



*Dangerous
Curves
Ahead*

*Short
Stories*

Pat Ballard

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Dangerous Curves Ahead
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*This book is dedicated to Jen Henderson
for all she's done to help people with weight-related issues.*

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Damn! Damn! Damn! Sarah mentally screamed as she sat quickly on the ground, clutching the thumb she'd just smashed with the hammer.

"Are you okay, Mommy?" Aaron, her three-year-old son, hurried to her and slipped his small arms around her neck in an effort to comfort her.

"Mommy's okay. I just hit my thumb with the hammer," she tried to reassure him.

"I know. I heard it make a funny noise," he said. "Let me see," he added, reaching for her hand, great concern clouding his small face.

"No!" Sarah's eyes were still closed from the excruciating pain radiating from her thumb up to her elbow. "I'm okay. I just need a minute for it to quit hurting." She rocked back and forth with pain.

"Why did Daddy leave us? If he was here he could help you feel better." The sadness in the little boy's voice finished bringing the tears she'd been trying to hold back.

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“He wanted to go somewhere else and live, but we’ll be okay without him,” she said weakly. How could she make her young son understand why his dad had left when she didn’t even know the reason herself?

“Is he coming back?” She could tell he was close to tears, and knew he was upset because she was hurt. Any time he sensed she was upset, he started asking questions about his father. *Damn you, anyway, John Singley.* She silently cursed her ex-husband for putting her in the position she was in.

“Mommy?” Now Aaron was leaning over and whispering in Sarah’s ear.

“Sweetheart, please just be quiet until Mommy’s thumb stops hurting, then we’ll talk more.”

“Mommy!” He was closer and more persistent.

“What, honey?” No matter how badly she was hurting, she could never be impatient with him.

“Who’s that man?” he asked in a low whisper.

Sarah’s eyes flew open as a bolt of fear shot through her. She found herself looking into the eyes of a stranger.

At what point he had ridden up on the big sorrel horse, Sarah had no idea, but by the amused look on his face he had seen her hammer her thumb and had heard the exchange between her and Aaron. So he knew there was no man around.

“May I help you?” she asked, almost forgetting the pain.

“It looks like you’re the one who needs help,” he responded, without moving.

Sarah had never heard a voice like his—and yet, it was somehow familiar. It was so deep, she imagined she saw his chest vibrate when he spoke. She wondered how it would affect her if he were talking

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softly into her ear.

Dumbfounded at her own thoughts, she hastened to be rid of this stranger. “I’m okay. I really don’t need any help. I don’t think anyone’s ever died of a smashed thumb.”

“From the way it sounded when you hit it, it may be more than smashed. I think I should look at it, just to make sure.” She watched in fascination as his tall frame unfolded from the saddle and stepped to the ground. He had to be at least six feet six inches tall, but handled his big frame with the grace and agility of a much smaller man.

He leaned over and said something to Aaron and the little boy went running toward their house.

Before she could ask what he’d said to Aaron, the man knelt beside her and took her hand in his. She was suddenly aware of her broken, unpolished fingernails. She’d been working outside all day, and looked as if she hadn’t had a bath in a month. She was also aware of his large tanned fingers as they gently inspected her thumb.

“Ouch!” The exclamation ripped from her without warning.

“I think it’s broken,” he said, and looked up at her. The most beautiful blue eyes she had ever gazed into captured, held, and mesmerized her. Black wavy hair and tanned skin gave his eyes a surreal glow.

“Sarah? Are you okay? You aren’t going to faint on me, are you? You don’t look like the fainting kind.”

Bringing herself back to reality, Sarah tried to smile. “No, I’m not going to faint. I’m okay. I’ll go inside and put some ice on my thumb and it’ll be fine.”

“No. We’ve got to get you to the doctor. That thumb may need to be in a cast.”

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“NO!” Desperation caught at her throat. “I have too much to do around here before winter sets in! I *can't* have my thumb in a cast. A cast will only slow me down. Now please go away. I don't need you. I don't need anybody! Just go away!”

The day had been too much. She'd had to mend a fence on the far side of the property, and that took all morning. Then she'd barely gotten finished with lunch and put Aaron down for his nap, and sat down to try to figure out how she would pay some bills, when a storm had blown in and half ripped the barn door off. That's what she was trying to fix when she'd hammered her thumb.

She just wanted a shower and a soft bed to crawl into. She was so very tired.

“Here they are, Mister,” she heard Aaron say, as he handed her truck keys to the stranger.

“Aaron Kyle Singley! What do you think you're doing?”

“I asked him to get the keys for me. I'm taking you to the doctor, so come on.”

Without warning, Sarah felt strong hands under her arms, hoisting her to a standing position.

Her knees were still weak from the pain. They started to buckle slightly, causing him to put an arm around her for support. Again she was aware of how big he was. Not just tall. He was thick. Standing beside him now and looking at him, she wondered how the poor horse had held up under his weight. But she'd always wondered that about Matt Dillon's horse, too, when she used to watch Gunsmoke on TV.

He let go of her just long enough to loop his horse's bridle over a nearby fence post before leading her to the beat-up old pickup truck and helping her inside. Then, picking Aaron up, he walked around to

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the driver's side and got in, gently placing Aaron between them.

"Who are you? I shouldn't be getting into this vehicle with a total stranger." She was about to reach for the door handle when she felt his strong hand on her arm, detaining her.

"My name is Stewart Remington. I own the neighboring ranch to yours. I came over this afternoon to meet you, and had just ridden up when you hit your thumb."

Sarah was slightly appeased. She'd heard that a newcomer to the area had bought the Thompsons' ranch. As another wave of pain shot up her arm, she gave in and allowed him to drive her to the local hospital.

The next morning Sarah sat at her desk and looked unseeingly at the stack of bills waiting to be paid. Aaron was still asleep, and she knew she should take this time to do her paperwork, but she couldn't get her mind off the tall stranger who had ridden into her life yesterday afternoon.

Her thumb hadn't been broken, but the doctor told her not to use it for several days. Just another setback added to the string of bad luck she'd been having.

John had announced six months ago that he didn't love her anymore because she'd gotten fat after the baby was born. She'd been crushed that he would say something so hurtful, and tried to reason with him that the weight would probably drop off once her hormones settled back down after having the baby. But the little doubt in the back of her mind had reminded her that her mother was a plus-size woman and so was her grandmother. She knew she'd probably inherited their tendency to be larger than the tall, thin models that were so popular.

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But John hadn't wanted to hear her reasoning. He wanted her to promise to lose the weight immediately or he would leave. When given an ultimatum and a time limit, Sarah's stubborn streak kicked in, and she'd told John to go ahead and leave. She'd suspected he was having an affair, anyway, and that he was just using her weight as an excuse to leave. Those suspicions were confirmed when he was married a month after their divorce became final.

What hurt Sarah the most was the fact that John had never asked to see Aaron since the divorce. He hadn't sent her any of the child support the court had ordered when they got the divorce, and she didn't have the time or the money to take him back to court.

He knew if things got bad enough she could sell the ranch and have money to live on. He'd always wanted to sell it, but the ranch had been in her family for three generations, and Sarah couldn't bear to part with it. Especially since it had been in her family for so long, and had meant so much to her ancestors. But now, not having John's second income to help defray the cost of running the ranch, she might have to sell after all.

He knew my name! The thought hit her like a bolt of lightning. Stewart Remington had called her Sarah yesterday when he'd knelt to check her thumb. She was sure she hadn't told him her name. Had he inquired from a neighbor? How did he know? A tiny thread of fear worked its way up Sarah's spine.

When they'd returned from the doctor's office and she and Aaron were inside for the night, Stewart had gone back out and finished repairing the broken barn door before he'd ridden away on his horse. At the time she'd felt grateful, and thought he was really going to be a good neighbor. But now she questioned his motives. Was he being a little *too* neighborly?

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Stewart sat at his dining room table with the first cup of coffee of the morning. He reached into his wallet and took out a picture of Sarah and Aaron. Aaron was about two years old when the photo was taken, and Sarah had the look of a contented and happy mother. He'd thought from the photo that her eyes looked almost purple, but he wasn't prepared for their brilliance when he saw her with tears brimming in them. They were pure amethyst. And that hair! It was like spun gold. Very windblown. It was obvious she'd been working outside all day. *Probably the way it would look after making love*, he thought, smiling slightly.

And what a body! She had curves that could make a man drool. But he'd almost screwed up yesterday. He'd called her by name right up front. *Fool*, he chided himself. He couldn't afford for her to know who he was until the time was right. He had to be careful and not slip up anymore.

Sarah pulled the truck up to the curb and parked. She glanced around at the storefronts. Very little had changed in the small town of Langford as she grew up there, and she liked it like that. She wanted to raise Aaron in this small community, just the way she had grown up. And for that reason, she was prepared to do whatever it took to keep the ranch to pass on to him and his bloodline.

Last night she'd made up her mind to come into town this morning and talk with Hal Thompson, her banker, about getting a loan to help her along until she could find a way to make the ranch start supporting itself like it used to in the days before her father died. After he'd died her mother had tried to keep the ranch running, but with Sarah away at college her mother just didn't have the strength to

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manage a working ranch alone. Then her mother had died. Only a year after Sarah's father, but by then, the damage was done. When Sarah came home to take over the running of the ranch, the debts were so huge she had to sell off all the cattle just to keep the ranch. To make matters worse, when she and John were married he had no interest in trying to revive the production of the ranch.

But now, a new excitement gripped Sarah. She knew she retained enough knowledge from living and working on the ranch all of her life to make it work again. And she had the business degree she'd gotten in college, so she had all the tools to make this thing work. All the tools except money.

Taking a deep breath to build her confidence, she lifted Aaron from the truck. She was taking him into the bank with her. Part of her plan was to try to convince Hal Thompson, the president of the bank, that he needed to loan her the money to save her ranch so she could pass it on to little Aaron, here. She hoped the appeal would work.

Turning with Aaron in her arms, she found herself facing, and almost touching, Stewart Remington.

"Good morning." Again, Sarah was amazed at his voice. Every time he spoke, she could feel cold chills start to flit up and down her spine.

"Good morning," she answered, suddenly overcome with an attack of shyness, which was totally foreign to her.

"How's your thumb?"

"It's okay," she answered, feeling ridiculous. If she wasn't holding Aaron, she wondered if she would stick her finger in her mouth and start shuffling her feet in the sand like a silly schoolgirl. She had to snap out of this.

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“Well, it’s good to see you, but I was just headed for the bank,” she said, desperate to break the awkward moment. “I’m going to try to get a loan to help me get back on my feet.” *Shut up!* She silently admonished herself. He didn’t need to know anything about her business. He was a stranger, for Pete’s sake. And a suspicious stranger, at that.

“Can you have a cup of coffee with me first?” he asked, indicating the little RX drug store they were standing in front of. It was one of those rare small drug stores that still had a place to buy coffee, cold drinks, and even ice cream.

“Well—” Sarah started to hedge.

“Oh, come on. We won’t stay long.”

“Yeah, Mommy, Stoot wants to buy me a ice cream cone,” Aaron pleaded.

“Aaron! You know not to ask people to buy you things. And you should say Mr. Remington.”

“He told me to call him Stoot when you were at the doctor’s.” Aaron was having such a hard time saying Stewart, she could imagine what he would do with Mr. Remington.

“That’s right, I did,” Stewart said, reaching and taking Aaron from Sarah. “And, yes,” he told the boy, “I would love to buy you an ice cream cone if it’s okay with your mother.”

The sight of Aaron being clutched so easily in the arms of the big man caught at Sarah’s heart. Aaron needed a male figure in his life so badly. Surely a little time in the coffee shop couldn’t hurt anything.

“Okay,” she gave in reluctantly. “But just for a few minutes.”

When they were settled at the little table with cups of coffee for Sarah and Stewart and an ice cream cone and glass of water for Aaron, Stewart kept Aaron on his lap and helped him with the ice

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cream, making sure the little boy licked in all the places that were trying to run down the cone. Aaron was losing the battle.

“Here, we’d better let your mom help you gain control of this,” Stewart said, handing the cone to Sarah. And without thinking, Sarah took the cone and started gingerly licking all the places where the ice cream was melting and trying to run down the cone. She almost had the cone back under control when she looked up into the amused blue gleam of Stewart Remington’s eyes. He was watching in fascination as she worked magic with her tongue on the ice cream cone.

Overcome with embarrassment, she quickly handed the cone back to Aaron. “Okay, I believe you can handle it now,” she said, not looking at Stewart.

The chuckle that came from deep in his chest sounded more like a growl, and the chill that had threatened to run up her spine finally broke loose. She could feel goosebumps forming on her arms and knew without looking that her nipples were beading up in response to the chill. *Get a grip!* she commanded herself.

As hard as she tried not to, she felt compelled to look at Stewart. But his attention was drawn to the area where she felt the most distress. He was staring at her breasts in fascination.

Her first impulse was to reach up and cover her breasts with her hands. No one had ever made her this aware of her body. He looked at her as if he knew what she looked like without any clothes on.

Just then, Aaron gave a sharp indrawn breath as the ice cream plopped out of the cone and landed on the table in front of them.

“Mommy!” he yelped and started to cry.

“It’s okay,” she reassured him, and leaned over and scooped up the ice cream with her hand and put it back on the cone. “See? That was easy, wasn’t it?” she said, and lovingly patted his cheek with the

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other hand, wanting to hug him for causing the distraction.

In the process of trying to wipe up the ice cream residue from the table her hand bumped Stewart's coffee cup. She jumped in reaction, and almost knocked the saltshaker off the small table. Stewart quickly reached to save the saltshaker, but instead his large hand wound up cupping one of her breasts. He quickly drew his hand back, but not before a charge of sexual need, like nothing she'd ever experienced before, shot through Sarah.

She had never in the entire five years of marriage with John been affected like this. She knew her breasts were rising and falling with her short gasps for air, as she and Stewart gazed at each other. She was captivated by those blue eyes, and felt as helpless as a bird caught in the hypnotic spell of a stalking cat.

"All done!" Aaron declared, and plopped his remaining ice cream cone into the glass of water, splashing cold water all over Sarah and Stewart, promptly breaking the spell.

Sarah hoped Stewart didn't notice her trembling hands as she hurriedly gathered Aaron and her purse and stood up.

"I really do have to get to the bank," she said, not looking at Stewart. Holding Aaron in her arms, she practically ran for the door.

Stewart watched Sarah's hips sway as she dashed toward the exit. She was all woman, and he couldn't wait to explore everything she had. He pulled a cell phone from his inside jacket pocket and dialed a number. "Hal, this is Stewart. Sarah Singley is headed for the bank to ask for a loan. Give her what she asks for. On second thought, find out what she wants the money for, and if she's not asking for enough, give her what you think she needs."

"You got it," the voice on the other end of the line answered, with no argument.

Ten romantic tales pack suspense and sizzle into this collection of short stories featuring amply curved women.

A handsome stranger comes to the aid of a full-figured divorcee in "Dangerous Curves"—but what does he really want? A young woman learns the cost of trying to be someone—and some size—she's not in "Freedom." Bountiful women learn there may be more to their handsome new bosses than they suspected in "Misconceptions" and "Playboy." Dig into these and other juicy stories for a healthy serving of entertainment and a reminder that love comes in all sizes.

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His Brother's Child:

Pat Ballard creates strong witty characters that pull you into the book, wanting to know more about their hopes and dreams.

—Melissa Alvarez, About.com

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