

The Firecracker Gets Her Man

By

Joannie Kay

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Chapter One

Rusty Bucket, Texas

July 1, 1874

The stage rolled into the small, dusty town of Rusty Bucket only an hour late, which was a fairly good time for a lazy Wednesday afternoon. Texas Ranger Lance Underwood stood in the shade of the general store to watch the passengers disembark. There was the usual number of gawkers who loved to see who was getting off the stage, he noticed. The sheriff, whose duty it was to keep the town safe for all, was there to observe the passengers for those who looked disreputable. There was also an assortment of relatives there to greet a loved one who was returning home from some time away, but there was no sign of Misty Feathers, Jared Cane's woman, or any of Jared's gang members. It meant that Lance was going to need to be patient.

He saw an elderly gentleman leave the stage, and it was obvious that he was flustered and angry by the twin spots of red staining his cheeks.

"Father, what has upset you so?" one of the waiting ladies asked in concern, reaching out to take his hand in her gloved one.

"That obnoxious female!" the elderly man muttered. "I swear I would take a switch to her, were she mine to deal with." He visibly struggled to regain his composure. "My, how nice of you all to come and meet the stage today! I have missed you all!"

"We missed you too, Father. Geraldine is preparing supper for everyone at your house."

"That sounds wonderful. Teddy, would you get Grandfather's bag? We certainly don't want to be late for the lovely meal your mama is preparing for us."

"Yes, sir." The teenager quickly stepped forward and took the bag when the driver handed it down.

"Let's all go home!" the elderly man said with a big smile for his loved ones, and as a body, they moved down the street.

"Hot damn!" Lance heard the sheriff exclaim under his breath. "I can't believe the nerve of that vixen!" The sheriff hurried toward the stagecoach, anger and determination in his step.

Lance was sure that he was going to see the blonde Misty Feathers, but instead, a pretty redhead was stepping down from the stage. She wasn't very old, either. He watched, transfixed.

"You just get your fanny right on back on that stage, little girl. You ain't comin' back here to upset Doc!"

"Sheriff Willis, you take your hand off of me before I kick you where it counts!"

"It ain't fittin' for you to talk like that, Rachel Waterford. Doc would be scandalized."

"I doubt it, since he is the one who taught me about the male anatomy!"

"Little girl, I am warnin' you. You done upset folks in this here town, and I ain't gonna stand for you doin' it again! Get back on the stage and get on out of here."

"Have I broken any laws, Sheriff?" Rachel asked sweetly.

"Not yet, you ain't." But it was clear by the man's attitude that he expected that to change momentarily.

"Until I do, please leave me alone." She was polite but firm, and the sheriff backed up a few steps.

Lance noticed the man didn't offer to help her down the steps from the coach, and he found himself stepping forward and offering his hand. She glanced at him for a moment, and then nodded and smiled. "Thank you, sir."

"My pleasure, ma'am."

"Miss Rachel, where should I put your bags?" the driver asked.

"Put them in the office for now, Gus. I might not be staying long if—"

"Rachel? Rachel! Is that you, honey?" An elderly man reined in the horse pulling his buggy, then hopped down from the seat with surprising agility for his age, and ran over to hug her tightly. "Are you truly home, child?" he asked, clinging to her.

"I am, if I am welcome?" she asked, her voice reflecting her doubt.

"What is this 'if you are welcome' business? Of course you are welcome! You are my child and you will always be welcome in my home."

"Thank you, Papa. Are you on a call?" Rachel asked, pointing at the buggy.

"Just coming home. Milly Gains gave birth to a baby boy in the wee hours of morning," he told her, reaching for one of the bags Gus handed down.

For some reason he couldn't explain, Lance stepped forward, took the heavy trunk and carried it to the buggy and put it in back, in the boot. "Thank you, young man. I don't believe we

have met. I am Doctor Caleb Waterford, and this lovely young woman is my daughter, Miss Rachel Waterford.” The look he leveled on Lance was the same one he used when obtaining information from a patient. It meant he wanted the truth and he wanted it right now.

“My name is Lance Underwood, sir. I just arrived in town this morning and thought you could use a hand with that trunk.”

“Very kind of you.”

“Were you disappointed to learn I am not Misty Feathers, Ranger?” Rachel asked, humor in her green eyes.

Lance felt as though she’d sucker punched him in the gut. “What?” he sputtered.

“It’s obvious you are the ranger who is on the trail of Jared Cane. If you were from around here you wouldn’t have bothered to help me from the stage. I’m not Misty, and she won’t be arriving here for another two days. She is having a dress made by a seamstress in Lyndon; she is four months pregnant and her clothes are too revealing, even for Misty. Jared won’t be here until the fourth of July. He figures he can slip into town with all of the festivities going on, and none the wiser.”

“How do you know all of this, Miss Waterford?” Lance questioned.

“Yes, Rachel. How do you know all of this?” Caleb asked with a frown. “You shouldn’t be associating with people like that!”

“Papa, I believe you are the one who taught me that everyone has red blood, feels pain and joy, and is considered by God to be His child.”

“Do not use my own words against me, daughter. I want an answer to what seems completely out of character.”

“Eating is not out of character, and I had to work, so I did. The only thing I can do with any skill is nursing, and I have been working as a nurse. People often forget you are in the room, remember? Jared Cane was shot in his last robbery attempt. He came to the doctor I worked for and when Doctor Merritt sent me out for some supplies, Cane repaid his kindness by shooting him dead. I was fortunate enough to be able to hide until he left town with Misty. They agreed to meet here on July fourth, and yes, that is why I came home. I fully intended to tell the sheriff, but he was rude to me, and so I didn’t tell him. I am happy to learn you are in town, Ranger. I heard a rumor that you were coming.”

“You are fortunate you were able to stay out of Cane’s sight, Miss Rachel. He doesn’t care who he kills, and he would have shot you down without a qualm.”

“I felt it was time to come home and make peace with Papa, and this just gave me the push I needed. Papa, I was wrong; you were right; I am very sorry I didn’t listen to you. I have grown up, and I promise I will heed your advice in the future. I love you so much, and I have missed you.”

“I am just happy you are home, honey. The past is over and done, and I can use a good nurse. I’m glad you are here.” He reached for her and hugged her tightly. “Thank you for coming home; this is so wonderful I can hardly believe my good fortune. I love you too. Don’t you worry about folks; they’ll warm to you when they see we are getting along.”

“The sheriff isn’t happy. In fact, he tried to put me back on the stage.”

“Arnold is overstepping his bounds. He does not own this town,” Caleb declared. “Last week he told Esther Clark she needed to marry again and find something else to do besides stick her nose in everyone’s business.”

“Now, *that* is probably true, Papa!” Rachel giggled at the thought.

“You stay away from Esther, honey. I’ll not have the two of you fussing.” He shook a long finger in warning at her.

“I am willing to leave people alone, provided they leave me alone. I won’t start anything, but I won’t walk away, either.”

“You aren’t so big I can’t spank you, Rachel Marie Waterford!” the doctor threatened.

“Papa, you won’t do that and you know it. Goodness knows I’ve given you enough reason to spank me over the years, but you wouldn’t raise a hand to me if you were threatened!”

“I’ll hire someone,” he promised, and then chuckled when she giggled. “I fear my threats bear no weight, Ranger. Would you like to join us for supper tonight? I could use your help in getting Rachel’s trunk inside and upstairs to her bedroom. She is a very good cook, and I happen to have been paid with two chickens today for delivering Milly’s baby.”

“I love fried chicken, Doc, but I would unload the trunk for you just for the asking. My Ma taught me that kindness doesn’t need to be paid for.”

“We would love to have your company, Ranger. Please come. I promise you that I am a decent cook, even if I say so myself.”

“I thank you for the invite. I can’t recall the last time I had a home-cooked meal, and I do love fried chicken,” Lance repeated. “I’ll get my horse and follow you home.” He started to walk away, only to stop, walk back and say, “I am supposed to be working undercover. I’m asking you not to say anything to anyone about me being a Texas Ranger. I don’t want Cane to get wind of me and run again.”

“We won’t say a word, Lance,” Caleb assured him. “Right, Rachel?”

“Why would I tell, Papa? I’m not foolish. I don’t want Cane to find me, either!”

Lance fetched his stallion and then followed the doc’s buggy to his home, which was down the street, and boasted a large sign, ornately hand painted with *Caleb Waterford, M.D.* hanging on a post beside the gate to the white picket fence surrounding his home and office.

“I see you like my sign, Lance. It is a bit too fancy for my taste, but one of my patients made it for me as payment for saving his son’s life. I could do no less than hang it.”

“You are a good man, Doctor.”

“Very practical,” Caleb corrected.

“Do you want me to put Sadie away, Papa?” Rachel offered.

“No, honey. You show Lance where to put your trunk, and then please put on a pot of coffee. I have sorely missed your wonderful coffee.”

“I will happily do that, Papa,” she agreed, and then gave him a spontaneous hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you for making me welcome. I have really missed you!”

“The world feels right again, does it not?” Caleb asked with a smile for her.

“It does,” she admitted.

Lance picked up the trunk and Rachel held open the gate for him to enter; then she led the way up the short sidewalk and the steps to the front porch of the large house. She opened the door, and hurried up the steps to the right of the entryway, Lance following. She went to the last door on the right, opened it, and then said, “This is my room, Lance. You can put the trunk down anywhere, and I’ll tend to unpacking later. Thank you so much for your help. Papa is a strong man, but this trunk is too heavy for him to manage all the way up the steps, especially after being up all night delivering a baby.”

She smiled and added, “I appreciate your kindness to me at the stagecoach too. I knew that coming home wouldn’t be easy, but I just couldn’t let Jared Cane come here to rob the bank and bankrupt this entire town. The people here work so hard for what they have. I didn’t expect

the sheriff to be so rude to me, and I just reacted instead of being the grown woman I am and telling him what I know.”

“Truthfully, I am glad you didn’t tell him. He would have told everyone and botched my chances of catching Cane. Just out of curiosity, what did you say to that elderly man who got off the stage all irate and threatening to switch you?”

Rachel giggled, and her green eyes twinkled mischievously. “He insists his family toe a straight line and call him Father and Grandfather. He is so pompous, and he couldn’t resist scolding me for leaving town the way I did. Only Papa has the right to reprimand me for my behavior, and I reminded him of that. He didn’t like it. I was supposed to dissolve in tears and repent of my wicked ways.”

“So why did you leave town?” Lance knew he was pushing his luck, but he was intrigued by the little redhead. She was beautiful and feisty, and he happened to like a woman who had some sass about her. He had the perfect cure for that, and she looked to have a bottom that just begged for a good spanking.

“I left because of a man. He promised me the sun, moon, and stars, and I learned he was all talk. When he learned I wasn’t going to share his bed until he put a ring on my finger, he dumped me in the closest town and took off. I was too humiliated to come home and face everyone in town and all of the ‘I-told-you-sos,’ that I would have heard. I found a job with Doctor Merritt, and I grew up. Is your curiosity satisfied, Ranger?”

“For now,” he answered, grinning impudently. Yes, Rachel Waterford was going to be a handful.

Rachel hurried to put on the coffee and tsked over the condition of her kitchen. The rest of the house seemed very clean, but not her kitchen. Once the coffee was ready, she sent her father and Lance into the parlor to sit and talk while she did a hurried clean as she was frying the chickens for their dinner.

“I am so hungry just from smelling that chicken cooking, Lance. I hope you’re hungry, too?” Caleb questioned. “My Rachel is a wonderful cook. She takes after her dear mother, God rest her soul.”

“How long ago did she pass, sir?” Lance asked politely.

“It has been three long years,” Caleb admitted. “It’s been hard on me, but it’s been even harder for little Rachel. She never would have run off to marry that no-good Jess Archer if my Estelle were still alive. I said all the wrong things.”

“You should have put her over your knee and walloped her and then tried to talk to her. You would have had her full attention then.”

“Probably, but I just couldn’t do that, Lance. She came to Estelle and me after we were married nearly eighteen years, and she was born way too early. So tiny, and I didn’t hold out much hope that she would live, but my Estelle worked day and night to save Rachel’s life, and she did it, but I am still afraid she will break if I put a rough hand to her behind,” he confessed.

“That explains why she is so feisty and sassy,” Lance said aloud and the older man looked at him thoughtfully.

“You sound as though that pleases you, young man.”

“I like a sassy, spunky redhead, sir. Your daughter is very pretty, and I would like your permission to take her for a walk after dinner?”

“You will need *her* permission, Lance,” he answered with a chuckle. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking she is of low virtue because of that fancy talker she ran off with. I know my girl, and she is still as innocent as the day she was born.”

“Yes, sir, she is. She refused to be with him when he wouldn’t put a ring on her finger. Stupid man ran out on her a couple of days after they left here,” he added.

“And you know this how?”

“I asked and she answered me. I wanted to know if I needed to track the bastard down and beat him half to death for mistreating her.”

“And you just met my child when she stepped off the stage?”

“Yes, sir.” He looked at the doctor and then said, “I don’t act this way normally, sir. There is simply something special about Rachel.”

“Yes, there is. Don’t try to talk her into anything improper, son, or else. I might not raise a hand to my daughter when I should, but I could make you hurt in ways you cannot imagine.”

“I am not like that either, sir. I have nothing but respect for Rachel. You need to trust her. She is a good girl; she misjudged a man who was trying to lead her astray and told him to get lost when she learned the truth. Rachel is a smart lady.”

“You met her less than an hour ago!” The doctor shook his head. “You have it real bad, son.”

“I sure do, don’t I?”

“Make sure you don’t forget about Jared Cane.”

“I won’t forget. I want to put him behind bars and watch him stand trial for all the wrongs he’s done. Sir, Rachel shouldn’t leave this house alone. She would be easy prey for Cane if he figures out she is here. I don’t want her where he can see her and shoot her.”

“I don’t want that, either!” Rachel said as she entered the parlor. “But, you needn’t worry about me, Lance. I am armed, and I will shoot Cane if he comes near me.”

“I don’t want you to take any chances, Rachel. It’s only a few days, and surely you can find something to do inside while I capture that man.”

“Yes, of course, I *could*, but I don’t want to. I want to help capture Cane and put him behind bars, and I want to testify against him and prove he killed Dr. Merritt.”

“I understand your feelings, Rachel, but it is too dangerous. The answer is no,” Lance said firmly.

Rachel smiled and tipped her head to one side, “You have no say over what I do, Ranger Underwood. I am going to capture that horrid man, and you may bet the farm on it.” She took a deep breath and then added, “Our dinner is all ready, and I hope you won’t mind that we are eating in the kitchen. I am too lazy to carry everything to the dining room and then back to the kitchen, so we will eat at the kitchen table. Papa, is that all right with you?” she asked.

“We eat nearly all of our meals in the kitchen. A dining room is a waste if you ask me, but your mama loved using it for her fancy parties.”

“Yes, she did, and there are times it is fun to be festive, but today we are eating because we all have a huge appetite. The kitchen seems perfect.”

“We never had a dining room in the house I grew up in,” Lance admitted. “I prefer to eat in the kitchen.”

“It’s all settled then,” Caleb said with a smile. “Daughter, I think a bottle of wine is called for this evening. We need to celebrate your homecoming.”

“I am ahead of you, Papa! In fact, I brought you a bottle of something I knew you would love.”

“Well, I am impressed. Of course, I won’t dare have more than half a glass,” he stated. “I am so tired that I would sleep around the clock, and you know that I could get called out at any time.”

“We’d best eat quickly then,” Rachel said with an understanding smile as she led the way to the kitchen. “Please sit on Papa’s left, Lance.” They all took their seats, and Caleb said a short blessing before picking up the platter of fried chicken and offering it to Lance.

“Help yourself, young man. There is plenty, so don’t be shy.”

“Yes, there are plenty of vegetables too. And I made biscuits,” Rachel said proudly.

“This all looks real good, Rachel, smells good, too!” Lance helped himself and passed the food across the table so that Rachel could fill her plate.

“Delicious, honey!” Caleb bragged on her. “I haven’t had food this good since you left!”

“I agree that this is real good cookin’, Rachel. Thank you for inviting me and sharing your table. It’s been a long time since I had anything this good to eat. I love this chicken. It’s so crispy on the outside, and tender and juicy on the inside.”

“I am going to get a big head!” she responded, blushing.

When they ate their fill, she produced bread pudding for dessert, and Lance wanted to propose marriage! “This tastes like my Ma’s, Rachel. It really is good!”

“Thank you for the compliment, Lance,” she said, blushing again. She wasn’t used to anyone but her father saying nice things to her, and it was going to her head. The man was too handsome for words with his dark, wavy hair and his warm brown eyes that seemed to see everything around him all at once. His voice was deep and sexy and she wondered if he could sing as well as she thought he could. “After I do up these dishes, perhaps we can gather at the piano? I’ve learned a few new songs and would play them for you and Papa.”

“Honey, I am sorry, but I must go and lie down for a while and get some sleep. If I am needed, come wake me, please. Don’t worry that the music will wake me; I won’t hear a thing.”

“Yes, Papa. Good night.” She jumped up and gave him a hug. “I am so happy to be home. Thank you for welcoming me; I am not sure I would have been so forgiving in your shoes.”

“I love you, Rachel. The past is over, done and forgotten. Good night, daughter. Good night, Lance.”

They heard the doctor's feet on the steps, and then Rachel started clearing the table. She was amazed when the big man started helping her, and he did it as if he actually knew what he was doing! "You are a guest, Lance. I don't expect you to help clean up," she protested.

"I was taught to show my appreciation for an invite to a good meal. My Ma made sure us boys knew how to use a dishtowel, and I can tell you I watched my Pa put his hands in the dishpan nearly every night unless he had something else going on that needed his immediate attention."

"I am honestly impressed," she admitted. "I have never seen a man willingly do the dishes, not even Papa. Mama never asked his help, and he never offered it."

"Ma said that a dish couldn't tell if it was a male or a female washing, drying, and putting it away. She wasn't afraid to shovel out a stall in the barn, or feed livestock, either. I like to think I learned to appreciate her viewpoint on work as I grew up. I've seen women who ran their own ranches, and men who worked as cooks. I didn't think less of them for it either."

"I think you are a good man, Lance, and I do appreciate your views on this subject. It will make it easier for us to devise a plan to capture Jared Cane!"