

Sugar Daddy

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

When I was four, my father died in an oil-rig accident. Daddy didn't even work for the drilling outfit. He was a company man who wore a suit and tie when he went to inspect the production and drilling platforms. But one day he stumbled on an opening in the rig floor before setup was completed. He fell sixty feet to the platform below and died instantly, his neck broken.

It took me a long time to understand Daddy was never coming back. I waited for him for months, sitting at the front window of our house in Katy, just west of Houston.

Some days I stood at the end of the driveway to watch every car that passed. No matter how often Mama told me to quit looking for him, I couldn't give up. I guess I thought the strength of my wanting would be enough to make him appear.

I have only a handful of memories of my father, more like impressions. He must have carried me on his shoulders a time or two—I remember the hard plane of his chest beneath my calves, the sensation of swaying high in the air, anchored by the strong pressure of his fingers around my ankles. And the coarse drifts of his hair in my hands, shiny black hair cut in layers. I can almost hear his voice singing “*Arriba del Cielo*,” a Mexican lullaby that always gave me sweet dreams.

There is a framed photograph of Daddy on my dresser, the only one I have. He's wearing a Western dress shirt and jeans with creases pressed down the front, and a tooled leather belt with a silver and turquoise buckle the size of a breakfast plate. A little smile lingers in one corner of his mouth, and a dimple punctuates the smoothness of his swarthy cheek. By all accounts he was a smart man, a romantic, a hard worker with high-carat ambitions. I believe he would have accomplished great things in his life if he'd been given the gift of more years. I know so little about my father, but I'm certain he loved me. I can feel it even in those little wisps of memory.

Mama never found another man to replace Daddy. Or maybe it's more accurate to say she found a lot of men to replace him. But hardly any of them stayed around for long. She was a beautiful woman, if not a happy one, and attracting a man was never a problem. Keeping one, however, was a different matter. By the time I was thirteen, Mama had gone through more boyfriends than I could keep track of. It was sort of a relief when she found one she decided she could stick with for a while.

They agreed they would move in together, in the east Texas town of Welcome, not far from where he'd grown up. As it turned out, Welcome was where I lost everything, and gained everything. Welcome

was the place where my life was guided from one track to another, sending me to places I'd never thought of going.

On my first day at the trailer park, I wandered along a dead-end road that cut between rows of trailers lined up like piano keys. The park was a dusty grid of dead-end streets, with a newly built loop that circled around the left side. Each home sat on its own concrete pad, dressed in a skirt made of aluminum or wooden latticework. A few trailers were fronted by patches of yard, some featuring crape myrtle with blossoms crisped a pale brown and the bark shredded from the heat.

The late afternoon sun was as round and white as a paper plate tacked to the sky. Heat seemed to come equally from below as above, uncurling in visible waves from the cracked ground. Time moved at a crawl in Welcome, where people considered anything needing to be done in a hurry wasn't worth doing. Dogs and cats spent most of the day sleeping in the hot shade, rousing only to lap a few tepid drops from the water hookups. Even the flies were slow.

An envelope containing a check crackled in the pocket of my denim cutoffs. Mama had told me to take it to the manager of Bluebonnet Ranch, Mr. Louis Sadlek, who lived at the redbrick house near the entrance of the trailer park.

My feet felt like they'd been steamed inside my shoes as I shuffled along the broken edges of asphalt. I saw a pair of older boys standing with a teenage girl, their postures relaxed and loose-limbed. The girl had a long blond ponytail with a ball of hair-sprayed bangs in the front. Her deep tan was exposed by short shorts and a tiny purple bikini top, which explained why the boys were so absorbed in conversation with her.

One of the boys was dressed in shorts and a tank top, while the other, dark-haired one wore a weathered pair of Wranglers and dirt-caked Roper boots. He stood with his weight shifted to one leg, one thumb hooked in a denim pocket, his free hand gesturing as he talked.

There was something striking about his slim, rawboned form, the hard edge of his profile. His vitality was almost jarring in those heat-drowsed surroundings.

Although Texans of all ages are naturally sociable and call out to strangers without hesitation, it was obvious I was going to walk by this trio unnoticed. That was just fine with me.

But as I walked quietly along the other side of the lane, I was startled by an explosion of noise and movement. Rearing back, I was set upon by what appeared to be a pair of rabid pit bulls. They barked and snarled and peeled their lips back to reveal jagged yellow teeth. I had never been scared of dogs, but these two were obviously out for the kill.

My instincts took over, and I spun to escape. The bald soles of my old sneakers slipped on a scattering of pebbles, my feet went out from under me, and I hit the ground on my hands and knees. I let out a scream and covered my head with my arms, fully expecting to be torn to pieces. But there was the sound of an angry voice over the blood rush in my ears, and instead of teeth closing over my flesh, I felt a pair of strong hands take hold of me.

I yelped as I was turned over to look up into the face of the dark-haired boy. He gave me a swift assessing glance and turned to yell some more at the pit bulls. The dogs had retreated a few yards, their barking fading to peevish snarls.

“Go on, damn it,” the boy snapped at them. “Get your hindquarters back home and stop scaring people, you sorry pair of sh—” He checked himself and darted a quick glance at me.

The pit bulls quieted and slunk backward in a startling change of mood, pink tongues dangling like the half-curved ribbons of party balloons.

My rescuer viewed them with disgust and spoke to the boy in the tank top. “Pete, take the dogs back to Miss Marva’s.”

“They’ll git home by theirselves,” the boy protested, reluctant to part company with the blond girl in the bikini top.

“Take ’em back,” came the authoritative reply, “and tell Marva to stop leaving the damn gate open.”

While this conversation was taking place, I glanced down at my knees and saw they were oozing and peppered with gravel dust. My descent into the pit of soul-shriveling embarrassment was complete as the shock wore off and I started to cry. The harder I gulped against the tightness of my throat, the worse it became. Tears runneled from beneath my big plastic-framed glasses.

“For God’s sake . . .” I heard the boy in the tank top mutter. Heaving a sigh, he went to the dogs and grabbed them by the collars. “Come on, troublemakers.” They went with him willingly, trotting smartly on either side as if they were auditioning for the 4H state dog show.

The dark-haired boy’s attention returned to me, and his voice gentled. “Here, now . . . you’re okay. No need to cry, honey.” He plucked a red handkerchief from his back pocket and began to mop at my face. Deftly he wiped my eyes and nose and told me to blow. The handkerchief held the sharp bite of male sweat as it clamped firmly over my nose. Back then men of every age had a red handkerchief tucked in the back pocket of their jeans. I’d seen kerchiefs used as a sieve, a coffee filter, a dust mask, and once as a makeshift baby diaper.

“Don’t ever run from dogs like that.” The boy tucked the kerchief in his back pocket. “No matter how scared you are. You just look to the side and walk away real slow, understand? And shout ‘No’ in a loud voice like you mean it.”

I sniffled and nodded, staring into his shadowed face. His wide mouth held the curve of a smile that sent a quiver down to the pit of my stomach and knotted my toes inside my sneakers.

True handsomeness had escaped him by millimeters. His features were too blunt and bold, and his nose had a crook near the bridge from having been broken once. But he had a slow burn of a smile, and blue-on-blue eyes that seemed even brighter against the sun-glazed color of his skin, and a tumble of dark brown hair as shiny as mink fur.

“You got nothing to fear from those dogs,” he said. “They’re full of mischief, but as far as I know they’ve never bitten anyone. Here, take my hand.”

As he pulled me up and set me on my feet, my knees felt like they’d been set on fire. I hardly noticed the pain, I was so occupied with the fury of my heartbeat. The grip of his hand was strong around mine, his fingers dry and warm.

“Where do you live?” the boy asked. “Are you moving into the new trailer on the loop?”

“Uh-huh.” I wiped a stray tear off my chin.

“Hardy . . .” The blond girl’s voice was sweetly cajoling. “She’s all right now. Come walk me back. I got somethin’ in my room to show you.”

Hardy. So that was his name. He remained facing me, his vivid gaze shifting to the ground. It was probably just as well the girl couldn’t see the wry smile secreted in the corners of his mouth. He seemed to have a pretty good idea of what she wanted to show him.

“Can’t,” he said cheerfully. “I have to take care of this little one.”

The disgruntlement I felt at being referred to as if I were a toddler was promptly replaced by the triumph of being chosen over the blond girl. Although I couldn’t figure out why in the world he wasn’t leaping at the chance to go with her.

I wasn’t a homely child, but neither was I the kind people made much of. From my Mexican father I had inherited dark hair, heavy eyebrows, and a mouth I thought was twice the size it needed to be. From Mama I had gotten a skinny build and light-colored eyes, but they weren’t a clear sea-green like hers, they were hazel. I had often longed to have Mama’s ivory skin and blond hair, but Daddy’s darkness had won out.

It didn’t help matters that I was shy and wore glasses. I was never one to stand out in the crowd. I liked to stay in corners. And I was happiest when I was alone reading. That and the good grades I got in

school had doomed any chance of being popular with my peers. So it was a foregone conclusion that boys like Hardy were never going to take notice of me.

“Come on,” he urged, leading the way to a tan single-wide with concrete steps at the back. A hint of a strut livened Hardy’s walk, giving him the jauntiness of a junkyard dog.

I followed cautiously, wondering how mad Mama would be if she found out I’d wandered off with a stranger. “Is this yours?” I asked, my feet sinking into the crackling beige grass as we went toward the trailer.

Hardy replied over his shoulder. “I live here with my mom, two brothers, and a sister.”

“That’s a lot of people for a single-wide,” I commented.

“Yeah, it is. I’ve got to move soon—there’s no room for me in there. Mom says I’m growing so fast I’m like to bust the walls of the trailer out.”

The notion that this creature still had some growing to do was almost alarming. “How big are you going to get?” I asked.

He chuckled and went to a spigot attached to a dusty gray garden hose. Turning it with a few deft twists, he started the flow of water and went to find the end of the hose. “Don’t know. I’m already taller than most of my kin. Sit on that bottom step and stretch your legs out.”

I obeyed, looking down at my scrawny calves, the skin covered with childish dark fuzz. I had experimented a few times with shaving my legs, but it hadn’t yet become an established routine. I couldn’t help comparing them to the smooth tanned legs of the blond girl, and the heat of embarrassment rose inside me.

Approaching me with the hose, Hardy sank to his haunches and warned, “This’ll probably sting a little, Liberty.”

“That’s all right, I—” I stopped, my eyes widening in amazement. “How did you know my name?”

A smile lurked in one corner of his mouth. “It’s written on the back of your belt.”

Name belts had been popular that year. I had begged Mama to order one for me. We'd chosen pale pink leather with my name tooled in red letters.

I inhaled sharply as Hardy rinsed my knees with a stream of tepid water, washing off the blood and grit. It hurt more than I expected, especially when he passed his thumb over a few stubborn particles of rock to loosen them from my swollen skin.

He made a soothing sound as I flinched, and talked to distract me. "How old are you? Twelve?"

"Fourteen and three quarters."

His blue eyes sparkled. "You're kind of little for fourteen and three quarters."

"Am not," I replied indignantly. "I'm a sophomore this year. How old are you?"

"Seventeen and two fifths."

I stiffened at the gentle mockery, but as I met his gaze, I saw a flicker of playfulness. I had never felt the allure of another human being this strongly, warmth and curiosity mixing to form an unspoken question in the air.

A couple of times in your life, it happens like that. You meet a stranger, and all you know is that you need to know everything about him.

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?" he asked.

"None. It's just me and Mama and her boyfriend."

"Tomorrow if I get a chance, I'll bring my sister, Hannah, to meet you. She can introduce you to some of the kids around here and point out the ones to stay clear of." Hardy took the water off my raw knees, which were now pink and clean.

"What about the one you were just talking to? Is she someone I should stay clear of?"

A flash of a smile. "That's Tamryn. Yeah, stay away from her. She doesn't like other girls much." He went to turn the water off and came

back to stand over me as I sat on the doorstep, his dark brown hair spilling over his forehead. I wanted to push it back. I wanted to touch him, not with sensuality but in wonder.

“Are you going home now?” Hardy asked, reaching down for me. Our palms locked. He pulled me to my feet and made certain I was steady before letting go.

“Not yet. I have an errand. A check for Mr. Sadlek.” I felt for my back pocket to make sure it was still there.

The name caused a frown to tug between his straight dark brows. “I’ll go with you.”

“You don’t have to,” I said, although I felt a surge of shy delight at the offer.

“Yes I do. Your mama should know better than to send you to the front office by yourself.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will after you meet him.” Hardy took my shoulders in his hands and said firmly, “If you ever need to visit Louis Sadlek for any reason, you come get me first.”

The grip of his hands was electrifying. My voice sounded breathless as I said, “I wouldn’t want to put you to trouble.”

“No trouble.” He looked down at me for a moment longer and fell back a half step.

“That’s real nice of you,” I said.

“Hell.” He shook his head and replied with a smile, “I’m not nice. But between Miss Marva’s pit bulls and Sadlek, someone’s got to watch out for you.”

We walked along the main drive, Hardy shortening his long stride to correspond with mine. When the pace of our feet matched perfectly, I felt a deep inner pang of satisfaction. I could have gone on walking like that forever, side by side with him. There had been few times in my life I had ever inhabited a moment so fully, with no loneliness lurking at the edges.

When I spoke, my voice sounded languid to my own ears, as if we were lying in lush grass beneath a shade tree. “Why do you say you’re not nice?”

A low, rueful-sounding chuckle. “Because I’m an unrepentant sinner.”

“So am I.” It wasn’t true, of course, but if this boy was an unrepentant sinner, I wanted to be one too.

“No you’re not,” he said with lazy certainty.

“How can you say that when you don’t know me?”

“I can tell by looking.”

I darted a covert glance at him. I was tempted to ask what else he read from my appearance, but I was afraid I already knew. The unkempt tangle of my ponytail, the modest length of my cutoffs, the big glasses and unplucked brows . . . it didn’t exactly add up to the picture of a boy’s wildest fantasies. I decided to change the conversation. “Is Mr. Sadlek mean?” I asked. “Is that why I shouldn’t visit him alone?”

“He inherited the trailer park from his parents about five years ago, and ever since then he’s harassed every woman who crosses his path. He tried it with my mother a time or two until I told him if he did it again I’d make sure he was nothing but a smear on the ground from here to Sugar Land.”

I didn’t doubt the claim for a minute. Despite Hardy’s youth, he was big enough to inflict quite a lot of damage on someone.

We reached the redbrick ranch house, which clung to the flat arid land like a deer tick. A large black-and-white sign proclaiming BLUE-BONNET RANCH MOBILE HOME ESTATES had been planted on the side of the house closest to the main drive, with clusters of faded plastic bluebonnets tacked to the corners. Just beyond the sign a parade of pink yard flamingos riddled with bullet holes had been arranged precisely along the roadside.

I was to find out later it was the habit of some residents from the

trailer park, including Mr. Sadlek, to visit a neighbor's field for target practice. They shot at a row of yard flamingos that bobbed and sprang back whenever they were shot. When a flamingo was too full of holes to be useful, it was strategically placed at the front entrance of the trailer park as an advertisement of the residents' shooting skills.

An OPEN sign hung in the little side window by the front door. Reassured by Hardy's solid presence beside me, I went to the front door, knocked tentatively and pushed it open.

A Latina cleaning lady was busy mopping the entranceway. In the corner, a cassette player spat out the cheerful polka rhythm of tejano music. Glancing upward, the girl spoke in rapid-fire Spanish. "*Cuidado, el piso es mojado.*"

I only knew a few words of Spanish. Having no idea what she had meant, I shook my head apologetically. But Hardy replied without missing a beat, "*Gracias, tendremos cuidados.*" He put a hand on the center of my back. "Careful. The floor's wet."

"You speak Spanish?" I asked him in mild surprise.

His dark brows lifted. "You don't?"

I shook my head, abashed. It had always been a source of vague embarrassment that despite my heritage I couldn't speak my father's language.

A tall, heavy figure appeared in the doorway of the front office. At first glance Louis Sadlek was a good-looking man. But it was a ruined handsomeness, his face and body showing the decay of habitual self-indulgence. His striped Western shirt had been left untucked in an effort to hide the billow of his waist. Although the fabric of his pants looked like cheap polyester, his boots were made of blue-dyed snake-skin. His even, regular features were marred by the florid bloat around his neck and cheeks.

Sadlek stared at me with casual interest, his lips pulling back in a dirty joke of a smile. He spoke to Hardy first. "Who's the little wet-back?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the cleaning lady stiffen and pause in her scrubbing. It seemed she had been exposed to the word often enough to know its meaning.

Seeing the instant tension in Hardy's jaw, and the clenching of the fist at his side, I broke in hastily. "Mr. Sadlek, I'm—"

"Don't call her that," Hardy said in a tone that made the hairs rise on the back of my neck.

They stared at each other with palpable animosity, their gazes level. A man well past his prime, and a boy who hadn't yet entered it. But there was no doubt in my mind how it would have ended if there had been a fight.

"I'm Liberty Jones," I said, trying to smooth the moment over. "My mother and I are moving into the new trailer." I dug the envelope from my back pocket and extended it to him. "She told me to give you this."

Sadlek took the envelope and tucked it into his shirt pocket, letting his gaze slide over me from head to toe. "Diana Jones is *your* mama?"

"Yes, sir."

"How'd a woman like that get a little dark-skinned girl like you? Your daddy musta been a Mexican."

"Yes, sir."

He gave a scornful snicker and shook his head. Another grin eased across his mouth. "You tell your mama to drop off the rent check herself next time. Tell her I got stuff I want to talk about."

"All right." Eager to be out of his presence, I tugged at Hardy's rigid arm. After a last warning glance at Louis Sadlek, Hardy followed me to the door.

"You'd best not run with white trash like the Cateses, little girl," Sadlek called out after us. "They're trouble. And Hardy's the worst of the lot."

After a scant minute in his presence, I felt as if I'd been wading through chest-high garbage. I turned to glance at Hardy in amazement.

"What a jerk," I said.

“You could say that.”

“Does he have a wife and kids?”

Hardy shook his head. “Far as I know, he’s been divorced twice. Some women in town seem to think he’s a catch. You wouldn’t know it to look at him, but he’s got some money.”

“From the trailer park?”

“That and a side business or two.”

“What kind of side business?”

He let out a humorless laugh. “You don’t want to know.”

We walked to the loop intersection in contemplative silence. Now that evening was settling there were signs of life at the trailer park . . . cars turning in, voices and televisions filtering through the thin walls, smells of frying food. The white sun was resting on the horizon, bleeding out color until the sky was drenched in purple and orange and crimson.

“Is this it?” Hardy asked, stopping in front of my white trailer with its neat girdle of aluminum siding.

I nodded even before I saw the outline of my mother’s profile in the window of the kitchenette. “Yes, it is,” I exclaimed with relief. “Thank you.”

As I stood there peering up at him through my brown-framed glasses, Hardy reached out to push back a piece of hair that had straggled loose from my ponytail. The callused tip of his finger was gently abrasive against my hairline, like the tickle of a cat’s tongue. “You know what you remind me of?” he asked, studying me. “An elf owl.”

“There’s no such thing,” I said.

“Yes there is. They mostly live to the south in the Rio Grande Valley and beyond. But every now and then an elf owl makes its way up here. I’ve seen one.” He used his thumb and forefinger to indicate a distance of five inches. “They’re only about this big. Cute little bird.”

“I’m not little,” I protested.

Hardy smiled. His shadow settled over me, blocking the light of

sunset from my dazzled eyes. There was an unfamiliar stirring inside me. I wanted to step deeper into the shadow until I met his body, to feel his arms go around me. “Sadlek was right, you know,” he said.

“About what?”

“I am trouble.”

I knew that. My rioting heart knew it, and so did my weak knees, and so did my heat-prickling stomach. “I like trouble,” I managed to say, and his laugh curled through the air.

He walked away in a graceful long-legged stride, a dark and solitary figure. I thought of the strength in his hands as he had picked me up from the ground. I watched him until he had disappeared from sight, and my throat felt thick and tingly like I’d just swallowed a spoonful of warm honey.

The sunset finished with a long crack of light rimming the horizon, as if the sky were a big door and God was taking one last peek. Good night, Welcome, I thought, and went into the trailer.