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SUSPENSE
RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

DAUGHTER OF TEXAS

TERRI REED



TEXAS RANGER JUSTICE

It was up to him to protect and help Corinna Pike.

Tucking her small frame against his side, he led her away from the scene of the crime.

She'd been a gawky kid with a mouth full of braces and an attitude of superiority that had grated on Ben when he'd first met her. He'd watched her transform into a Texas Rose—beautiful, poised aloof and way off-limits.

At least, for a girl like him.

Now Corinna was an orphan. Something they had in common. Ben gathered Corinna's hands in his. He'd walk through this with her every step of the way. But first he had to know what had happened.

TEXAS RANGER JUSTICE: Keeping the Lone Star State safe.

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Love Comes Home

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Giving Thanks for Baby

Treasure Creek Dad

TERRI REED

At an early age Terri Reed discovered the wonderful world of fiction and declared she would one day write a book. Now she is fulfilling that dream and enjoys writing for Steeple Hill. Her second book, *A Sheltering Love*, was a 2006 RITA® Award Finalist and a 2005 National Readers' Choice Award Finalist. Her book *Strictly Confidential*, book five of the Faith at the Crossroads continuity series, took third place in the 2007 American Christian Fiction Writers Book of the Year Award, and *Her Christmas Protector* took third place in 2008. She is an active member of both Romance Writers of America and American Christian Fiction Writers. She resides in the Pacific Northwest with her college-sweetheart husband, two wonderful children and an array of critters. When not writing, she enjoys spending time with her family and friends, gardening and playing with her dogs.

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DAUGHTER OF TEXAS TERRI REED



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DAUGHTER OF TEXAS

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Delight yourself in the Lord, and He shall give you
the desires of your heart.

—*Psalms 37:4*



Writing is never done in a vacuum.

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ONE

The Ranger creed: "No man in the wrong can stand up against a fellow that's in the right and keeps on a-comin'."

Corinna Pike froze on the unlit front porch of her family's ranch home. Gunfire had come from within the house!

Her startled gaze shot to her father's Crown Victoria parked in the driveway. Her father, the only person she had left in the world, was inside the house.

Terror crashed through her like a runaway freight train.

She exploded into motion, but the front door was locked. She dropped her dance bag, fumbled with her house key, jammed it in the lock and pushed the door open so hard it bounced back from the wall.

"Dad!" she yelled at the top of her lungs.

A chill of dread that had nothing to do with the drop in the late September evening temperature skated across her flesh.

Corinna raced through the darkened hallway of the sprawling, single-story house toward the crack of light

coming from beneath her father's study door. As the daughter of a Texas Ranger, running to gunfire was in her blood.

She skidded to a halt and reached for the study's doorknob and flung open the door. The light in the study winked out, throwing the world around her into pitch blackness. A loud feline screech, followed by eighteen pounds of fleeing cat slamming into her legs, made Corinna lurch back.

Before she could even think of shouting out in surprise at her deranged tabby, an explosion of noise erupted. A bright flash of light scalded her eyes. Her ears rang. Something hot sliced across her bare biceps. Searing pain brought tears to her eyes. She'd been shot!

She instinctively dropped to the floor, her hands covering her head. No more bullets came her way. Instead, she heard the patio doors fly open and the sound of running feet leaving the scene.

Around her, the house settled into a stark silence where only the rasp of her own breathing echoed in her ears. The acrid smell of gunpowder permeating the air almost obliterated the coppery scent of blood assaulting her senses.

The moon's light spilled into the study through the open patio doors outlining the desk. Staying low, she edged along the wall toward it. Using the desk as cover, she reached for the lamp with her right hand and winced with pain at the effort to raise her injured arm. Switching to her uninjured arm, she flipped the control knob. Soft light made her blink as she adjusted to the brightness. Cautiously, she peered out into the room.

She didn't see anyone ready to take another shot at her, but the sight before her was even more horrifying.

Her gaze landed on her father sprawled across the thick wool rug in front of his cherrywood desk. Everything inside her recoiled. Her mind tried to process what she saw, her feet felt rooted in place.

Her father's service weapon lay beside him. Blood oozed from a gunshot wound in his chest just below the Texas Ranger badge pinned to his plaid flannel shirt, soaking the beige carpet beneath him a deep crimson red.

Her wild gaze swept the room again looking for a threat and landed on an unfamiliar man's prone body. He had a similar wound in his abdomen. The man, mid-thirties and looking very much out of place with his dirty clothes and matted dark hair, lay very still.

She didn't see a weapon in his hand.

Crying out in anguish, Corinna crawled as best she could with one arm to her father's side. "Please, don't let him be dead."

A high keening noise filled the room. Vaguely aware the sound came from her, she reached a shaky hand to his neck and pressed her fingers to the spot where a pulse should beat. Nothing.

Agony trapped her breath in her lungs. She fell forward, her head coming to rest on her father's broad shoulder. First her mother, now her father. The two people she loved most in the world both taken from her. Her mother by sickness, her father...murdered.

How could God let this happen?

Forcing herself to move, to assess the situation, she asked herself, What would her father do?

She scrambled over to the other man and checked for a pulse. Beneath her fingers she felt the faint beat of his heart.

Quickly, and without regard to her own pain, she ripped off her navy sweatshirt with the orange-and-white roadrunner logo of the University of Texas, San Antonio. She pressed the wadded-up material against the man's wound to stem the flow of blood seeping from his abdomen.

She needed help. She ran to the credenza and grabbed the cordless phone with the hand of her uninjured side.

A cat yowled to her left.

Corinna jumped at Gabby's unexpected cry, her heart still racing from being shot at, her breath stalled in her chest. The orange tabby stood on the threshold of the open double French doors leading to the back patio. Corinna breathed a sigh of relief. If it hadn't been for Gabby's forceful exit just minutes ago, Corinna might be dead.

In the distance the sound of an engine turned over, roared and then faded away. The killer getting away. Returning to the stranger's side to press the hand of her wounded arm on the bunched-up sweatshirt, she dialed 911 with her other hand. Her gaze shifted back to her father.

A sob caught in her throat. Now she was truly alone in the world.

Texas Ranger Ben Fritz threw his Jeep into park on the curving, graveled driveway of the ranch behind the

small compact car belonging to Corinna, Captain Pike's daughter.

Gut churning, Ben glanced once more at the cryptic text message he'd received on his cell phone from his boss, Texas Ranger Captain Gregory Pike, only twenty minutes ago.

CONVENE AT MY HOUSE, ASAP. MAJOR CASE ABOUT TO EXPLODE.

What was Greg working on that was so volatile?

No way would he call the Rangers to his house for a case with his adult daughter in attendance. Greg had kept his private life as isolated from his job as possible.

When he'd first received the text, Ben had been bothered that Greg had kept a case from him. But his annoyance evaporated. Something weird was going on and Greg had reached out to him. Apprehension slithered down Ben's spine like a rattler on the loose as he jumped out of his Jeep.

Lights from the cars of other Rangers, the elite law enforcement agency unique to Texas, cut through the twilight, illuminating the front of the Pike house, an expansive L-shaped place set back from the road. The circular driveway wrapped around a grassy area with a magnolia tree, a cedar bench, and a few small bushes that would flower in the spring.

Obviously, all the Rangers of Company D had received Greg's text. This was serious.

Oliver Drew climbed out of his 4x4, the red paint barely visible beneath a thick layer of grime and dust. Ben paused to wait for the half Native-American Ranger. He sported his usual leather vest over a long-sleeve white button-down, jeans and scuffed boots.

Tall, well-built and oozing with charm, Daniel Boone Riley adjusted his standard issue white cowboy hat over his dark hair as he stepped from his truck. His eyes were troubled as they met Ben's gaze.

More vehicles barreled down the drive and halted, stacked end to end like slot cars ready for the races. Cade Jarvis, Trevor Donovan, Marvel Jones, Levi McDonnell and Gisella Hernandez, the lone female of their company, got out of their vehicles and joined Ben. Only two were missing, Anderson Michaels and Evan Chen. Evan was on assignment over in Corpus Christie and would no doubt check in. And Ben knew Anderson would arrive as soon as possible from wherever he was.

It was the Ranger way to drop whatever they were doing to answer the call. Ben had been grocery shopping. He'd abandoned his cart in the middle of the produce aisle.

"Any idea what this is about?" Oliver asked.

"None." Ben started toward the front porch.

"What case was the captain working?" asked Gisella, falling in step behind Ben.

"Don't know," Daniel replied.

Ben stopped in his tracks. Since the porch light wasn't on, he hadn't noticed that the front door stood wide open. The hairs on the back of his neck rose in alert. He held up a hand to halt his fellow Rangers. He pointed at the open door.

Cade tapped Levi on the shoulder. "We'll take the back," Cade said in a low voice as he unholstered his weapon from his belt.

The wail of a siren punctuated the air, intensifying the unease gripping Ben. He motioned for the others to

follow as he drew his sidearm. They entered the house in standard two-by-two formation. Ben directed Gisella and Oliver to peel off toward the unlit living room, while he motioned for Daniel and Marvel to head down the darkened hall toward the bedrooms. Then Ben, with Trevor at his back, moved toward the only lit room. Greg's study.

The scene that met them rocked Ben back on his heels. Horror filled his senses as he tried to process what he was seeing.

Greg, his mentor and friend, lay on the floor. Blood pooled around him. Another man, also shot, was sprawled a few feet away. Greg's daughter, dressed in loose sweatpants and a pale purple leotard covered in blood, sat beside the man, her knees drawn to her chest, her head bowed so that only one side of her pale face was visible. One hand pressed a wad of material to his wound. A black cordless phone dangled from the other.

Acting on instinct and training, Ben quickly searched for the unidentified man's weapon. And found none. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, Ben picked up Greg's weapon and sniffed the end. He frowned. The gun hadn't been fired recently.

Obviously, this wasn't a Western-style shoot-out. Whoever had fired the fatal shots was gone, along with the murder weapon.

Cade and Levi entered through the open patio doors. A hiss of surprise came from Gisella as she stepped up behind Ben. More shocked exclamations followed as the Rangers slipped carefully into the room.

Ben went to Greg and squatted down to check his

pulse. Grief sucked the air from his body. He looked at his comrades and shook his head.

"This one's still breathing," Cade said as he checked the pulse of the other man.

Ben shoved his own anguish aside to be dealt with later and focused on Corinna. By profession, Corinna was a prima ballerina with the San Antonio Ballet Company, like her mother before her. Amanda Pike had died of breast cancer when Corinna was young, not long before Ben had met Greg.

He moved closer and touched her shoulder. She flinched. A knot formed in his gut. She looked so small and vulnerable.

Had she witnessed her father's murder? Fresh sorrow and compassion tightened his chest. Protective instincts rose despite the antagonism that had always sparked between them. He wanted to shield this fragile ballerina from the harsh reality of her father's death.

The sound of booted feet brought Ben's gaze around. Sheriff Karl Layton, a tall man with shocking white hair and chiseled features pushed his way into the room. Layton inclined his head, his question clear. *Was Pike alive?*

Ben shook his head as another wave of grief flowed through him. Layton blew out a breath and tears misted the older man's eyes. Greg and Karl had been close friends from way back.

Layton swiped a hand over his face. "Dispatch relayed the 911 call."

The sound of an ambulance arriving let Ben know they only had a few minutes to collect information before the body was remanded to the local police force. His

gut twisted with grief. Greg wasn't just any body. He'd been a father figure to Ben for more than a decade.

Shifting his focus from Greg, Ben said to his men, "Work the scene. Get the SAPD crime response unit in here pronto while the evidence is still fresh."

"Already made the call," Cade replied, his normally tanned skin ashen.

Gently, Ben took the phone from Corinna's hand and passed it to Oliver. Her skin was pasty white; her dark hair had loosened from her normally severe bun. And her dark eyes were glassy as she stared off into space. Taking Corinna's shoulders in his hands, he pulled her to her feet. She didn't resist. Ben figured shock was setting in.

When she turned to face toward him, his heart contracted painfully in his chest. "You're hurt!"

She didn't seem to hear him.

Blood seeped from a scrape on her right upper biceps. He inspected the wound. Looked like a bullet had grazed her. Whoever had killed her father had tried to kill her. With aching ferocity, rage roared through Ben. "Get the paramedics."

"On it." Cade pivoted to disappear out the door. A moment later, he returned with one of the emergency personnel in tow while the rest rushed by to help the injured man.

"Excuse me, sir," the young blond man said to Ben. "Let me take a look at her injury."

Ben stepped back but held firmly to her slender hand.

"It's a surface wound that will probably leave a small scar," the paramedic stated as he placed a bandage over

the gash. "The heat of the bullet cauterized the flesh. It will heal quickly enough."

But Ben had a feeling that her heart wouldn't heal anytime soon. She'd adored her father. That had been apparent from the moment Ben stepped foot into the Pike world. She'd barely tolerated Ben from the get-go with her icy stares and brusque manner, making it clear she thought him not good enough to be in her world. But when it came to her father...

Greg had known that if anything happened to him, she'd need help coping with the loss and ensuing devastation.

"Ben, I need you to promise me if anything ever happens to me, you'll watch out for Corinna. She'll need an anchor. I fear she's too fragile to suffer another death."

Of course Ben had promised. Though he'd refused to even allow the thought that any harm would befall his mentor and friend to form. He'd wanted to believe Greg was indestructible. But he wasn't. None of them were.

The Rangers were human and very mortal, performing a risky job that put their lives on the line every day.

Never before had Ben been so acutely aware of that fact.

Now his captain was gone. It was up to him to not only bring Greg's murderer to justice, but to protect and help Corinna.

Tucking her small frame against his side, he led her away from the scene of the crime and into the living