

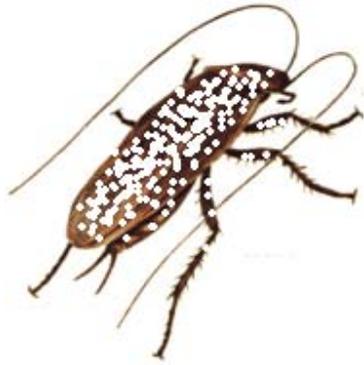
A DEA agent makes Darla McCargo an offer; seduce a dangerous Mexican drug baron, arrest his boss and the U.S. Government will pay off her New Mexico ranch. Doable job she thinks, never expecting to fall in love.

The White Cockroach

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THE WHITE COCKROACH



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CHAPTER NINE

DARLA – CHUY

The cornered rattlesnake coiled and dared Darla to come closer, its buzzing defense mechanism giving her fair warning.

She had spent most of the morning cleaning the adobe shack. She knew Chris had warned her about the place but, like so many times in her life, she ignored advice when it didn't suit her purposes and she had a purpose for this house.

"I know you were here first, mister," she told the snake. "But it's either you or me and I'm bigger'n you." The slug from her Beretta blasted a hole through the snake's head and the buzzing stopped.

She snatched the convulsing reptile with a gloved hand and carried it to the door where she tossed it on a growing pile of dead varmints, which included rats and other snakes.

After cleaning and patching a few holes in the floor, she stocked the shelves with canned goods, bottled water and diapers. She admired the sign she had painted: "*¡Recepción, peregrinos!*" and tittered. She knew the U.S. government in its wisdom would take a dim view of her humanitarian gesture of "welcoming pilgrims" but she didn't care.

Oh, some of the immigrants going through here would be crooks or even killers but from her experience back in New Mexico, most of them were risking their lives to find a better life for their families and many brought their babies. All the guns and Berlin-type walls in the world would never stop them. She

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figured her little attempt to help someone along their way wasn't going to affect this cold, hard fact one bit. Besides, it felt good.

The Don Carlos ranch house was built around an open courtyard like an adobe fort. The concept was comforting to Darla. Being a lone woman in a foreign land didn't bother her so much as not being able to predict the actions of Señor Chuy Dominguez. She'd already pissed him off.

Will he strike back? If so - when and how? she wondered. "He'll find you." Chris had told her.

With those chilling words in mind, she'd tried to secure the exterior doors but the locks were rusted and inoperable. So, until the carpenters and locksmiths could remedy that problem, she'd barricaded herself in and slept with a Beretta under her pillow and her thirty-o-six rifle nearby.

Not that she'd slept much. In addition to all the problems she'd dealt with and the danger in which she found herself, the feel of Chris' arms around her and the memory of that unexpected kiss still haunted her. She kept telling herself it didn't mean anything to Chris - he was just being a good handler. But the tenderness, the lingering perception of solidity - that somebody, somewhere, cares gave her an invisible cocoon she could wrap herself in when she felt lonely and afraid.

She scolded herself for acting like a silly schoolgirl with a crush. It had been a long day. She'd risen before the sun and the workmen arrived shortly after with the new stove and the propane tank. The roof-repair job was going well and she was pleased with the colors she had chosen for the interior. The painters were almost finished. Things weren't progressing as fast as she'd like, but she couldn't complain.

Darla had fed the newly-purchased horses, giving the line-back dun an extra ration of oats. She was eager to get acquainted with each mare and she especially wanted to ride the dun. She was pleased that he seemed to take his role as stud seriously.

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She sat in the kitchen, nibbling on a peanut butter sandwich and gazed at the lengthening shadows across the wall as the late-afternoon sun dipped toward the west.

Later, Darla sat on the front porch in the twilight, inhaling the dry, cooling desert air and sipping brandy. Randy Travis sang "Too Gone for Too Long" on her new short wave radio. Somehow that song seemed appropriate at the moment.

The view of the western mountains was nice but it wasn't like Jicarita. The thoughts of her New Mexico mountain home flooded her mind with memories of Traction. God, she missed that dog.

She was about to call and remind Chris of his promise concerning Traction, when a tendril of dust on the horizon caught her attention. "This could be trouble." She drained the glass and hurried inside to retrieve her rifle.

Soon, two pickups full of men slid to a stop in front of the house. Two men jumped down, hefting rifles. They separated, walking silently past her, around both sides of the house. She considered ordering them to stop, but decided she had enough trouble without asking for more.

The moment had finally come. Six months of training just to prepare her for this moment. Was she ready? She cradled her rifle in her arms and waited, trying not to reveal the cold fear that gripped her heart.

A sound from inside the house made her jump. The taller one emerged. "*Es seguro. Nobody else here.*" He returned to the trucks. The other man remained out of sight somewhere behind her. She hated the vulnerable feeling that gave her.

Darla rallied her courage and called to the faceless pickups, "Tell your other flunky to get out of my house. What the hell do you want?"

A harsh metallic taste of fear filled her mouth. She licked her dry lips and waited.

A door opened. Chuy Dominguez stepped from one of the pickups and swaggered up to the porch.

Darla braced herself.

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His gaze riveted on her, he slowly removed his white straw hat and dusted his blue denim jeans with it. The pearl-handled automatic she remembered so vividly protruded from his belt. A disheveled shock of black hair flecked with white alkaline dust covered his furrowed brow.

"You bet the races very well," he said.

"Just lucky," she replied.

"You also bid the horses pretty good."

"So?"

His eyes darted to the corral. "Where is my stud?"

She shifted her rifle and glared. "He's not your stud. Neither are the mares."

He glared back. "I don't give a shit about the mares. I want the stud."

"Well, you're not getting him."

After a moment of silence, his dark brown eyes darted past her into the dim interior of the house. He glanced along the length of the porch, before slowly appraising her body. "Why you come here?"

"I live here." She was sure her voice sounded squeaky.

"¿No tiene esposo?" His eyes filled with ridicule as they scanned her body again.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I'm divorced."

"Can't keep a husband?" He asked with an arched eyebrow.

"No, I just can't tolerate assholes."

He snorted, flashed a cruel smile. "Nobody else here?" he asked.

"Do you see anybody else here?"

His head jerked and his eyes again locked on hers. "This place belong you?"

"You'd better believe it."

"You're breaking the goddamn law, you better believe that," he said. "Foreigners owning land in Mexico is not legal."

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She folded her arms around her rifle. "You don't know jack - shit about the law and you ask too many questions that are none of your goddamned business."

Anger contorted his face. His hand made a threatening move as if to backhand her.

She managed not to flinch.

His voice was low and chilling. "Last week, a sumbitch talked to me like that. I dragged him behind my truck until his guts fell out."

Bracing herself for a blow that could come at any moment, she kept her voice steady and low to match his. "You make a lot of threats for a man who hasn't done a thing yet."

He shouted a command. "*¡Rubin. Agarrar el caballo!*"

A man walked from the pickups toward the corral. He held a coiled lariat.

"Don't you touch my horse." Darla commanded the man to stop. "*¡Alto!*"

He gave her a sneering look and proceeded.

She aimed her rifle and fired.

The man's hat flew off and he fell to the ground. Dazed, he sat and stared at her. Surprise replaced the sneer on his face.

The pungency of gun powder in her nose, Darla jacked another cartridge into the chamber. The empty shell hit the floor and rolled toward Dominguez. He picked it up as Darla pointed the rifle at him.

She glanced past Dominguez and saw the men in the pickups reaching for weapons.

He slammed the empty shell to the floor of the porch. "You nearly killed my brother."

"If I'd wanted him dead, it wouldn't have just been 'nearly.' The next round will be in your gut." She waited for a response. It was a long time coming.

Slowly, a row of white even teeth flashed beneath his bushy mustache and his weathered face wrinkled into a lop-sided mischievous grin. A soft chuckle broke the strained silence. It slowly built into a loud laugh.

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His men lowered their guns and joined in. Everyone laughed except the brother named Rubin. His hate-filled eyes warned her she hadn't heard the last of him.

Dominguez finally spoke. "Your well is fucked up."

She relaxed a little but the rifle didn't waver. "I know that."

"So," his chin rose defiantly. "What you gonna do for drinking water?"

She pointed to a small cluster of willows. "I'll divert that spring and run it through the house."

He peeked through the screen door. "How the fuck you gonna run a spring under your stinkin' house?"

"You come back in six months and I'll show you."

He snarled. "You ain't gonna last six months."

"Come back in six months and say that."

He waved his hand at the skyline. "I own every fucking thing between here and Ojinaga."

Darla pointed a finger at him. "Not all of it, mister. What you're looking at is mine – all fifty thousand fucking acres of it."

He turned toward her quickly. She stood firm, fighting to keep from recoiling.

He pushed the rifle barrel aside and gripped her arm with a strong hand, his eyes impaling hers like steel rivets. "Gringas don't live long in this country."

She jerked her arm away. "This one will."

He stepped from the porch and walked toward his truck.

She called after him. "I can take care of myself, pal." As the words left her mouth, she realized they sounded hollow.

He turned and looked back at her. "I still want that horse."

Darla watched as the trucks disappeared into the gathering darkness. Would they come back after she went to bed?

It was a tall order, but she managed not to cry.

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