. She inclined her head in acknowledgment of Chastain's com-

pliment. The hand she clasped in a firm handshake was so loaded down with gold-nugget jewelry it could have anchored a fair-sized yacht. "Thank you for arranging this meeting, Mr. Chastain."

"No problem, no problem. Glad to be of service to both you and Greg. And call me Pat." Taking her elbow, he turned her toward the other two men, who had come to their feet out of deference to her. "This here is Mr. Angus Minton and his son, Junior."

"Gentlemen." Confronting them, meeting them eye to eye for the first time, had a strange and powerful impact on her. Curiosity and antipathy warred inside her. She wanted to analyze them, denounce them. Instead, she behaved in the expected civilized manner and extended her hand.

It was clasped by one studded with calluses. The handshake bordered on being too hard, but it was as open and friendly as the face smiling at her.

"A pleasure, ma'am. Welcome to Purcell County."

Angus Minton's face was tanned and weathered, ravaged by blistering summer sun, frigid blue northers, and years of outdoor work. Intelligent blue eyes twinkled at her from sockets radiating lines of friendliness. He had a boisterous voice. Alex guessed that his laugh would be as expansive as his broad chest and the beer belly that was his only sign of indulgence. Otherwise, he seemed physically fit and strong. Even a younger, larger man would be loath to pick a fight with him because of his commanding presence. For all his strength, he looked as guileless as an altar boy.

His son's handshake was softer, but no less hearty or friendly. He enfolded Alex's hand warmly, and in a confidence-inspiring voice, said, "I'm Junior Minton. How do you do?"

"How do you do?"

He didn't look his forty-three years, especially when he smiled. His straight white teeth flashed and a devilish dimple cratered one cheek, suggesting that he behaved no better than any given occasion called for him to. His blue eyes, a shade

deeper than his father's but just as mischievous, held hers long enough to intimate that they were the only two in the room who mattered. She withdrew her hand before Junior Minton seemed ready to relinquish it.

"And over yonder is Reede, Reede Lambert."

Alex turned in the direction Pat Chastain had indicated and located the fourth man, whom she hadn't noticed until now. Flaunting etiquette, he was still slouched in a chair in the corner of the room. Scuffed cowboy boots were crossed at the ankles, their toes pointing ceilingward and insolently wagging back and forth. His hands were loosely folded over a western belt buckle. He unlinked them long enough to raise two fingers to the brim of a cowboy hat. "Ma'am."

"Mr. Lambert," she said coolly.

"Here, sit yourself down," Chastain offered, pointing her toward a chair. "Did Imogene offer you some coffee?"

"Yes, but I told her I didn't care for any. I'd like to get to the purpose of the meeting, if we could."

"Sure enough. Junior, pull that other chair over here. Angus." Chastain nodded for the older man to sit back down. When everyone was reseated, the district attorney returned to his chair behind the desk. "Now, Miss— Well, I'll be damned. During all the introductions, we failed to get your name."

Alex held center stage. Four pairs of eyes were trained on her, curiously waiting to hear her name. She paused for dramatic effect, knowing that divulging it would cause a profound reaction. She wanted to witness and catalog their individual reactions. She wished she could see Reede Lambert better. He was sitting partially behind her, and the cowboy hat hid all but the lowest portion of his face.

She took a breath. "I'm Alexandra Gaither, Celina's daughter."

A stunned silence followed the announcement.

Pat Chastain, befuddled, finally asked, "Who's Celina Gaither?"

"Well, I'll be a sonofabitch." Angus flopped backward in his chair like a collapsing inflatable toy.

"Celina's daughter. My God, I can't believe it," Junior whispered. "I can't believe it."

"Somebody want to fill me in, please?" Pat said, still confused. Nobody paid him any attention.

The Mintons openly stared at Alex, searching her face for resemblances to her mother, whom they had known so well. From the corner of her eye, she noticed that the toes of Lambert's boots were no longer wagging. He drew his knees in and sat up straight.

"What on earth have you been doing with yourself all these years?" Angus asked.

"How many years has it been?" Junior wanted to know.

"Twenty-five," Alex answered precisely. "I was only two months old when Grandma Graham moved away from here."

"How is your grandma?"

"She's currently in a Waco nursing home, dying of cancer, Mr. Minton." Alex saw no merit in sparing their sensibilities. "She's in a coma."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you."

"Where have y'all been living all this time?"

Alex named a town in central Texas. "We lived there all my life—at least, as far back as I can remember. I graduated high school there, went to the University of Texas, and then, straight into law school. I passed the bar a year ago."

"Law school. Imagine that. Well, you turned out fine, Alexandra, just fine. Didn't she, Junior?"

Junior Minton turned on his charming smile full blast. "I'd say so. You don't look a thing like you did last time I saw you," he told her teasingly. "Best as I recall, your diaper was wet and you didn't have a single hair on your head."

Considering the reason for this prearranged meeting, his flirting made Alex uneasy. She was glad when Pat Chastain in-

tervened again. "I hate to butt into such a touching reunion, but I'm still in the dark."

Angus enlightened him. "Celina was a classmate of Junior's and Reede's. They were best friends, actually. Rarely did you see one of them without the other two when they were in high school. Crazy kids."

Then, his blue eyes turned cloudy and he shook his head sorrowfully. "Celina died. Tragic thing." He took a quiet moment to collect himself. "Anyway, this is the first time we've heard a word about Alexandra since her grandma, Celina's mother, moved away with her." Smiling, he slapped his thighs. "Damned if it's not great to have you back in Purcell."

"Thank you, but—" Alex opened her briefcase and took out a manila envelope. "I'm not back to stay, Mr. Minton. Actually, I'm acting in an official capacity." She passed the envelope across the desk to the district attorney, who looked at it with puzzlement.

"Official capacity? When Greg called me and asked if I'd help out his top prosecutor, he said something about reopening a case."

"It's all in there," Alex said, nodding down at the envelope. "I suggest that you peruse the contents and thoroughly acquaint yourself with the details. Greg Harper requests the full cooperation and assistance of your office and local law enforcement agencies, Mr. Chastain. He assured me that you would comply with this request for the duration of my investigation." She closed her attaché with a decisive snap, stood, and headed for the door.

"Investigation?" District Attorney Chastain came to his feet. The Mintons did likewise.

"Are you working with the Racing Commission?" Angus asked. "We were told we'd be carefully scrutinized before they granted us a gambling license, but I thought we had already passed muster."

"I thought it was all over except for the formalities," Junior said.

"As far as I know, it is," Alex told them. "My investigation has nothing to do with the Racing Commission, or the granting of your horse-racing license."

After a moment, when she didn't elaborate, Chastain asked, "Well, then, what *does* it have to do with, Miss Gaither?"

Drawing herself up to her full height, she said, "I am reopening a twenty-five-year-old murder case. Greg Harper asked for your help, Mr. Chastain, since the crime was committed in Purcell County."

She looked into Angus's eyes, then into Junior's. Finally, she stared down hard at the crown of Reede Lambert's hat. "Before I'm finished, I'm going to know which one of you killed my mother."

Alex peeled off her suit jacket and tossed it onto the motel bed. Her underarms were damp and her knees were ready to buckle. She was nauseated. The scene in the D.A.'s office had shaken her more than she wanted to admit.

She had left Pat Chastain's office with her head held high and her shoulders back. She hadn't walked too fast, but she hadn't dawdled. She had smiled good-bye to Imogene, who had obviously been eavesdropping through the door because she stared at Alex bug-eyed, her mouth agape.

Alex's exit line had been well rehearsed, well timed and perfectly executed. The meeting had gone just as she had planned it, but she was vastly relieved that it was over.

Now, she peeled off one cloying piece of clothing after another. She would love to think that the worst was behind her, but she feared it was yet to come. The three men she had met today wouldn't roll over and play dead. She would have to confront them again, and when she did, they wouldn't be so overjoyed to see her.

Angus Minton seemed as full of goodwill as Santa Claus, but Alex knew that nobody in Angus's position could be as harmless

as he tried to pretend. He was the richest, most powerful man in the county. One didn't achieve that status solely through benign leadership. He would fight to keep what he'd spent a lifetime cultivating.

Junior was a charmer who knew his way around women. The years had been kind to him. He'd changed little from the photographs Alex had seen of him as an adolescent. She also knew that he used his good looks to his advantage. It would be easy for her to like him. It would also be easy to suspect him of murder.

Reede Lambert was the toughest for her to pigeonhole because her impressions of him were the least specific. Unlike the others, she hadn't been able to look him in the eye. Reede the man looked much harder and stronger than Reede the boy from her grandma's picture box. Her first impression was that he was sullen, unfriendly, and dangerous.

She was certain that one of these men had killed her mother.

Celina Gaither had not been murdered by the accused, Buddy Hicks. Her grandmother, Merle Graham, had drummed that into little Alex's head like a catechism all her life.

"It'll be up to you, Alexandra, to set the record right," Merle had told her almost daily. "That's the least you can do for your mother." At that point she usually glanced wistfully at one of the many framed photographs of her late daughter scattered throughout the house. Looking at the photographs would invariably make her cry, and nothing her granddaughter did could cheer her.

Until a few weeks ago, however, Alex hadn't known who Merle suspected of killing Celina. Finding out had been the darkest hour of Alex's life.

Responding to an urgent call from the nursing home doctor, she had sped up the interstate to Waco. The facility was quiet, immaculate, and staffed by caring professionals. Merle's lifetime pension from the telephone company made it affordable. For all its amenities, it still had the grey smell of old age; despair and decay permeated its corridors.

When she had arrived that cold, dismal, rainy afternoon, Alex had been told that her grandmother was in critical condition. She entered the hushed private room and moved toward the hospital bed. Merle's body had visibly deteriorated since Alex had visited only the week before. But her eyes were as alive as Fourth of July sparklers. Their glitter, however, was hostile.

"Don't come in here," Merle rasped on a shallow breath. "I don't want to see you. It's because of you!"

"What, Grandma?" Alex asked in dismay. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't want you here."

Embarrassed by the blatant rejection, Alex had glanced around at the attending physician and nurses. They shrugged their incomprehension. "Why don't you want to see me? I've come all the way from Austin."

"It's your fault she died, you know. If it hadn't been for you . . ." Merle moaned with pain and clutched her sheet with sticklike, bloodless fingers.

"Mother? You're saying I'm responsible for Mother's death?"

Merle's eyes popped open. "Yes," she hissed viciously.

"But I was just a baby, an infant," Alex argued, desperately wetting her lips. "How could I—"

"Ask them."

"Who, Grandma? Ask who?"

"The one who murdered her. Angus, Junior, Reede. But it was you . . . you . . . you . . ."

Alex had to be led from the room by the doctor several minutes after Merle lapsed into a deep coma. The ugly accusation had petrified her; it reverberated in her brain and assaulted her soul.

If Merle held Alex responsible for Celina's death, so much of Alex's upbringing could be explained. She had always wondered why Grandma Graham was never very affectionate with her. No matter how remarkable Alex's achievements, they were never