

## Stick To Your Guns

When Mrs Stokes - Jillian, must remember to call her Jillian - had directed her to the barn with a knowing smile, Sara hadn't been entirely sure what she should have been expecting. As she now stood in the doorway, she realised that the sight that greeted her would have trumped even her wildest imaginings.

When she'd last seen Nick, more than a month earlier, he'd still been sporting more bandages than the mummies at the Luxor and a hair cut that would have made the average bootcamp newbie look like a long haired hippy. He'd been pale, too, with deep shadows beneath his eyes a testament to the nightmares that kept him awake. In short, he'd been more corpse-like than any live human being should ever be. The contrast between then and now was stark. The bandages were gone and if there were still some scars on his arms, they were pale and fading fast. The hair had grown back, too. As for the pallor and the dark circles, they'd been banished by a thick layer of tan and, to judge by his current occupation, a healthy amount of exercise.

As for that current occupation, Sara had to grin. Bales of hay and crash dummies weren't terribly alike, but apparently they could be thrown just as easily.

"Most done, Momma."

He must have heard the barn door open, though he hadn't bothered to check to see who his visitor was - something that amused Sara, once she'd successfully deciphered his words. His tan wasn't the only thing to have thickened appreciably; she didn't think she'd ever heard his drawl this deep.

"Oh, don't stop on my account," she said, announcing her presence. "I'm enjoying the show."

There was a loud squawk and the bale dropped back to where it had been picked up from with a graceless thud. "What the--" For the first time he turned to face the doorway. "You're not m'mom."

"Good thing too," said Sara with a grin. "Otherwise that would be all kinds of awkward."

That earned her a grin in return. It wasn't quite the full Nick Stokes hundred watt smile, but it was close enough. "Sara - what are you doing here?"

"Well, you know me. I have at least ten weeks of leave piled up - that I haven't, somehow, managed to lose through suspension - so I thought I'd actually use some of it and come see you." She started to step forwards, intending to offer him a hug, but to her surprise he held up a hand. "What? I can't say hi properly?"

"You, ah, might not want to until I've cleaned up," said Nick, gesturing vaguely with his

hands. "Horseshit's not quite a decomp for destroying clothes but it can be a bitch to clean off all the same."

Sara took a quick glance down at the dress slacks and blouse she'd travelled in and recognised that she probably was a little overdressed for spending too much time in a barn. "Thanks for the warning, then."

"Won't be a second," he said, turning back to the bale he'd dropped. "Just need to finish off."

"Like I said," Sara answered as the bale got flung across the barn, "don't mind me."

"I won't." Another bale joined its compatriot. "I want to get done before Momma decides I've done enough."

That was the first even sideways mention that he wasn't quite as hale as he looked. Knowing Nick, it would probably also be the last one, but at least it gave her a clue. "What is it you're actually doing? Apart from throwing bales of hay around, that is; I can see that for myself."

He snorted. "Restacking 'em, ready for the next cut." Another bale went sailing across the barn. "Next crop's 'most ready for cuttin'."

"Hay's a crop now?" It wasn't a subject Sara had ever given much thought to.

Nick looked over his shoulder at her. "Sure it is." He picked up the last bale. "It's bedding and fodder for the horses." He heaved it in the direction the other bales had travelled. "Same for the cattle." He brushed his hands against his thighs. "Least, when this place was a fully working ranch. Just the horses these days."

"It isn't a working ranch?"

Nick shook his head. "When Cisco made the bench, he didn't really have the time for it. Said he didn't want to spend his weekends going over ranch accounts instead of spending time with his family. What he and mom are gonna do when he retires next year, though, is anyone's guess." He started towards the door. "So, uh, really; what brings you to Texas?"

Sara smiled. "Really? Your mom - both your parents, actually - invited us all to come visit, once you'd had some time to..."

"Recover?" said Nick wryly.

"Heal," said Sara. "And, like I said, I had ten weeks of leave built up, so since we couldn't all come - though, Greg did try and get me to pack him in my suitcase," Nick snorted

with amusement, "I suggested I came and, uh, saw how things were."

"So here you are." He reached the doorway. "You didn't have to, y'know. I know this is kinda middle-of-nowhere, but we do have a telephone; if you just wanted to see how things were, you could have called."

"And you'd have told me things were 'fine', just like you've been doing for Warrick and Catherine and Greg, and I still wouldn't know."

Nick had the grace to look sheepish. "Guess there is that." He folded his arms across his chest. "So if I said I was fine now, would you believe me?"

Sara smiled. "I'd say you were getting there. I'd definitely say you look better than the last time I saw you."

"Was that before or after they let me out of hospital? Things got real fuzzy for a spell." Now he sounded sheepish, too.

Sara reached out and gently squeezed his arm. "Hey; it's okay. Things were pretty fuzzy for all of us for a while - at least you had the benefit of good drugs. We just had Ecklie's idea of coffee."

"Ouch."

"I shouldn't knock it. He's actually been almost human recently. He's even covered a few scenes when we've been really pressed."

"Has he lost any more bodies?" Nick asked.

Sara giggled. "No. But, uh, he did get possibly the stupidest trick roll we've had in years."

Nick blinked. "Ecklie did a trick roll?"

"He spent maybe a week afterwards telling anyone who'd listen that it 'wasn't the lab AD's job to deal with a newbie prostitute too dumb to keep a hold of her handcuff keys', but yeah. He really did go process a trick roll."

"Oh now you've said that much, you've gotta tell me what she did."

Sara gestured towards the house. "I'll tell you on the way up, cause you're right, you do need to clean up."

"Not as bad as decomp."

"No - but it's bad enough." With a mischievous smile, she added, "I might even go as far

as to say you smell."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Did warn you." They started towards the house. "So tell me about Ecklie's trick roll."

"Well, the call PD got was that a woman was being held against her will in a hotel room - she'd yelled for help and finally someone had decided to call the cops on the noise. They busted into the room and found this skinny brunette girl handcuffed to the headboard with a fat bald guy passed out on the floor, buck naked. So the cops called CSI because there was no way what the girl was saying made any kind of sense, and Ecklie ended up with the call. I think Gris had intended to give it to Greg, except that right as he was about to do assignments, we got a call to a big gang shoot out just off Industrial. Ecklie wanted all hands to that because of it being high profile so he volunteered to cover this other scene. By the time he got there, the guy was starting to come round. Turned out, she'd slipped him a zolpidom and then they'd decided to get a little kinky."

"She loses the keys and then the John passes out, leaving her stuck there," Nick completed, grinning. "I bet Ecklie enjoyed sorting that one out."

Sara smirked. "Actually, I think he did, but I'm sure if you ask him he'll bitch about it."

Nick tipped back his head and laughed. "Man, I would have loved to have seen his face."

Sara smiled. It was good to see him laugh. There hadn't, she recognised, been enough of that lately. Even without Walter Gordon, she knew that the cases had been grinding him down and stuck both in her own pit of despair and on her own shift, she hadn't found a way to reach out. Not until **that** night. Not until it had almost been too late.

They had reached the back porch of the house now and he was bending over to unlace his boots.

"Thought you hated taking your shoes off," she teased.

"I hate the idea of scrubbing floors even more," he shot back. "And Momma's never been happy with us kids trackin' mud through her clean kitchen."

"In this case, I'm not sure the mud's so much of the problem," said Sara dryly.

"That, too."

The door suddenly opened and Jillian appeared, looking amused. "Thought I heard voices," she said. "Lunch is in half an hour, Nicky. Why don't you show Sara up to the guest room so she can freshen up after her flight?"

Sara had to swallow a smile as Nick did a double-take. "She's staying here?" Then he

looked at her. "You're staying here?"

"Of course she is," said Jillian in a tone of voice that suggested she considered her son had taken complete leave of his senses.

"Only for a couple of days," Sara felt compelled to add, seeing a small measure of panic creeping into Nick's expression. "There's a conference in Dallas - that's kinda why visit now than, say, next week."

"She was going to stay in Dallas the whole time," Jillian continued, "until I pointed out how far out of Dallas the ranch is."

"Oh."

"So you can show her up to the guest room," Jillian finished, "and then you can go and take a shower yourself. I'm not sharing the table with someone who smells like they've spent all morning shovelling horseshit."

"Yes, Momma."

Again Sara swallowed a smile, this time at the resignation in Nick's voice. It was the sound of someone who'd long since learned not to bother arguing with someone who was, as Sara had discovered, almost a force of nature when it came to having her own way.

Apparently satisfied with the response, Jillian merely nodded. "Lunch in twenty minutes," she said and disappeared back inside.

"She railroaded you," said Nick.

"Strongly suggested, maybe," Sara replied. "If you don't want me to stay, though, I can go. I don't want to crowd you."

That provoked a small smile. "Sar, you're 'bout the only person I know who doesn't crowd me. And if you really want to stay out here in the boonies, I'm not gonna freak out. Well," he added wryly, "probably not. No guarantees on that one." Before she could follow up on that remark, he'd swung the door open. "C'mon; Momma likes things punctual and I probably do need a shower in the worst way."

Sara managed a chuckle. "Maybe not the worst way - at least this won't involve lemons."

Nick just laughed and led the way indoors.

After lunch - a meal enlivened considerably by Jillian's tales of the pitfalls of combining a full career as a public defender with being a mother to seven - Sara found herself out on the back porch of the house, sitting on an old fashioned bench swing and enjoying sunshine that she normally seldom saw. The view was both beautiful and soothing. She could see, perhaps for the first time, why Nick had chosen to recuperate here rather than staying in Las Vegas. The miles of open spaces and fresh air were just about as far from a Plexiglas coffin six feet under as you could get.

At the sound of footsteps, she looked round just in time to see a wiry yellow dog crane its neck and drop a beaten up tennis ball into her lap before sitting down and looking hopeful.

"Uh, hi?" Sara offered, feeling a little nonplussed. She could work out that the dog wanted her to throw the ball, but, in truth, she wasn't sure if that was something she should do. She and dogs had never been more than uneasy allies at best.

"Maisy, you're shameless, you know that?"

It took Sara a second to recognise that Nick was addressing the dog. To her amusement, the dog's head promptly drooped as if to say she was sorry for the presumption.

"Don't mind her," Nick continued, coming to sit on the steps just in front of the bench swing. "She's an overgrown puppy and thinks anyone who's sitting here is only out here to play with her." He turned so that he could look at her. "She won't bite. More likely lick you to death."

Sara wrinkled her nose. "I'd prefer the biting."

"Ooh." A small grin crossed Nick's face. "That's right."

"What is?"

"Here, gimme the ball." He held out his hand for the tennis ball. "I just remembered something Warrick told me."

Gingerly, Sara handed over the ratty object. "Warrick?"

"About how he knew about grinning suppressing the gag reflex." He threw the ball out into the open grassland and with an excited yap, Maisy was off after it.

Sara frowned. "What?"

"Something about a spit bucket, as I recall."

The penny dropped and Sara felt her cheeks flushing bright red. "I'm going to kill him."

Maisy returned, ball in mouth and wagging her flail-like tail vigorously. "Hey; it kept Sanders from tossing his cookies all over the crime scene. It's a small price to pay."

"Wait. He told Greg, too?"

Nick threw the ball again and chuckled. "No, I got the explanation out of 'Rick later."

"What scene was it?"

"That pet store B&E 'Rick and I pulled about two weeks before the shift change. Gris got us to take Greg with us for experience. Unfortunately, half the evidence was covered in bird guano. Never believed people could literally turn green until I saw Greg go green enough to give a lime a case of envy."

"You made him sort through guano?"

"No, I made him help me sort through guano." Maisy dropped the ball at Nick's feet and offered another yap. He picked it up and obligingly threw it again. "The store specialised in exotic birds. There was a lot of the stuff."

Sara giggled. "Poor Greg."

"He got over it."

"So, you know my weakness, you know Greg's, you must know Warrick's--"

"It, uh, came up - 'scuse the expression - in the same conversation," Nick agreed.

"Right. So you know what gets to us yet, I don't think I've ever seen you gag. There's gotta be something that does it, though."

Nick smiled. "Yep."

"So what is it?" Sara asked. "I mean, liquid man didn't; bodily fluids don't; guano doesn't; obviously horseshit doesn't--"

"Which is just as well," Nick pointed out as Maisy returned and dropped the ball at his feet again.

"Right. So?"

Nick threw the ball and watched Maisy bound after it. "Like I said, there is one thing - and it has cropped up in evidence. Not my fault you guys didn't notice."

Sara started for a moment. "What?"

"You'll laugh."

"No I won't."

Nick offered a lopsided smile. "You will."

"Hand on my heart, I won't laugh." Now Sara wondered what this mystery substance was.

"Don't make promises you won't be able to keep, Sidle," he warned. "Even Momma couldn't keep a straight face about it."

That gave Sara pause. "Your mom laughed?"

"Maybe that was more because of how she found out." Maisy deposited the ball again and Nick obliged by throwing it once more.

"Okay, now you've really gotta tell me," said Sara.

Nick smiled ruefully. "Peanut butter. Makes me heave pretty much every time. And I'll give you three guesses what Kathy and Ellie used to eat every day when they came home from school."

Kathy and Ellie were, Sara knew, his two closest sisters. "PBJ?"

"Oh yeah."

Sara smiled. "That's actually kinda cute."

"Glad I can amuse you."

"I'm not laughing."

"No, but I'm not sure cute's a huge improvement." He smiled, taking the sting out of his words. "What Momma found so amusing was last weekend. Kathy and her boys were visiting. I offered to make the boys some sandwiches, just to keep them going, and they both demanded PBJ."

Now Sara did giggle. "Did you do it?"

"Yeah, but Momma wanted to know what I found so funny. She and Kathy both found it hilarious to know that the smell still makes me heave."



Maisy returned again, but this time, instead of giving the ball back to Nick, she once more dropped it on Sara's lap as if to say, "Well you need to join in too."

"Maisy, have a few manners - Sara's a guest," said Nick severely, holding his hand out for the ball. "And she's not gonna throw for you from there, any way."

As Sara gingerly handed the tennis ball across to him, she would almost swear the dog was pouting, though she took off after the ball once it was thrown readily enough.

"Like I said," Nick continued. "Overgrown puppy."

"How long will she do this for?" Sara asked.

"As long as one of us is willin' to toss the ball for her," Nick answered. "Think she feels that if there's someone out here, she has to keep them busy."

Sara chuckled at that and, for a while at least, conversation lapsed. True to his word, as long as Nick kept throwing the ball, Maisy kept charging after it. Sara got the impression that this was an old, old game. She could almost see a much younger Nick, sitting in much the same place, tossing the ball time after time for a succession of dogs.

"This must have been a nice place to grow up," Sara observed eventually.

"Had its moments."

"I'm not sure I'd have ever left."

Nick smiled faintly. "You're seeing it on a good day. It can look a whole lot less nice with the wind whipping through the yard and the rain comin' down in torrents and you've still got to go out and do your chores. It's also kinda lonely sometimes. Kathy left for college before I'd finished junior high so for a while it was just me."

Sara blinked. "I guess I never realised how much of a gap there was between you and your sister."

"Five years. Never been able to decide if I was an after thought or an accident." He smiled again as Maisy approached with the ball. "It never made any difference to anyone, but I can do the math as well as the next guy." He rubbed Maisy's ears and got to his feet. "Guess I should show you around a bit - if you're feelin' up to it. I mean, if you worked last night and need to take a nap, y'know, don't--"

Sara giggled. Nick could be cute when he started babbling. "It's okay. I've been working on Swing the last couple of nights."

"How come?"

"Mostly because of coming to the conference here - it never looks good if you show up to a conference and spend the whole first day comatose."

"Good point."

"And then, we've all kinda been trading off shifts lately. Ecklie's reorganising the shifts again and Sophia's leaving at the end of this month so there's a lot of stuff kinda hanging at the moment."

The biggest thing hanging over the lab, Sara knew, was whether or not Nick was going to return, but she wasn't sure if that was something she should even raise with him. Not until she'd got a much better idea of how he was really doing behind the repeated "I'm fines". And maybe not even then.

Nick, for his part, shrugged. "Surprised you got the vacation time approved."

"Ecklie's finally managed to hire a couple of new CSIs, which has helped," Sara admitted. "But he hasn't finalised who's gonna be on which shift." In an effort to move the discussion away from the chaos that had enveloped the Las Vegas Crime Lab, she got to her feet. "Weren't you offering to show me around?"

For a moment or two, it looked as though Nick was going to say something, but then he smiled faintly and shook his head. "One tour, comin' up."

The easiness of their conversation had gone, though. Instead, Nick reserved his remarks for simply pointing out objects or places of interest and Sara found herself simply smiling politely and nodding at each thing in turn. Awkward didn't begin to cover it. Sara began to wonder if, perhaps, staying at the ranch was a mistake. Maybe it was too soon - or maybe she should have spoken to him ahead of the visit instead of relying on his mother's assessment.

It was only when they reached the edge of the wide open paddock where three horses could be seen cropping the grass beneath a couple of shady trees that Nick said anything that wasn't related to the tour. "Do you ride?"

Sara blinked, a little startled by the question. "Uh, no. Never really had the chance to."

Nick leaned on the paddock fence, staring out across the open grass. "Only way to see the rest of the ranch is on horseback," he said.

"You ride?" Sara could have kicked herself the moment the words left her mouth. "That's a stupid question, isn't it?"

Nick huffed with laughter. "Kinda." He held his hand out to one of the horses, a grey,

who'd come over to see what they were doing. "This, just by the by, is Murphy." He gently rubbed the horse's nose. "She's possibly the most curious horse on the ranch."

"Can I--" What was it you did with horses? Stroke them? Pet them?

Nick just smiled. "If you hold your hand out, she'll come over to see you. Let her say hello."

Hesitantly, Sara followed his example, though it was hard not to flinch when Murphy snuffled at her outstretched hand.

"Murph, this is Sara - we're gonna see if we can convince her to go out with us tomorrow morning, so be nice."

"Out?" Sara found that Murphy's nose was surprisingly soft and silky to the touch.

"Like I said, only way to see the rest of the ranch is to ride."

"Did you miss the part where I said I'd never ridden before?"

Nick chuckled. "No, but it's not that difficult. Becky regularly brings some of her kids out of the city to go riding here."

"Oldest sister?"

"Second oldest - she works with foster kids, so they're not literally hers. Most of them have never ridden before either."

"It's a lot easier as a kid. I'm old enough to know what could happen."

That got another chuckle. "You're making it sound like you expect to get thrown."

Sara eyed Murphy. "It would be a long way to fall."

"Murph's a good girl; she wouldn't buck you and unless your sense of balance is way off, you won't just fall off. Besides, all we're talking here is a nice gentle trail ride, not a flat out gallop."

To her general surprise, Sara found herself wavering. "I can't believe I'm actually thinking about this."

Nick smiled. "I can promise that it'll be more interesting than a day sitting around here at the house."

"Wouldn't I need special equipment? Like boots?"

"As long as you have a pair of jeans with you, the rest doesn't matter. Like I said; Becky brings her kids out here to go riding so we've got all kinds of kit you can borrow."

"You have an answer for everything."

"Only about this," said Nick. His voice had lost the teasing quality and he suddenly sounded incredibly sad. "I'm sorry - I shouldn't have pushed."

Before Sara could take in what he'd said, he'd turned and started back towards the house. By the time the words had penetrated, he'd built up quite a lead and she found she had to run just to catch up with him.

"Nick, wait a minute, will you?" she called. He didn't stop, but he did at least moderate his stride so that she could keep up. "If anyone should be sorry, it's me."

"Why? You'd already said no; I should have taken that as an answer."

"One, I didn't actually say no - I just pointed out I've never ridden a horse before and you answered my questions about why it wouldn't be that difficult. Two, I do actually want to see the rest of the ranch. I mean, you once described Old Man's Canyon to me and I'd really like to see it - you made it sound so beautiful. The problem is that, three, I have to admit I'm a little scared of horses."

"Oh."

"I'm a city girl, Nick," Sara continued gently. "This might as well be another planet. A very beautiful planet, but it's a little scary, too."

That got a small smile. "Less scary, more like quiet," he suggested.

"That, too."

"I didn't think Tomoles Bay was all that urban."

"It's not," Sara agreed, "but I only had to stand on the front porch to see the neighbour's house. Here, I don't think I even know which direction to look."

To her amusement, Nick jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "That way, about five miles." Then he pointed in the other direction. "Or that way, about ten miles."

Sara couldn't help but giggle. "Thanks."

"Well this is supposed to be a tour."

As they neared the house, Sara spotted something. "Uh, Nick? I guess I'm not worried if you're not, but there's a cat sitting on the barn roof."

"That's Copernicus," Nick answered. "Because he's always star gazing. And no, it's nothing to be worried about. He sits up there most of the day - it's his place."

"It looks so high."

"Have you ever tried keeping a cat from doing something?"

"Good point." Sara eyed the watchful feline. "Still..."

"Here - I'll show you how he gets up," said Nick, veering towards the barn.

Sara stopped dead. "You're not going to climb up and join him, are you?"

"Hell no. The last time I tried that, Cisco tanned my hide for scaring the crap out of everyone."

Reassured, Sara followed him into the barn. "How old were you when you tried that stunt?"

"Nine or ten. Old enough to know better, not old enough to actually think about it." He stopped at the foot of a ladder and gestured upwards. "Nic goes on up here into the loft. Then onto a box and out through the skylight onto the roof. Pretty safe journey, provided you're a cat."

Almost as if to prove Nick's point, there was a sudden thud and a moment later the ginger tom appeared at the top of the ladder.

"Must be dinner time," said Nick as Copernicus descended the ladder in brisk fashion. "That's the only time he comes down."

"But it's only--" Sara trailed off as she looked at her watch. "How did it get to be six pm?"

"The usual way," Nick answered, amusement on his face. "I need to go see to the chickens - you'd probably better go on up to the house. I'll be along in a few."

Part of Sara was tempted to offer to help out, but she suspected she'd be more hindrance than help. She also got the sense that Nick wanted a little space. "Sure."

She wasn't entirely surprised to find Jillian waiting on the back porch.

"Presume he's seeing to the chickens," said the older woman knowingly.

Sara nodded. "He said he wouldn't be long."

"I'm sure he won't; there's pot pie for dinner and he knows that won't wait." Jillian smiled, but there was a nervous edge to it. "So what do you think?"

"I think he's doing okay," said Sara. "Better than I thought from when we've spoken to him on the phone, at least."

"Nicky has a powerful need for everyone to believe that he's fine, even when he's got a broken arm and is running a temperature of a hundred and three." Jillian shook her head, a tolerant, motherly smile on her face. "But if you think he's getting better and I think he's getting better, we can't both be too far wrong." Her smile slipped. "Has he said anything about going back?"

"I haven't asked."

"Part of me hopes he won't," said Jillian with a sigh. "Part of me knows he will. And about the only consolation is that I know that he works with good people. I know you won't let it happen again."

Sara smiled. "Over our dead bodies."