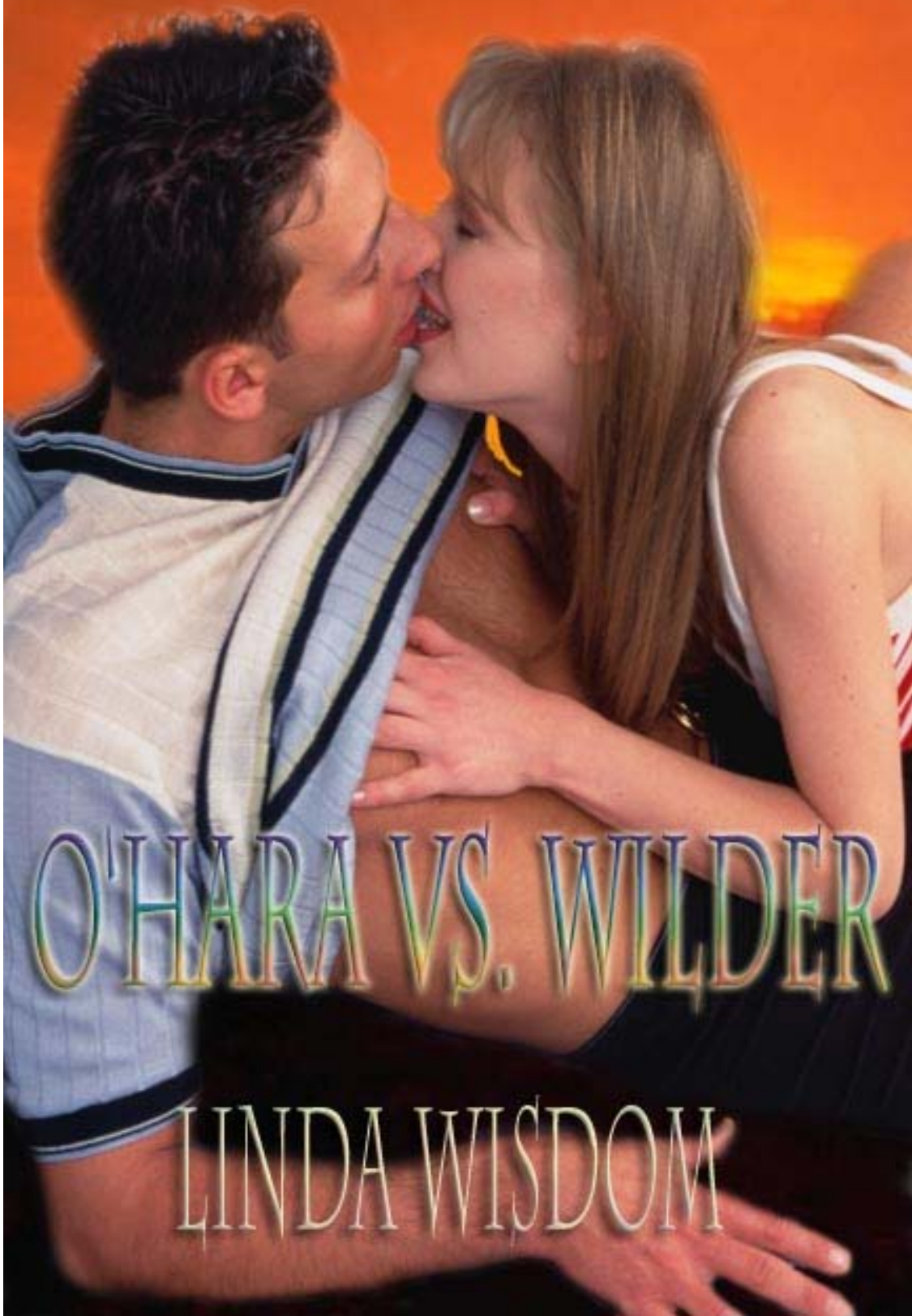


Triskelion Publishing Presents



O'HARA VS. WILDER

LINDA WISDOM

O'Hara vs. Wilder

By

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Triskelion Publishing

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PROLOGUE

“Come on, guys, don't you think you're carrying your paranoia just a little too far?” Jake Wilder leaned back in his chair, resting his booted foot on top of the opposite knee. His shiny gold badge, clipped to his belt, looked at odds with his frayed sweatshirt and torn jeans, which were a lot more compatible with his ragged beard and hair that hung almost to his shoulders. He knew his less-than-professional appearance wasn't helping him make a favorable impression on the three men facing him, who wore the traditional dark suits, white shirts, and conservative ties. Neither was the fact that he'd been working undercover for the last ten days and hadn't had time for a shower.

Jake held back a grin at their identical expressions of distaste as they stared back at him.

“This has to be kept on the QT, Jake,” Roger DeWitt-DimWitt- to those who worked under him stated. “This counterfeiting operation appears to have sprung up in the last six months or so and is expanding into Arizona and Texas. Our sources have pinpointed the origin to Crater Rock. It's some hick town near the Arizona border.”

Jake's interest was piqued by the town's name, but he didn't give any indication of it by word or manner.

Roger continued scanning his notes. “Some ranching goes on there and some tourism, but that's it.” He closed the file folder. “Tess O'Hara is the town sheriff.”

Now Jake was most *definitely* interested! Still, he kept his expression bland.

“You need to head over to Crater Rock and find out what you can, but O'Hara is not to be told why you're there.”

Not by a flicker of an eyelash did Jake show his displeasure at that piece of news. “Why not?”

“Because crooked sheriffs aren't anything new and who says she isn't part of it?” Ted, one of the other superiors, spoke up.

Jake's dark brown eyes snapped with fire at the man he'd had disliked for years. “Tess O'Hara was one of the best operatives this office ever had until you fools refused to stand behind her. “Watch it, Wilder,” the third man warned.

Jake turned to him. “Hey, I call it as I see it. You guys think Tess is part of a counterfeiting ring?” He leaned forward menacingly. “I say you're full of shit.”

“Cool it, Jake,” Roger cut in.

He sat back in the chair, his movement as graceful as a jungle animal's. “She needs to know I'm coming.”

"It's not a good idea." Roger slapped a file folder on his desk. "We've kept a watch on O'Hara for the past year, and while on the outside she looks clean as a whistle, she does go in for some high-priced entertainment that doesn't reconcile with a small-town sheriff's salary. Her bank records don't show any large deposits, but she's smart enough to know how to keep it hidden."

"You've had her watched?" Jake's low voice held dangerous undertones. "You actually felt Tess was such a viable suspect, you had her under surveillance?"

"It's standard procedure," Ted snapped. Jake's reply as to what Ted could do with procedure was decidedly profane.

"Just settle down, Jake," Roger ordered. "While we're checking to determine if she is or isn't in it, we don't want Tess to know the whole story. You worked with her. I'm sure you can come up with a good reason for going out there to see her."

Jake shook his head. "Not without her knowing what's going on. If my cover's blown, I want to know I have a reliable backup. She has to be told."

Ted uttered an incredulous laugh. "You're not indispensable, Wilder. If you won't do it our way, we'll get someone else who will."

Jake braced his elbows on the chair arms, pressing his fingers together in front of his face. "Go ahead. They'll screw up, and you'll have to send me in to clean up the mess. By then the whole scam will be blown, and your bad guys will just move their operation somewhere else. Talk about a black mark on your records," he chuckled. "But hey, it'll be your rear end on the line, not mine."

Roger looked as if he wanted to kill someone-namely Jake. All three men knew Jake had them backed into a corner. He was right. It was a tricky job, and if they hadn't considered him the best one for it, they wouldn't have pulled him in.

"We'll notify Sheriff O'Hara that you'll be in the area by the beginning of next week."

"Dammit, Roger," Ted said with a growl.

Roger held up his hand for silence. He picked up another folder and handed it to Jake. "This should give you enough information."

Jake stood up and accepted the folder. He lifted it to his forehead and saluted them. "Gentlemen, it's been nice doing business with you. Please feel free to call on me anytime." He walked out of the office, deliberately not closing the door behind him.

Whistling a tune under his breath, Jake sauntered down the hallway, stopping when he reached a pay phone. He quickly punched in his phone credit-card number and waited, silently counting the rings on the other end of the line. He turned, bracing his shoulder against the wall as he faced the department's main

entryway. He straightened up when a woman's voice came on the line.

“Hey, Legs, guess who's coming to dinner?”

ONE

It took a few seconds for Jake to register the significance of the high-pitched wail of a siren and the flashing lights on the vehicle following him. He swore under his breath as he pulled over to the side of the road. Drumming his fingers against the steering wheel, he kept an eye on the rearview mirror and watched the black-and-white Bronco slide to a stop behind him.

Humming under his breath, he watched the truck's door swing open. A pair of khaki-covered legs appeared and made their way toward him.

He looked up and found his angelic smile reflected in mirrored sunglasses under the pulled-down brim of a tan Stetson. "Is there anything wrong, Officer? Gee, great sunglasses. I gotta pair just like them. They're wonderful for intimidating the bad guys, aren't they?"

The officer's face could have been carved from stone. "Hey, Slick, we've got a big problem. Now, I know how it is. The sun's shining, you've got the top down, the Stones are blasting on the stereo. What else can you do but cruise down the road at a leisurely eighty-five miles an hour?" A leather-bound folder appeared in one gloved hand. "Thing is, Slick, the speed limit around here is only fifty-five. So why don't you be a good boy and show me your driver's license, your car registration, and your proof of insurance."

Jake nodded in agreement as he shifted his hip from one side to the other to pull out his wallet. "How do you feel about one law officer making a concession for another?". He flipped open the case with his badge and identification, holding it up for the officer's inspection. "Sort of professional courtesy."

"Hate to tell you this, Slick, but that doesn't look like a license to operate this hot little number," the officer drawled, indicating Jake's bright yellow Corvette Stingray. "I'd really rather see that than your Junior G-Man badge and ID card."

He sighed and pointed to the glove compartment. "I also have my weapon in there."

"Then take it out slow and easy, and we'll both be happy. And while you're at it, why don't you turn your music down to a dull, roar. No use in scaring the 'wildlife.'"

Jake studied the officer writing up his ticket. "You from Crater Rock?"

"Yep."

"Nice town."

"If you like peace and quiet."

"City folk like it there?"

The pen continued scratching across the paper. "Nope. Occupation?" the officer asked, as if Jake hadn't already shown his ID.

He pulled out a cigarette and lit up. "Cop."

The officer handed the folder to Jake. “Sign down there, please. You have twenty-one days to respond.” Jake took the ticket that was handed to him. “And if you intend to stick around, I suggest you keep the speed down to a tidy double nickel.”

Jake carefully folded the ticket and stuck it in his shirt pocket. “I’ll think about it.”

The officer tapped the side of the car with a flat palm. “Have a nice day, Slick.”

Jake watched the officer walk back to the waiting Bronco and climb in. He was tempted to peel out but decided against it. He whistled a tuneless melody under his breath and stared into the rearview mirror.

“So, did you realize you used my nickname, Legs? I gotta give you credit. You acted the part of the small-town cop to a tee.” He reached for the gearshift, put the car in gear, and drove onto the road at a sedate pace worthy of a society matron. He glanced again into the rearview mirror as he drove away. “Did you honestly think that your threats would keep me from coming out here? Since you’ve decided to be hostile about this, I guess I’ll have to make a few changes in my game plan, and, honey, you are not going to be happy with it at all.”

The Bronco remained in place for the next five minutes while its driver watched the bright yellow sports car finally disappear in the shimmering heat waves trailing across the road.

“Damn him.” The voice belonging to the person in the uniform and mirrored sunglasses was unmistakably female.

Tess wasn’t able to get back to her office for another two hours. She’d had to check out Jed Carter’s complaint that Huey had been chasing his cattle again. She suspected that Huey, a Nubian goat from a neighboring ranch, had either been a cutting horse or an Australian herding dog in another life.

After listening to Jed’s ranting and raving, she drove over to the Randolphs’ ranch to tell Nettie she had to keep a closer eye on her prize goat if she didn’t want him to end up as the guest of honor at one of Jed’s weekend barbecues. Her warning only brought howls of outrage from Nettie. She screamed at Tess that if that old coot, Jed, dared to threaten her darling Huey or hurt one hair on Huey’s back, Nettie would take a shotgun to him! Tess stuck around to make sure Nettie wasn’t planning to call on Jed before heading out.

She stopped long enough to down a couple aspirin with a mouthful of cold coffee from her thermos. By now her headache had barely subsided and her stomach was loudly demanding food. She was fuming because Jake had showed up after the warning she’d given him when he’d called. All his talk about coming to Crater Rock on a case, as far as she was concerned, was just that-talk. This was *her* turf, dammit! A tiny smile curved her lips as she looked down at her ticket book. Writing out that ticket had been very satisfying.

Memories suddenly intruded, overlapping her most recent run-in with Jake. His coffee-brown hair was still unruly. As usual, he was in need of a haircut. She could see five years had added some gray to the temples. Sunglasses may have shaded his chocolate-brown eyes, but she doubted they'd lost any of their sharpness. His features were still rough-hewn that he couldn't be considered conventionally handsome, but that had never stopped the women from coming around. The creases by his eyes were cut deeper, and she noticed a fairly recent scar on his forearm. He still wore jeans that belonged in a ragbag and looked tight enough to restrict his breathing. His face was dark with a late-day beard, and she recalled he usually needed to shave twice a day when he was working a sting. Unfortunately, to a woman who'd been living in a desert for almost four years, he was a most welcome sight.

She wearily climbed out of her truck and headed for the meager office space in city hall the city council allotted to the sheriff's department. A department made up of herself, three deputies, and a dispatcher.

"If he thinks he can come in here and take over just because he's a fed, he has another think coming," she muttered, taking off her hat and slapping it against her thigh as she slammed her palm against the swinging glass door labeled Crater Rock Sheriff's Department. "This is my town, and I'll take care of anything that goes down here. I don't need him or anyone.

Raucous male laughter greeted her as she entered the office. She muttered a more pungent curse under her breath as she approached the waist-high counter where Wilma, the dispatcher, kept track of any officer on patrol and fielded incoming calls.

"Hey, Chief," Walt, one of her deputies, said with a broad grin. "We've got a surprise for you."

Her answering smile was sorely strained. "I doubt that."

"Sweetheart!" Jake stood up, from *her* chair, dammit! He walked over to her with his arms outstretched. Before Tess could recover and get the hell out of there, he'd wrapped his arms around her and fastened his mouth on hers.

Tess's eyes popped wide open as Jake's kiss sent shock waves clear down to her toes. Then, it careened back into her pussy with the force of a high octaned vibrator. When his tongue parted her lips, she deliberately bit down, hard. He didn't flinch. He just looked into her eyes, his amused expression battling her furious gaze.

"Since you refused to forgive me when I called you a few days ago, I decided I'd have to come down and beg your pardon in person," he cooed as he pulled back but still kept a deceptively tight grip on her. "I admit it. I was wrong. I shouldn't have said what I did. And you left before I could ask for your forgiveness. So I'm here now with the hope that you're not going to run me out of town." His eyes danced

with devilish lights.

“When hell freezes over,” she said under her breath, keeping a tight smile pasted on her lips. “What do you think you're doing?”

“Playing the part of a besotted suitor, love,” he whispered in her ear. “It's a new role for me, but I think I'm doing pretty good, don't you?”

“Told you it was a surprise!” Walt hooted, pumping one arm up and down. “Jake here just showed up awhile ago looking for you. We told him to stick around. That you were due in soon.”

“Tess, you never told us about Jake,” Wilma chided. She gingerly patted her orange-red beehive, a hairstyle she hadn't changed for more than thirty years, even if the color changed on a regular basis depending on her and her hairdresser's whims. “He's so masculine,” she confided in a stage whisper. “And sexy.”

Jake grinned at the woman's description. He released Tess, now confident she wouldn't try to kill him, and leaned across the counter. “The kind of compliment a man wants to hear. If Tess here throws me out, can I come knocking on your door?”

The older woman tittered. “Anytime.”

Tess wrapped her fingers around Jake's arm, ignoring the temptation to stroke the rock-hard muscle when she really wanted to dig her nails into it. “Come with me,” she muttered, pulling him toward the frosted-glass door with her name painted on it in gold letters.

“Honey, shouldn't we wait until we're alone?” he asked, moving more than willingly with her.

“Tess, George is on the phone. He says he caught the kid who's been stealing Cokes from the machine,” Wilma called after them. “And he wants you to come down and throw the book at the kid.”

She sighed. “Okay, tell him I'm on my way.” She glared at Jake. “You stay right here so we can have this out, then you can toddle back to San Diego in your hot little car.”

He leaned back in the chair, his hands laced behind his head. “I never had such a sexy peace officer write me a ticket before. Although I have to say, your penmanship leaves a lot to be desired.”

Tess pulled him to his feet as she murmured something in his ear. Jake's smile froze as he listened to what was most definitely not sweet nothings.

He screwed his face up in a mock frown. “Are you sure that's anatomically possible?”

“By the time I get through with you, it will be.”

She snatched her hat off the counter and strode out the door.

“She hasn't been in the best of moods for the past few days,” Wilma confided to Jake.

“Yeah, we figured it's that time of the month,” Walt snickered. “Women sure get strange then, don't

they? I've heard women even use that as a defense when they kill somebody."

Jake had a pretty good idea what the reason was behind Tess's bad mood. He walked over to the younger man and slung an arm around Walt's shoulder. "Let me give you a piece of advice, Walt. That lady can kick your butt from here to Seattle without getting winded. If I were you, I'd be real careful what I say about women's issues around her. The lady has a nasty temper and isn't afraid to show it. She once dated a veterinarian and she likes to brag that he taught her how to castrate someone with a minimum of fuss."

Walt winced. "Yeah."

"He's *what*?" Tess was barely hanging on to her frayed temper when she returned to the station after a lengthy argument with George on how to handle a kid with a bad attitude, only to learn that Jake had taken off.

Five-foot-two Wilma looked up at five-foot-ten Tess without one ounce of fear. "I told you. He's waiting for you at your house. There was no reason for him to hang around here waiting for you to finish listening to George's whining that the kids are forcing him into poverty when we all know he creates his own problems with the way he treats the kids who come into his store. I gave Jake your spare key along with directions. That boy looked ready to drop, Tess. You should have thought of it yourself," she said with concern. "Especially after all he's been through."

Tess's eyes narrowed to aquamarine slits. "What exactly did he tell you?"

Wilma leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Why, how that last battle you two had made him ill. And here we all thought you only went to Palm Springs for some sun and shopping." Her dark eyes displayed hurt. Wilma fancied herself the department's mother figure and expected confidences from her "babies" to go with her self-imposed title. "Honey, that man really cares for you. And we all know good men are hard to find. Don't let him get away."

Tess rolled her eyes. "No, no, no." She threw her hands up in disgust. "I will not allow this." She stalked out of the room, hitting the swinging door with the flat of her hand.

"You can't tell me she isn't suffering from one of those women's things." Walt spoke up after Tess stormed out. "Hey, no woman goes off like that unless her hormones are doing strange things." He held up his hands in "I surrender" when Wilma glared at him.

"I want you to know I read those articles about PMS and all that other female stuff. You women have it made!"

"I swear, Walt, when you say things like that, I start to think we'd all be a lot better off if you weren't carrying a gun," she retorted.

Tess's anger had grown by leaps and bounds by the time she reached her tiny house on the outskirts of town. It escalated further when she saw the bright yellow Corvette parked in front of her house. She swung the Bronco around and backed it into the driveway.

She pulled open the screen door and stepped inside. She could hear Jake's voice humming along to loud rock music in the kitchen as she walked over to the stereo and turned down the volume. Jake appeared in the kitchen's doorway. A dish towel was tucked into his jeans' waistband, and smears of what looked suspiciously like tomato sauce were splattered across his T-shirt. While his appearance was decidedly domestic, his wicked grin was very much the opposite.

"Hi, honey, have a good day at the office?"

Tess acted purely on instinct. She did what she'd been itching to do from the moment Jake had called her with the news that he was coming out her way on business. She did what she'd wanted to do from the moment she'd pulled him over and written out the speeding ticket while he looked up at her with that devilish grin that always raised her body temperature. She did what she needed to do from the moment he'd kissed her as if there was no tomorrow.

"You son of a bitch," she hissed, walking up to him and pushing her face into his. "Who do you think you are coming into *my* town and claiming some sort of passionate love affair with me? Do you realize what your crazy stunt will do to my credibility here?"

"I wouldn't think it would have anything to do with your skills as a peace officer." He looked around the small kitchen with its less-than-modern appliances. "Although I would have thought you'd end up in a town that can afford more than a couple of kids still wet behind the ears to patrol the area and a clerk who looks as if she just stepped out of a fifties movie."

"We aren't that far behind the times!" she argued.

He shrugged. "That depends on how far behind you're talking. You may have a computer, but it looks like something out of the dark ages."

Tess pulled her hat off and tossed it onto a nearby table. She idly ruffled her bangs, not thinking that Jake would recognize an old sign of her agitation. "This isn't San Diego or Los Angeles, Jake. This is a small town that doesn't have the funding for fancy computers or state-of-the-art forensic equipment, nor do we have the crimes that require all that. We do the best we can with what we have. As for Walt and Ray, I fought like hell to get them hired on. They both had the proper training and they're doing very well. Besides, as I told you before, we don't get high-profile crimes around here."

"You could get them now. What if you're caught in a cross fire? Can you count on anybody as backup? Do they really understand that there are times when a cop has to draw his gun and fire? When he

might have to kill someone?" he said, then immediately backpedaled when he saw her whitened features. "Tess, I'm sorry." He reached out a hand.

She quickly stepped back. The last thing she wanted was for him to touch her. "There's nothing to be sorry about, Agent Wilder." She spoke in a controlled voice. "That's all in the past."

He studied her closely. He decided this wasn't a good time to accuse her of being a liar. Not if he didn't want to get thrown out, as he knew Tess wouldn't hesitate in doing. He turned away to stir something in a pot. "I hope you don't mind. I went through your cabinets and came up with something for dinner. You didn't have much, so it's nothing fancy, just spaghetti. We should probably eat it soon before it turns completely into mush."

A smile unwillingly tugged at Tess's lips. She remembered Jake's lack of cooking skills all too well.

"No wonder I haven't suffered from heartburn in the past five years."

"I resent that!" He looked properly affronted. "I'd like to remind you that I never ruined a spaghetti dinner. I've been slaving over a hot stove for the past half hour. Please don't insult the food until you've eaten it."

"You might not have exactly ruined a meal, but I'd have to say that your spaghetti never turned out like anyone else's either," she retorted, unconsciously falling back into the old banter the two had once shared. Deep within her mind was the whispered reminder that she once considered the man standing before her her best friend. And, for one night, they were even more than that.

Jake recognized what was happening and grinned.

"Wilder and O'Hara, together again. Hey, kid, with us on the job the bad guys don't have a chance. This scam will be wrapped up in no time."

Tess's smile slowly faded away. "Don't do this, Jake." Her harsh whisper told him more about her unsettled feelings than any words could.

He rubbed his hand over his jaw, wincing as the coarse bristles of his day-old beard rasped against his palm. He noticed how the late-afternoon light filtered through the sheer curtains and highlighted the wisps of dark auburn hair that had escaped Tess's French braid. "You can't hide out for the rest of your life, Tess," he said gently. "You're a damn good investigator. Much too good to be stuck out here. What's the challenge here? Finding out who stole Farmer John's chickens? This kind of Mickey Mouse work isn't for you, Legs."

She winced at the nickname that he'd given to her the first time they had worked together. Acting the part of a wealthy man's mistress, she'd worn a dress that had barely covered the essentials. Jake had taken one look at her legs and let out a long wolf whistle, claiming that with Legs around, the bad guys

wouldn't even think about going for their guns. When Tess once mentioned Jake's slick moves, he ended up with his own nickname. From then on they'd been known as Legs and Slick, and no one had touched them for the airtight cases they'd closed. "You don't know what's for me anymore, Jake. People change."

His own force of will compelled her to look at him. "Not you. Why do you think I made sure DimWitt didn't try to hand this case over to anyone else?"

Tess threw back her head and laughed. The sound was more sad than humorous. Her face was taut with some unnamed emotion. "Oh, Jake, let's do ourselves a favor and not talk over old times. I'm going to wash up for dinner. Then we'll sit down and talk about the case that brought you here, nothing else."

Jake watched her walk into the bathroom, her boot heels clicking on the tile floor. Funny, he'd never considered khaki uniforms all that sexy until he saw Tess in one. She sure gave it a completely different look. "You're wrong, Legs," he murmured. "We've got a lot to talk about."

The spaghetti was overcooked, the garlic bread too heavily spread with garlic salt and Parmesan, but Tess was determined to eat every bite and take her time doing it. She hoped that as long as she ate, Jake would remain quiet.

Since Jake had long ago been accused of not having any taste buds, he ate quickly and pushed his plate away. He laced his hands together and placed them on the table, studying the wood surface as if he'd written his questions there. As if the answers would be there too.

"There's one thing you can answer for me."

He looked up warily. "What?"

He turned his head and faced her. His dark eyes bored into hers, silently demanding an answer. "Why you ran out."

Tess had to make sure her gaze didn't waver from his. Years of working with Jake had taught her one thing. If a suspect looked away, he pounced without mercy. She wrapped her self-control around her like a flak vest. She knew it was meager protection against Jake's strong personality, but right now she took whatever she could get.

"It was in the best interests of everyone that I resign," she began as if they were words long she'd rehearsed.

He suddenly slapped the top of the table with the flat of his hand. The sound ricocheted off the walls like a gunshot.

"That's not what I meant! I read all the reports, Tess." He leaned forward and allowed his emotions to spill out. If he felt any pain inside, he was determined that she see it. "What I want to know is why you ran out on *me*. Why I woke up that morning and found you gone."

TWO

Tess pushed herself away from the table and stood up so suddenly, her chair clattered to the floor. She was too agitated to bother picking it up.

“What proof do you have that the counterfeiting ring is in this vicinity?” Her voice sounded shrill in the charged silence blanketing the room.

There was no mercy in his voice. “Don't try changing the subject, Tess. Do you know how long it took me to track you down that first time? What kind of guts it took for me to approach you after you skipped out on me without a word? Not even a damn good-bye,” he said through gritted teeth. “Even then you wouldn't tell me what caused you to bolt. All you did was tell me not to sound like some sentimental idiot, that what we had was no big deal and to stay the hell away. I've got news for you, sweetheart, this time I'm here to stay.”

She shook her head in rapid jerks, the end of her braid whipping around her neck. “I want you out of here, Jake, because this will not work. I doubt you're going to find what you're looking for in or around Crater Rock. We're talking about a small town where everyone knows everyone else and gossip is more popular than television. Secrets just aren't kept around here.”

“Then they must be going nuts trying to figure out how you kept me in the background for so long,” Jake drawled, deciding that if she wanted to change the subject, he could just as easily switch it around to work for him. “Sweetheart, we're probably tonight's conversation over dinner.”

She spun around. Something akin to horror crossed her face as she recalled the scene at the station. “What did you say to them before I showed up?”

He leaned back in his chair, an arm draped across the back. He looked so damn comfortable, Tess wanted to shoot him.

“Hey, darlin,' you know the routine. I say whatever it takes to cover my behind. This time was easy. I had to set up a past history for us. Since I was pretty sure you hadn't mentioned me,” he said with a wry look in her direction, “I think I spun a good tale. We've got a whole new past. I told them we met in L.A. about a year ago when you were there for your friend Heather's wedding. I'm a computer consultant who took one look at you and fell hard.” Tess's face turned paper white at the words that drove flaming stakes through her heart. “I kept it all pretty straightforward. Since then we meet in Palm Springs once a month or so when we both can get away. You preferred to keep the story about us quiet because we both wanted to make sure what we had was real. Then recently I decided I wanted some kind of commitment.. We had a fight, you stormed out, and I realized I was wrong to push you the way I did.” He held out his arms as if

inviting her in for a big hug. “So here I am to make it up to you.”

“You’ve-” She cleared her throat. “You’ve been following me for the past year.” She stared at the file folder on the table with horrified fascination as if it held her ugliest secrets. Revulsion warred with pain. “Is that what you’ve been doing? Documenting where I go, what I do, whom I see? You slime!”

Bitterness filled Jake’s gut as he watched the pain mar Tess’s features. office has been chasing down leads on the ring for the past year,” he said quietly. “They were checking out every possible area. Naturally they’d check out everyone who had the opportunity to get in on the scam.”

Comprehension dawned. “Of course. I’m one of the prime suspects,” she flatly stated. “Naturally you’d want to see if I was spending above my means. And I’m sure my trips into Palm Springs seemed suspicious to you paranoid types, since it’s not exactly a cheap spot for a small-town sheriff’s weekend getaway. Unless they stop to think that certain someone might have only minimal expenses at home and considers those weekends as a time to recharge her batteries.” Her aquamarine eyes flashed fire, challenging him to dispute her. “Go ahead, Jake. Tell me I’m wrong, that I’m really the one acting paranoid. That I’m seeing things that aren’t there. Tell me it’s all in my imagination!” she shouted, waiting back over to the table and leaning forward, bracing her hands on the glass top. “Damn you! You’ve been following me for the past year, watching me like some sick pervert.” She jabbed her forefinger against her chest.

“That’s not my style and you know it, Tess,” he said in a low voice. “You can’t have forgotten how DimWitt works. I didn’t even know about this case until three days ago when I was called in and asked to check out the few facts they’ve finally been able to dredge up. You know he’s always been your classic paranoid. He sees everyone as the enemy. Remember how we all used to joke that he probably tapes his mouth shut at night so he won’t spill secrets in his sleep to his wife.” He kept his eyes fastened on her face, wanting nothing more than to erase the pained distress from her eyes. “I’m not the enemy, Tess. I never have been.”

“Then why are you encroaching on my territory?” She deliberately ignored his statement.

“You can’t have forgotten that counterfeiting is a federal offense.”

She slowly leaned down and picked up her chair, carefully setting it upright and positioning it a certain way before sitting down.

“What information do you have on these people?” she asked quietly.

Jake opened the folder and withdrew a clear plastic page protector that held six small cards, each bearing a different name.

“Let’s play a game. You guess which card is legit.”

She arched an eyebrow. “What’s the prize if I guess correctly?”

"I'll do the dishes, and you know that's not an offer I generally make."

Tess looked around the kitchen littered with more food-encrusted pans than one spaghetti dinner warranted. But then Jake never did anything by half measures.

"You would have done the dishes even if I had to handcuff you to the sink."

"Kinky but effective," he said, pleased she was finally relaxing. "So, Legs, which card is the real one?" Using the tip of his finger, he pushed the plastic page across the table.

Tess picked it up and inspected it carefully. She sighed, set it down, and stood up.

"Giving up already?"

She shook her head as she opened a drawer and pulled something out. When she sat back down, she had a pair of horn-rimmed glasses perched on her nose and a magnifying glass in her hand.

"No jokes," she warned, holding up her hand, palm outward. "I need the glasses only for reading, and if I spend too many hours at my computer. Crater Rock may not have entirely moved into the computer age yet, but its sheriff has." She picked up the plastic sheet again and examined each card.

"This person is very good," she murmured, studying the cards now with the magnifying glass. "It looks as if the card stock is identical, and if not, it's an extremely close match. The print type also appears to be the same." She looked up. "I'd say someone has access to the paper Immigration uses. What was the first red flag?"

"A border-patrol guard pulled over a suspicious looking van. All ten men had what appeared to be genuine ID's and green cards. The fakes showed up when the guard ran a computer check. One of the names was a man who'd died six months before, and the address was a residence hotel in L.A."

"That's nothing unusual."

"It is, if it's a well-known fact that the hotel manager hates foreigners and wouldn't let them in to clean the toilets. Brian Swenson did some further research, which proved all the cards were fakes." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a cigarette pack and lighter. He held it out to Tess first. She shook her head, murmuring she'd quit a couple of years ago but that he could go ahead if he wanted to. Jake lit up and drew the smoke deep into his lungs. "After that, more random checks of green cards were set up. Four out of every twelve were fakes."

Tess pursed her lips in a silent whistle. "A very high percentage."

Jake nodded. "That's when we set up someone to go undercover. We needed to find out where these cards were coming from. At first we only learned about the people selling them in the usual border cities or where a population of illegals could easily disappear from the authorities' eagle eye. We got word from our undercover agent that it looked as if the print shop was out this way. That was the

last we heard from him. We're afraid his cover was blown and he's now out there doubling as dinner for the desert animal population.”

She shook her head as she assimilated the information. “You can definitely rule out this town. There haven't been any newcomers settling here for the last three years. If there had been, I would have been one of the first to know. We have a gossip grapevine that rivals any major news service. Every new resident is subjected to an interrogation worthy of even you. No one could slip in or out without someone noticing.”

“You get some tourist trade here,” he said. ‘How do you know some of these tourists aren't some kind of cover?’ “

“Some,” she stressed. “Luther has what he calls a lizard farm and rock garden out by the highway that seems to be the favorite rest stop for kids. It's not one of my favorite places to visit.” She shuddered. “There's also a restaurant out there. Dave, who owns the gas station, does a bang-up business between pumping gas and towing in cars with overheated radiators. Other than visiting relatives, not many people volunteer to stay overnight at Bradley's Stay-A-Spell.”

“Bradley's Stay-A-Spell?” Jake repeated.

Tess shook her head. “He thought a cozy-sounding name would make it more inviting. Trouble is, he hasn't bothered to redecorate the rooms since 1962, and he lets his rottweiler roam the grounds freely, which really discourages anyone from coming in. And that is one ugly dog with a very nasty temper.”

“I thought people like that were only in books or the movies.” He chuckled.

“Then you're in for an education, because we have more than our share of eccentrics around here.” Jake gathered up the plates and carried them to the sink. “Does that mean I get to stay?” He pasted on a hopeful expression.

She closed her eyes. “Do I have a choice?” “Not if you don't want that grapevine to speculate about our second breakup when I haven't been in town for more than half a day. I'm sure you'll remember that I've always had a way with little old ladies, so they'll naturally think you refused to forgive me and take me back. I'll be the victim in all this.”

Tess buried her face in her hands. “All right, you can stay. Are you happy now? Perhaps I can fight you and win, but I can't battle the town's gossips too. But you sleep on the couch. And fed or not, if you think about sleepwalking in the direction of my bedroom, be warned, I sleep with my gun under MY pillow.”

Jake winced. He began rinsing off the dishes and stacking them on the counter. “Just as long as

the couch doesn't have any broken springs or tiny critters reside in it. So where do you hide the dishwasher?"

"There isn't one."

He spun around. "What do you mean there isn't one? Everybody has a dishwasher! Hell, even that box I call an apartment has a dishwasher!"

"Welcome to the old ways, Slick, because I don't have one. I don't dirty enough dishes to consider having one installed. Besides, I'm still paying off the new refrigerator I bought last year. But then I guess that's in my file, isn't it? My wild spending sprees." Except this time there was no rancor in her tone, only mild amusement. "You'll find the dishwashing detergent under the sink and that blue scrub brush is wonderful for getting rid of stubborn food stains on the pans."

Jake followed her directions and pulled out the tall plastic bottle. He studied the label with a great deal of interest. "I just hope it's as mild on my hands as it promises."

Tess couldn't sleep. For the first time in years she lay in bed staring at the nighttime shadows chasing each other across the ceiling. She pretended not to strain her ears to hear even the slightest sound from Jake on the other side of her bedroom door. She damned him for being able to sleep when she couldn't. She began to pray an emergency would come up so she'd get called down to the station. It had never happened before, but there was always a first time.

Although he'd said nothing more about their shared past, the subject still hung between them like a bitter aftertaste. They had discussed the contents of the file folder Jake had brought with him and chatted idly about what each had done the past five years. By unspoken agreement neither again mentioned the reason behind Tess's resignation or that one night they had spent together. They especially didn't say anything about Tess's flight from Jake's apartment in the early-morning hours.

She tilted her head back, feeling the cords in her neck stand out and painful memories rip through her body.

"I need to feel alive." Her whispered words to Jake that night rang through her head. *"Make me feel alive, Jake. Make me forget everything that happened."*

He'd done just that.

Even though the evening was cool, sweat sprang out over her body. A heavy liquid feeling pooled deep in her pussy while her veins heated past boiling with a sensual warmth. She suddenly found it difficult to breathe as memories flashed lightning-quick before her eyes.

Jake's hands, those tough, callused fingers so tender as they'd pulled the pins from her hair and gently combed it into loose waves. How he'd turned off all the lights but one burning dimly by the bed. How he'd removed her clothing, murmuring how beautiful she was and entreating her to remove his clothes and touch him. Telling her how much he needed her.

How he'd led her to the bed, stretching out beside her. His hands and tongue were everywhere. Touching, tasting. He used his tongue, sweeping over her folds and teasing her clit until -- Tess's breathing grew more frantic as the memories flooded her brain and revved up her core. She felt it heating it up, demanding satisfaction only Jake could give her.

"This isn't just sex between us, Tess," he'd murmured in her ear as he settled his hot shaft between her thighs. *"Never just sex."*

"Yes." She'd moaned, grasping his face with her hands and pulling him down for her kiss. She'd been so hot and wet and ready for him.

"No!" She quietly sobbed, rudely torn back to the present, where her body ached with unfulfillment and her mind still raced with five-year-old sexual images that still haunted her.

Except that at the same time she felt a strange release. Some sort of mystical orgasm. Tess rolled over, and before her cheek felt the pillow, she was sound asleep.

Jake never knew silence could be so deafening. He drew on his cigarette, then dropped his arm to tap the ashes into a coffee mug he'd set on the floor for that purpose.

He kept one ear tuned for the slightest sound from the bedroom. He wasn't about to dare hope she'd open that firmly closed door and invite him into her bed. But he could think about it. He considered himself lucky she hadn't made him sleep in his car. It wouldn't have been the first time he'd tried to sleep in that bucket seat.

Fed up with just lying there, Jake pushed the covers away and got up, stretching his arms over his head. He walked into the bathroom and snapped on the light, wincing at the brightness. He glanced at the door that led into the bedroom and wondered if it was locked or not. He didn't try the knob in case it was. He also didn't give the deep claw-foot tub more than a cursory glance. The image of taking a long, steamy bath with Tess was a bit too vivid for him during the night hours. He turned on the water and splashed some of the icy liquid on his face before looking into the mirror.

"Well, old boy, you've looked better," he muttered as he flipped off the light and returned to his lonely couch.

“First-day report from Jake Wilder. Subject, Tess O'Hara,” he whispered into an imaginary tape recorder—an old tactic he'd begun in the beginning of his career. “She's lost weight. She's harder, stronger, more determined.” He idly blew a smoke ring into the air. “Sadder.” He paused, allowing his thoughts to fall into their proper places. “And even more lovely than when I last saw her. And then she only had a sheet over her. The assignment would normally be a snap. Except I'll be working with Tess again. She walked away from me once. Will she do it again?”

He stubbed his cigarette out in the mug and rolled over onto his side, finally falling asleep with a mental picture of Tess wearing that sheet to keep him company.

“How in the hell does anyone sleep around here with all that peace and quiet going on outside?”

Tess looked up from the morning paper she'd been reading while downing her third cup of coffee. Sleep marred by X-rated dreams starring Jake hadn't helped her peace of mind. Looking up and seeing the genuine article all rumpled and grouchy in a pair of faded navy sweatpants and nothing else was more than enough to send her over the edge. She nodded her head in the direction of the coffeepot on the counter.

“If you're missing ear-splitting sirens, even occasional gunshots, and domestic arguments going on around you that badly, perhaps you should head back to San Diego,” she suggested, lifting her coffee mug to her lips. As if she needed any more caffeine when just looking at Jake's bare chest sped up her heart rate. “Cups are in the cabinet overhead.”

He opened the cabinet door and rummaged through her eclectic collection of coffee mugs.

“I'm Not A Morning Person. I'm A Coffee Person,” he read out loud. “Okay.” He picked up the glass pot and filled the mug. “Most people have coffee cups that match their dishes.”

She rolled her eyes. “This from the man who serves coffee in paper cups to his guests.”

Jake grabbed a chair and spun it around, sitting down and resting his arms along the back. He sipped the hot brew cautiously then heaved a deep sigh.

“This is the first good cup of coffee I've had in five years, Legs. Is this one of those gourmet blends you always liked?”

Tess folded the newspaper and put it down on the table. “A few more ground rules. No calling me Legs and no bringing up the past. You're here to do a job and nothing more. I have no choice but to put up with you, so I expect you to do your usual thorough and fast work and get out.”

Jake drained half his cup before speaking. “Tess, when we walk out of this house, we have to act the part of lovers who can't keep their hands off each other, because I can't afford to blow a cover

that's already been set up. Since we worked together for close to three years and came to know each other pretty well then, we should be able to pull this off. Look on the bright side. You didn't get stuck having to pretend you're nuts about DimWitt. Talk about having to put on a major acting job. That man is wrapped tighter than a virgin." He gave a mock shudder. "Hell, he could be a virgin for all I know."

A reluctant smile tugged at her lips. "I thought Roger gave up fieldwork."

"He did, and good thing. He's bad enough behind a desk. Think what could happen with him in the field." Jake leaned forward and placed his hand on her arm. A hint of her perfume teased him as he moved closer to her. "You always smelled like spring," he said huskily.

Tess's head shot up. "That's not a line a small town sheriff hears too often."

"Then I'm glad I was the one to say it to you first." His dark eyes swept over her in a warm caress.

She shook her head, both to stop him from saying more and to stop her from saying something she might regret. "I mean it, Jake. A lot has happened over the years, and I've never been one for short-term relationships." She finished her coffee and carried her mug over to the sink. "I suppose you're going to check out the lay of the land first."

Jake nodded. He was pleased she still remembered his methods. "Yeah."

"Come by the station and I'll have some maps marked for you. I have a Jeep I use when I'm off duty. You'll need to use that. Your sports car won't be able to handle half the back roads around here, since they're unpaved and full of potholes." She opened a drawer, withdrew a key, and handed it to him. "All I ask is that you are very careful what you say to the people around here."

He bristled at her less than subtle warning. "Someone might know something that they don't think is important but could be important to me. Don't tell me how to do my job."

"Then you remember that you're not dealing with long-time offenders. They're not people who lie at the drop of a hat and would turn on their best friend if it meant an extra buck," she retorted as she unlocked a cabinet and pulled out her gun and holster.

Jake rested his elbows on the chair back, holding the mug between his palms as he watched Tess pick up her Stetson.

"Tess, I'm well aware I'm in unknown territory, and I'll be sure not to say anything that will harm your reputation."

She ducked her head as she pretended to adjust a buckle. "Just as long as you remember there are a lot of nice people around here. And yes, I am very aware that the nicest person can pull out a gun and blow someone away."

Jake stood up and walked over to her, placing his hands on her shoulders. The warmth of her body reached out to him through the heavy material of her shirt. “I’ll be by in about a half hour for those maps,” he told her.

She moved away before she weakened and turned in his arms. She blamed her unsettled feelings on her restless night. “I have to go.” She walked quickly out of the kitchen and headed for the front door.

“Hey, Sheriff.”

Tess turned her head to find Jake leaning against the doorway. She could have sworn his pajama pants had drooped lower on his hips and his bare chest looked just a bit broader. His hair was still ruffled and his jaw was dark with his morning beard. It was too easy to imagine him sprawled across her bed with the sheets pulled awry and the pillows tossed to one side. Dammit, he looked downright desirable!

Jake's wicked grin did crazy things to the pit of her stomach. It told her he knew exactly what she was thinking.

“Let's be careful out there,” he said the line that had become a popular catch phrase in the classic police series *Hill Street Blues*.

THREE

“Tess, you sly thing. And here we were worrying about your love life when all the time you had a good-looking man hidden away,” Ginnie teased as Tess walked past Ginnie's Cuts just as the owner unlocked the front door.

Tess sighed. She had known the interrogations would start. She just hadn't expected them to start this soon. “Funny, I never thought of Jake as a secret.”

The older woman's head bobbed up and down. “The way I hear it, yesterday an ever-lovin' hunk drove into town in a hot yellow Corvette, looking for you.” Her faded blue eyes twinkled behind her glasses as she scanned, with evident satisfaction, Tess's tired features. “And I'd say he found you.”

Tess shifted her cup of coffee and white bakery bag holding her apple fritter to her other hand. If she hadn't broken down and sneaked to the doughnut shop for some much-needed sugar and caffeine, she wouldn't have been subjected to this. Her shoulders rose and fell in a resigned sigh. “Who told you?”

“Wilma or Walt?”

Ginnie blinked as she tried to figure out why Tess thought she would have heard it from them. “Why, darlin', I got it straight from Roxie.”

Tess's nose twitched as the older woman moved closer to her. She could swear the woman's pores exuded permanent solution instead of perfume!

“Roxie, of course. Did she happen to say who told her about 'the hunk in the yellow Corvette'?” She only hoped Jake didn't hear that description. He was impossible enough to live with without that compliment piled on his already swollen head.

“No one had to tell her, Tess. She saw him for herself when she was down at the gas station taking Gus his dinner. Jake Wilder himself drove up asking for directions to the sheriff's station. He explained he was a real close friend of yours. Roxie said he's a real looker too.” She lifted one eyebrow in a meaningful gesture as she adjusted her pink cardigan sweater around her shoulders. “So tell me. Who exactly is he?” She leaned forward, practically salivating all over the sidewalk as she eagerly awaited the news. “How long have you known him? Have you two made any long-term plans?”

A sly smile tilted Tess's lips as she looked around

He hung his head. “The arrest records for the last six months.”

Tess carefully set her cup of coffee and bakery bag on the desk. “Where's the back-up disk?” Walt's expression gave her her answer. “Terrific, you forgot to back it up the last time. Did you press

any more keys when you realized what you did?"

He shook his head. "I remembered you telling me to always keep my hands off the keyboard and not to even turn the system off. I figured your boyfriend might have an easier time of finding it than you would."

"He'll probably be stopping by later, but this needs to be taken care of now." She sat down at his desk and pulled out a computer retrieval program. As her fingers flew over the keys, a part of her mind started laughing at the idea of Jake fixing a computer problem. That he was using the guise of computer consultant for a cover was laughable, since it had been a well-known fact at the offices that he and computers never got along. It had been said that if anyone could destroy a computer just by turning it on, he could. She couldn't imagine he'd finally turned computer literate. She breathed a sigh of relief when the missing file finally appeared on the screen.

"Make a backup disk right now," she ordered, relinquishing the chair to Walt. "In fact, make two and give the second one to Wilma for safekeeping."

The dispatcher walked up to Tess and peered closely at her face. Tess reared back, fearing the older woman would see too much.

"What?"

"Well, you look tired around the eyes but not as tired as I thought you'd be after a night with a man who looks like Jake." She gave a girlish giggle as she joked, "He doesn't seem like the kind of man who'd sleep willingly on the couch."

"Wilma thanks to all you surrogate mothers in this town, I have very little privacy where my love life is concerned," she said out loud, brushing past her and heading for the safety of her office. "Does that explain why I feel the need to go out of town to meet men?"

Wilma remained close on her heels. "How did you meet him?"

Tess held on to the doorknob. "Don't you have to answer the phone?"

She ignored her pointed question. "Walt can answer it."

"It's your job."

"Honestly, Tess, I would think spending the night with the man of your dreams would have improved your mood instead of making it worse. Someone should have a talk with that boy."

Shaking her head and clucking under her breath, Wilma returned to her desk. As she settled in her chair, she shot Tess one last look of wounded reproach.

Tess closed the door and dropped into her chair. She grimaced as it creaked loudly when she leaned back in it.

"I hate that man," she muttered, picking up the Slinky she kept on her desk, and tipped the coiled wire from one hand to the other in hopes the repetition would have its usual calming effect. A soft knock on the door took away the little composure she'd regained. "What!"

Walt, with a weak grin on his face, slunk in. "You forgot your coffee and doughnut," he whispered, putting the cup and bag on her desk along with several sheets of paper. He slowly stepped back. "And here's Frank's report."

She felt three inches tall. "Walt, I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"Don't worry about it. I guess things are a little crazy for you right now," he replied.

"You've got that right." She popped the lid off her coffee.

"Is this a private meeting, or can civilians join in on the fun?" Jake stood in the doorway.

Tess swallowed the curse rolling up her throat and managed to paste a smile on her lips.

"Hi, hon." She greeted him with a smile that already hurt. "I'm afraid I haven't had a chance to get those papers ready for you yet."

Jake walked in and dropped into the chair on the other side of Tess's desk. "No hurry."

Seeing he was a third wheel, Walt muttered that he had to get out on patrol and slipped out, making sure the door was closed behind him.

"Real relaxed atmosphere you've got here, Sheriff," Jake said lazily, slumping down in the chair with his ankle propped on his opposite knee. He idly picked a small dirt clump off his boot heel before lacing his fingers together and wrapping them around his upraised knee. "I'll tell you, people sure are friendly around here. I guess it helps to be hooked up with the town sheriff." He idly rocked his leg back and forth. "They sure love to talk, don't they?"

Tess's eyes couldn't help but focus on the worn denim placket surrounding the brass buttons of his fly, which moved enticingly when he did. She licked suddenly dry lips. "I'll get those maps out for you," she said woodenly, pulling open a drawer. She fumbled with the contents until she found what she wanted.

"Think you could come with me?"

"I have my duties here."

"What if I rode with you while you're out on patrol? You could say you're showing me the area, and no one would get suspicious."

She relaxed her suddenly tight jaw. "You, of all people, know that wouldn't be proper protocol."

Jake's grin sent those familiar waves of heat straight to her stomach. "Aw, come on, you can't tell me you follow strict protocol around here. Besides, I doubt anyone would mind."

“We try to stick to the rules.” Although she had to admit he had a good idea. As usual. Tess tore a piece of her fritter off with her fingertips. She bit into the pastry, savoring the apple and cinnamon flavors. ‘But I guess I could make an exception, since you won’t be in town very long. I may as well do what I can to wrap your case in record time.”

He cocked his head to one side as he studied her. ‘Now, Tess, how can you think that? You know what a thorough guy I am. This case could take some time. After all, I want to do it properly.”

She shook her head. “You’ll be gone as soon as you realize how wrong you are. This isn’t the kind of place you’d want to hang around in. You need a fast pace, and that is not to be found in this town. I keep a very tight lid on my turf, Jake. No one would dare to come in and run such an operation without my hearing hints of something strange going on.”

Jake shook his head. The sorrowful expression on his face would have looked real to anyone who didn’t know him as well as Tess did.

“Well, Legs, I’m afraid your living out here in the boonies has caused those fine instincts of yours to kinda fall down on the job. You’re going to be in for quite a surprise when I have to prove you wrong.”

Tess hardened her heart against Jake’s mock sympathy. “You can forget the ‘I’m here to help you, kid’ spiel, Jake. I’ve heard it too many times before. I know how you work. So do us both a favor and can the charm and the superiority, Wilder.” Determined to have the last word, so to speak, she deliberately leaned back in her chair and propped her booted feet on top of her desk.

His features hardened. “Lady, you are so stubborn, you make a mule sound easygoing. You’d better remember one thing. I have the seniority here. Get it?”

She tipped her chair forward, dropping her feet to the floor. “Loud and clear, Agent Wilder. Your shield is bigger than my shield. You have more important contacts than I do. And more important resources and so on and so forth.” Her smile sent poison-tipped darts straight to his heart. “But I know the residents of Crater Rock, and they hate people with badges, even me. I also know how to get around their animosity. You don’t. Tell you what. Let’s let it get out that we had a nasty fight, and you can head on down to Stay-A-Spell. Just make sure Bradley doesn’t try to give you Bungalow Six. The plumbing makes the most obscene noises when least expected, and Bradley refuses to fix it. He claims it gives the place character.”

Jake narrowed his eyes. ‘Oh, no, you can’t get rid of me that easily, Legs,” he drawled, looking as dangerous as a loaded semiautomatic. “We’re a team, sweetheart. And we’ll continue to work as a team. So why don’t you haul that shapely butt out of that chair so you can show me the area.

Considering the residents' joy in finding out you have a love life after all. I can't imagine anyone's going to say anything about my tagging along. Why shouldn't I want to see the town my sweetie pie is so enamored with." His eyes glinted pure steel. "I won't be so easy to dust off this time, Legs."

The lines were drawn, the gauntlet tossed to the ground. Tess never backed down from a challenge.

She pushed herself out of her chair and crossed the small room. "Wilma," she called out, throwing open the door. "After I finish reading Frank's report, I'll be going on to patrol. Mr. Wilder will be riding along."

The older woman's eyebrows raised in a significant manner. "Will you be available if anything comes up?"

"Of course I'll be available!" Tess snapped, wanting to cram Jake's knowing chuckle down his throat.

"There you are, darlin'!"

Tess whispered a pungent curse. "Henry." Her greeting was friendly but guarded. She purposely called the man by his first name to keep them on equal footing. And because she knew he hated it. "Any problem?"

Henry Dietz seemed to enjoy looking the part of the small-town mayor as he sauntered toward Tess's office. In Jake's estimation the man's plaid sport coat strained against the beefy shoulders of a football player who'd since gone to seed via too much food and not enough exercise. His florid features also told Jake that the man enjoyed more than his share of alcohol. He wondered what else the man enjoyed.

"I understand you had a surprise visitor yesterday." He looked Jake over with a shrewd gaze.

"An old friend. Henry Dietz, Jake Wilder." Her words were as clipped as his. "Henry is the town mayor."

Jake didn't bother standing up. He merely nodded.

Henry pulled off his Stetson and nodded back. "So our little Tess has a secret life." He chuckled before turning to her. "I'm glad to see you have a man in your life, darlin'. I'd hate to think you were one of *those* women," he confided with a dirty laugh, looking at Jake with the figurative elbow jab in the ribs.

Jake lifted an eyebrow. "Little" Tess was a good two inches taller than the portly mayor, but the man obviously insisted on figuratively patting her on the head. Tess's tight smile told him how much she resented the man's patronizing manner.

“Let me assure you she's as far from one of 'those' women as you can get.”

Tess looked as if she could cheerfully tear Jake into pieces and throw him to the buzzards.

“I have to go out on patrol, Henry. Is there a problem you need to speak to me about?”

The man looked startled by her terse words. “Now, Tessie, you need to stay calm,” he said.

“Frank knows how important it is to keep a cool head.”

She narrowed her eyes at the mention of one of her officers. “Frank is also a little too quick with his fists.”

Jake easily read between the lines. The mayor was not happy having Tess as sheriff and had obviously had someone else in mind for the job. So how did this Frank lose the job? And why did she put up with someone like that? “If you want to talk privately, I can step outside,” Jake offered.

“No, don't worry, Tessie and I have no secrets,” Henry drawled, pausing long enough to give Jake the onceover. “You in the law-enforcement game too?”

“Not a chance. If I tick someone off, I want to know they're not going to shoot a gun at me. I like my head staying right where it is.”

“Jake is a computer troubleshooter,” Tess explained.

A flicker of disappointment flashed in Henry's eyes, “Too bad.” He lost all interest in the man.

“I understand that you've been harassing Nettie.”

She lifted her chin slightly, hating to explain anything, but having no choice. “I wouldn't call it harassment. I only pointed out to her that if her goats don't stay on their own side of the fence, they're going to be the main guests at one of Jed's barbecues, and there's nothing I can do about it. She had no right going to you, Henry,” she said softly, too softly. “No right at all.”

“Now, as I'm mayor of this town and basically your boss, I guess she felt she needed to. Nettie's family has lived in these parts for many years. She's contributed a lot to the community and she doesn't deserve shabby treatment from the police.” He turned it into two words.

“Then tell her to make sure to keep her fences in good repair so Huey won't go wandering and Jed won't file a complaint. He's threatened to shoot Huey the next time he finds him on his land, and to be honest, I can't blame him. That goat's personality is as ornery as his mistress's.”

Henry wagged his finger in her face. “Now, I won't have you talking about Nettie's pride and joy that way. You hear me good. You tell Jed Carter if he dares to harm little Huey, he'll have to be arrested.”

Tess couldn't believe what she was hearing. “For what, murder?”

“Exactly. That kind of violence has to be nipped in the bud. We'll show people we just don't

stand for it in these parts.” He slapped his hat back on his head, nodded to Jake, and left.

“I guess you could see that Henry had aspirations to be supreme dictator.” Tess's lips twisted as she picked up her gun holster and buckled it on.

“I wouldn't worry. Men who wear those fancy snakeskin hatbands don't get very far,” he scoffed.

“Oh, really?”

“Sure, who's going to trust a guy who wears a snake in any form?”

Tess led Jake outside to her Bronco and indicated that he get in. “Since we're understaffed, I take my turn at patrolling.”

“Then you have two officers on duty during the day and two on duty at night?”

She shook her head as she checked her radio and double-checked the emergency supplies she always kept on hand. “No, just Frank at night. With his ego you don't need anyone else. And the rest of us are on call.” She slipped on the metal-rimmed aviator sunglasses that were part of her uniform.

“The Frank Henry mentioned? The one you feel is too quick with his fists?”

“Essentially Frank is a good cop,” Tess said slowly as she put the truck in gear and backed out onto the street. She held up a hand in a wave as someone shouted her name. “The trouble is, he has a temper he has trouble controlling. Henry wanted him to take over as sheriff, but too many people knew that Frank would turn into a worse bully than he already is. His temper, and my law-enforcement experience, was what swayed the town council to hire me instead. Around here you're hired on, not voted in. Considering the number of enemies Frank's made over the years, I doubt he would have been voted in anyway, although his ego says otherwise.”

Jake frowned. He was certain Tess knew a cop with a nasty temper and ready fists was dangerous to have around. “If he's such a troublemaker, why keep him on? Doesn't that make matters worse?”

“To paraphrase an old saying, I'd rather work with a devil I know than one I don't,” she replied, easily shifting gears and picking up speed as they reached the outskirts of town.

He sprawled back in the passenger seat. “Must be a real peach of a guy. How were you so lucky to get him?”

Tess smiled. She might be able to best him yet. “I grew up with Frank. In fact, we attended the same high school.”

Jake sat up. “What?”

“You forget, I grew up in this area. I pretty much know everyone living here, although Henry is

fairly new to the area. He's only lived here for the past fifteen years, though he's done pretty well for himself in that time," she said drily. "Newcomers usually don't rise so high in local politics, but Henry has a pretty good gift of gab and charmed the voters. Plus, most people don't want to be mayor of a town that's slowly dying. Although I don't think he looks at it that way. He sees himself as a very big fish in a very small pond. And plays on it for all he's got."

Jake made a mental note to check into the mayor's financial background.

"He have any vices?"

"If he does, he takes them out of town." She stared at something in the distance and quickly turned the wheel before slanting him a sly glance. "Just like me."

"You forget, Legs. You've been under observation for quite some time, and word has it you always slept alone."

Tess's fingers tightened on the wheel before she gave in to her first impulse of tightening them around Jake's throat.

"I should tear your heart out," she muttered.

"You seemed to have forgotten about that Tuesday night five years ago when you took my heart."

Tess's foot had a mind of its own as it slipped off the accelerator and stomped on the brake, sending the truck into a rubber-burning skid. When she finally got the vehicle under control, she turned in the seat. Her chest rose and fell with her staccato pulse. Her features were white with shock.

"Do not ever mention that night again, or so help me, I will shoot you where you stand," she said between bloodless lips.

Jake didn't look the least bit intimidated by her threat. "Let me tell you something, Tess. It ain't all that easy to forget the night of the best sex I've ever had." His features hardened. "Just as it isn't easy to forget that you ran out without a word the next morning, and when I tracked you down eight months later, you told me to get lost. We have a lot of things to talk about, and as soon as this case is broken, I intend for us to have that talk."

Tess whipped off her sunglasses. She was determined not to have anything between them when she read him the riot act. Then she saw something in his eyes that halted the angry words.

"Knowing us, that talk should prove to be very interesting," she murmured. "Just remember that I might have had a good reason for what I did back then. A reason you have no right to hear about."

He shook his head, refusing to listen to her rationalization.

"No one has that right, Tess. Not even the lady who discovered the darker side of her nature the

hard way. You shot and lotted someone who deserved it. Someone who would have killed you if you hadn't killed him first. You didn't need to punish yourself by coming out here to hide in the back of nowhere.”

FOUR

Tess wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of responding. She steered the truck around a sharp corner and forced him to grip the dashboard so he wouldn't be thrown through the window, then she headed for the outskirts of town.

Except Jake wasn't about to give up when he felt he was on a roll. One way or another he was determined to get a reaction from her. And he knew just how to do it. He settled back in the seat and propped a foot on the dashboard. When she reached over and brushed it off, he immediately propped it back up again.

"No wonder they sent you out here. They figured out that here in the wilds you'd be in your element."

She slowed down and returned a wave from a woman walking down the street. The woman did a double take when she noticed Tess had a passenger, and hurried her steps. "Terrific. In about five minutes everyone in town will know you're on patrol with me. It will probably take the town's grapevine about ten minutes to turn you into a household word."

"I could live with that." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small notebook with a pen clipped onto it. He flipped through the pages until he found a blank one. "It's nice to know there's people out there who see me for the great guy I am."

Tess's heart took a jump as she saw the notebook. With its tattered cover and crumpled pages covered with the scrawl that only he could read, it could have been a twin to the one he'd used five years before on a case. To most people they wouldn't make any sense, since he only used one or two words to jog his memory. How many times had she teased him about it? She opened her mouth to do just that when she caught herself in time.

"I didn't think anything had happened that would warrant notetaking just yet," she said coolly as she stopped for a stop sign.

He shrugged. "Oh, a few things have happened that deserve documenting," he said lazily, tipping his head to snare her with a stare that might have been hidden behind dark sunglasses but was no less searing in its regard. "I like to make sure that I don't forget anything important."

Tess stared back with every ounce of intimidation she used when dealing with one of the good ole boys who rolled through town occasionally on their motorcycles and thought it was fun to take on a lady sheriff. They had soon learned what a mistake that could be.

Jake's mouth curved in a slow grin as he realized she wasn't going to back down. "You can't win all the time, darlin'."

By now her confidence had risen a few levels. "Sure I can. You're on my turf, Wilder. You can pretend to yourself you're in charge, and your paranoid superiors might like to think so, but you still need me if you want to survive out here."

"Oh, I need you all right."

Tess clenched her teeth so hard, pain burst through her jaw until she forced herself to relax. Concentrating on not saying a word, she viewed a mental map of the area and pulled off onto a dirt road.

Jake uttered a curse when the truck hit a deep pothole and tipped sharply to one side. "Isn't there a better road for where you're headed?"

"Only the highways and main roads are paved. The county doesn't have the funding to pave roads that are seldom used. For all our modern airs we're still pretty rural," she said lightly, looking completely unconcerned about their roller-coaster ride.

Jake grabbed hold of the armrest when the road suddenly turned in a sharp curve and the Bronco easily followed it. "Where the hell are we going?"

"Up into the mountains."

He looked at the rolling hills that stretched out in front of him. 'In case you haven't realized it, I doubt we'll make the trip in one day. Or do you have some shortcut that will send us off a cliff or something?"

"It's not that bad if you know where you're supposed to go. I wouldn't recommend it to anyone who doesn't know the land. They'd get lost real fast" She scanned right and left as she negotiated the vicious curves with the ease of a veteran race car driver. "But there's someone out here we need to talk to."

She abruptly spun the wheel to the right and drove across the desert wasteland until they reached the foot of several smaller hills. Tess unbuckled her seatbelt, reached into the back, and pulled out a rifle before she swung herself out of the truck. She reached back in for a small package, which she pushed into her shirt pocket. She turned to Jake, who had followed her.

"It's a pretty warm day, so keep a watch out for rattlesnakes. It's a good thing you wore your boots. Otherwise I wouldn't have brought you up here. Although on second thought I doubt you'd have anything to worry about. Any self-respecting snake would spare one of his own kind." She broke open the rifle, loaded it with shells, and snapped it closed. She began walking without bothering to see if Jake was following her.

"She's been out in the sun too long. It must have fried her brain," he muttered, double-checking his weapon nestled in a shoulder holster under his jacket. "Who in their right mind would live out here vol-

untarily?"

Tess didn't answer. She stopped, looked around, and finally lifted her rifle to fire off two shots.

"Hey, Charlie! It's Sheriff O'Hara." She cupped her hands around her mouth to help her voice carry farther.

Jake spun around when he heard an unearthly cackle.

"Hey there, Sheriff. Did you bring my tobacco?" a hoarse voice asked. The grizzled man in dusty coveralls and no shirt limped his way toward them. His bony chest and shoulders were nut brown from all his years out in the desert sun. "Won't talk to you if you didn't bring it."

Tess pulled the package out of her shirt pocket and tossed it to him. "Then I guess you're going to have the pleasure of talking to me. Walt picked it up for you yesterday.",

He caught it with both hands and quickly opened the bag to investigate the contents. "He's a good boy. Knows what's important to a man." He peered nearsightedly at Jake. "Who's he?"

"Wow, someone who doesn't know about me," Jake murmured. "Your town's Western Union is slipping, Legs. It seems the news hasn't reached the suburbs yet."

She shot him a look that told him to shut up, before turning back to the old man. "How are you doing, Charlie? Are you taking care of yourself? Taking your medicine when you're supposed to?"

He shook his head. "I'm too old to be nagged at, Tessie. 'Fore I know it, you'll be coming out here every night to tuck me in bed."

"Now, there's a thought," Jake murmured, earning another warning glare from Tess.

"And I'll keep on nagging you. You know you have to take care of yourself, or your grandson will put you in that nursing home you've been fighting to stay out of for the past few years."

The old man started spouting a profane vocabulary that impressed even Jake. Tess looked as if this was nothing new to her as she listened to Charlie curse his son for giving him an idiot of a grandson. Then he cursed his grandson for interfering where he wasn't wanted and for not allowing his grandfather to live out his numbered days in peace. He then went on to revile the nation as a whole for not bothering to listen to the old folks and let them live the way they wanted.

Tess held up one hand. "Charlie, before you begin noting the law, will you calm down and listen to me?" She waited a beat. "There's been rumors that something illegal's been going on somewhere out here."

"Great, Tess, let him tell the world," Jake muttered.

She shook her head, silently ordering him to keep quiet.

Charlie scratched his head. His sun-bleached white hair contrasted vividly with his weather-beaten face.

“You talking 'bout drug runners or illegal aliens?”

“Could be either,” she said. “Have you seen anyone out here?”

“Hell, Tessie, we both know no one comes out here but me,” he chortled. “Who else would be crazy enough to want to live here?”

“That doesn't mean they might not be off in one of the canyons where they figure they won't get found. So will you do me a favor and keep an eye out?” she asked him. “Don't go down and confront them yourself. We don't know how dangerous they can be. Just get a message to me that you need to see me, but don't say why.”

“Sure thing.” He continued shooting curious glances Jake's way. “You still haven't told me who he is.”

“Jake Wilder.” Jake held out his hand. The man may have been in his golden years, but he still possessed a strong grip. “I'm an old friend of Tess's out here for a visit.”

“Hell, son, if you consider yourself old now, I don't know what you're going to think of yourself when you get to be my age.” He looked him over with a sharp eye. “If you think you can rule her, you've got another think coming, son. This is one lady who has a mind of her own, and she's not going to take crap off anybody.”

Jake grinned. “Yeah, I'm finding that out.”

“If you two men have finished your Tess bashing, we still have a lot of territory to cover.” She didn't care if she sounded cross. Charlie was going too far this time! “Walt will be out in a couple days to see how you're doing.”

Charlie fingered his pouch of chewing tobacco. “Thanks, Tessie.” With a brief wave he walked back to the split between the two hills and soon disappeared from sight.

“Isn't he kind of old to be out here alone?” Jake asked.

“I wouldn't call him old to his face unless you want a load of buckshot in your butt,” she warned. “He's been living out here for the past thirty-seven years and has done just fine, no matter what his pompous grandson thinks. It's only because he's in such excellent health and we drive out to check on him on a regular basis that he's been able to stay here.” She started walking back to the truck. She looked over her shoulder. “Are you coming?”

He couldn't resist it. Not when Tess was so good at providing straight lines for him.

“Not yet, darlin', but I have hope.”

“What's down that road?” Even with the air conditioner running strong in the truck, Jake could feel

the desert heat seep into his pores as the day wore on. He had shed his jacket a long time ago and was grateful his sunglasses were dark enough to cut the glare.

Knowing what he was she obliged by turning down the road he indicated. 'A ranch house that was abandoned back in the nineteen fifties. The owner came out here thinking he could make a fortune raising sheep and discovered he didn't have the knowledge. When he couldn't sell the place, he settled for walking away from it and letting the bank have it.' She pointed toward the cluster of one-story buildings. "For a long time rumors floated around that the place was haunted. A kid couldn't go through puberty without accepting the dare to spend the night alone out here." She braked in front of the Spanish-style adobe house. Boards scarred by the harsh weather covered the windows, and the screen door hung askew on one hinge. The wind moaned through the empty expanse. While it wasn't cold, the wind's sound was enough to send shivers through Tess.

"It looks like something out of a fifties' horror film," Jake commented, walking around to the side of the main house and testing the boards to see whether they were still tightly nailed or if they were loose enough to allow someone to climb inside.

Tess walked around to check the other side. Since the house wasn't very large, it didn't take long. They met at the rear patio where sand covered the brickwork and a cherub-topped fountain. The plaster was badly cracked with large gouges caused by the weather.

"It's a shame they let this place go to ruin. I heard it was once a lovely home.' She studied the barns that stood close by. "I doubt anyone could hide in the outbuildings. They look as if they'd fall down if anyone breathed too hard on them."

Not wanting to take any chances, they explored all the structures but found nothing that looked suspicious. Jake stared down the road, then back to where the barns were. "With the lack of trees anybody could see this place pretty clearly from the highway. It wouldn't be easy to hide out here without someone driving by and noticing cars or trucks or even lights inside. The windows aren't covered all that tightly that they'd keep light in." He pulled on a board covering the back door but found it tightly nailed. "Any other abandoned buildings around like this one?"

"A few, but none in such good condition. Most of them are so tumbled down, they're nothing more than piles of rotten boards that should have been carted off years ago." She took her hat off and wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. Jake watched her, entranced as she blew air upward to fluff her bangs. 'Just another typical hot day in Crater Rock," she muttered, wiping drops of perspiration from her upper lip.

"It was real hot that night," he said huskily. "Remember, Tess?" The way she stiffened told him she remembered. It gave him enough reason to push on. 'I sure do. I remember everything about it."

"I told you I don't want to talk about it," she snapped, walking back toward the house. She spun around. "Damn you! Don't you ever listen to anything I say?"

He went on as if she hadn't spoken. "That wasn't just sex we had that night. Hell, it was more like a mystical experience," he said, advancing on her as she backed up two steps for each one of his until she was trapped against the side of the house. Her stony expression told him how much she hated him for bringing up a memory she'd kept buried deeply. 'You'd wrap yourself around me like the paper d a candy bar.' She deliberately looked away. But he wasn't about to stop now. 'We made love, what, three, four times? And that last time, when we finally fell asleep, I remember I was still inside you,' his voice lowered to a husky purr. "You felt like silk to me. I never wanted to leave you. So you left me instead."

"Stop it, Jake," her low voice ordered.

"Why?" he argued, shackling her wrists with his hands and pressing them back against the wall next to her waist. Her breasts thrust upward. "Don't you want to remember? I haven't forgotten any of it. How you were all hot and silky and wet against me when I entered you." He felt grim pleasure when he heard her barely audible moan. "You buried your teeth in my shoulder that one time and scratched my back. You drew blood in both places, Tess. You branded me."

Her breathing grew erratic as she felt her body grow languid with the mental pictures he drew. "Stop it!"

He deliberately ignored her as he bent his head and ran his tongue along the curved contour of her ear. His breath was hot against her skin.

"We started out on the floor with some pretty wild lovemaking, Tess. Remember how we couldn't even wait to get to my bed? How we tore each other's clothes off?" he whispered, feeling her body shiver in his grasp. "By the time we got to the bed, we could take it slower, more deliberate as we tried to stretch it out as long as possible until we were both crazy with wanting each other. Trouble was, it didn't work for very long, did it? I think my favorite was in the shower when we soaped each other all over and I picked you up and we--"

Before his mouth could finish its journey and surely destroy what little sanity she still had left, she managed to jerk herself free. She pushed him away so violently, he almost lost his balance.

"You idiot, you just can't stop, can you?" She only hoped she didn't give in to the angry tears she felt stinging the backs of her eyes. "You have to play your adolescent games in hopes of getting to me. Fine, you got what you wanted. You wrung more orgasms out of me than I can ever remember having. I am so furious that I could shoot you. Are you happy now?" She didn't bother waiting for an answer. "So do us both a favor and leave me the hell alone!" she screamed at him before she stalked off toward her truck. She

jerked open the door and climbed inside, slamming it behind her.

Jake took his time reaching the truck, hoping Tess would calm down. He walked along, his hands jammed in his front pockets.

“Naw, she wouldn’t shoot me once I’m in the truck. Too messy.” He locked a rock out of his way as he reached the passenger door. He climbed inside and settled back, fastened his seatbelt, and waited.

Tess sat behind the wheel staring outward at nothing in particular. Only her cheek color and pursed lips gave her agitated state of mind away. She twisted the key in the ignition and put the truck in gear the second the engine caught. The drive back to the highway was fast and bumpy. Jake doubted she cared a whit about his comfort.

“Say, Tess, before we get back to town, you might want to button those three buttons on your shirt, unless you’re planning on giving everyone something really good to talk about.”

Jake barely had enough time to grab the dashboard as she slammed on the brakes and the back of the truck fishtailed across the road.

She muttered words under her breath as she jammed the buttons in the holes. Jake winced as he listened to what she wanted to do to him, and all of it had something to do with his libido. She looked down, cursed, then tore the buttons open and rebuttoned them correctly. In two seconds they were speeding down the road again.

“Sheriff, you out there?” Wilma’s voice crackled over the radio.

Tess snatched up the microphone. “What’s up?”

“Mrs. Toomey just called. Flo is after Ike again, and the neighborhood’s out for the show.”

“Send Walt over there.”

“He’s hoping he doesn’t have to go. In case you forgot, the last time he tried to break up one of their battles, he ended up locked in the backseat of his cruiser,” the older woman said. “I told him it was only because he alluded to Flo’s age, and you know how sensitive she is about that. Why, she hasn’t listed her age on any kind of official form for the last thirty-five years. Anyway, Walt’s afraid she won’t even listen to him this time.”

“Why do I put up with this?” Tess sighed, before depressing the microphone button. “All right, I’ll go over there, but you sit Walt down and have a long talk with him about how to treat anyone over the age of forty. Because he will handle the next problem with Flo and Ike no matter how bad it is!” She took her thumb off the switch.

“So what’s so bad with Flo and Ike that little Walt doesn’t want to deal with them?” Jake asked. “They into martial arts, drug dealing, or just strong-arming people?”

“Let me explain it this way. Flo and Ike celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary last year with a party that turned into a brawl,” Tess began. “It appears that some old crony brought up that Ike had dated some woman at the same time he was seeing Flo just before he was drafted and sent to the South Pacific. As far as she's concerned, he was unfaithful to her, and she has been insisting he be the perfect husband or else.”

“Or else what?”

“With Flo it can be anything. None of us even want to think what she might do.”

“I like the way you don't bother with codes on the radio. It must save a lot of time.”

“Wilma never remembers them,” Tess told him. “It was easier to go along with her idea of radio etiquette than retrain her.”

Jake drew a mental map as Tess drove down several narrow residential streets. The houses had probably been built in the forties with either sparse lawns in front or white gravel beds. There were no sidewalks' although he noticed that the small children outside playing were under a close parental eye. Many of them had bicycles scattered across the front or on the driveway. He guessed they were on the right block when he saw people lined up on the edge of the street and the sounds of people shouting reached them through the closed confines of the truck.

“I know you're cheating on me again, you slimy worm!”

Jake shot Tess a questioning look. “Flo?”

“Flo.” She punched the siren to clear the way before pulling the truck over to the side of the street. ‘And it sounds as if she's worked herself up to a real head of steam.’

“So tell me, Sheriff, do we use tear gas or riot guns to break up this mob?” Jake pushed open the passenger door.

“I use common sense. You can just remain quiet and stay in the background.” She looked over her shoulder and sliced him with her gaze. “Maybe someone will up and confess to you that they're the ones playing with pen and paper when they shouldn't be.”

Jake blew a tuneless whistle between his teeth. “The woman is still crazy about me.” He did as suggested and stayed in the background because he already knew that following Tess was turning out to be more than interesting. He had to admit she wore her authority well, and it wasn't just her Stetson pulled down low, the aviator-style sunglasses hiding her eyes, or the shield pinned to her khaki shirt that had people deferring to her. She spoke quietly to some of the people standing on the fringe and passed through to the action.

“Flo, because of you I'm late getting my lunch, and it's already been a long day,” she raised her

voice. "So can we get this settled real fast?"

Jake's eyes widened with surprise when he saw who Tess was talking to. A diminutive white-haired woman wearing flowered dress and a red gingham apron turned around with a heavy-duty rifle cradled in her arms. A tall, thin, bald-headed man stood a few feet away watching her with a wary gaze.

"That little old grandmother is a troublemaker?" he muttered.

"Hey, buddy, that little old grandmother is a crack shot and doesn't take anything off anybody," one man told him. "You couldn't pay me to be married to her."

Jake shook his head. "Amazing," he murmured, crossing his arms in front of his chest and watching Tess at work.

"Flo, you have to stop this," she informed the older woman.

"Stop it? He's lucky I didn't go after him with my butcher knife!" She glared at her husband. "Then I'd just cut his privates off and we wouldn't have to worry about any of this. You might as well arrest him, Tess."

"What am I supposed to arrest Ike for?"

She raised her chin, which put her height at a scant five feet. "He refuses to do his duty by me. He says he's too old to have sex."

"Good Lord, woman, you don't have to tell everybody our private business." Ike groaned, clapping his hands on top of his head.

Tess had to bite down on her lower lip to keep from bursting out laughing. She finally coughed into her closed fist. "The last I looked, failure to have sex wasn't a crime."

"Well, it should be."

"Amen," Jake said with an amiable smile.

"It was bad enough he was seeing another woman when he had already promised himself to me. I am not gong to allow him to stay out of our marriage bed because he thinks he's too old for sex," Flo said with a snort, starting to lift the rifle to her shoulder and swing it toward her panicking husband.

"Enough." Tess plucked the rifle out of her hands and quickly unloaded it. She held up one of the shells. "Flo, you promised me that if you ever went after Ike again with the rifle, you wouldn't load it."

"What good does an unloaded gun do? He's not going to listen to me if I wave around an unloaded gun." She waved her finger at Tess. "Now, rnissy, I want him arrested and put in jail."

"Flo Riley, if you keep waving that finger in my face, you're going to be the one ending up in a jail cell," she said tartly. "You promised to forget and forgive Ike for his past indiscretions. As for anything else, that's for the two of you to handle indoors, not out here."

"I don't want him back in the house." She reached for her rifle, but Tess easily kept it out of her reach. "Now, look here, that's my rifle."

"Not since I've impounded it." Tess looked at the crowd. "This isn't a block party, people."

As the people dispersed, several women stopped by Jake.

"So you're the one," one murmured, giving him a lazy smile. "I'd think a man who looks like you would want someone who was a lot more woman."

Jake looked at the blonde, whose obvious charms were overflowing her strapless dress. "Trust me, Tess is more woman than any man can handle. But I'm more than willing to do what I can."

"Just don't overtire her," one elderly woman suggested, patting his arm. "We all keep Tess pretty busy around here."

Tess tried to close her ears to the suggestions but found it difficult when the voices carried so easily.

"Good thing I unloaded the rifle," she muttered with a grim twist of her lips.

Flo peered nearsightedly around Tess's shoulders, took off her glasses, wiped them on her apron, and slipped them back on again. She bobbed her head with evident satisfaction at what she saw.

"So that's who everyone's talking about, is it? I bet he doesn't tell you he's too old for sex."

Tess glanced at Jake. She wished he didn't look so good to her. "There're times when someone would think he's barely out of kindergarten."

Flo patted her arm. Her earlier anger at Tess and her husband was already forgotten, as it had been countless times before. "Honey, with a man like that, you don't care how dumb he is 'long as he can do his duty by you."

"Believe me, he's a man who firmly believes in doing his duty."

FIVE

“Heads up!” Tess walked in and tossed the rifle to Walt. The young man fumbled with the weapon, almost dropping it before he got a good grip and hung on with both hands.

“Good thing you unloaded it first,” Jake murmured. ‘If he’s lucky, he’d only shoot one of the lights. If not, it would probably be his foot.”

Tess shook her head as a warning to keep silent. She waited until Walt had put the rifle away and returned to stand in front of her.

“The next time Flo and Ike have one of their battles, you will be the one to handle it; I don’t care what time of day or night it happens, you will settle the next dispute,” she said softly in a voice laced with steel.

He turned red. “She locked me in my own cruiser, Tess. That little old lady-”

“Little what!” Wilma’s screech was probably heard in the next county. “Young man, what did I just pound into your head about proper treatment of your elders?”

If it was possible, his face turned even redder. He leaned over to confide, “Maybe it makes her mad to hear it, Tess, but she’s still a little old lady, and I can’t talk to her like I would some smart-mouthed kid or one of the creeps hanging around Red’s bar. Hell, looking at Mrs. Riley is like looking at my own grandmother. And if I tried to arrest my grandmother or treat her the way I’d have to treat Mrs. Riley, she’d skin me alive!”

“Just remember that that grandmother can shoot the eyes off a fly fifty yards away. That little old lady was also a civilian instructor during World War Two, teaching Marines things we don’t even want to think about,” Tess reminded him. “And it’s obvious she hasn’t forgotten any of her skills. So what you will have to do is outwit her. It’s going to take some practice, but you’ll do fine.” She patted his shoulder and walked back to her office.

“You must have seen that old lady,” Walt appealed to Jake. “Would you want to take her on?”

“Maybe not, but I’d figure, if Tess could succeed, there’s no reason why I couldn’t.” He looked around the large room with a casual gaze, noting the walls that were long overdue a new coat of paint and the battle-scarred metal desks. He thought of the modern offices his contemporaries used, the cubicles for assistants and clerks where all work was done on computers, and fax, machines spat out information all day and all night. Tess had left it all for something out of a fifties’ B movie.

“I guess policework is a whole different world from yours,” Walt commented, noticing his studied air.

“Yeah, a whole different world.” He turned his head when Tess stepped out of her office. “Now what, Chief?”

“Lunch,” she said succinctly.

“Sounds good to me.” He agreeably ambled off behind her with his hands in his pockets, looking as harmless as a timber wolf.

“Couldn't you just feel it?” Wilma sighed, hustling to the window, where she had an excellent view of them walking down the sidewalk.

“Feel what?” Walt asked.

She clucked under her tongue and shook her head. “I swear, you men don't have any romance in your souls. I'm talking about the sexual tension between those two. Why, I know that if they had their way, they'd be back at Tess's house for a long lunch instead of walking down to Nancy's Cafe, where half the town can see 'em.”

“Wilma, you've been reading too many of those romances,” he teased.

She stomped toward him and leaned over, with her hands planted on her ample hips. “It wouldn't do you harm to read a few. If you learned what a woman liked, you wouldn't be spending your free time down at Red's. You could be out with a pretty girl who'd have one of you.”

“Afternoon, Sheriff.”

“Janet.”

“Sheriff, my, it's a pretty day, isn't it?”

“Just ducky,” Tess muttered under her breath.

“Any reason why we're running the town gauntlet?” Jake asked, tacking on a lazy smile for the woman, who responded with a warmer one of her own.

“Down, boy, she's married to a very possessive guy who makes the Incredible Hulk look like a ninety-pound weakling.” Tess shook her head in bemusement. “If you want to keep yourself in one piece, you'd better find someone else to focus that lethal charm of yours on. He would think nothing of breaking a few bones, and I might be a bit slow in saving you.”

“Not you. You'd be on the ball, like always. There's no one else I'd rather have covering my back” Jake draped his arm, across her shoulders. “Notice I'm a smart guy in keeping your gun arm free, sweetheart?”

She looked up from under the protection of her hat brim. “Funny, I thought you might be afraid I'd shoot you by mistake if you walked on the other side.”

He inclined his head and bit down on the top curve of her ear. “Not you, darlin',” he crooned.

“You're too good a shot. You wouldn't miss.”

“I didn't say I'd miss. Merely that I *might* shoot you by mistake.” Tess lifted her shoulder just enough to dislodge him. “I do have an image to keep,” she reminded him as he pushed open the glass doors leading to the local cafe.

Tess nodded to the people greeting her with nods or words as she led Jake toward one of the empty booths that overlooked the street.

“You'll love this place. They serve your kind of food,” she told him. “Nancy believes in cooking all her meals with grease, and all her pies and cakes are mostly fat and cholesterol. Even her salads are covered with heavy-duty dressings. You won't find any health foods here.” She picked up the plastic-covered menu and handed it to him. “Here, knock yourself out. My treat.”

“Hi, Tess.” A girl of about nineteen stopped by the table. “You want something to drink?”

“Iced tea for me, Nicole.” She looked inquiringly at Jake.

He shrugged. “Sounds good to me.”

“You know what you want to eat?” Nicole slanted a glance at Jake. She held the order pad in one hand while the other hand was braced on a shapely hip encased in a pair of tight jeans.

Jake looked at the young woman's dangerously long red nails and wondered how she managed to wiggle into the tight jeans without breaking a nail.

“Cheeseburger with everything on it and onion rings,” he told her.

It was with marked reluctance that she turned to Tess. “How about you?”

Tess met her gaze squarely. After a silent moment the younger woman fidgeted. “I'll have a BLT with fries.”

Nicole nodded and scurried off. She returned long enough to deposit their ice-filled glasses of tea and then moved off when someone called her name.

Jake looked around. “This looks like something straight out of the fifties. Considering the chauvinism back then, I'm surprised they let a mere woman in here. Even if she is wearing a sheriff's shield.” He nodded toward the jukebox and at the gleaming counter, where he could see members of the town's business community eating and talking to each other. Every once in a while someone would casually turn around and give Jake the once-over.

“When the 'mere woman' wears a uniform, they have no choice, no matter how strongly they feel the cafe is their domain during the lunch hour.” She lowered her voice. “See that group of self-righteous individuals at that corner table? They're a few of the town's leading citizens. From right to left, we have Brian, who owns the hardware store, Fred is our druggist, Paul runs the grocery store, Larry owns the dry

cleaner's and the video store next door.”

It only took Jake a few seconds to study each man carefully, committing their names and faces to memory. “What about your esteemed mayor? What does he own?”

“Besides the town?” She laughed softly. “He has an insurance agency, which his brother-in-law helps him run. Darryl, who owns the feed store, is a cousin and usually in this caucus, and there's Leonard, the bank president. We also have Dr. Miller, who has a pretty well-equipped medical clinic and is able to handle any emergency that comes up. And if he isn't available, there's always our vet, Dr. Carson. We have a men's shop, and a dress shop that carries a little bit of everything for the discerning woman. Sam is the barber, and you don't dare ask him to style your hair, and Ginnie's beauty salon is purely a woman's domain. The nearest mall is sixty miles away, and some people have been known to make a weekend of it so that they can take care of all their major shopping. Red's Bar, at the end of town, is one of the hot spots for the party animals. We occasionally get some trouble with bikers when they roll through town, or bored kids on spring break who think they're going to tangle with some local yokels.”

Jake grinned. “Bet they get a surprise when they meet up with you.”

“Sure they do. They find out in a hurry they're not dealing with Sheriff Andy Taylor of Mayberry.”

She grinned back.

“Here you go,” Nicole said airily, setting their plates in front of them. Her gaze lingered longer on Jake. “Is there anything else you need?”

He stared at the gigantic onion rings that he could see were just the way he liked them, crispy on the outside. He smiled at the young woman. “I don't think so right now.”

Her face lit up. “You just let me know.”

Tess rolled her eyes. “You can't stop, can you?” He widened his eyes until he looked the picture of boyish innocence that she knew he didn't have when he *was* a boy. “Stop what?”

She glanced around to make sure no one was watching them. There were curious looks from some, but nothing she felt threatened by.

“I'm talking about the overload of testosterone you're exuding,” she muttered through her smile as she lifted her sandwich. “If you keep giving Nicole those killer smiles of yours, she's going to jump right onto your lap.”

His eyes shifted in the direction of the young waitress, who was standing at the counter chatting and giggling with a couple of girls who looked to be close to her age. Every so often they'd look his way and giggle some more. He sighed, trying to remember if he'd ever felt that young.

“I'd feel better about it if I knew she's of legal age.”

“Don't worry, you won't get picked up for corrupting a minor.”

Tess's fingers dug into her sandwich. It took her a moment to release some of the tension.

“Well, Sheriff, this must be the young man I've been hearing about from everyone.”

They looked up at the man standing by the booth.

Jake mentally catalogued the man who appeared to be in his late fifties, with thinning gray hair and a lean body dressed in khaki twill pants and a blue dress shirt. His smile told the world he was an easygoing guy, the kind of man people wanted to confide in. Although they probably changed their minds once they looked at his eyes that were a pale gray and cold as ice. Jake doubted the man kept anything a person confided to him a secret unless it was to his benefit.

“Jake, this is Brian Palmer, who owns the town's hardware store. Brian, Jake Wilder.” Tess's smile was about as welcoming as a rattlesnakes.

Brian held out his hand. “Glad to see that our Tessie has the good sense to find herself a man. We've all been worrying about her,” he said with genial good humor that Jake didn't find the least bit amusing. “If you feel the need for some man talk, come by the store. Though we'll probably quiz you about Tessie here.” He flashed him a man-to-man wink.

“Thanks.” Jake didn't commit himself to anything. He'd keep it in mind in case there was a chance he might learn something.

Brian smiled, patted Tess's shoulder, and walked back to the table. A few minutes later the men got up and left as a group. Nicole walked over to clear the table, picked up a few coins, made a face at them, and turned to look at the door. Jake could see her mouth the words “Cheap jerks” before she returned to clearing the table.

“They obviously don't believe in leaving a decent tip while they don't mind leaving a pretty messy table.” He jerked his head toward Nicole.

Tess laughed. “Are you kidding? As far as they're concerned, Nicole is doing this for fun, since she's going to school and lives with her parents. Nancy only pays minimum wage because she figures her waitresses will rack up on tips. She doesn't realize that to the men a dime tip is more than enough, and a quarter is downright scandalous.”

“Are you sure we're still in the twentieth century?” He pulled his cigarette pack out of his pocket and dropped it next to his plate.

“Not the way we remember it.” Tess watched the well-remembered action. He always set his cigarette pack next to his plate so that he was ready for his post meal smoke. She could feel the nicotine cravings begin as imaginary smoke seemed to fill her nostrils. She didn't notice the deep indentations her

fingers made in her sandwich or that her hands, shook slightly as she brought it to her mouth. Her favorite sandwich tasted like cardboard.

“Are you okay?”

She looked up. “Why?”

He tipped his head toward her hands. “You're shaking.”

She tightened her grip. ‘Caffeine shakes.’

He didn't look convinced. “You used to drink coffee by the gallon and it never bothered you.”

“I was also a lot younger back then,” she said, biting down on the sandwich with a savage chomp and chewing energetically. “I could also stay up for ninety-six hours without feeling like something a truck drove over. Now I like my eight hours' sleep, and I've cut down on caffeine.”

“Then I'm surprised you didn't order milk instead of iced tea.” He picked up an onion ring and devoured it in two bites. “You give up spicy food too?”

“I don't have to worry about fast food or heavy gourmet food anymore. And I don't have that horrible smoker's cough when I wake up in the mornings. I don't even have to worry that my clothes smell like the inside of a cigarette pack.”

“Nothing worse than a reformed smoker.”

Tess set her sandwich down. There was nothing more she'd like to do than smash it in Jake's face. Even after all this time, he could still irritate her.

“Teresa O'Hara, you finish everything on your plate.’ A woman's raspy voice preceded its owner. Jake looked up, his eyes widening as he saw a large woman seem to sail across the room. When she reached them, she looked down at Jake's plate, which was clean as he finished the last onion ring. “You've got a good appetite.”

“In case you couldn't guess, that's the highest praise you can receive from Nancy,” Tess said wryly. “So, Nancy, what little tidbits have you heard about us? I'm taking a survey, since everyone seems to have their own opinion.”

“I haven't heard as much as I'd like, but what bits and pieces I have heard are better than the afternoon soaps,” she said promptly. “You two keep it up and ‘General Hospital’ is going to lose some viewers for a while.”

In Jake's eyes Nancy Grant didn't look like the chief cook and owner of a small-town cafe. Close to six feet tall, she was more muscle than fat. Coal-black hair was coiled on top of her head, making her look even taller, and without any signs of lines on her face there was no way to tell her age.

“Do you work out?” Without thinking, Jake spoke his thoughts out loud.

She lifted her arm and displayed a rock-hard biceps muscle. “Damn right I do. Got my own set of free weights set up in the back. There's some nights drunks come in here and don't want to leave. I'm only too happy to show them where the door is.”

“She doesn't believe in calling us to take care of any problems in here,” Tess explained.

“Why bother when I can take care of it myself”

Nancy's voice still boomed loudly. “I don't get much trouble in here, I can tell you that.” She laughed, clapping Jake on the back. It might have been a light and friendly clap, but if he hadn't gripped the edge of the table, he would have ended up sprawled across it. His eyes still bugged out as he tried to drag air into his lungs.

Tess ducked her head to hide her smile. Bigger men than Jake had been victims of Nancy's puckish sense of humor. That he managed to stay upright after a slap on the back said a lot to Nancy about the man.

“Yeah, well, it's always nice to see a woman who's able to take care of herself,” he choked out. Nancy crossed her arms in front of her chest and stared at Jake until he felt as if he were an insect under a microscope. Undaunted, he settled back on the bench and stared back.

“You don't look like a computer consultant” was her final analysis.

That was something he hadn't expected. “What does one look like?”

“You're supposed to be pasty-faced because you spend all your time indoors, you wear glasses because it's the only way you can read one of those screens, you don't have time for women and wouldn't know how to talk to one if you got lucky. And all you can understand is computer language. Of course I'm describing my grandson,” she pronounced. “Now *he* looks like the typical computer nerd, while you look like somebody who would be out looking for trouble.” She gazed at darkly tanned arms visible under his shirtsleeves that showed a lean definition of muscle. “And have no problem in handling it.” She switched her gaze to Tess. “He looks as if he should be wearing a badge, doesn't he?”

“I don't think Jake would like having to work for someone when he's much happier working for himself,” she said finally. “You should know how that is, since you weren't happy when you used to work for someone else.”

“I don't believe in spending all my time with computers,” Jake explained. “When I can, I help my brother at his lumberyard. It gets me outside doing physical labor.”

Nancy studied Jake with a silence that grew more charged by the second. “Sure you do.” Three men walked in, greeting Nancy and Nicole along with a few curious looks at the man sitting with their sheriff.

“Should I stand up and state my name, rank, and serial number, or what?” he muttered as Tess settled

the bill and they walked outside.

“At least Henry wasn't in there with his big ears and equally big mouth,” she muttered. “Damn! How could I forget that Nancy senses things no one else would? Everyone else is taking you at face value, but she never goes along with what anyone else thinks. At least, I know she won't voice her opinion to others. She'd rather think you're a crook and don't want me to know or something even worse.”

“I hate to think what she'd consider worse.” Jake turned around and looked down the street. “You going back to the station?”

Tess nodded, looking a little wary. “Why?”

“I thought I'd take a look around, see if I can get a feel for the place and the people. Maybe even learn something.”

“Do you still have the house key on you?” He nodded. “Good, if you want to go back to the house, you can walk back. I usually get off around six or so.”

“Okay.” Jake walked over to her and put his arms around her waist, pulling her against him. “I'll miss you, sweetheart, but I know how important your work is.” He smiled as he lowered his head and covered her mouth with the heat and emotion that signified the thoroughness of a longtime lover. His mouth was hot with enough pressure to keep her anchored to the ground and light enough so that she could walk away if she wanted to. That was the last thing she wanted to do.

It wouldn't be until later that Tess would kick herself for allowing Jake to get the upper hand again. He was still smiling when he finally lifted his head. A smile she would have loved to have wiped off his face. But unfortunately she couldn't do what she wanted to when there were so many people watching them with smiles and titters. She was positive the story about their kiss would burn up the town's phone lines within the next sixty seconds.

“I suggest the next time you decide to kiss me in public for the sake of your case, you forgo the onion rings at lunch,” she said softly, with her own smile pasted on her lips. “And it's only because of our audience looking on with fond affection that you are still in one piece. But don't push your luck, Slick. Accidents can happen just about anywhere. Even in li'l ole Crater Rock.” She patted his cheek a tad harder than necessary and finished her walk back to the station.

“I'd say you've got a lot of woman to deal with, Wilder,” a man standing in front of an electronics store called out. “You're a braver man than I am. I don't know if I'd want to fool around with a woman who carries a gun.”

“Hey, that's what makes life interesting. Besides, I'm the kind of guy who likes to live life dangerously. I want a woman who can give me some pretty wild nights,” he called back. He grinned at the

stiff set of her posture, which told him she'd heard. Sensing an opening, he walked over to the man with the intention of taking it.

As Jake smiled and talked to the man about a little bit of everything, he still couldn't get the taste of Tess's mouth out of his mind.

SIX

“Now, Tessie, you can't mean to bring this proposal before the town council next week. Especially after all the times we've had to sit up there and explain to everyone how the town coffers keep getting lower instead of higher.” Henry dropped the six-page proposal on Tess's desk. He treated the proposal she had labored over for almost a week as if it was nothing more than a throwaway ad someone had stuck under his car's windshield wiper.

“Then I guess the council is going to have to come up with some, ideas, because this town is starting to grow, Henry, and growth means we'll need more officers,” she argued, picking up the proposal and smoothing the top page. “I'd like to add at least one more on nights. We could use that additional coverage now.”

He puffed himself up. “What's wrong with Frank?”

“He's a damn good officer, missy. He's always been devoted to his work, so I can't think you'd have any complaints about him.”

She stifled her sigh of frustration. “Calm down, Henry. Your face is so red that if you don't sit down, you might end up having a stroke.” She waited until he dropped into the chair across from her desk. “For the past six months you have been talking to the entire town about our future growth, about luring manufacturing firms out this way, and then the real estate developers. All of that is good and fine, but with growth we have to start thinking about protection for the extended population. As it is, we can't cover the entire area as effectively as we should.”

“Since we haven't had a major crime committed here in the past thirty years, I don't see why you're worrying so much,” he argued.

“Maybe because I like to be prepared. I didn't write this up for the fun of it, Henry.” She tapped her proposal. “I conducted a survey by talking to sheriffs and police chiefs in charge of towns our size and to chiefs of towns twice our size. Even the smaller towns have more than one man patrolling at night.”

“I don't hear Frank complaining about his workload.”

She felt herself starting to lose her temper. “Probably because he can crack heads to his heart's content without too much 'interference. There's going to come a day when he's going to crack the wrong head and be in a lot of trouble. Right now I'm on call twenty-four hours a day. I've never complained before and I'm not complaining now, but it isn't something we should count on in the future. What if something happens to me? The day shift can't work nights, too, and remain effective.”

Henry heaved himself out of his chair. “Now, darlin', you're worrying about problems that haven't

even come up yet.” He reached across the desk and patted her hand. “I think the problem is you're working yourself too hard. You need to relax, spend time with that young man of yours. I heard he went alone -- with you when you patrolled. Now, I know you wouldn't have taken him with you if you even thought there might be some kind of trouble, would you?” He didn't wait for an answer but rambled on. “You see, there's nothing for you to worry your little head about. I'd say in about another six months we could easily think about hiring someone on a part-time basis to take some of the load off you.” His smile broadened more before he sketched a wave and left.

Tess sat there staring at the door while jiggling a pencil between her fingers. It wasn't long before the pencil lay on the desk in two pieces.

Wilma opened the door a crack and peeked in. 'Is it safe to come in, or should I just post a warning on your door to beware of the sheriff.’”

Tess gestured for her to enter. “Did you ever get the idea that the world would be a better place if women ran it?”

“Every day of my life. More so when Curtis died and I found out he'd run the business into the ground. The man was the only house painter and wallpaper hanger in town and he still couldn't handle it,” she said, taking the chair Henry had recently vacated. “And to top it off, he didn't take on the extra insurance policy Henry kept pushing him to take, because he figured on living forever instead of having that heart attack while painting Joe Simpson's house.” She sighed, shaking her head. “Do you know Joe never paid me for that job? It might not have been finished, but he could have paid for the three sides of the house Curtis had done. I really should have taken him to small-claims court about that.”

Tess closed her eyes, feeling the headache Henry's visit started increase with Wilma's presence. “No offense, Wilma, but is this story going somewhere?”

“Well, of course it's going somewhere! I don't exactly talk to hear myself talk. What I'm saying is that if the men would just settle back and let us women run the world, it would be a better place because we wouldn't listen to the ridiculous excuses men put up with,’ the older woman concluded.

By then it took Tess a moment even to remember the original question and to wish fervently that she hadn't asked it! She knew she wasn't going to ask about the excuses men accept.

“Is there a problem?”

Wilma looked blank for a moment, then brightened. “Oh! Why I came in here. I wanted to know what Henry thought of your proposal to expand the department. I saw him carrying your report.”

Tess tossed the pencil pieces into the wastebasket. “He said there's no use taking it before the town council because we just don't have the money. Frank .is doing fine on his own, but maybe in six months or

so we can see our way clear to hire someone part-time to take the strain off 'li'l ole me“ She wasn't sure if it was bitterness or, sarcasm that colored her voice. Probably both.

“See what I mean about ridiculous excuses? A woman would come up with a rational reason we'd all understand. Besides, if the town is so poor, how come Henry's got the money to drive that big Cadillac all over the place and is buying that parcel of land from Larry Weaver so he can build a new home on it? And he's planning on putting in a swimming pool and a spa too.”

Tess's ears pricked up at that. “He's buying Larry Weaver's property? That's a good fifteen acres. Why would he want to buy so much?”

“Who knows what men plan? Henry likes to look important, so he needs a lot of land to do it with.” She waved her hand around. “I know his insurance agency does all right, but I didn't think it could do that well. There's only so many policies a person can write in this town before he runs out of clients.”

A few other possibilities entered her mind, but she didn't want to voice them yet. She knew if Jake heard this, it would give him a stronger reason to stay around. And while she was still remembering that heated kiss on the street, she wasn't sure that was a good idea.

“I'm sure Henry solicits insurance clients outside of the area,” she said carefully.

Wilma leaned forward. A gleam of excitement fit up her eyes. “Maybe Jake would be willing to break into Henry's computer and find out where all his money comes from. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if his family came from bootleggers or worse. You know how so many of those small-town politicians are.” Tess didn't know and wasn't about to ask. “Computer hacking is illegal, Wilma.”

She waved the statement off as if unimportant.

“As if that would stop us! Besides, you'd think of a way where he'd have a good reason to do it,” Wilma insisted.

“I don't think so, Wilma, but thanks for the idea.”

Wilma stood up. “I never have trusted Henry, Tess. He smiles too much when he's around people, and we all know a man who smiles too much must have something to hide” was her verdict as she walked to the door. “Oh, Frank called and said he hasn't finished last night's report yet, but he'll make sure you have it first thing in the morning.” She left the office, closing the door behind her.

Tess collapsed back in her chair. *Jake shows up to make my life impossible, Henry keeps treating me as if I'm a brainless little girl, Wilma wants to break into other people's computer systems, Walt's afraid of a little old lady. Even Frank is doing his best to make my day completely miserable It's a miracle I haven't gone insane.*

“We're talking small town here, Roger,” Jake argued, switching the phone receiver from one shoulder to the other. “The worst crime on the books happened about thirty years ago when Floyd Garver got fed up with the banking system and walked into the local bank with a sawed-off shotgun and demanded all his money and everyone else's. He didn't even make it out of the bank because the gun wasn't loaded and the sheriff took it out of his hands. Floyd insisted he was only making a point.”

“Everything our sources have dug up points to that area, Jake. You must have heard something from someone to corroborate that. There has to be something that doesn't seem right.”

Jake sighed. “Can it with the big, fancy words, okay? English was never a strong point of mine. Tess took me out with her this morning, and we drove by some out-of-the-way places. But the buildings could barely hold themselves up, much less house a printshop the size we're talking about.”

“Come on, Jake, did you she'd lead you right to them?”

“Sarcasm will get you exactly nowhere, Roger.”

“Dammit, Jake, you were sent there to do a job, not relive old times!” he exploded. “Don't count on Tess to give you any help. Go out on your own. You've never had a problem in ferreting out information before. Why now?”

Jake crushed his cigarette out in the ashtray he'd picked up at the drugstore that day. “Just remember, I've only been here twenty-four hours. Not to mention I'm dealing with a lot of people who wouldn't know organized crime if it smacked them in the face. These are the kind of people who think they can keep their doors unlocked at night. Their idea of a hot date is getting a hamburger at the Dairy Queen. This isn't the place you find big-time confidence men or drug dealers. I'm dealing with a completely different mentality here.”

In desperation he moved the chair around to the other end of the table, closer to the phone, and slid his papers across also. The notes he'd made after his “stroll” through town were pretty extensive, since everyone he'd met appeared to like to talk and took little encouragement to do so. Most of his notes were about Tess more than about the town itself.

“I want something more concrete in the next twenty-four hours, or I'll send someone in there who can do the job without panting after Tess,” Roger threatened. “We want this ring broken up immediately.”

Jake's reply was short, succinct, and very profane.

“You bastard!”

He jumped to his feet at the sound of Tess's voice, which preceded the gunshot snap of the back screen door slamming shut. And started to gag when the phone cord wrapped itself around his throat.

“What's going on there? Jake? Answer me!” Roger's voice came through clearly.

“Nothing's wrong, Roger. I just forgot what it's like to use a phone that has a cord attached to it,” Jake answered, keeping an eye on Tess. She looked angry enough to cut him into tiny pieces as she advanced on him.

Her gaze swerved between him and the phone. “Is that Roger?”

Jake nodded.

“Did he call you or you call him?”

“I called him.”

Tess grabbed the phone, not bothering to untangle Jake from the cord. He instantly bent backward to lessen the strain.

“Talk to me, Jake!” Roger's command rang out. “What the hell is going on?”

“Roger, how nice to talk to you again. We're all fine here. Thanks for asking,” she cooed. “I'm sure you'll understand that Jake has to go now. Next time you be sure and call him, because we small-town sheriffs don't have the big expense accounts you government types do. Good-bye.” She efficiently uncoiled the phone from Jake's throat and hung it up.

He coughed a few times. “You didn't need to worry about the phone bill, Legs,” he croaked out. “I'd used my phone credit card.”

“Oh, I assumed you had, but it felt so good to have the chance to hang up on Roger that I couldn't resist it.” She unbuckled her utility belt and laid it on the counter, then placed her hat on top of it. “Tell me, was there anyone you didn't talk to this afternoon?” Her calm voice was deceptive, and Jake easily read the warning signs.

“I'm sure there were a few.”

She got a glass out of the cabinet and filled it with water. “I don't see how you could have missed them. You talked to Dan Walker, you carried Mrs. Ivy's groceries home for her, you helped Andy Morris unstop his sink. Shall I go on?” She leaned against the counter, sipping her water as she waited for his reply.

“I was just being friendly. After all, they're real nice people, so it's easy to be nice back. -No wonder you like it here.”

She rolled her eyes. “Give it a rest, Wilder. You're not happy unless you're in the midst of a crime ring you're breaking up or in easy reach of every take-out restaurant known to man. Even working here is going

to drive you crazy until you climb into your yellow bomb and take off for the big city.” She set her glass

down with a thump that left it rocking slightly. “Until the day you go up against someone who's a bit smarter than you and a bit faster on his feet. Although, in this day of equality, maybe it will be a she who's smarter. Either way you'll end up dead from a bullet or a knife wound or...” She couldn't go on. She spun around and gripped the sides of the counter. She felt his body heat warming her back before she heard his words.

“The day I don't think I can cut it, Tess, is the day I take that desk job or get out altogether,” he said quietly. “I don't consider myself invincible. I've got the scars to prove it. But you're thinking of the Jake from five years ago. I'm a lot more careful now. Roger will even tell you that there're cases I've turned down because I know they could be a lost cause. Oh, I'll help map out strategy for someone else who thinks he can go in and break it, but I let someone else take the chances.”

She lifted her head but refused to turn around. She wasn't sure she could trust herself if she saw his face. “And if you see it as the case of a lifetime? The one you absolutely can't turn down. What then?”

Jake heard the strain in her voice, the fear. ‘Is this what you felt before you left? That you'd get killed? Didn't you trust me to back you up, Tess?’ he ventured.

She spun around and pushed him away from her. “You idiot, you never did understand, did you?”

Jake started to reach out and grab her as she brushed past him, but something held him back. He sensed that if he touched her now, she would make sure to inflict physical pain on him. If there was one thing about Tess he knew, it was that she wasn't the vulnerable type who accepted comfort. So he remained behind while she stalked out of the kitchen. A moment later he heard the slam of the bedroom door. He began rummaging through the refrigerator in search of dinner makings. He studied a package of chicken as he tried to remember how it could be cooked. He sighed.

“I guess I'd better figure out what I said wrong before I do it again and she kicks me out.”

Damn him, damn him, damn him! Tess pounded the tile walls of her shower cubicle with her fists. *Can't he understand what I'm saying? That it's his sorry hide I worry about Would he be better off if I just shot him myself? '*

She straightened up and adjusted the showerhead so that the water could spray fully over her face. She closed her eyes and tipped her face upward. She soaped herself vigorously, shampooed her hair, and rinsed off before stepping out of the shower.

Tess combed her wet hair back from her face and only blotted it dry before drying off the rest of her body. She dressed in blue chambray shorts and a blue-and-cream-striped T-shirt. Feeling a bit better about herself, she walked back into the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” She looked in the kitchen and found Jake just closing the oven door.

“I wasn't sure how to fix the chicken, so I put it in a pan and dumped barbecue sauce on it,” he explained, opening the oven door far enough for her to see. She checked the temperature, looked inside, and nodded her approval.

“It looks fine. I'd give it about an hour or so.” She pulled out the makings for a salad.

“I could tackle that if you want to go dry your hair,” he offered, still watching her with a wary gaze.

“It's so warm my hair will dry on its own in no time.”

Jake leaned across the counter. “Tell me something, Tess. Did you come here because you considered it safer? Did you think none of the bad guys would come out to a nothing town like this and you could have it easy? Is that why you came back? To feel safe?”

Her fingers stilled as they curved around a knife. “Don't play psychologist, Jake. It doesn't suit you.”

“I'm just trying to understand that earlier outburst of yours.”

Tess cut two tomatoes into equal-size wedges and set them aside. She tore the lettuce into pieces and dropped them into the bowl in front of her.

“Outburst'? Don't you mean 'tantrum'? Or 'PMS'? Or maybe something worse, as long as you can make it sound female related,” she spat out. “All of you men are alike. If a woman makes a statement you men can't understand, you blame it on her hormones, because it's easier than to stand there and listen to her.”

“Now, wait a minute.” He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her around to face him. “Something tells me you're mad at someone else so you're taking it out on me. Considering that just about every man in this town seems to be a raving chauvinist, the list seems pretty long. Should I just pick up the phone book and start with the As?”

She took a deep breath. ‘A couple of weeks ago I worked up a proposal on expanding the department. While the town is growing slowly, it is growing. We're going to need more officers. Henry somehow got hold of the proposal and brought it in to tell me that he can't imagine our crime rate growing so quickly, we'd need new staff right now. And besides, the town doesn't have the budget to cover the salaries. So I'm not supposed to worry my li'l ole head about these nasty business matters, and maybe I'm just overtired and should take it easy,” she finished on a sarcastic note. “He didn't mention hormones or some obscure female emotional disorder, but it was implied.”

“Why do you stay here if you're treated that way?” he demanded, slowly running his hands down her arms to her wrists and clasping them loosely. “Why would you put up with it?”

“Why?” she shrugged. “My best reason for sticking it out is because there are a lot of people who

believed in me, and as hokey as it sounds' I want to show them I'm worthy of their trust. The next best reason is that I look at Henry's red face when he gets angry and I can only hope his blood pressure will shoot up so high, he'll drop like a stone."

He chuckled in spite of her dire words. "That's a horrible thing to wish about a person."

"Are you kidding? You'd be surprised what people hope will happen to Henry. The trouble is, every time election year rolls around, no one wants to take him on, so he always wins." She looked down at his hands lightly gripping her wrists. How could she have forgotten what his hands were like? The skin deeply tanned, the fingers strong when necessary, gentle when need be. "I want to show them that women can do more than keep house and have babies."

Jake stepped back and held her arms out from her sides as he studied her from head to toe. "Somehow, Legs, you don't look like the type of woman who wants to stay in the house and bake cookies." He hurried on when he saw the storm brewing in her eyes. "Now, wait a minute. Before you decide to shoot me where I stand, let me state I have never thought of you as unfeminine, because you're as feminine as hell." His eyes darkened with memories. "And I think I proved that pretty well once upon a time. So don't let those SOBs try to browbeat you." He started to grin when he saw the signs that told him her temper was rising.

"As if I would let them really get to me!" She jerked her hands out of his. But her anger couldn't remain hot under his cheerful manner. "You're trying to cheer me up, aren't you?"

He looked hopeful. "Is it working?"

"Well, I don't think I'll shoot you," she conceded. "I know very well you're not like Henry and the others. If you were, I wouldn't care if you slept in your car. Although if you did, I'd run you in for loitering." She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "Ah, Jake, there are times when you're a regular idiot and there are times when you're a sweetheart. Thank you for being a sweetheart." She returned to making the salad.

"So, can we talk more about my being a sweetheart?"

She kept her back to him so he wouldn't see her smile. "Do yourself a favor and don't push your luck."

SEVEN

“Do you realize our biggest clue in the past few days is Wilma's comment about not trusting Henry because of his smile?” Jake commented.

Dinner had been long over. They spent the rest of the evening going over Jake's notes he'd taken since he'd arrived in town. He had already secreted away the information he'd gathered on Tess. He already knew how she would react if she knew how openly the townspeople had talked to him. He was just glad they had. He learned how much the people respected and liked her and was amazed how freely they talked about their feelings about the town and its people in general. Used to dealing with people who wouldn't part with a word unless they were paid, this was something new to him.

What he especially learned was that they cared very deeply about Tess and how hard she worked in helping the town. And with what they told him, he realized there would be no way he could tempt her back to the old job.

She shook her head. “As far as Wilma's concerned, that's more than reason enough. But what she said was she doesn't trust him because he smiles too much. She feels anyone who smiles too much must have something to hide. There was a time I'd dismiss her idea, but ' considering how she's always been so accurate about others, I wouldn't dare dispute her.”

He flipped his pen back and forth between two fingers. “I think we should consider checking into his personal and business bank accounts. It could prove real interesting to see how well off a small-town insurance agent is. Of course there's also good old Henry's gift of gab. Say, does anyone call him Hank?” She pursed her lips and shook her head slowly from side to side. “Didn't think so. Anyway, with the way he loves to talk, people probably buy insurance from him just to shut him up. Did he try to sell you a policy?”

“He's mentioned from time to time that the policy that comes with the job isn't enough, but I reminded him I really don't have any family to benefit from my death, so he finally backed off.” A line appeared between her eyebrows as Tess concentrated on translating his scrawl into English. She used her forefinger to push her reading glasses back up her nose, then picked up her glass of cola to take a sip.

Jake's stomach clenched at her matter-of-fact words. Death was something the two of them lived with every day they worked together.

They'd been shot at more than once, Tess had been held at knife point, and there was that time Jake was caught off guard and got shot, but crazily enough, the sense of Tess losing her life never occurred to him until that very moment. He wasn't sure if it was because the adrenaline wasn't running or because his

feelings for her had changed so much over the years. If he wanted to admit it, he knew it had to be more the latter than the former.

He looked at her across the table. He'd learned she had a habit of taking a shower the minute she got home and usually let her hair dry on its own. Tonight her hair had dried into loose waves, which she absently pushed behind her ear as she read. When she moved, he could detect the faint scent of shampoo, soap, and powder. After several nights of having the light fragrance surround him, he realized how quickly it was arousing him. He shifted uneasily in his chair. "I can't believe this! Martha Phillips and Tom Kerns have been having an affair for almost years?" She howled with laughter, dangerously rocking back and forth in her chair, almost failing off a few times. "Those two have always acted as if they're the worst of enemies. Now I find out that he's been sneaking into her yard and through her bedroom window since 1966." She set the notes on the table. "Great reading, Slick, but I don't see one clue about anyone being accosted by someone on a street corner trying to sell them a counterfeit green card."

He snatched the notes back. "I was trying to get a feel for the people, and you know it."

"I think you did a wonderful job of getting their confidence if you were able to find out about Martha and Tom. That must be a pretty well-kept secret, since I hadn't heard about it. But then Allen Parker lives next door to Martha, and he's a worse snoop than anyone I know. He had to be the one who told you."

He nodded. "He was. I also met the woman who runs the beauty shop." He gave a mock shudder. "She could give our best interrogator a run for his money. The only thing that saved me from caving in and telling her the truth just to get her off my back was someone screaming that the timer went off for their bleach job."

"If you're smart, you'll stay away from Ginnie," she advised. "If anyone can squeeze blood out of a stone, she can."

"I'd guess so."

Tess raised her arms over her head and stretched them high. She glanced at the clock and groaned. "I can't believe it's so late!"

"It's only a little after midnight," Jake protested. "We used to stay up all night partying, remember?"

"But back then I could sleep all day if I wanted to." She pushed back her chair and stood up. "Now if I dared to oversleep, Wilma would call to see what's going on and accuse you of all sorts of kinky things that probably overtired me," she teased.

"How do you handle this lack of privacy? These people seem to know everything there is to know about you. You can't do anything without them finding out about it within five minutes."

"Usually it only takes about two minutes if they have to dial a phone. If someone runs into Ginnie's

with the news, it takes even less time,” she explained. “But they're never vicious with their gossip, and you get used to your life being held up in the public eye. Plus, you can guarantee that you'll be old news within ten minutes. We may be small, but we do have our share of scandals.” She suddenly giggled. “Such as Martha and Tom. Talk about the original odd couple.”

Jake never felt more wide awake. Probably because he was used to staying up at all hours, but also because he was enjoying this time they were spending together.

“You could sit down and talk for a little while, couldn't you?” He watched her pick up their glasses and set them in the sink. “We haven't had much-chance to do that.”

“Haven't we discussed this case enough tonight?”

“I didn't intend to talk about the case. I want to m& about us. You know what I mean. We could talk about what we've been doing these past five years.”

Tess looked at him without a trace of emotion on her face. “Since your department appears to have kept tabs on me, you probably know more about what I've been doing than I do. And I can already figure out what you've been doing.”

He laughed at that. “Yeah, right. You been keeping tabs on me, Legs?”

She held up her forefinger. “One, you've been on one case after another. Two, you drove down to Baja to celebrate every successful case for a long weekend of beer and fishing. And each time you come home, you're hung over and didn't catch one fish. Other than that, you haven't done one thing.”

“What about women?”

What about them? That was something Tess didn't care to think about too closely. “Last I knew you were on a blondes kick. You tend to go in cycles.”

He stood up and walked slowly over to her. The Jake she was seeing was the dangerous Jake. Not the man with the gun but the man who exuded testosterone and stalked a woman with gentle menace.

“Last I remember I had a hankering for dark auburn hair.” He stopped in front of her and reached out for a stray lock. He wound it around his finger as he looked down into her eyes. “Maybe I still do.”

She had to break the spell he was weaving fast. “Are you trying to tell me you haven't had sex with another woman in the last five years? Because if that's what you're trying to tell me, I won't believe you. I remember your success with women only too well.”

“I'm not going to deny that I have had sex with other women.” He purposely waited a beat. “But I never made love to them.”

Her throat worked convulsively. “We made a deal.”

“That's funny, I don't remember making any deal.”

“You're here on business,” Tess reminded him. A desperate note entered her voice. “You never mix pleasure with business. What we have here is purely a business relationship.”

“You don't feel like a business relationship. Actually you feel more like old times.” He carefully placed the coil of hair on her shoulder, taking the time to arrange it just so. When he finished, he ran his finger along her collarbone, visible above the wide-necked T-shirt, and then down her bare arm. He bent his head and nuzzled her throat. “Soft, sweet-smelling old times. I like that idea.”

She found it harder and harder to breathe, the closer he got. The rough denim of his jeans brushed against her bare legs. She unconsciously thought of the rough feel of the hair on his legs brushing against hers that long-ago night. Otherwise any coherent thought she might have had flew out of her head.

“We only act that way so that the public will accept you as my boyfriend.”

Jake's slow smile was as dangerous as the rest of him. “I hate to say this, Legs, but they don't seem to view me as something harmless like a boyfriend. They see me in a lot stronger light. They're seeing me as your lover, Tess.”

The word floated between them.

Tess had forgotten that Jake could practically hypnotize a person. As she stared back into his chocolatebrown eyes, she saw his memories of them tangled together on the rough carpet, then lying among the sheets they'd impatiently pushed off the bed because they'd wanted nothing between or around them. It had been all he had told her-and more.

Her fingers itched to sift through his hair, to see if it was still as silky soft as she remembered. And if his face was still pleasingly rough to the touch. He could always seduce her with his words, smile, and eyes. Now he was being unfair by using all of them on her. She felt her entire body go limp and all the heat from her blood ran to her pussy as he caressed her. He was succeeding too.

“Jake.” His name left her lips on a soft breath of air.

Flame raced through his veins as he watched her cheeks turn a warm rose color and her respiration increase. Her breasts moved under the soft cotton as her body swayed toward him.

She was soft, warm, downright sexy and the only woman he wanted in his arms. He wanted to draw this out as long as possible. He started with feather-light kisses strung her forehead. Touching her warned him drawing it out long wasn't a possibility. He wanted to fuck her. Be inside that velvet pussy. It had been too long for them. He watched her eyes close when his mouth passed over the lowered lids. The warm scent of her skin filled his nostrils, reminding him of heated, sweaty nights when they couldn't get enough of each other. He swore he only had to inhale the womanly fragrance of her skin and he could track her down like a bloodhound. And right now, this bloodhound was horny as hell!

“I think the real reason I was willing to take on this case was because I knew you were here,” he murmured, running his fingers up and down her bare arms, then trailing down her sides and back up to rest just under her breasts. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to send me away the way you did five years ago. I also knew it wouldn’t take much for me to get under your skin.” He pushed up the hem of her T-shirt to reveal a strip of golden-tanned skin. “And over your skin. And around your skin.” He dipped his head so his parted lips could caress her abdomen. He smiled as he felt her sharp indrawn breath of arousal. .

Not content for this to be one-sided, Tess ripped Jake's shirt from his jeans. She slowly ran her hands over the hair-roughened skin of his chest, which was hot to her touch. Her hands shook. She wanted his cock inside her, deep inside as she rode him hard and fast. Her smile was just as predatory as his when his gorgeous, sculpted abdomen muscles rippled under her fingertips.

“If you keep talking, Slick, you’ll just talk yourself out of everything you're hoping for, she said as she looped her arms around his neck and pulled his face down to hers. Jake might have been content to take things slow and easy, but Tess had other ideas. Her lips parted with wild eagerness as her tongue darted out to first bathe his lower lip then slip between the seam of his lips to delve inside. She felt his heat and tasted the hot flavor of his tongue. . She set an intoxicating rhythm that fairly rumbaed its way down their bodies.

There was no mistaking the feel of his cock throbbing between her thighs. Jake rocked his hips against Tess. She felt her pussy first swell then soften and moisten in preparation for his invasion. She knew he only had to slide his hands between her thighs to know how wet she was for him. She knew she wanted his fingers to tease inside her pussy and she wanted his hard, hot cock offering her the nirvana she’d once experienced. She dug her fingers under the waistband of his jeans for balance her fingers moving for his zipper while she shifted her thighs slightly apart to accommodate him.

“This time let's not start on the floor,” he muttered, pulling her shirt off then dispensing with her bra. He nuzzled, the valley between her breasts then turned his head so that he could cover a dark rose-colored nipple with his mouth. He pulled the peak gently between his lips, drawing it deep into the heat of his mouth.

Tess moaned as electric shocks started at her breast and raced through her body to set off an explosion inside her pussy. She was hot, wet and ready for him, now!. She throbbed with an urgency that had her forgetting everything but what he was doing to her. She arched up against him, curling one leg around his thighs so that his denim-covered erection would rub against her. In response, he moved his hips in a way that had lightning practically shooting out of that part of her body. She was so close! She could feel herself moving closer to Nirvana. The walls of her pussy tensed in anticipation. Jake’s movements increased as if he could feel the tension building in her body. Almost there. She practically panted as she

rubbed herself harder against him. So close! Closer!

Just like that the sensation changed. She felt her body seem to turn its back on what was happening to her. *No! Not fair!* The reason for her mind switching her body off was coming through loud and clear. But it still took another moment for her to realize that the buzzing in her ears was the phone ringing.

She wanted to scream with frustration instead of the satisfaction she was so close to. She wanted to kill someone. Namely, the person who dared call her at this moment.

"We have to stop," she said with a gasp. She pushed him away even though she really wanted to pull him back.

"Mmm?" He nibbled on her neck, then moved back up to her mouth. He kissed her hungrily, pulling her back into that sensual spell.

"Jake." It took all of her willpower to push him away. It would have been a lot easier for her to melt back into his arms and have it all. "I have to answer the phone."

He captured her hands and held them against his chest. "Ignore it. They'll call back."

"I have to." With a great deal of effort she finally freed herself and blindly groped for the phone. "So help me if this is a wrong number I will shoot them," she murmured. She cleared her throat before speaking. "Sheriff O'Hara." She straightened up as she listened to the caller. "How long ago did he call in? All right, radio him and tell him I'm on my way."

Jake was taking a little longer to recover--until he saw the light of battle taking over the desire in Tess's aquamarine eyes. He cursed the phone for ringing. Then he cursed the caller. By now they should have been in Tess's bed, where he could reacquaint himself with her beautiful self. He should have ripped off the rest of her clothes. Then it would have been easier to persuade her to not answer the damn phone. He stepped back as she moved around him and followed her to her bedroom.

"What's up?" He stood in the doorway watching her pull a uniform shirt out of her closet and a pair of jeans out of a drawer. She looked up, read the hunger in his eyes, and quietly let herself into the bathroom to finish dressing.

"It's just a typical rowdy night down at Red's that got out of hand," she replied. When she walked out of the bathroom, she was busy tucking her shirt into her jeans and zipping them up. She sat on the bed and pulled on her socks and boots. "I shouldn't be gone long."

Jake hadn't hesitated as he went back into the living room. He pulled on his shoulder holster and covered it with his leather jacket. "Honey, if you think I'm letting you go out there alone, you're wrong."

Tess had finished pinning her shield on her shirt and was walking out of her bedroom when she heard his words.

“A barroom brawl has nothing to do with your investigation. You know where the sheets and blankets are to make up the couch. I'll try to be quiet when I get back.” She was out the door and halfway down the driveway before Jake could catch up with her.

He knew better than to try to argue with her and merely jumped into the passenger seat and buckled up.

“Come on, Legs,” he coaxed. “I want to see you at work. Hey, I'll even stay out of your way.”

She looked at him with blatant disbelief. “Yeah, right.”

But she didn't lock him out of the truck. Within seconds she was racing down the street. Jake noticed that while the houses were dark, a few curtains still fluttered as if someone had moved them aside to watch.

“No siren?”

“I don't have to worry about traffic at this hour, and Red's isn't far from here.” She made an abrupt left turn. “Red's Bar is practically an institution around here and what could be called your typical redneck watering hole. Beer is the drink of the day, pool is the game, and the jukebox only plays country western. If anyone's stupid enough to argue with Red, they usually get locked out if not knocked out first. Since he uses fear to keep his patrons in line, he rarely needs to call us.’

“What about your guy working nights? Isn't he taking care of this?”

“I'm not sure what exactly is going on. Red was the one to call the station for backup instead of Frank calling in. So either Frank is out of commission or. . .” She shook her head, not wanting to think the worst. While she didn't like Frank as a person, she hated the idea of any of her deputies ending up critically hurt.

“Yep, your typical watering hole,” Jake muttered, looking at the number of pickup trucks in the parking lot. Several women wearing tight jeans and equally tight shirts stumbled out the front door. Their drunken giggles drifted across the parking lot. His head swiveled around when he heard Tess mutter an earthy profanity.

“Tiny is back. No wonder Red is panicking.” She climbed out of the truck and walked around to the rear. Jake followed her and watched her pull out her shotgun, load a couple of shells, and drop more in her shirt pocket.

“If you have to defend yourself inside there, wouldn't you be better off using a handgun?” His mouth grew dry, at the idea of her getting shot because she couldn't return fire in a crowded room.

“Not with Tiny.” She lifted her head and studied him. “Are you all right? You look a little green around the gills. The Jake Wilder I remember didn't turn a hair when he faced Carlos Lopez, who was not

only more than a little psychotic but also well known to use a very sharp knife to carve dirty words on his opponents. And then there was Steven Keats, who looked like your everyday normal guy and had the mind of a real scuzz.” She slammed the back of the truck shut and headed for the door.

“And what's Tiny like? His name or the opposite?”

The noise rolled over them when Tess opened the door. Jake could hear the unmistakable sounds of arguing and a fight as they entered.

Tess leaned back against his chest as she pointed across the room. ‘The big guy with all the tattoos is Tiny.’”

“Holy-” Jake's epithet was smothered by the yelling going on around him. He stared at a man who had to be six foot five, with long, dirty hair, wearing the ragged jeans and frayed T-shirt usually found on a biker. And Tess was going to go up against him?,

Tess shoved her way through the crowd until she reached a tall, beefy man who was perfectly bald.

“Where's Frank?’ she shouted in his ear.

He looked over her shoulder. “That the guy you been boffing in Palm Springs?”

Tess didn't change expression. “Where is Frank?”

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “He tried his usual trick to hold Tiny down, so Tiny threw him against the wall. Myrna's trying to bring him to.” A wave of disgust flashed over his face. “Although I doubt he needs the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation Myrna's giving him. Look, Tess, I want Tiny and his friends out of here before they tear the place apart.”

Tess nodded grimly. “Where's Brock?” She mentioned his bouncer.

“In almost as bad shape as Frank. Now, please get him the hell out of here!’

“What do we do?” Jake murmured in Tess's ear.

“You're a computer consultant, remember?”

“So tell them I watch all the reruns of 'NYPD Blue.’” He remained at her heels as she made her way to the center of the bar, where three men were in the midst of a wrestling match that involved breaking furniture.

“All right, enough!” she shouted. When they ignored her, she shook her head slightly and aimed the rifle over their heads. The first shot barely skimmed over the tallest man's head, and the second nicked the second man's shirt collar.

Both men froze and turned in her direction.

“You again!” Tiny sneered. “Why ain't you home where you belong? You broads who think you can be cops make me sick.”

“Believe me, I'd love to be home catching up on my sleep, but instead I got a call to come out here because you were being a bad boy again,” she told him. “I hope you've got the money to pay the damages and that you'll decide to go quietly. I'm in no mood to put up with one of your tantrums.”

He hitched his jeans up over a bulging beer belly. “No broad tells me what to do.”

“Yeah, Tiny, show the lady sheriff who's the man around here!” one of the other men bellowed with a drunken laugh.

“Has she ever had to come out here before?” Jake asked Red as the other man came up beside him.

He shook his head. “Tiny showed up the first time about eight months ago, and my bouncer got him out of here when he made trouble. This time he's a lot worse.”

Jake looked back to the troublemaker. “He's probably on drugs. You can see the signs.”

Red looked suspicious. “You a cop?”

He shook his head. “Computer consultant.”

“Then who's going to help Tess?” Both men tamed back to the show when they heard the jeering getting louder and more profane from the crowd.

Jake didn't miss the look in Tess's eye. He remembered the last time he had seen the look and what had happened to the person who caused it. “I'd say she can handle herself just fine.”

“You calling me a wimp?” Tiny roared at Tess.

She looked unconcerned by his fury. “Only if you think the picture fits, and I'd say it does.”

Still roaring, Tiny advanced on Tess with his hands outstretched in preparation to wring her neck.

“She needs help!” Red grabbed Jake's arm.

“Trust me, she'll be fine.” And if he turned out to be wrong, he knew he wouldn't hesitate to drop the guy where he stood.

Tess was familiar with Frank's tactics on handling the large man. She didn't even try them. She quickly gauged the man and did what she felt would work the best for her. She spun around and firmly planted her boot in his midriff. It effectively pushed the air out.

Tiny's eyes bulged, and his breath whooshed out of his lungs like a hurricane. He immediately dropped to the floor in a sitting position.

“Don't worry, Tiny, I only knocked the wind out of you. You're not in any danger of suffocating,” she assured him as she dragged his hands behind his back and slipped the handcuffs on. “Just relax, and by the time you're at the jail, you'll feel fine.” She reached for the second pair of handcuffs she always carried and gestured for the second man. “You going to behave, or do I have to use my feminine wiles on you too?”

The man didn't hesitate.

“Somebody told me she used to work for the government, but I didn't believe them,” Red said. “I mean, I thought she was a secretary for them or something. That was one nice piece of work she just did. I always thought women couldn't do that kind of thing. I mean, you see it on TV, but that's only special effects. She's good.”

“PMS,” Jake pronounced. “Gets 'em every time. Where's this Frank? I'll help him out of here.”

Red led him to the rear of the bar where a waitress in a midriff top that barely contained her abundant breasts, and a denim miniskirt that almost covered her rear end, was cooing over the downed deputy and wiping his face with a damp towel.

“Come on, Frank.” Jake hauled him upright and helped him outside.

“Who're you?”

“Part of your backup, pal.” He braced him against the second Bronco and went back in to help Tess.

“Why don't you drive Frank back to the station,” she suggested as they put the prisoners in the back of her truck. “I'll book these guys and take over Frank's patrol. Since he was knocked out, I want him checked out.”

“Why don't I drop him by the doctor's?”

“All right, there's a bell by the front door for emergencies.” She looked back at her truck. “Just do me a favor and follow me over to the station first. Once Tiny gets his breath back, he isn't going to be too agreeable.”

Jake looked around the parking lot at the people spilling outside to see if anything else would happen. He turned to a woozy Frank slumped in the passenger seat of his own patrol vehicle, and at the two prisoners.

“You didn't forget that trick, Legs,” he murmured.

A tiny dimple appeared next to her mouth. “How could I? I fell on my butt more often than not when I first started practicing it. Let me tell you, though, it's a lot easier to do in boots than in high heels. Although I wouldn't have minded a little help.”

Jake's grin grew wider. “You were the one who ordered me to remain in the background because of my cover.”

“Hey, Sheriff,” one of the men shouted out from the bar's entrance. “When you get around to arresting me, think we could talk about a strip search?”

Tess looked over that way. “No problem, Wilma lives for that part of her job.”

Jake grasped her arm as she turned toward her truck. “Tess, I wish like hell the phone hadn't rung.” She didn't, couldn't, say anything as she walked away.-

“You remind Tiny he owes me for damages!” Red's words were the last ones Tess heard before she drove away. But all she concentrated on was Jake driving the truck behind her.

She glanced at the two men, who were finally succumbing to the large quantity of beer they'd drunk. The second man was slumped against the window snoring loudly. *You're not the only one who wishes the phone hadn't rung.*

EIGHT

“What do you mean I’m not going along with you today?” Jake’s voice turned dangerously soft. “What’s so different about today from the other times I’ve accompanied you on your patrols? Or are you checking out something you don’t want me to know about?”

“Get real, Wilder. As for today, I say it’s different. And that’s all you need to know.”

Tess took the time to drink a cup of coffee and grab a piece of toast before getting ready to leave the house.

She stood at the counter dressed in her uniform except for her hat, while Jake lounged in one of the chairs. Seeing him in a pair of sweatpants was too potent a reminder of a couple of nights earlier.

“It wouldn’t look right if you rode along with me every day. Besides, you said that you were doing fine gathering your own information. I went through the county map and highlighted the unpaved roads. You won’t want to take the ‘Vette on them if you want to keep it in one piece.”

She kept her eyes averted as she poured herself a second cup of coffee. Having only two hours’ sleep hadn’t helped her mood as she’d finished out Frank’s shift. Frank fought the doctor’s decision and fought Tess, so she knew the only way she could keep him off duty was to take his shift herself instead of giving it to Walt or George.

“What about exploring some of the more remote areas on horseback? Didn’t you say that was possible? Does anyone around here rent out horses?”

She shook her head. “Don’t even think it. You can’t ride.”

“I can ride,” he insisted, stung by her mild dismissal. “Maybe I’m no Roy Rogers, but I can ride.”

Tess studied him for a moment. She had a sinking feeling Jake was going to find a horse one way or another.

“All right, Jake, you win. The last thing I want to do is spend the rest of the day having to find you when you get lost. I have to go in to the station and sign some papers. Come over in about two hours. Luckily the days aren’t too hot yet, so we should be able to cover a large section of land. I’ll call and arrange for the horses.” She drained the contents of her cup and set it in the sink. “See you then.” She headed for the door.

He laced his hands behind his head. “What, no good-bye kiss? No cooing and billing about how you’re going to miss me? Sweetheart, what will the neighbors think?”

The heat intensified in the pit of her stomach as she remembered what they had started the night before. She kept her hand on the back door’s knob as she turned around.

“Since the neighbors can't see into the house, I wouldn't worry about what they're thinking. Besides, they seem to do very well on their own. Just be at the station in two hours.”

Jake sat at the table drinking his coffee and listening to Tess's voice as she greeted Emma Nichols, who lived next door. Jake had spoken to the woman several times and found out that since her husband's death three years before, she worked as a seamstress in her home and handled any alterations the cleaners took in. He also learned that her garden was her pride and joy and that she could be found working in it almost every sunny day. He knew Tess would spend a couple of minutes talking to the woman before she left. Sure enough, about three minutes later he heard the Bronco's engine start up. He pushed himself out of his chair and headed for the phone.

Might as well make use of the time. Within minutes, he submitted his request for specific information and extracted promises of results as soon as possible. By the time Jake finished his calls, he felt ready for a shower and shave. He only hoped all traces of Tess's scent would be gone from the bathroom. Otherwise he knew he'd be shocking the neighbors by using the garden hose for a shower. Every morning he used the bathroom after her was a course in torture as he walked into the small room and found it usually redolent of her scent. He wondered if the day would come when he would just say the hell with it and put himself out of his misery by walking in and sharing her shower with her.

Before he left the house, Jake's calls were returned, he received a few of the answers he wanted, but he still didn't feel he had enough. He only hoped he would come up with a few more answers soon, or, as his other half liked to taunt, he could end up with a whole new list of questions.

“Hey, I just told you I'm fine!”

“That's not what the doctor said.”

“What the hell does he know?”

Jake walked into the station and was instantly aware of the hostility in the air. Before he could get past the dispatcher's desk, he found his sleeve grabbed by a feminine hand.

“You might want to get out of here while it's still safe enough to escape,” Wilma said in a hushed voice as she looked up at him. She kept casting anxious looks over her shoulder as if afraid of being overheard.

Jake leaned over her desk to whisper in her ear. “What happened? Did Tiny try to break out last night? I thought he was given five days and had to pay for all the damages?”

She rolled her eyes. “We all would have been better if it was only that. Tess told Frank he has to stay off until the doctor releases him, and he's furious about it.” She unconsciously patted her hairstyle that

upped her height a good five inches. “So right now they're in her office fighting about it, Walt lost an important computer file, and other than that everything else is going to hell in a handbasket around here. I had an appointment with Ginnie this afternoon too. I decided it's time to change my hair color, and she told me she came up with the perfect shade to match my personality. And now I can see I'm going to have to cancel it and stay around here to make sure no one starts throwing things.” She confided in a breathy whisper, “Frank has a horrible temper.”

Jake lifted his head to focus his attention on Tess's office. He discreetly took in a breath of fresher air. Wilma's overuse of perfume was suffocating him.

“Obviously Tiny didn't tell him how Tess managed to bring him in, or he wouldn't try to pick a fight with her.”

“Don't you worry about Tess. She can handle things just fine.” She leaned over and patted his hand, sending out another wave of Tabu cologne. “Would you like me to get you a cup of coffee while you wait?”

He shook his head. “No thanks. I did want to tell you that I heard you're not too fond of the mayor's smile.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I never did trust a man who smiled as much as he does,” she insisted. “It just isn't natural. But then I have to remind myself he's a politician, and they're always spring about nothing. I never trust politicians and I never trust insurance agents, so that gives Henry a double whammy in my book.”

Jake had to laugh at that. “Sounds like he's batting zero with you.”

“Oh, he is.”

“There's no way you can keep me from doing my job tonight!” Tess's door opened and Frank stormed out.

Jake noted the muscular build of a man who spent a lot of time working out with weights. With his blond hair and steel-blue eyes he looked a far cry from the punch-drunk man Jake had helped the night before. He deliberately stepped to the side so that Frank had to either stop or go around him. Frank chose the former. Frank stood there looking Jake up and down with a cold insolence.

“So you're the boyfriend.” He shook his head. “I can't believe someone with her brass would pick a computer consultant.” He spat out the job title.

“We do what we gotta do.” Jake's own eyes turned as cold as his. “I hope you realize that if Tess got it into her head, she could easily toss you right on your ass?” His tone was as friendly as if they were talking about nothing more ominous than the weather.

Frank laughed. “You won't last long. You'll realize she has more *cojones* than you do, and you'll be

long gone. You should have stuck to your long weekends away from here. Then you wouldn't see what she's really like.” He cast a contemptuous look toward Tess, who now stood in her office doorway.

“Three days, Frank,” she called after him.

“Yeah, sure, whatever.” He brushed past Jake and left. He hit the glass door so hard with the palm of his hand, Jake was surprised it didn't shatter.

“What a lively group you have here, Legs,” he told Tess when she walked up to him.

“Are you ready for that ride?” she asked, tightlipped.

“Maybe not the one you have in mind,” he began in a low voice, but quickly abandoned it when her gaze sliced through him.

“We're going.” She walked outside without bothering to check on Jake.

Wilma shook her head. “Maybe the fresh air will improve her mood,” she told him.

“Wilder, are you coming or not!” Tess's shout could have rattled glass.

Wilma gave Jake a look filled with sympathy. “But then maybe it won't.”

“Maybe I should give you the name of my next of kin, just in case.” He dropped a quick kiss on her cheek and ambled out.

He didn't want to tell the older woman that he'd long ago given up being intimidated by Tess's temper. In fact, he invited it. It was the best way to find out what the lady was thinking.

“The department keeps a few horses on the edge of town,” Tess explained, not bothering to look at Jake once they drove away from the sheriff's station. “We use them in case we need to search for a lost traveler or if we need to go where even off road vehicles can't travel.”

“You do a lot of search and rescue out here.”

“A few every summer. People who forget that distances are deceptive or have no idea how dangerous the desert can be. We help out when and where we can.”

Jake dug out his trusty notebook and flipped through the pages. “I found out a few interesting points about your esteemed mayor.”

“Don't tell me. He wears his wife's underwear under those expensive suits.”

“That depends on what his wife looks like.” He whistled through his teeth as he looked for the page he wanted. “Good ole Henry has an unremarkable balance in his personal checking account. Hasn't bounced a check in the twelve years he's had his account at that branch, and there's no suspiciously large deposits or withdrawals made. His business account is a lot more active. Deposits made every couple of days, so the balance fluctuates a hell of a lot more.”

“You didn't check him out in the beginning when you were checking me out?”

“No reason to when he's not as cute as you are.” He tweaked her braid. “They're still doing some checking on him. He's got to have accounts hidden somewhere, I so they're checking out anything that might be in his wife's name.”

“Yeah, that sounds like something he'd do.”

Jake looked at the small stable that advertised boarding and training as Tess backed the Bronco up to a horse trailer.

“The zoning laws were changed about ten years ago so that the residents could no longer keep their horses on their property,” Tess explained as she efficiently hitched the trailer to the back of the Bronco. She looked up when a young woman walked out of the office. “When I got to the station, I called over to arrange for the horses so that our mounts would be ready when we got here. We'll then trailer them out to our starting point. Hi, Cassie. How's it going?”

Cassie returned Tess's smile with a warm one of her own. “Pretty good. I saddled up Bear and Rollie for you.” Her curious gaze kept shifting toward Jake. “He can ride, can't he?”

“*He* has been known to ride something more energetic than a carousel horse,” Jake retorted, stung at being ignored.

Tess turned her face away to hide her amusement. “He only looks like a city boy, Cassie. This is one tough hombre to tangle with.”

Cassie's dark blond hair was pulled back in a no nonsense braid. The freckles sprinkled across her nose went along with her faded plaid shirt and worn jeans. She had a fresh wholesomeness Jake couldn't remember seeing on a woman in a long time.

“Cassie Rogers.” She held out her hand. Jake took it, not surprised to find it callused, her grip strong. “Funny, you don't look like a computer consultant.”

Tess leaned over and murmured to him, “Nancy's niece.”

“Would you believe I am a member of a secret government agency and can speak three languages fluently, have a pretty good knowledge of the martial arts, and am a crack shot?” Jake asked with a blandness that Tess knew didn't suit him.

Cassie studied Jake for several moments then burst into laughter. “You watch a lot of James Bond movies, don't you?”

“Nothing better.” His grin dimmed when he watched a man lead two horses that in his eyes looked pretty large out of the barn and load them into the trailer. He turned to Tess. “Are those ours?”

“Ours,” she confirmed before gesturing to Jake to get back into the Bronco. “Thanks for having them ready, Cassie. We'll be back before dark.”

“Have fun, secret-agent man.” Cassie wrinkled her nose at Jake. “Just remember, there's no hidden weapons on a horse.” Her shoulders still shook with her laughter as she returned to the office.

“These people have strange ideas about humor,” he grumbled.

“It's your fault for starting with that secret-agent nonsense.”

“It's not all nonsense.”

Tess rolled her eyes. “Jake, we worked as nothing more than glorified cops. The only difference in our work was the crooks we went after had larger expense accounts and more expensive tastes. I can remember days when you and I had trouble recalling what our real lives were like.”

“It wasn't all that bad, was it? We had our laughs.” She thought it over. “There might have been a few, but we weren't out there to have fun.”

“What about Stanley Cosgrove?”

Tess groaned. “No, you promised never to bring up that name in my presence!” She moaned, slapping the steering wheel with the flat of her hand. “You promised, Jake!”

“Oh, come on, Tess. He thinks you are the sweetest, gentlest woman on the face of the earth.” He was enjoying his chance to get back at her. “Stanley thinks you're hot stuff.”

“Stanley looks like Humpty Dumpty, is incredibly nearsighted, and even with his glasses can't walk more than a few steps before falling over something. He looked like a harmless little boy, which made it easy for him to rob all those savings-and-loan offices.”

“Until you posed as that loan officer and he fell in love at first sight,” he declared with a dramatic flourish.

Tess slowed down and pulled over to the side of the road. “Jake, either you shut up about Stanley or you can walk back to town.”

He held up his hands. “I was just reliving old times, Legs. Nothing wrong in that.”

“There is when I have no desire to relive old times.” She pulled back onto the road. “Get it through that thick skull of yours, Wilder. You can talk about the so-called good old times all you want, but you're not going to seduce me into going back.”

“If I were going to seduce you, it wouldn't have anything to do with work.”

“We're going up into the hills southeast of town,” Tess said in an abnormally loud voice. “Every so often campers hike up into that area when the weather cools off. I happened to think about it and thought it might not hurt for us to ride up there and check it out.”

Jake looked at the desert land, which appeared to go on without end. He turned to glance in the passenger side-view mirror and couldn't see any sign of the town. “Why would anyone want to camp out in

the middle of nowhere?”

“Some do it because they enjoy the isolation and it makes them think they're back in the pioneer days. But a lot of them don't think to bring snakebite kits with them, the proper clothing since the temperature can take a big drop at night, and some don't even bring in enough food and supplies. Luckily we don't get too many tenderfeet this far out.’

Jake shook his head. ‘This job of yours has a hell of a lot of headaches.’”

“And what we did didn't cause any headaches? Not to mention gunshot and wounds or merely bruises if we were lucky. What about that time you threw me off that yacht?”

“If I hadn't thrown you off, that bodyguard would have shot you!” he argued, half turning in his seat. He pointed his finger at her. “I saved your life, lady.”

“Then the next time you decide you want to save my life, make sure I'm not wearing something that's so heavy, it drags me under the water,’ she shot back. “When that heavy satin dress got wet, it immediately dragged me under.”

He threw up his hands. “One little mistake!”

Tess shot him a look filled with disbelief. “One? You call it one little mistake? Maybe I should give you a detailed list of a few of your other little mistakes.” She pulled off the main road and slowed down in deference to their cargo so that the truck wouldn't bounce around too much. She searched her memory for something that could really shake him up. Luckily, she didn't have to search too far.

“Buffy Rhodes LaRue.”

“Low blow, Legs.”

She soon stopped the truck. Before she got out, she dug an extra hat out of the back and handed it to Jake.

“You want to talk about hot stuff. How about the way she followed you everywhere? She thought you were the sweetest lil ole thang,” she cooed in a syrupy Southern drawl as she walked around to the rear of the trader. The back dropped with a loud thud. “‘Why, sugah, if anyone could tempt me to move out of Mississippi, you could.’” She stuck her finger down her throat and made gagging sounds. “I swear I put on a good fifteen pounds just being around that woman.” She brought one horse out, then the other. She suddenly stopped and gave Jake an assessing look. “You son of a bitch.”

“What did I do now?”

“This is all deliberate. All this talk about the so-called good times, the so-called fun times.” She handed him the reins to the bay, while she kept the sorrel for herself. She pulled on a pair of gloves. ‘You want me to realize what I've missed so that I'll want to go back. Wrong!’” She swung herself into the saddle

and wrapped the reins around one gloved hand. “As difficult as it is for you to understand, I happen to like my life the way it's going.”

“Out here in the sticks where you're hauling in drunks and settling domestic disputes?” he scoffed as he carefully climbed into the saddle. He deliberately waited until Tess mounted so he'd make sure to mount on the correct side. “Come on, Legs, you've got talents that will never get used here.”

“It is sad that my expertise in lock picking, lying, carrying concealed weapons in some very uncomfortable parts of my body, and itching my way through a body rash every time I had to be wired is going to waste.” She urged her mount forward. “Forget it, Wilder. Besides, you're just not talking about my returning, which I have no intention of doing. You're also hoping that I'll return to your bed, too, and I think we've already discussed the impossibility of that.”

“*You* discussed it. I already knew it wouldn't work.”

“Just stop sounding like a typical chauvinistic male, Jake, and we'll both get along better!”

Tess could swear her nerve endings were tingling from his voice. The rocking motion of the horse wasn't helping either. She gritted her teeth and moved on. She thought riding would be a better solution than their being confined in the Bronco most of the day. It appeared her solution wasn't turning out to be a good one. The farther they rode into the hills, the more aroused she was feeling. She only hoped that when they finally stopped, she didn't tear Jake's clothing off even if the idea of his being naked was a good one.

“You have a pretty large area to patrol, don't you?”

Tess breathed a sigh of relief that Jake changed the subject. It saved her from having to do it.

“Park rangers actually cover this area, but we help each other out in emergencies. There are times when we help out in an unofficial capacity so that we don't have to go through red tape when time is of the essence.”

Jake shifted in the saddle. He could swear his rear end had lost all feeling. He had tried to concentrate on the enticing sight of Tess's body swaying with the motion of her horse and the way she seemed at one with her mount, but pretty soon all he could think about was another kind of ride, and that didn't help his sanity one bit.

“No wonder more women ride than men. They have the natural padding for this kind of thing.”

“You should be grateful that I'm ignoring that sexist remark.”

“You can't think I was talking about you? You've always had a great ass, Legs. I noticed that, second after the legs of course.”

Tess had to laugh. “Nice save, Wilder.”

“Just quick on my feet, that's all.” He looked up and noticed her absorption in an area off to their

right. “What?”

“I’m not sure.” She reined in her horse and dismounted.

Jake’s dismount wasn’t as graceful, and he discovered his legs weren’t all too steady on solid ground. He walked gingerly alongside her as they climbed a narrow path between boulders.

Tess stopped and pointed to what looked like a naturally carved-out section of one of the boulders. “I thought I saw something over there.” She carefully made her way over to the base of the boulder. “I’m going to check it out first.”

“Good idea, I’ll look over here.”

That easily, they fell back into their old routine as they divided the area and did a thorough search.

“I’m impressed,” Jake spoke up. “There’s no litter everywhere. I haven’t even found a cigarette butt.”

“Responsible campers take their trash with them,” she explained, crouching down and sifting through the sand with a small stick. “This far out you don’t get too many novices. Oh, be careful picking up any rocks. You never know what might be sleeping under them.”

Jake stared at the large rock he was reaching for. He changed his mind about picking it up.

“Bingo!” Tess jumped up.

Jake ran over to where she stood so that he could view her prize.

Tess was smiling broadly as she handed him what appeared to be a tom comer of a card. She didn’t have to worry about losing any fingerprints that may have been on it, since the smudged and barely visible lettering was the result of its being out in the open.

“How much do you want to bet it’s fake?”

Jake turned it over several times and let out a rebel yell. “I knew it!” He grabbed her by the waist and swung her around in a half circle. “Legs, you’re still the best!”

With that he captured her mouth in a kiss that seared Tess down to her toes and traveled right back up to include Jake in the firestorm.

NINE

Tess was drowning in liquid heat. She held on to Jake for dear life even if she couldn't breathe and couldn't think. Right now, thinking wasn't as important as taking care of the building storm going on inside her. She pulled his shirt away from his back and ran her hands up under the fabric. She vaguely recognized the soft, whimpering sounds as her own as she felt his rock hard arousal nudge her feminine center.

"Damn!" he rasped out, finally tearing his mouth away from hers. 'You're making me crazy, Legs! I'm here on a case, and all I can think about is you. I question people and what I really want to know About is you. Since I came to Crater Rock and have seen you again, I've learned how empty parts of my life have been the past few years."

Tess lifted her fingertips to her lips. She was stunned to find them trembling as she pressed them against her mouth.

"I have led a pretty quiet, uneventful life the past few years. In that time I've given the people nothing to use against me." Even her voice shook with the emotion racing through her. "Then you show up, having them believe I take off for illicit weekends."

"You're not a married woman, Tess. I can't imagine they expect you to live the life of a nun."

"But I'm still a woman in a male-oriented town," she argued.

Jake wrapped his arms around her and drew her close.

"I've really screwed up your life, haven't I?"

"Just made it more difficult, but what's so unusual about that? You've always done your best to make my life insane," she mumbled against his shirt front.

"If I promise to behave myself, will you promise not to shoot me?"

Tess wondered why she bothered to fight Jake and her escalating attraction to him. Why couldn't she have him while he was there? She already knew small-town living wasn't for him, while she wanted nothing else. She knew if she was smart, she'd relax and enjoy what she could get.

"Why don't we finish up here, then I'll take you a little farther into the hills before we head back," she suggested. 'There's another open area like this one that people could easily hide out in. Do you want to check that one out too? We'll have to do a fast look so that we can get back to the truck before dark." Jake kept his arms around her as he looked around. "Who all would know about this area?"

"Pretty much anyone in town who does any hunting or camping or has helped out with search and rescue," she replied, making sure she stepped back before he released her. She dug an evidence envelope

out of her jeans pocket and dropped the tom piece of card into it. "I told you there weren't many secrets kept around here."

Jake returned to the boulder where Tess had found the card and poked around some more while Tess searched another section. They continued looking for almost an hour more before deciding they wouldn't get lucky again.

Jake groaned loudly when he mounted up. "How much do you want to bet I won't be able to walk tomorrow?"

"You told me you could ride,' she teased, nudging her horse forward.

"Sure I can ride. I just didn't expect to be thrown back to the Old West, where you rode because a truck can't climb upward or over boulders or on narrow trails that even a horse can barely fit through," he grumbled. "The least they could do is put padding on these damn saddles."

"You're bitching like a tenderfoot, Wilder."

"It's not my feet that's feeling tender!"

"Don't worry, we don't have far to go," she assured him.

Jake decided to ignore his pain by watching Tess and visualizing some pretty erotic pictures of the two of them. Once upon a time he might have thought riding naked on a horse was pretty sexy. Not anymore. He was so lost in his fantasy of making love to Tess that he almost ran into her when she abruptly stopped. He noticed her stillness and automatically reached for his gun, then cursed when he realized he didn't have it with him.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "The road is blocked." She dismounted and walked forward.

Jake did likewise. "A rock slide?" He gestured to the boulders in front of them.

She lowered her hat over her eyes to keep out the late-afternoon sun as she scanned the surrounding area. "This wasn't done by a rock slide."

"How do you know?"

She swept her arm in a half circle. "Look around you. Is there any indication there were enough boulders to block a trail this wide?" She didn't bother waiting for a reply. "There aren't. "This was done deliberately. And I'd really like to know the reason." She started to climb the rock surface carefully.

"Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"No, I just want a few answers." Tess glanced over her shoulder. "Are you coming?"

Jake sighed. "I guess so."

Amid skinned knuckles and Jake's curses, they reached the other side. By unspoken agreement they

silently crept forward until Tess gestured that they had reached their destination.

“Stay here, I'm going to check out a few things,” she murmured.

“No way, we go together.”

“Slick, I know the area, you don't. Stay.”

Jake hunkered down on a large rock, grumbling, “I am not a dog.” But he kept his ears tuned for the slightest sound until she reappeared.

“I was right. Someone did a lot of work to deliberately block the trail.”

“Anyone around?” he asked tensely.

Tess shook her head. “But there are signs of people camping out up here. There's also a couple of cook stoves and some sleeping bags hidden under a tarp. They've made it semi-permanent.”

“What?” He noticed her expression as she continued to turn in a circle.

“Just something about this place that's nagging at me, but I can't figure out what.” She finally shook it off. “I'll have to think about it later. We should come up here again when we have more time. I'd like nothing better than to have someone stake this place out.”

“No offense, but we can't trust any of your people.”

Her expression was blessedly innocent when she faced him. “Then I guess it would have to be you, wouldn't it?” She walked back to the boulders. “I'm not some namby-pamby, Tess.” He wasn't about to brush the dust off his jeans now.

“Good, then we can step up the pace during the return to truck.”

Jake suppressed his groan when he remounted. He was already dreading when the time came to climb off.

“I'm surprised you're not jumping for joy. Not telling me 'I told you so' because we found another piece of your counterfeit cards.”

“There would have been a time I'd have done that, but I'd like to think I've grown beyond that.” Jake paused. “But you could make my day and admit I was right. I did know what I was talking about.”

“Don't hold your breath. That little victory dance you used to do when you made me say you were right was pretty disgusting to watch.”

Jake resisted the urge to grab hold of the saddle horn as the trail declined sharply. “I just know a four-wheel drive vehicle would have made it up there easily enough,” he muttered.

“Not really,” she called back. “Too many rocks. Don't worry. “We're almost back at the truck.” Tess had to breathe deeply several times to keep from laughing out loud as she heard Jake's occasional curses. She had to admit he was being a good sport about the tough ride. Which gave him another point on

the good side of the mental ledger she was keeping on him. Although after that kiss she was very tempted to toss it away. The rocking motion of her saddle wasn't helping matters either as she felt her body begin to beg for relief. She knew she would only have to say one word to Jake and he'd happily relieve her of her problem. She wondered if she'd have her sanity afterward, though ' She wasn't sure she could handle intimacy right now. She was glad they were both too dirty and too tired to think about sex. She usually only had to look at Jake and her nerve endings started zinging. Dirty or not, he looked too good to be true. Which made her never so glad as when she saw the parked truck up ahead.

Jake wheezed as he forced himself out of the saddle and dropped to his feet. He promptly grabbed hold of the saddle when his legs almost gave out under him.

"Do you do this a lot?" he asked.

"Riding?" She led her horse into the trailer then came back for his. "Nowadays I seem to ride more for pleasure than for business. I never like doing it when the weather's bad, but you don't usually have a choice."

He shook his head in amazement. "You handle a lot out here' I don't know if I would want to do it. My work doesn't look so bad after seeing what you go through. At least my expense account covers a limo if it's necessary. Let me tell you, I can't imagine ever needing a horse. Give me good old-fashioned white collar crime any day."

Tess's expression seemed a little sad as she gazed at him. She looked as if she was going to say something then changed her mind.

"I've got to get the horses back,' she said quietly, climbing into the truck.

Jake was aware of her quiet demeanor during the drive back

"Are you all right?" he finally had to ask.

"Just fine. A little tired maybe. It's been a long day after not too much sleep," she said glibly. "I'll be glad when Frank gets released to return to work. I never spent so many boring hours in my truck before."

Jake stared at the road winding before them. "I thought maybe you were still unnerved by our kiss."

"I wouldn't worry about it." Her tone indicated the subject was closed.

Tess reached the stables in record time and kept up a running conversation with Cassie as she helped the other woman unsaddle the horses and groom them while Jake wandered around. He finally leaned against a fence where he could watch her work and do some thinking.

Her khaki shirt, which had been so crisp and dean that morning, was now dust-and-sweat-streaked, with the fabric sticking to her back in damp patches. Her braid now drooped, and wisps of hair stuck to her damp cheeks. She looked in great need of a hot shower.

Jake thought of the times they had worked together when she'd worn figure-revealing dresses, expensive jewelry, and had acted the part of either a highly paid call girl or a bored jet-setter looking for additional locks. She had backup to depend on if things got hairy, and he couldn't think of a time when she ever got her hands truly dirty or she was up against an opponent she might not have been able to handle.

Then it hit him. That last case they had worked on. She had faced someone who was going to kill her if she didn't kill him first. So she did what she had to do-and resigned. Obviously she hadn't wanted to go through something like that again.

"So instead she ended up out here in the middle of nowhere," he murmured.

Tess said something to Cassie before the other woman led the horses into the barn. Tess rotated her shoulders to ease the stiffness then turned around.

"Are you ready?" She nodded toward the truck.

He straightened up and pushed himself away from the fence. "Yeah. You look pretty beat. Do you want me to drive?"

"It's an official vehicle, Wilder, and you're not here as an official, remember?"

"Then why don't we stop somewhere to eat?" he suggested.

"I'm too dirty to want to stop anywhere. I've got some steaks I can throw on the grill."

Jake felt in his pocket for the evidence envelope." At least we found something. Too bad it wasn't more, but maybe we'll get luckier next time."

"There's still something odd about that place," she murmured as if talking to herself. "I wish I could remember what it was."

"I wouldn't worry. It will come to you when you least expect it."

Tess nodded. "True, it will. For now, I'll settle for a hot shower and some food. I'll think about the other later on."

"If you'll show me where the charcoal is, I'll start up the barbecue for you," Jake offered when they both climbed out of the truck.

"You'll find the bag in the garage on a shelf over the lawn mower," she replied. "I'll marinate the meat while you do that, and take my shower afterward."

Tess quickly poured teriyaki sauce over the meat and left it in a large, shallow bowl while she showered and changed clothes.

"Right now I'm more hungry than anything, so can you stand looking at the dirty me until after we eat?" Jake picked up the bowl and carried the meat outside to put on the grill.

"No problem." She pulled two beer cans out of the refrigerator and handed him one.

As Tess gathered together the ingredients for a salad, she watched Jake through the kitchen window. As he used a long fork to check the meat, he occasionally lifted the can to his lips. He'd left the hat on one of the lawn chairs. He ran his fingers through his hair. It sprang up in damp spikes around his face. His jaw was dark with his late-afternoon beard and dirt.

For a brief second she fantasized what it would be like if she had him around all the time. Deep in her heart she knew that could never happen. Jake used to brag that no one really knew him. But Tess did. She knew he liked the fast pace of his work too much. The excitement and danger were the drugs he craved and needed. Jake was in his element when things got tough. Here he was like that proverbial fish out of water. She noticed his inner strength that shone through, the toughness in his manner.

No wonder people found it difficult to believe he was a computer consultant. He didn't look or act like someone who spent most of his time indoors tinkering with computer programs. He looked like a man who lived life on the edge. And enjoyed it.

While she was happy working in a small town, settling small-town disputes. Where her only problem was battling the town bureaucracy every time she needed something. But she discovered she didn't mind the battles, because they didn't require a weapon to win. As long as she didn't have to draw her gun, she was happy. Which was one of the chief reasons she'd taken the job. But she's discovered something else. She'd learned how much she'd missed Jake these past years.

Terrific. I'm getting used to having him around. Except once this case is wrapped up, he'll be gone and I'll be back to where I was.

She tore the lettuce into small pieces and practically threw them into the bowl. She wasn't about to use the word alone much less think about it.

Jake opened the screen door and ducked his head inside. "The steaks almost done. How is it going with the rest of the food?"

She suddenly devoted herself to searching through the refrigerator for salad, dressing. "Everything's almost ready."

"Think I could get another beer?"

Tess took out a can and handed it to him. Jake deliberately kept his hand over hers when he took the can from her. She tried to tug her hand free, but he tightened his grip.

"I have to set the table," she said huskily.

"Why don't we eat outside?" he suggested. "I cleaned off the table and chairs."

"That's fine with me." She picked up the salad bowl and plates while Jake picked up silverware, napkins, and the bottle of salad dressing.

Tess had to admit eating outside was a lot nicer, since the early evening was cooler than the day had been.

"It's nice that the days are growing longer," she mused, cutting her steak into bite-size pieces. "I tend to sit out here a lot when the weather is nice."

"Who do you sit out here with?"

She slanted him a glance. "I thought your little spies found out everything there was to know about me."

Jake bit back a curse. "They were mainly interested when you traveled out of town. For all we know, you could have had a harem of men here and we wouldn't know."

She laughed at that. "If I had a male harem, the town would have gossip fodder for years. I guess one man only rates a few comments from them."

Jake's eyebrows drew together. "One man?"

Got him! Tess hid her gleeful laughter. So the townspeople hadn't told him everything about her after all!

"Is something wrong with your food?" She looked up at him with bland innocence in her gaze.

"What one man?"

"What one man. What?"

"Dammit, Tess. First you said there hasn't been any men, then you say there's been a man. Which is it?"

"Would you care to repeat that? I don't think the northern half of the state heard you." She continued eating. "Who I date isn't any concern of yours."

Jake leaned across the table, never looking more dangerous than he did at that moment. Even so, Tess didn't feel one bit frightened. "It is if he's the kind of guy who might try to use you as a cover for illegal activities."

"Chuck is entirely harmless."

"Chuck? *Chuck?*" he barked with laughter. "What does Chuck do? Coach football at the high school where he was once their big star?"

"So what if he was? He enjoys his work and enjoys working with the kids. And he's even turned the team into real champions. He's a very nice man, and don't you dare say anything against him."

Jake leaned across the table. "You don't need a nice man, Legs."

"And if I don't, what do I need?"

"You need someone who's as reckless as you can be. Chuck might be a good guy, but he won't make

you happy,” he stated with firm arrogance.

“He'll make me more than happy! He'll make sure the grass is cut every other Saturday and he'll fix that loose board on the porch and he'll remember all the days that are important between us!” she argued vehemently, half rising from her chair. “He won't forget about Christmas until it's two weeks past the way you do!”

“March fourth.”

Tess sat down with a thump. “What?”

Jake also sat down. Ms face was set in rigid lines as he faced her. “March fourth. That was the first day I saw you in the agency offices. We were officially introduced on April sixth at the ten A.M. meeting, and were assigned together for our first case on April twentieth,” he said quietly “Your birthday is November seventh, our last case ended on August fifth, we made love that night, and you left the next day. That year I forgot about Christmas was because my dad died Christmas Eve.”

Tess's tanned features faded to a pale gray as she sat there listening to his words.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered, reeling from the blow she'd received. “You never talked about him.”

He tried to shrug it off, but didn't quite manage it. “Didn't see the need to. We were working a tricky case then. I finished the case, flew home to check on my mom, and got good and drunk.” He carefully picked up his dishes and started to carry them into the house. He stopped before he entered. “There's a lot of stuff I remember, Tess. Maybe that was the real reason I took this assignment. I wanted to see if you were all I remembered.”

“Am I?” Her whisper barely reached his ears.

“Yeah.” He suddenly flashed that cocky grin of his. “Life's a bitch, isn't it?” He walked into the house, allowing the screen door to flap closed behind him.

Tess collapsed in the chair.

“Damn you, Jake. Every time I think I have you figured out, you throw me another curve ball.”

She sat out there for a while, expecting Jake to come back out. When he didn't, she carried her dishes inside and got her answer. She could hear the water running from the bathroom and knew Jake was taking his shower. From then on Tess acted purely on instinct. The shower was running hard enough so that Jake didn't even hear the sound of the bathroom door opening and closing. She stood still for a moment and watched his body obscured by steam and water pounding against the frosted glass door.

“What are you doing?”

She took the soap out of his hand. “I would think this is pretty self-explanatory, Slick.” She began running the bar of soap over his chest in a slow, leisurely manner that had nothing to do with cleansing but

was certainly doing a lot for his libido. She then rubbed the soap between her palms to create a foamy lather before setting the soap back in its holder. “You came in here for a shower, didn't you? Yes, I can see how dirty you are,” she murmured, rubbing lazy circles across his chest that increased in width as her hands made their way below his waist. “My my, Agent Wilder, you do have a problem, don't you?” She deliberately kept her eyes on his even if they were very tempted to look downward. Still, it was more fun to see the heat building up in his gaze. He stood in front of the showerhead, shielding her from the spray. “A very large problem, if I do say so myself,” she practically purred with delight.

“Why?” The word came out sounding raw.

She knew he wouldn't settle for anything less than complete honesty. “Because I realized I have to stop lying to myself and admit the truth. You and I did share something fantastic that night. I'd like nothing more than to see if we can recreate it. Maybe even make it better. Something tells me you're already up for the idea.”

She cradled his penis with soap-slick hands, feeling the life pulsing between her palms. “Mmm, yes, you are most definitely up and ready for action.” Laughter bubbled in her throat and she slowly slid her hands up and down in at a guaranteed to send him through the roof. Determined not to stop there, she stepped back for a moment so that the warm water hit his body, rinsing off the soap. Then she knelt down and took him into her mouth.

Jake was positive all the air had left his lungs. Damn Tess! The little witch knew exactly what she was doing. She was inflicting a hellish pleasure on him that he wasn't about to deny. Not when she gently raked her teeth across the ultra-sensitive tip then drew him deep into the heated cavern of her mouth. He was afraid if she kept at it much longer he'd explode like an atom bomb. He was afraid if she stopped he'd drop dead of a heart attack.

He gripped her shoulders and pulled her upright. He groaned at the sight of the aquamarine lights shimmering in her eyes. “No more teasing, Tess. It's just you and me here. Damn the phone and anything else that might show up. I'm not about to let you go.”

She stepped forward and moved her hands slowly over him. “And here I thought I'd made things quite clear. Besides, you proved something out there.” She stood up on her toes to tease his mouth with hers. “You”-she breathed into his mouth as her tongue circled his lips-”remembered all the important dates. You remembered everything, didn't you?” His nod was a faint hitch of the head, but she knew what he meant. “I guess I won't be able to mistrust you anymore.”

Jake took that as her answer. He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her up as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

“As great as the idea of making love here in the shower sounds, with my luck we’d slip and I’d break something important,” he muttered, leaving no doubt what important body part he feared would break. He shoved the door open and walking out with her still wrapped around him. He barely gave her time to grab a towel before he carried her into the bedroom and dropped her onto the bed. Tess squealed as she bounced onto the mattress. A squeal that turned into surprised laughter when he dropped down beside her.

Jake shook his head, sending droplets of water flying everywhere.

“We didn’t dry off. We’ll get the bed wet.” Her protest was weak at best.

“Then I’ll just have to dry you off, won’t I?”

“You forgot the towels,” she murmured.

“Who says we need a towel?” Jake used the tip of his tongue to ease a water droplet off her cheek. He raised his head and noticed another drop perched on a nipple. This time he lowered his mouth, drawing it deep into his mouth. Tess gasped as fire raced through her body. When she tried to move, he placed his palm flat against her belly, gently holding her down. “I haven’t gotten you dry yet,” he murmured.

“Trust me, darlin’, the way you’re going about it, I won’t be dry!” she groaned. His bawdy chuckle told her he understood exactly what she meant.

Jake took his time, making sure he found every drop of water on her body and a good many nonexistent drops. He lapped the drop inside her navel then started moving downward. Tess wanted to move so badly she was cursing him. He still only chuckled and shook his head.

“I’m not finished drying you off yet.” He moved his open mouth across her belly and downward to the patch of hair. He slipped his fingers between the folds of her body. “Hm, you’re not dry here.”

She was positive her eyes were crossed. “No kidding! Damn you, Jake! Do something or so help me, I will shoot you!”

“Whatever the lady wants.” He shifted his body lower. Just as his fingers started up a throbbing rhythm, he dipped his head and licked her.

Tess almost shot off the bed with each rasping lap of his tongue. Instead, she bent her knees and arched up against him. This time when the fire shot through her, she flew into the flames and was reborn.

She barely regained her breath when Jake moved up and gently nudged her legs apart lowering himself between them. His penis throbbed hotly against her sensitive skin.

“I told you I had a better way of drying you off.” He nuzzled her nipple with his lips, sending

more shock waves throughout her body. His fingers combed the dark auburn hair between her legs until he found the tiny nub that blossomed for him. Ribbons of heat undulated through her body. A heat she knew only he could control.

This time Tess wanted him fully with her. “I mean it, Slick. If you stop, I will hurt you.”

TEN

Jake chuckled. “That’s my Legs. Always knowing what’s important. Trust me, sweetheart. I’ve always believed a task done right is a task done well. And I intend that this task will be done exceptionally well.”

It had been five years since he had made love to her, and he had a lot of memories to equate with reality as he prepared to make up for lost time.

He laved her throat with his tongue, feeling the rapid pounding of her pulse beneath his touch. He tasted the slight saltiness of her skin and inhaled the sweet perfume from her pores as he savored her like a rare delicacy. He intended to take his time and feast on the feminine banquet lying before him.

“You always wore the same perfume,” he muttered, nibbling her collarbone. “I could always count on finding you by your scent alone. And that night, when yours mingled with mine, there was a rightness about it. It seemed as if I could smell your perfume on my pillow forever. You don’t know how many nights you haunted me as I lay awake remembering what we had.”

She arched her neck, pushing her head deep into the pillow as her entire body bowed upward. She needed to touch him and touch him she did. She ran her hands along his shoulders feeling the slight roughness of his skin under her fingertips. She continued to map out his upper body with her fingertips then with her lips so she could taste him as well. He wasn’t the only one who hadn’t forgotten the smell and taste of a lover. She’d never forgotten one thing about him. He’d been with her every hour of every day no matter how hard she tried to thrust him from her mind and heart. She held back telling him this because she knew that would give him power over her she wasn’t willing to give up just yet. She still needed to keep her heart because this time when he left she knew it would break without any chance of healing.

Jake took no notice of his body quivering under her touch because he was too busy noting the slight changes in Tess’s body since the last time he’d made love to her. He found her leaner, her skin only tanned where the uniform didn’t cover it. There were no marks showing she sunbathed in any kind of bathing suit much less the bikini he remembered she used to wear. Her hands were rougher and slightly callused as they trailed across his body, but no less exciting. He also noticed where there were no changes. Her mouth was the same, the shape of it, the taste of her against his tongue. And the way she touched him with a raw hunger was also something he well remembered. He felt that same intense hunger that started down deep inside him and moved all through his veins. He swept his hand across her flat abdomen, pressing inward slightly as his fingertips caressed the dark auburn curling hair at the juncture of her thighs. He moved his fingers

down until he reached the wet slit that was made just for him. She felt like hot wet velvet to his touch.

“Oh, Tess.” He groaned, trying to keep himself from thrusting into her too soon. He doubted he could last when he wanted her so much. “This is a hell of a lot more comfortable than all that dirt up in the mountains.”

But Tess wanted to be in charge. With a twist of her hips she managed to unseat him and roll over onto him. She smiled down at his sprawled body.

“You’re right, this is very comfortable.”

She lightly scratched his nipple with her nail watching it sprang outward. Then she touched her lips to the coppery center and soothed it with her tongue. “You’ve tempted and teased me all this time,” she whispered against the copper-colored nub. “I should hate you for it, but I never could. Then I figured it was time I’d see if you were going to pay up or shut up.”

“Honey, I’ll be only too glad to pay up.” He laced his fingers through hers and pulled her hands up to lie flat on the pillow on each side of his head. His eyes were glowing chocolate coals as he gazed up at her body moving restlessly above his. “And pay ... and pay ... and pay.” She raised his hips and slowly lowered them onto his penis. He looked down to see where their bodies merged.

Tess closed her eyes and used her inner muscles to caress Jake in a manner that had him ready to shout to heaven. She paused.

“Don’t stop on my account,” he gasped.

Her smile told him that wasn’t the case. She moved faster and faster while Jake thrust upward in counter movements.

She could tell by the widening of his eyes that he felt her tiny contractions around him the same time she did.

“It’s too soon,” she wailed softly, wanting it to go on forever.

His grin reassured her. ‘Don’t worry, darlin’, we’ve got all night.; We’ll just try again,” he murmured, lifting his head and capturing her mouth with his. At the same time, he rolled them over so he was now looming over her. His tongue circled her lips as he felt her hips buck upward while he kept his own movements slow. It wasn’t until he knew she was senseless that he increased the rhythm until they were both soaring to that same plateau.

Tess’s cries were swallowed by his mouth as she convulsed around him, accepting all he had to give. All Jake knew was that it felt so right. Even more than the first time they had made love. As far as he was concerned, Tess wrapped around him was like coming home.

As he tried to shift most of his weight off her body, a sharp twinge of pain along his hip caught him

by surprise. He muttered a curse.

Tess's dreamy gaze of desire slowly dissipated. She sat up. "What's wrong?"

He winced as he tried to move again and muttered another earthy mine. "I guess you could say my age has caught up with me. I'm so damn stiff from that horseback ride, I can barely move." He groaned, finally flopping onto his back. "And I don't want to hear any cracks from you either."

Tess stiffened her facial muscles to keep her smile from appearing.

"Not even when I can make you feel better?" she cooed, shifting up onto her knees.

Jake opened one eye and found the enticing sight of Tess's bare breasts swaying over him. If he'd had the energy he would have lifted his head and latched on to a pebbled nipple. "I'd say that makes me feel pretty good. No offense, but I don't think that's going to help these old sore muscles," he said slowly.

"Just wait and see."

Tess leaned across his chest, deliberately brushing against him as she reached into her night-table drawer and brought out a bottle. She drew back in the same leisurely manner and straightened up. After she unscrewed the top, she held the bottle under his nose.

He inhaled the exotic aroma of honey and almonds. "Am I going to like this?"

She tipped the bottle and poured some of the lotion into her palm, allowing it to warm before she slowly rubbed both her palms together. She nudged; him over onto his stomach. He lay facedown with his arms cradling the pillow.

"Trust me. You'll like this very much." She straddled his hips and began rubbing the lotion onto his back in long, slow strokes that began at the nape of his neck and ended just above his buttocks. She smiled as she felt his muscles slowly release their tension. "I told you you'd like this."

"If you're talking about the rubdown, you're wrong," his answer was muffled by the pillow. "It's knowing you're sitting on me naked that's making me feel better."

"I should be using liniment instead of this lotion, because you're probably still going to feel sore in the morning." She climbed off and pushed him over onto his back. "And you have a couple of lovely bruises on that fine set of buns of yours."

Jake forgot the pain as he pulled her down on top of him. "You'll be gentle with my poor battered body, won't you?"

She pressed tiny kisses along his brow. "By all rights I should push you off the bed so that I can make it up with fresh sheets."

"Do we have to do it now?" He grasped her waist and pulled her over to nestle against his erection. "I'm not sure, Sheriff, but I think I'm in need of some attention here."

Her laughter against his mouth soon turned into a soft moan as he thrust upward. Tess hugged his hips with her knees as she moved with him. This time their loving was languid as they found new ways of arousing each other to a higher level until both their bodies were damp from their exertions.

Together they learned just how perfect a team they were.

“I suppose you're feeling very pleased with yourself right now.”

Jake had been dozing, looking the picture: of a vastly satisfied male while Tess lay curled up against his side. He opened one eye and glanced down at her.

“I'm very relaxed.. Isn't that what your rubdown was supposed to do?” he asked.

She pinched his side. “You know very well what I mean, you cretin! You finally wore me down. You teased and seduced and tempted me until I went mad with lust and attacked you.”

He held up a finger. “That's right, *you* attacked me. I was standing innocently in your shower, when you raced in and jumped on me.”

Her mouth shaped a large O of surprise. “Innocently? 'Raced'? 'Jumped'? I didn't hear any protests on your part.”

He rolled over to trap her beneath him. “Why should I? I got a great rubdown in the bargain,” he murmured, nuzzling her ear with his lips. “You know, I haven't felt this great in a long time. And I don't mean just the sex either. It's us. I think it's always been us and we just didn't want to admit it. Until that last night.” He felt her body tense up. “You never talked about it, did you? Not even when you were questioned by our esteemed superiors or anyone else did you let on how you felt.”

Tess turned her face away. She regretted her action the moment she realized she was facing the mirror on her dresser, where she had an excellent view of their intertwined bodies. She saw the dark memories in her eyes and the questions on Jake's face.

“You told me to get it out of my system that night, remember?” She spoke in a voice devoid of emotion. She might have been reciting a business report for all the feeling she put into it. “You said I should either cry or scream or throw something or even drink myself into oblivion, but I had to do something if I wanted to survive.”

“But you wouldn't,” he recalled. “You said there was nothing to say about it. You fought me at every turn, except you did it without words. For the first time, you shut me out, and I didn't know how to get to you.” When she began to shiver, he drew her closer, enveloping her with his warmth.

“I thought if I didn't talk about it, other than a debriefing and the usual paperwork, I could forget,”

she said in a small voice. "Instead it haunted me in MY dreams. I'd tell myself they'd go away, but they haven't yet." She cleared her throat. "Believe me, Slick, this isn't my idea of post-coital conversation, so why don't we move on to something else."

For a moment Jake was tempted to do just that. But he remembered what it was like for him after the first time he had shot and loll'd someone. He knew he couldn't allow her to suffer that kind of pain any longer. He didn't have to search his memory for that night. He remembered it as well as she did, but for other reasons.

"It was one of those situations we didn't expect, Tess." He spoke slowly. "We were able to get Westin down on video and audiotape. We teamed everything we needed to know about the bonds he stole and he gave- up without a fuss. No one expected his son to show up suddenly and go ballistic on us. He didn't seem like the type who'd carry a gun."

"I didn't have to kill him," she insisted, sitting up in bed and drawing the blanket up around her breasts and shoulders. Her eyes were brilliant pools filled with pain. "I could have shot him in the arm or the leg."

Jake grabbed hold of her shoulders. "Tess, the kid pulled out his gun and ordered us to let him go. The way he was waving that thing around, I would have been shot first, then you. You did what, had to be done. You ordered him to put down the gun he refused, and when he pulled back the hammer, you shot. You dropped to the floor and shot. If he hadn't tried to run to one side, he probably would have been injured, but you had no idea he'd do it. Just remember that if you hadn't shot him first, we would have been dead."

"I remember Westin screaming his son's name, then his wife coming in and starting to sob when she saw him lying there in a pool of blood." Her words came out jerky. She combed her fingers through her hair. "She called me so many names, and she was right."

"She also called us bloodsuckers for putting her husband in jail," he reminded her. He gathered her in his arms when he saw the moisture in her eyes. "Back then I told you you had to talk about it. To get it out of your system before it ate you alive."

"That's why I went to your apartment that night." She hiccuped. "But when you opened the door and looked at me, I couldn't bring it out. I realized I only wanted you to help me forget." Her laugh ended in a sob. "And I guess I could say you did."

He tightened his hold on her. When he rested his cheek against the crown of her head, he felt her body still trembling with tears. "Maybe we should have gotten drunk that night instead. I would have had a hangover in the morning, but you might have still been there."

“No, I think I needed some wild lovemaking.”

He smiled. She was handling reliving the shooting much better than he hoped. He heaved a dramatic, heavy sigh. “Well, if that's all you think you need, I guess I can do something about it.”

“Are you sure? You were the one talking about age, and you haven't been given much time to recuperate. After all, it isn't all that many years before you hit forty and . . .” She ran her fingernail down his arm. “I'd hate to tire you out.”

“We'll just see who tires who out, woman,” he said with a growl, bearing her back onto the bed.

“Jake?”

“Mmm, what?”

May I say you have incredible stamina a for a man your age.”

Tess shivered under a cold shower and drank four cups of coffee, but she still felt as if she should crawl back into bed. The bed that Jake was peacefully sleeping in. The bed she was forced to leave because she had to take Frank's shift. For a moment, as she had lain there in Jake's arms, she had been sorely tempted to get Walt out of bed and ask him to do it. Then she had remembered the battle at Red's Bar and changed her mind. “They'd throw him in a trash can and roll it down the highway,” she muttered, standing at the sink as she drank her coffee and munched on a slice of toast.

“What's wrong?”

She turned around and almost groaned at the enticing sight of a nude Jake standing in the doorway. His eyes were heavy with sleep, his face dark with beard, and his voice raspy. Her hormones went on instant alert.

“I have Frank's shift, remember?” She was trying very hard not to stare at the body she'd spent the past hours thoroughly exploring.

He opened his mouth in a jaw-cracking yawn. “I don't see how you have the energy.”

Her bones were already melting. “I don't. Right now I'm living on caffeine. I'm praying it will be a quiet night.”

He rubbed his hand over his eyes. “Want some company? I could be ready in a couple of minutes.” , Then she knew she wouldn't accomplish anything! She regretfully shook her head. “No, you catch up on your sleep. While I'm out there, I'm going to do some about what I saw today. Maybe I'll remember what bothered me about it.” She grabbed her utility belt and hat.

Jake walked with her to the back door. She halted him there.

“You never know who might see you. And I do mean *see* you.”

“Then let's give them something to look at,” he murmured, wrapping his hand around the nape of her neck and dragging her against him. His tongue thrust into her mouth with the same sureness he had used in entering her body. Tess was powerless to resist and hungrily kissed him back as if their lovemaking hadn't happened.

Tess finally pulled away. Her eyes glazed and she was breathing hard. For a second she was purely tempted to drag him into the bedroom and make him pay up for that kiss! Her only satisfaction was that it made Jake as hard as it did her wet..

“Yes, well, that seemed to have done more for me than all the coffee I drank. As for you, I suggest a long, cold shower.” She hurried out to her truck and got in before she gave in to her first instinct.

Jake grinned when he noticed Emma's curtains parting slightly at the sound of the truck starting up. Then they widened a bit as if she realized he was standing on the back porch buck-naked. They dropped more abruptly than they had parted.

“That's what happens when you get too nosy,” he murmured, walking back to the bedroom. He flopped down on the bed, pulling the pillow toward him. At least this time he knew he wouldn't have to rely on Tess's scent to keep the memories alive. Within seconds he was sound asleep.

Tess walked into the station and was surprised to find Frank sitting at his desk. “What are you doing' here?”

“If I can't go out on patrol, I might as well catch up on my paperwork,” he mumbled, nodding toward the files heaped on his desk. “Or are you going to argue with me about that too?”

“No, not at all. You know you can always work a desk. I'm just surprised you'd be here tonight, that's all.” She poured herself a cup of coffee from the pot they kept going at all hours. She was grateful to see it had been made recently.

He shrugged. “I never did sleep good at night.”

Tess looked at him and wondered when she'd last seen him without his hat. His dark blond hair was cut close to his head, and she could swear he must have shaved recently. His shirt was crisp, and she'd bet her paycheck if she looked under his desk, she'd see him in neatly creased khaki pants instead of the jeans some of the men preferred to wear.

“I hate to tell you this, but your Marine background is showing.”

He looked wary. “What about it?”

“Hair cut so short, you only have to swipe it with a towel. Uniform so clean, it must squeak, and knife-sharp creases on your pants. I bet your boots even shine so much I could see my face in them. And I

bet if I suddenly yelled, 'Officer on the deck,' you'd snap to attention." She sipped her coffee.

A reluctant grin tugged at his lips. "You got a sick sense of humor, Sheriff."

"So I've been told."

He pretended to fiddle with his papers. "I heard what you did down at Red's." He paused a beat. "Thanks."

"Tiny was making some pretty nasty remarks about women. I had to do something." She set her cup down.

"Yeah, well, it sounds as if you used a pretty potent move on him. He bitched around here that you wouldn't have gotten the drop on him if he hadn't been drunk."

"If he hadn't been drunk, he probably wouldn't have fallen so easily," she replied. "After seeing how he was built like a gorilla, I knew the only way to get him to drop was to basically punch the air out of him."

"I still appreciate it." He looked uncomfortable. "I know I can be a real SOB at times, so I would have understood if you'd let me go down out there."

"I couldn't do that." She suddenly, grinned. "You think I want to work nights all the time? Or, worse, put Walt on nights?"

Frank grinned back. "Yeah, I'd like to see him take on Tiny."

Tess joined in his laughter. "Now there's a scary thought! Has George come in yet?"

He shook his head. "Nope, but he did call in about ten minutes ago and said everything was quiet and he was on his way. He'd driven out by the Parker place and was swinging by the old Morrison Road along the way. He heard the teenagers have been using that as their latest make-out place. He'll roust out anyone he finds."

Tess wrinkled her nose. "It's a lousy part of the job." She walked into her office to see if there was anything for her to sign.

"Say, you haven't said whether you've caught His Honor with his pants down."

She lifted her head. "Why would I lecture Henry?"

Frank walked into her office, grabbed the chair, swung it around, and sat down, resting his arms along the back. "You mean you haven't seen him and Louise Bennett driving out near the old Dennis place?"

Her mouth dropped open. "Henry and Louise? Louise from down at Red's? You've found them doing the hot and heavy out at the Dennis place?"

His head bobbed up and down as his grin grew broader. "Yeah, and I don't think they were out there to discuss future campaign strategies either."

“Staid old Henry and the floozy Louise,” she mused. Something started to click into place. “The old Dennis place. That’s pretty far out even for a married man looking for some action. It’s out by-” She jumped up and ran out of her office. By the time Frank caught up with her, she was standing at the county map hanging on the wall, tracing first one line with her finger, then another that seemed to connect.

“What is it?”

“I’m not sure, but I think I might have a question answered.” She whirled around and almost ran out of the station.

“What’s up?” Frank called after her.

“If we’re lucky, I’ll be able to let you know soon!”

Frank went as far as the front door in time to see Tess’s Bronco back out of her parking space and peel down the road.

He shook his head as he went back inside.

Tess felt exhilaration as she raced down the road.

“It has to be,” she said. “There can’t be any other answer.”

When she turned a corner, she finally realized she still hadn’t turned on the headlights, and quickly flipped them on. She thought about stopping at a pay phone to call Jake with her idea but decided to wait until she had more solid proof.

The closer Tess got to the road she was looking for, the more she knew she’d have to be cautious. She suddenly veered off the road and drove across the desert floor, then slowed down when she sensed she was near her destination. She stopped the truck and dug through the backseat for her flashlight. She eased the door open to keep the interior light off as she crept outside. She ran for the faint outline of buildings she could see in the distance.

“I never thought I’d have to do this again,” she muttered feeling the pull of unused muscles in her back and thighs.

She stopped when she could see the buildings more clearly. With the dark night it was easy to see what she hoped for: Faint slivers of lights peeked out the cracks in the boarded-up windows. She turned to her right and saw exactly what she had expected to. The mountains she and Jake had ridden into the day before.

Tess thought about doing some more exploring to see what vehicles she might find, but she knew when to back off. Next time, she vowed, she’d bring some help with her.

As she stealthily returned to her truck, she gleefully made some plans. Then her euphoria

disappeared as quickly as it had come. Once Jake caught the counterfeiting ring, he'd be gone., By the time she climbed into her truck, I she didn't feel as excited as she had in the beginning.

Terrific, Tess, you've got a choice, she told herself. She kept one eye on the rearview mirror as she made sure she wasn't followed. *I can tell him I've got vague proof that something might be going on out here that shouldn't be. That for all I know, the people he wants are the ones doing it. Or I can keep quiet for a little while until I can find out exactly what's going on. At least that way I can keep him with me a little while longer.*

The cop in her warred with the woman. Too bad both sides had valid reasons, because she knew in the end neither would win.

ELEVEN

Tess kept glancing at the dashboard clock, fully convinced the hand moved even slower than usual. Several times she thought of calling Jake with her news, and each time she decided against it. Right now she didn't trust using the radio to patch through a call, or even a pay phone. She knew this was something she should tell him in person.

“Sheriff” Frank's disembodied voice crackled through the radio.

She shook her head as she picked up the microphone. Obviously the usual codes weren't used during the night patrol either.

“Yeah, Frank.”

“Remember what we talked about before you left?”

It took a moment for her to register that he was deliberately not giving her any clues. Was she right, after all, not to trust the radio? “You mean about the map?”

“Yeah. I was thinking maybe you ought to check a new one out. This one doesn't have all the information we need.”

Did she dare hope he could be trusted? She felt she could, but she knew this was Jake's case. It was up to him to make that decision.

“Thanks, Frank. I've been thinking about the same thing. I'll check into it the first chance I get.”

“I also thought, if it wouldn't get me into too much trouble, I can save you some steps by checking the doors on the store fronts.”

Tess laughed softly. “You're not going to change, are you?”)

“No, ma'am, I guess I'm not.”

“All right, we'll consider it part of the desk job.”

She depressed the switch and reflected on the conversation for a moment. “I'm not sure I can handle any more surprises tonight.”

On a whim she cruised past the mayor's house. She expected the house to be dark at this late hour and wasn't surprised to find it so. What she hadn't expected was to find the garage door open and only one car parked inside. She recognized it as Henry's wife's Buick

“Hmm, the mayor is working late this evening.” She swung onto the next street and headed across town to the small bungalow she knew Louise Bennett rented. On a hunch she chose to take the back route. She found Henry's Cadillac parked behind the bungalow's carport. She made a note of the time and the fact that only the bedroom light was burning, and drove off as quietly as possible.

At the end of her shift Tess walked into the station, or rather dragged into it.

"If you're going to do this, you need to learn to take a nap before you come in' " Frank told her. He stood at the open file cabinet. He gestured to the papers on top of the cabinet. "Thought I'd catch up on my filing too. When Wilma does my filing, it takes me forever to find my papers."

"She does have her own system." Tess eyed the glazed doughnuts on his desk. "How did you manage those so early?"

"Fred had just finished making these when I made my rounds. He took pity on me." He gestured toward the box. "Go ahead and have one."

Tess took two and bit into the first one. The warm, yeasty flavor topped with a sugary glaze burst inside her mouth. She closed her eyes against the almost sensual pleasure the food was giving her.

"Do you two want to be alone?"

She opened her eyes and encountered the faintly amused expression on her deputy's face.

"You have a sense of humor," she said with a sense of wonder.

"Never said I didn't."

Tess dropped into a nearby chair. "How come I'm seeing this new side of you all of a sudden? We've worked together for almost four years."

"And you figured me for a hard-nosed bully who prefers his fists over logic," he finished for her. He walked over to the coffeepot, poured two cups, and brought one to her.

She nodded her thanks as she finished off the rest of the first doughnut. "I'm seeing a new side of you."

"There're a lot of people who have more than one side to them." He perched on the edge of his desk. "Such as your boyfriend."

She forced herself to look only curious about his statement. "What about Jake? "

"He's a computer consultant like I'm a rich playboy. You can't hide some things, Sheriff. The way he walks, the way he looks around in this casual way that isn't so casual. Red said that night in the bar, your boyfriend seemed to keep reaching for a gun he shouldn't have. A computer consultant doesn't do that." He looked watchful. "Now, if he's some kind of cop, he wouldn't need to say he wasn't unless no one's supposed to know he is. And he's here for a specific reason."

Tess sipped her coffee. "With all this profound g you do, why are you working here as a deputy on a shift in a town where very little happens?"

"I had enough excitement in the Marines to last me a lifetime. This is all I want now." He

straightened

up. "Don't worry, I'm not asking for any answers. But I wouldn't be surprised if it doesn't have something to do with the mayor and some of his cronies in town.

Her interest sharpened. "Why would you say that?"

"Just a hunch." Frank glanced up at the clock. "Walt and Ray should be coming in any minute. I guess I should be out of here before they show up." As he walked out the door, he paused for a moment and turned around. "If you're really curious and there's something to the mayor, let me know." With a wave of his hand he was gone.

Tess sat there replaying the conversation in her mind. She already knew that she'd be talking to Jake and that he would be making a call to Frank.

By the time Walt came in, yawning widely and looking half asleep, Tess was eager to leave.

"I suggest you keep your dates to your time off if you're going to drag in here looking that worn out," she tartly suggested, attaching some notes to a clipboard on Wilma's desk.

He looked suitably chastened. "Went out with some friends last night and got in later than usual. Anything happen last night?"

"I found Mrs. Emerson searching through the bushes along her block because Fluffy escaped again. She's afraid that her dear kitty may have been compromised by some horrible tomcat who doesn't have Fluffy's impressive credentials," Tess said with a straight face. "I suggested if she's so worried about Fluffy getting in the family way, she should consider taking Fluffy in for some surgery. You would have thought I suggested she have her legs cut off. I also told her we cannot come out on calls about Fluffy anymore."

Walt blew out a huge sigh. "Does that mean I don't have to climb any trees to get that cat for her?" "Exactly. That cat likes to inflict too much pain with those razor-sharp claws of hers."

Tess waited until the morning shift was in, conducted a quick meeting with her deputies. After that, she was more than ready to go back home. After informing them she'd be in later that morning, she left.

She found the house quiet when she walked into the kitchen. She set a white bag filled with freshly made pastries on the table. She made up a pot of coffee before heading for the rear of the house. By the time she reached the bedroom she could hear the faint sound of voices coming from the room.

She found Jake stretched out in the bed watching television. She decided there was nothing better than an uncovered and naked Jake in her bed. Her mouth watered and not for the pastries she'd left on the kitchen table.

"Will you look at this?" He pointed at the screen. "Talk about form."

Tess walked over to the bed where she could see the screen. Three women, wearing scanty

exercisewear

were moving back and forth as they talked back and forth among themselves.

"It's called *Hard Bodies*," Jake explained from the mound of pillows he'd piled up behind him. "Samantha, Jeannie, and Carla are showing the viewers how to properly tighten their inner thighs. Did you know they're the least used muscle? I'm finding this show to be very informative. How have I missed a program that's so educational?" He kept his eyes glued to the screen as the three women bent and stretched and arched athletically lean bodies. "I had no idea satellite dishes could give you such great TV. And here I was fighting even getting cable all these years because I'm so rarely home."

"I wouldn't worry, Jake. Your inner thighs are tight enough." She picked up the remote control and flicked the off button. "I can't believe you were watching that."

"I can't believe television has made such strides. Those women show some great moves." He laced his fingers behind his head. "Anything exciting happen?"

She strove to act casual. "Not much. Mrs. Emerson was out looking for her cat again. I have an idea Fluffy's kittens will turn out like the gray cat two doors down, but I didn't have the heart to tell her that. I had a good talk with Frank."

"I thought he was off duty."

"He's willing to work a desk until he's declared fit for his patrols." Tess sat on the edge of the bed to pry her boots off, then lifted her legs, wiggling her toes. "He decided it was a good time to catch up on his paperwork too." She stood up and took off her badge, then unbuttoned her shirt. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Jake was watching her with a great deal more interest than he'd been watching the exercise program. His eyes widened when he realized she was wearing a lacy mint-green bra that didn't look the least bit official. She looked down to unsnap and unzip her khaki pants and rolled them down her legs. A pair of mint-green bikini pants matched her bra.

"I like the socks," Jake said gruffly, gesturing to her gray socks that were pulled up over her ankles.

Humming a tune more associated with a stripper's bumps and grinds, Tess slowly peeled off each sock then swung it over her head before tossing it at him. Her gaze flicked over him, lingering at a penis that was rising high and proud. He stared at her as if daring her to ignore him now.

"Something tells me that's not all you liked, big boy," she cooed, kneeling on the end of the bed before crawling up toward him. Her braid dropped over her shoulder, swinging from side to side with each movement.

He watched her glide toward him. "Yeah, well, the boots seemed to make a statement too."

"How much sleep did you get?" she murmured against his mouth. She nibbled his bottom lip, then

tugged on it gently.

“I got more than you did.” He reached for the sides of her panties to skim them down her hips and legs.

She laughed and kicked them off. He unsnapped the front closure to her bra with one finger and slid it down her arms.

“Ooh, you do that very well.”

“Yeah, well, I can show you something else I can do just as well.” He ran his hands across her hips, urging her to sit astride him. He reached up and flicked her braid, dragging it across her breast. His eyes darkened as he watched her nipple tighten under the light touch.

“I brought Danish for breakfast.” She licked his bottom lip and returned for another taste.

“Later.” He urged her closer to his arousal.

But she wanted to tease him a little more. She was discovering that she felt invincible with her power as a woman. “I have something important to talk to you about.”

“Like I said, later.” He did some teasing of his own by combing her wiry auburn curls to stroke the damp cleft between her thighs.

Tess swiveled her hips just enough as she lifted herself, then slowly lowered herself onto his hardness. Her eyelids dropped to cover the glaze of desire in the brilliant depths. As she began moving upon him and feeling him move with her, she called on her last bit of sanity.

“Jake,” she gasped. “I think I found the counterfeiting ring.”

Jake's eyes almost popped out of his head as Tess's statement reached his ears. Except by then the glands of the lover overtook the mind of the cop. It didn't matter, because Tess had made sure he wasn't going to be talking about work for a while.

As he looked up into her face and kissed her with the hunger of a man who needed his woman, he knew he was well and truly lost. Because he loved Tess O'Hara about as much as a man could love a woman. Now all he had to do was convince her of that.

There was no going slow. Clothing landed in a pile. Hands gripped, tugged and pushed. Tongues stroked and licked. No way to make it last. His cock was so hard and hot as he slid inside her wet, tight pussy. He watched her move faster and faster, her features tense as she climbed that mountain with him. When she convulsed around him, Jake held fast on to her hips, guiding her when she seemed lost, remaining with her throughout it. He remained very still under her as she rode him, smiling as she muttered and cursed him. Then, just as suddenly, he thrust upward fast and furious until he felt her began to clench around him. The moment he felt the walls of her pussy tighten around him., He moved even faster until he yelled out her

name. He immediately covered her mouth in a soul-felt kiss as he erupted inside her.

Jake struggled to drag air into his lungs.

"Next time can we try it with your uniform on?" he said. "I always had this fantasy about shields and handcuffs. Especially the handcuffs."

Tess laughed as she buried her face against his chest. She wrinkled her nose against the crisp hair tickling her nostrils.

"Next thing I know, you'll be asking for a strip search."

"I wouldn't complain." He kept his arms around her, figuring that if he did, she couldn't leave him. "You want to explain your little announcement before the big O overtook us?"

She idly raked her fingers through the mat on his chest. "Remember I said that something about that campsite bothered me?" She waited for him to nod. "It turns out there's a back road that goes from there directly to the old Dennis place. That abandoned house and barn we searched?" she clarified.

"The one that's all boarded up."

"That's the one. Well, Frank made a comment about seeing Henry out that way with Louise Bennett. She does the bookkeeping for Red and some of the other businesses. She's what you would call a divorced woman with a reputation. She doesn't mind indulging in a discreet affair every now and then, if the man is willing to help her out with a few of her bills every now and then."

"So they were caught in some backseat athletics. That's nothing new wherever you are. What does that have to do with you thinking you may have found the ring?"

Tess rolled over until she lay atop his body. "I played a hunch and drove out near the Dennis place, but I took a roundabout route and walked the rest of the way. I couldn't get as close to the house as I'd like, but I was close enough to see that someone was there."

He sat up so suddenly, that if she hadn't grabbed hold of the covers, she would have fallen off the bed. "Who?"

"I couldn't get close enough to find any cars and identify them." Her face glowed with excitement. "But I did see bits of light coming from inside the house."

Jake hopped off the bed and reached for his briefs.

"How do you know they weren't kids out there for some privacy and more room than the backseat of his old man's car?"

"Because the kids are scared of that place. And there was too much light. This was more like electric light than a few candles." Tess reached for Jake's shirt and pulled it on over her head. When she stood up, it fell to her thighs. She paced back and forth. By now she was unable to remain still. "Don't you

see? The back road from the Dennis's property leads to that camp. It makes sense. What if they bring in the aliens to the camp and distribute the fake green cards there? If they're on foot they can climb over the boulders blocking the main trail the way we did. Even most experienced hikers will probably bypass the blocked trail, so they wouldn't have to worry about anyone stumbling on to their special hideaway."

"Why not just use the Dennis place for all of it?"

She shook her head. "It's too open. Although--"her forehead creased in thought--"I can't understand why we didn't see anything when we looked through those boards. That floor was still covered with sand and dust. I didn't see any footprints, did you? And how are they getting in? All those boards looked as if they were nailed there years ago. We're going to have to go out there during the day and poke around some more. Obviously we missed something." She picked up her panties and stepped into them. She puffed them up her legs. "Henry wouldn't dare go out there during the day. People would wonder why. And since there's been talk of developers coming in, people get a little paranoid of any land sales going on. They're all afraid of getting cheated." She loosened her braid and ruffled her hair with her fingers until it flew around her face in crinkly waves. She groaned when the telephone rang. "This better not be for me." She picked up the receiver. "Sheriff O'Hara."

"Tess, Roger DeWitt. Is Jake there?"

Tess deliberated. She leaned forward to look at herself in the dresser mirror. She touched the tiny love bite she found along the side of her throat and shot Jake a telling look.

"He's tied up right now, literally," she uttered with a throaty laugh. "And somehow I lost the handcuff key."

"This is no joking matter, Tess," he stated with chilling certainty. "Put Jake on. Now."

"That's Sheriff O'Hara to you, bub. I don't work for you anymore, remember? That means I don't have to do what you say, although there is one thing I've always wanted to tell you. I don't think I ever knew the meaning of anal retentive until I met you." Ignoring Roger's sputtering, she handed the receiver to Jake, who had been unashamedly eavesdropping.

"Guess who."

"Yeah?" Jake kept his eyes on Tess, who was humming to herself as she up the bed and laid his jeans over the footboard.

"You were supposed to submit reports to this office and we haven't seen one!"

"Probably because I haven't had much to report on, unless you want a mouthwatering recipe for blueberry cobbler. We've got a couple of strong leads, and if they pan out, I'll let you know."

"What kind of leads?" he demanded. "What have you found out?"

“The kind I'm not going to discuss until I can follow them up to see if they're valid. Tess was the one to find out, but she couldn't learn anything more at the time.” As he watched her bend over the dresser to get a closer look in the mirror, he felt his body tighten in reaction. Damn! It had only been a few minutes, and he was already getting hard. At this rate he'd be dead from exhaustion in twenty-four hours. “I'll call you when I learn something.”

“That isn't going to satisfy anyone!” But by then Roger was already talking to air.

“How did such an idiot get so high up in the department?”

He grasped her hips and pulled her back against him. “Easy. The incompetents always get promoted.”

She turned around in his arms and kissed him before stepping away. “Let's get something to eat and plan our strategy.”

“At the same time, I'd also like to know about the talk you and good ole Frank had.” He followed her into the kitchen.

She poured two cups of coffee and set them on the table, then pulled the Danish out of the bag and placed them on a plate. “I can't understand how I had the man working under me for so long and never bothered to know him. Probably because he kept to himself so much and didn't invite any confidences.”

“And he was the one who told you about the mayor. Why would he?”

Tess recognized that he was playing the devil's advocate. “He made a joke asking me if I'd run across Henry and Louise Bennett yet. He then told me how he'd seen them driving out near the Dennis place when they'd have no reason to be out there. That's when it hit me about that back road. I checked the area map we keep in the squad room and found out I was right. That's when I decided to drive out there. Later on Frank radioed me and sort of suggested the same thing.”

“Terrific, now everyone will know,” he grumbled.

“No,” he said it in a roundabout way by just talking about the map, and he didn't mention any names.” She selected raspberry Danish and bit into it. “I really have to quit eating all this junk food, or I'm going to end up looking like a blimp. He also said he doesn't believe you're a computer consultant. It appears you walk and act more like a cop than a guy working with computers all day. I think he was much more than your typical M.P. in the Marines.”

“Terrific. Another equation that doesn't add up,” Jake muttered. “Next thing you know, we'll find out that the mayor is actually an undercover operative for the CIA who's hiding out here between assignments.” He glanced at his watch. “Look, you're really tired. Why don't you get some rest, and I'll check out the house.”

She shook her head. “We're a team. We do this together. I can sleep later.”

Jake was fully prepared to argue, but he knew what Tess was like when she got an idea in her head.

“All right, you take a nap, and we'll go this afternoon.” He lifted his hand, fourth and second fingers standing upright while the others were folded against his palm. “I promise I won't go without you.”

“A promise you'll keep?”

“I'll keep.”

She tore her Danish into bite-size pieces and tossed one into her mouth. “Good, because otherwise I'd have to get out the handcuffs.”

“Keep talking dirty to me, Legs, and you'll have to wait for that nap.”

“Handcuffs, frisk, interrogation, search and seizure.” She exaggerated her lips with each word.

He shook his head. “Okay, that does it.” He stood up and pulled her to her feet, bending down as he threw her over his shoulder.

“Jake!”

He patted her on the rear as he walked back to the bedroom. “Hey, darlin', a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.”

TWELVE

“There can't be that many members in the ring,” Tess commented late that afternoon as they drove the back roads to the house she'd visited the night before. “The barn is in too bad a shape to hide many cars. Not to mention that I can't imagine half the town caught up in something illegal. A lot of people are real rigid about the law around here. No underage kid in his right mind would dare try to buy beer or cigarettes, because he knows his parents would find out within minutes.”

“They may have their own definition of legal,” Jake replied. His head swiveled from one side to the other, looking for signs of their being followed. He hoped he wouldn't find another vehicle in the vicinity. Because there was no guarantee they could come up with a good enough reason for being out there. He knew Tess could be counted on to bluff as well as he could. ‘I think there was enough room behind the walls still standing to hide two good-sized trucks.’”

This time, Tess parked the truck behind the barn so that it couldn't be seen from the road. This time they didn't simply peer inside the barn; they went inside to check it out with flashlights.

“Look over there.” Jake pointed to the section his flashlight illuminated. Tess followed him to the one end of the building and squatted down beside him. She watched him dip his fingers into the dark patch on the dirt floor and bring them up to his nose. “I'd say someone has a nasty oil leak.” When he lifted his head, his eyes were glowing, this time with excitement. “And no one is supposed to be out here, right?”

She nodded, sharing his excitement. “All right!” They searched the rest of the interior, but only found a few more oil stains, none as fresh as the first one

Jake turned off his flashlight. ‘Let's check out the house now.’”

“I wonder how many cars or trucks in town have major oil leaks,” she mused as they walked toward the boarded-up house.

“It would be easier if the driver would have it fixed right away.”

When they reached the house, Jake did more than look at the boarded-up windows and doors; he tested them. He started with the front door and pulled on each board, then moved on to one of the windows, while Tess went around to the back door.

“Jake, come back here!”

In response to her excitement he took off at a run. When he reached the one corner of the house, he found Tess kneeling on the ground. She looked up at him with a broad smile on her lips.

“Who would have thought?” She gestured to what looked like a pile of boards on the ground.

He hunkered down beside her. “Thought what?” He could see that the boards were fastened together

and she easily lifted the whole pile.

“This.” She grabbed a metal ring set in the ground and lifted a trap door. They looked down to find a ladder leading into the dark interior. “You don’t find all that many cellars in Southern California.” She tucked her flashlight into the waistband of her jeans and started to climb down.

“Wait a minute.” Jake held her back. “We can’t go down there without a search warrant, and you know it.”

“I have just cause.”

“What just cause?”

Tess patted his cheek. “I drove by here last night and saw lights in a house that’s known to be abandoned. The only reason I didn’t check it out then was because of lack of backup. I’m assuming that kids broke in. I came back here to make sure there’s no vandalism.” She started to climb down the ladder.

Jake sighed. He grabbed hold of her arm. “Then let me go down first.”

She nodded and stepped back. She waited until he was halfway down the ladder before she began climbing down. When she reached the bottom, Jake was already prowling around. His flashlight moved from right to left.

“No smell of decay, not that many cobwebs,” he murmured. “Hmm, what do we have here?” He passed the light over several large, dark shapes. He used his flashlight to carefully lift an edge of the tarp. “What does this look like to you, Sheriff O’Hara?” He lifted it a bit higher.

Tess walked over and looked over his shoulder. “My, my, I would say that looks like a printing press, Agent Wilder. A fairly new one at that.”

Jake dropped the tarp. He made a quick survey of the room and found a few boxes that looked to be filled with paper and ink.

“I just bet they’ll be back tonight.”

“That’s a bet I don’t care to take.”

He reached over and pressed a hard kiss against her lips. “Still think I’m nuts to check out this area for the counterfeiting ring?”

“I never said you were nuts, but any man who can figure out something big from next to nothing is pretty good in my book.” Her smile broadened. “Even if he does have dirt on his face.” She stood up. “I’d say we ought to get out of here.”

“Good idea.”

As Tess climbed up the ladder, she felt a couple of pats on her rear end.

“Hey, no fondling the local cops, bub.” She squinted against the afternoon sun when she reached the

top and pulled herself out of the hole. She grabbed Jake's arms, helping him out. They both sat on the ground staring at each other. They knew they were grinning like crazy idiots and couldn't care less. Tess's grin wobbled a bit when she realized what their find meant.

Jake's gaze sharpened as he watched the conflicting emotions cross her face. "What's wrong?"

She shrugged. "Having to stake this place out tonight isn't going to be too much fun." She looked off in the distance. "I'd like to talk to Frank about backing us up."

"No way," he said instantly.

"A third set of hands would be helpful. Besides, I think we can trust him."

"Tess, I had to pull teeth to get them to agree to let me tell you about this."

"Come on, Jake, you've gone against orders before," she argued, standing up and dusting off the seat of her jeans. She marched back to the barn.

"Oh, right, now he's an okay guy because you had a nice little chat with him last night," he said sarcastically as he followed her.

"Hey, if you've got a problem with it, I'll bring him in as one of *my* men, and we'll clear this up ourselves." She swung open the driver's door.

"I have precedence in this case and you know it." He was hard on her heels.

Tess's reply was succinct as she informed him what he could do with his precedence.

Furious, Jake pulled her around and pushed her against the truck's fender. "Your mother should have washed your mouth out with soap more often."

"I was the one who figured out the back road. I was the one who saw the lights And I was the one who allowed you to come out here, so don't pull your federal crap with me." Her chin jutted out.

For a moment Jake looked ready to punch her. His eyes narrowed to slits. They were both dusty from roaming around the cellar, and breathing hard from their argument.

"You ought to brush up on your anatomy, sweetheart," he said in a low voice that fairly throbbed with menace. "I have to tell you your suggestion is physically impossible."

Just as suddenly the air around them seemed to crackle with electricity.

"If I was in my right mind, I'd throttle you," Jake said between clenched teeth.

"If we were both in our right minds, we'd be speeding back to the house right now."

Jake stared down at Tess. She stared back without flinching. One thing he'd always admired about her was her ability not to back down in the face of danger.

He held out his hand.

"Give me the keys."

“It's an official vehicle.”

“And I'm an official guy.”

Tess dropped the key ring in his outstretched palm. “Try to keep it lower than the speed of light, okay?” She walked around and climbed into the passenger seat.

Jake kept his foot glued to the accelerator as the truck bounced along the desert floor before they reached the highway.

Tess felt the crackling of the electricity between them during the drive. It only increased the closer they got to town.

She entered the house first through the back door.

“Now wha-” Her question was abruptly cut off when Jake spun her around and fastened his mouth on hers. He tore her shirt open, then his own as he pressed his chest against hers. They began kissing and nibbling as if there was no tomorrow. Not content with that, he gripped her waist and lifted her onto the counter. He stood between her spread legs and groped for her jeans fastening. He jerked the zipper down and pushed the jeans to her hips along with her panties.

She shifted her body slightly so that he could push them off the rest of the way. Swearing under his breath, he fumbled with his own.

“Let me,” she murmured, brushing his hands away and finishing the job.

Jake felt it bubble up inside him like molten lava as he pulled her onto his cock. There were no words, no lingering over touches. It wasn't what they needed at the moment.

Tess's breath caught when he thrust so deep inside her she felt her pussy nearly swallow him up..He was so thick and hard, driving his cock in and out but she felt no pain. Instead Jake's rapid-fire thrusts matched the urgency boiling in her blood. She gripped his shoulders so tightly her short nails drew blood. At that moment, he was beyond feeling anything except for the pain in his cock demanding its release.

Their perspiration-drenched bodies moved faster and faster until Tess would have fallen off the counter if Jake hadn't been holding her. She felt the convulsions build deep within her honeyed pussy and cried out as they traveled up through her body and she was lost. When they started to subside and she felt ready to take a breath, they started again and then again. This time Jake joined her as they seemed to fall out of the sky in a shower of sparks.

Tess held on to Jake as she struggled for air. She buried her face against the curve of his shoulder. She opened her mouth, tasting the salt from his damp skin.

“At least we agree on something,” she said.

His own body was shaking from the force their loving had created.

"I wasn't sure I was going to be able to wait until we got back here, but I didn't think it would look good for your image if you were caught with your pants down in an official vehicle." He stepped back and held on to her as she hopped off the counter.

Tess looked at her jeans and underwear strewn on the floor next to Jake's jeans. Her gaze moved on to her shirt and bra hanging open. She smiled when she saw Jake's briefs were still looped around his knees.

"I always wondered what the books meant by a woman being ravished. I think I understand it better now." She stooped to pick up her clothes. As she started to walk out of the room, she looked over her shoulder. "How about a shower?"

"I could be talked into it."

Tess placed a hand on her hip and struck a pose.

"I'm talking."

"And I'm moving." He raced forward, grabbed her up in his arms, and carried her into the bathroom. They didn't emerge until the hot water was gone.

"I still say we can trust Frank."

"I know you do, and I'm pretty tired of hearing

"Then let me call him."

Jake threw up his hands. "Where's that wild woman I just shared the shower with?"

"Right here. I'll even take responsibility when Roger starts screaming about you calling in too many locals."

He thought for a moment. "You willing to take full responsibility?"

"That's what I said." She sat back, looking pleased with herself.

They had opted for a casual dinner in bed as they planned their strategy. It brought back memories for Tess as she recalled the times they'd sat up till all hours, usually in her apartment going over tactics.

"We don't know how many are in on this. We need additional back up."

"Frank might be one of them."

"I don't think so."

He waved a pretzel stick at her. "You don't *think*?"

She leaned forward and took it out of his hand. "I know so."

"You've got guts, lady."

Tess knew she'd won. "You taught me." She reached across the bed and picked up her cordless phone. She quickly punched out a series of numbers. "Frank, this is Tess. I'm sorry if I woke you

up, but. this is important. I'd like you to stop by the house today. Can you come by in about an hour? Good." She started to laugh as she heard something on the other end of the line. "You know, I've been called a lot of things, but that's a new one. No, it didn't get you off the hook. I still want you to come by. See you in an hour."

Jake shook his head in wonderment. "You weren't going to waste any time, were you?"

She hopped off the bed and walked over to her dresser. She pulled shorts and a T-shirt out of the drawer.

"Since Frank is going to be here in about an hour, you might want to think about getting dressed too," she suggested as she sauntered into the bathroom.

"I think I liked you better before you got so powerful," he called after her.

"No, you don't, and you know it."

Tess and Jake were seated in the living room looking the picture of the conventional couple when Frank knocked on the door.

"Glad you could make it so promptly," Tess said.

He scowled back. "This better be good."

"Doesn't he remind you of someone, Jake?" She turned back to her lover. "It's that charming expression that jogged my memory."

"Roger."

"Exactly." She gestured to one of the chairs. "Have a seat. Would you like something to drink? Coffee, soda, a beer?"

He shook his head as he seated himself in one of the chairs. "No, thanks, I'm fine." He looked from one to the other. "Do you tell me what this is about, or do I have to play twenty questions?"

Tess looked at Jake. He shrugged.

"It's your decision. You do the talking."

With a minimum of words Tess explained Jake's true occupation and reason for being in Crater Rock. She also told him about their search for a logical place to hide the printing press and, thanks to that comment from him and what she'd remembered about the back road, they had gone back to the Dennis house and found the cellar.

"A cellar," Frank mused. "Yeah, no one around here would think there was one." He looked from one to the other. "What do you need from me?"

"Backup." Jake was the one to answer him this time. "We're going to have to move fast, so we want

to go in tonight.”

“What about your federal buddies? They won't appreciate not being in on this.”

“We can't afford to call anyone in without arousing suspicion,” Jake explained. “This town isn't exactly known for an influx of visitors.”

Frank sat forward with his laced fingers swinging between his knees. “I never did like the mayor and his grandstand ideas for the town. If this means he won't be eligible for the next election, I'm in.”

Tess shot Jake a smug look.

“What time do you usually see Henry out that way,” Jake asked.

He thought for a moment. “Usually between midnight and two. I always thought he was dumb to go all the way out there.”

“One question is why Louise Bennett is in on this with him,” Tess commented. “What does she have to do with it?”

“She's got relatives still living in Mexico,” Frank told her. “Maybe that's where the contacts come from. Before she got married she was Louisa Mendoza.

“Makes sense. Who else do you think could be in on this?” Jake asked.

Frank shrugged. “Henry's got a lot of so-called friends in this town. Could be any or all of them. They're always talking about big deals and even bigger money. They're all hope to cash in on the land boom if industry moves out this way. Henry, Dave, and I think even Leonard own quite a bit of the land outside the town limits.”

“I did a title search and found that the Dennis property was reverted to the bank after Mr. Dennis left,” Tess spoke up. “It was never put up for auction or anything.” She slapped her forehead as something occurred to her. “And Leonard is president of the bank. It's making more sense by the minute.”

Frank turned to Jake. “What if they have someone keeping an eye on whoever is working the night shift for me? It wouldn't be all that hard to do since none of us would expect to be followed. I know I thought of anyone watching me when I was out there.”

“It makes sense,” Jake murmured. “If you follow a pretty regimented schedule, they'd know when to expect you to drive past. That way they wouldn't have to worry about you happening by at any old time. With low crime rate, you don't have to worry about varying your schedule to throw anyone off.”

“Plus, working down in that cellar guarantees them little chance of their lights being seen too far in the distance. I was obviously lucky last night when I saw the lights and went over to investigate.”

Frank looked from one to the other. “So, we go in tonight, when we can catch them off guard? It does sound like your best bet if you want to catch them all together.”

“You sound pretty eager for this,” Jake said. “I thought you preferred nights because they're quiet. This could end up to be a pretty hairy dealt if we don't contain it right away.”

He shrugged. “Then I'll have my excitement for the year. No one's going to worry about me, because they all know officially I'm off duty.”

“Good, then when Tess goes out on patrol tonight, you can come by here and pick me up. We'll meet up with her later,” Jake decided. He laid his notes out on the coffee table as he quickly outlined the plan he'd come up with to the two of them.

As Jake talked, Tess began to feel that old excitement bubbling up inside of her. And she didn't like it one bit. Because deep down she wondered, if push came to shove, would she hesitate to pull her gun on someone? So far she'd been lucky and hadn't been forced into that situation during her four years here as sheriff. She also knew luck could only last so long.

She prayed it would last another twenty-four hours.

THIRTEEN

“Did you call Roger to tell him what's going on? You know how he likes to be informed. And how upset he gets when he finds out about it after the fact. And Roger in a snit is never a pretty sight.”

Jake was standing at the bathroom sink shaving. While he was used to the scruffy look he didn't like harming Tess's skin with razor burn. Tess sat on the edge of the bathtub efficiently weaving her wet hair into a French braid.

“I never could figure out how you do something like that without looking in a mirror,” he commented.

“And you do it so fast too.”

She shot him her “you're changing the subject” look- “Lots of practice. It stays off my face this way and doesn't interfere when I'm wearing my hat.” She nudged his bare leg with her foot. “Roger? Remember him? The uptight guy who sleeps in his suits and has his underwear starched? The guy who gets a haircut every two weeks? The guy I used to work for and you still do? Him.”

He leaned over the sink as he carefully scraped the beard-flecked foam from his jaw. “I left a message.”

“What did the message say?”

“I told him enough, don't worry. And, so we don't have to worry about our losing on a technicality, I made the arrangements for the warrant we'd need. It's going to be delivered today in an envelope marked 'Computer Disks.' I also ran a check on Frank.”

“Didn't trust my instincts?”

“Yeah, but you know me. I like to see it in print. He racked himself up quite a distinguished record while in the service and is about as clean as a person can get.”

“You're not telling me anything I don't already know.”

He turned his head and looked at her. Her French blue cotton camisole and matching panties were lace trimmed and incredibly sexy.

“What?” Tess looked at him with a question in her eyes.

“I wish we'd gotten together sooner.”

“If we'd gotten together sooner, Jake, we might have ruined a good partnership,” she pointed out. “And we did some great work back then. We were meant to wait, that's all. I had to get over that shooting, and whether you want to admit it or not, you had some things of your own to figure out.”

Now he was confused. 'Figure what out?'

Tess used an elasticized band to secure the end of her braid. She stood up and wrapped her arms around his waist. She dabbed at the flecks of shaving foam still dotting his face before she kissed him carefully on the mouth. As she kissed him, she inhaled the crisp scent of spice mixed with male. She knew she'd never smell it again without thinking of Jake.

"You're a smart guy, Wilder," she whispered as she drew back. "Think about it." She looked over his shoulder so that she could see the clock on her night table. "I've got to get dressed. I'll see you and Frank at the rendezvous point at midnight."

He nodded as he quickly wiped his face clean with a hand towel and walked back into the bedroom, where Tess was putting on her uniform.

"I still say someday we gotta try it with the handcuffs," he teased, grabbing a pair of black jeans and slipping them on. "I may even let you put them on me first."

Tess paused in buttoning her shirt. "You forgot something, Slick. Once we catch those nasty bad guys and you haul them off to the federal pen, your assignment will be over. You'll be back on the big city doing what you love best."

Jake stared at her. For a moment he wasn't seeing the Tess he had come to know the past couple of weeks. This was the flippant, fast-talking woman he used to work with.

"Tess," he began.

She shook her head. She quickly finished buttoning her shirt and picked up her belt and threaded it through her pants waistband. "Don't worry, Slick. We both knew from the beginning it would have to end. But you have to admit it's been fun. I have to go so I won't be late. Frank will be by later to pick you up. And don't forget to put on a shirt. Though I adore your gorgeous chest, I don't want Frank thinking I keep you as a half-dressed sex slave." She kissed him on the cheek. "See you in battle, Slick."

It wasn't until after she left the house that he realized she had used the same words they had used years ago just before their case's climax. He immediately regretted the word choice.

If she thinks she's going to write me off that fast, she's got another think coming.

Tess thought she was a brave person until the realization hit her that, with luck, it would be all over by tomorrow and Jake would be gone.

She gripped the steering wheel so hard, her knuckles turned white.

You did good, old girl, she told herself as she parked her truck in her marked slot. *You basically told him it's been fun, but the party's over. You wanted to let him believe he won't leave any broken hearts behind.* She suddenly sniffed. *And I think he believed it.* She climbed out and slammed the door harder

than usual. *And if that son of a bitch thinks he's going to leave me without a single word...* She marched into the station and found Frank seated at his desk. Walt sat nearby.

"Hiya, Chief," Frank drawled.

"I forgot my wallet." Walt spoke up as if he needed to explain why he was there.

Tess ignored the second man and advanced on the first.

"What are you doing here?" She found it easy to take her anger at Jake out on Frank.

Frank held out his arms in an expansive gesture. "Don't worry, I know I can't take a patrol, but I figured you wouldn't mind if I came in and did the paperwork." His dark eyes glinted with malice. "I figured you wouldn't get all stressed out at that. I guess I was wrong."

Walt stared open-mouthed from one to the other.

"I guess I'd better get going," he muttered, edging out of his seat.

Tess gripped his shoulder and shoved him back into the chair. "Don't run off so soon, Walt," she blandly advised before turning back to her adversary. "You are on medical leave until the doctor clears you. Since no one has ever been needed here at night, there's no reason for you to come in. You want to clear up paperwork, do it during the day." She walked over to Wilma's desk and sorted through the paperwork left in a box with her name on it.

"There's no law saying I can't do it now."

Tess didn't bother to turn around. "Sure there is, my law. Be in here at seven."

"I don't work days, and you know it."

This time she did turn around. She was finding it too easy to take her anger at Jake out on the man in front of her.

"Then consider it a change of pace in a mundane life," she snapped, picking up her clipboard. "Out of here, Frank."

As she walked back outside, she heard Frank sneer to Walt. "Guess she's not getting enough at home. That's what happens when you fool around with guys who only know computers and not women."

"I'll get you for that, Frank" she murmured, walking back to her truck. just before she climbed in, she saw Walt run out of the station. He skidded to a stop when he realized she hadn't left yet.

"He didn't mean it, Chief," he spoke rapidly. "He's just teed off because he can't take his patrols."

"It's nice that you're sticking up for him, Walt, but Frank knows what a jerk he is," she replied. "I'll see you tomorrow, all right?"

He instantly relaxed. "Yeah. See you then." He paused and tamed back. "Oh, I heard that Nettie was gunning for Jed tonight. Huey got onto his land a few times too often, and he-well-" He winced. "He

did threaten to barbecue him.”

Tess sighed. 'Maybe we'll get lucky and she'll sue him and they'll end up on *Judge Judy*. I'd love to see how she'd handle them. Okay, I'll run out that way and make sure Nettie is tucked into her bed and not turning Jed into mincemeat. Thanks.’

As she drove toward the Carter and Randolph ranches, she glanced at her watch. That fiery excitement was building up inside her as she reviewed the plan and thought of the black shirt and jeans she'd hidden in the back of her truck that she would change into before she met up with them.

Tess's luck held out. When she reached the edge of Nettie's property, she noticed the irascible Nubian goat in the middle of one of Nettie's pastures happily nibbling on grass.

“You'd think that idiot goat would realize it's time to sleep. Unless he's fueling up for a raid on Jed's place,” she muttered, making a U-turn in the middle of the road.

“She sure knew how to cut me down to size,” Frank told Jake when he picked the man up late that night and they were driving out of town. Frank was deliberately taking back roads and kept his headlights off so that they wouldn't be seen.

“She's real good at doing that,” Jake agreed. “Even better that Walt was there to witness it.”

“There was something about her sweet, loving nature that had me thinking she was putting your face to mine,” Frank said casually as he negotiated the rocky terrain with ease. Both men were dressed in dark clothing and had blackened their faces.

“That doesn't surprise me. Tess has a way about her that puts fear into a man better than any drill sergeant could.” Jake gritted his teeth against the intense need for a cigarette. Without any streetlights and with little moonlight the tiny red, burning dot of cigarette would stand out like a beacon. He settled for a stick of gum and offered one to Frank. “You do anything like this when you were in the service?”

“The weather was a lot more humid, I had more than one guy with me. Not to mention other guys who kept shooting at me, so it was different. But the basic principle is the same. You bring them down before they get you.”

“That why you're out here? Drier weather and fewer enemies?”

“I always considered it a good reason.” Frank shot him a look. ‘Look, just because I'm helping you and the sheriff out doesn't mean we're good buddies. We don't need to swap fife stories, okay?’

“Fine with me.” Jake had attached his shield to a chain and hung it around his neck, while Frank's was already clipped to his belt. “I was only making conversation.”

“And trying to find out why a guy with my supposed qualifications is all the way out here. I'm like Tess. I grew up out here and, decided to come back when I got out of the Marines. Nothing more than

that.” Frank swung the truck near a cluster of boulders and parked it behind them. He'd already disengaged the interior light so that it wouldn't come on when they got out. “The Chief should be here pretty soon.” He pointed off into the distance as he rummaged in the back of his truck and handed Jake a rifle. “And the Dennis property is in that direction. About a ten minute run.”

Jake walked around, feeling his muscles pump up.

“It's crazy,” he murmured. I've had larger cases than, this, been up against odds that no man in his right mind would want, but it never changes. The excitement, the rush of going in even if you don't know what you're up against. It's a high.” He shook his arms loose at his sides.

Frank's teeth shone white in the dark. “Better than sex’

Jake chuckled. “Close.”

They both snapped to attention when the faint rumbling of a truck engine broke the night silence. And relaxed when they saw it was Tess.

She hopped out of the truck carrying a small duffel bag. “Give me a minute,” she told them as she walked around to the other side of the truck. She reemerged wearing a black T-shirt and jeans. She coiled her braid on top of her head and secured it with a black knit cap. “I already did my expected drive-bys. Walt told me that Nettie and Jed were at it again about Huey, so when I drove through town 'and happened to see Carl, I grumbled about how I was going to have to drive out there and give Nettie hell for not keeping an eye on Huey. That way anyone who wonders where I am will think I'm all the way out there.”

Jake checked his watch. “Ready?” He looked at Tess. He knew Frank was ready.

Unsmiling, she nodded as she pulled on a pair of thin black gloves and clipped her shield badge to her belt.

Jake watched her movements, which were as economical as always.

He stalked over to her and hauled her into his arms for a kiss that sent lightning bolts all the way down to her toes. Her hands had just settled on his shoulders when he pushed her away.

“Now you're ready,” he growled, walking away.

Frank shot a look between the two. “If you two think you can keep your hands off each other long enough, we've got to get going.”

Jake looked as grim as Tess did. “Right.”

The trio moved quietly across the wasteland until the abandoned house and barn were faint outlines in the distance. When they drew closer, Jake gestured for Frank to take one side while he and Tess took another. Frank moved silently until he was out of sight.

“No lights visible tonight,” Jake murmured in Tess's ear when they flattened themselves against the

house's exterior wall.

She touched his arm and crept along the wall with him following until they found the pile of boards. Both dropped to the ground. Faint echoes of voices their ears.

Jake looked up when Frank appeared by them. The latter held up two fingers. Jake nodded. At least they had an idea how many people they had to deal with.

"Can't believe they didn't bother with any lookouts," Frank whispered.

"He probably figured a mere female wouldn't get suspicious," Tess murmured.

She thought back over what they had discussed earlier that day. She knew only too well that no matter how well an operation is planned, something can still go wrong.

Frank held up the tear-gas canister that would be dropped into the cellar at the right moment.

The trio silently counted to three. Quick as a flash, Jake lifted the boards, then the trap door. At the same time Frank activated the canister and dropped it down.

"Holy cow!"

Shouts and curses reached them as they dropped back and waited.

"Nasty stuff," Frank commented, deadpan. "Bums your eyes, your sinuses, and your throat. They're going to come out of there feeling pretty miserable."

"What the hell?" Henry was the first one to climb out. He blanched when he saw Tess, Jake, and Frank standing with guns ready.

"Good evening, Henry. In case you can't guess what's going on, you are under arrest." Tess greeted him with a broad smile.

"We're just having a friendly poker game," he blustered. "There's nothing illegal about that."

Frank had donned a gas mask and gone down. He came back up with the news that the room was empty.

He held several printed sheets which he handed to Jake. Tess took a quick glance.

"A friendly poker game is one thing. Counterfeiting green cards is another. And illegal. Who else do we have?" She looked beyond him. "Well, well, well, look at this. Dave, Louise, Leonard, and Larry. Who else attended your party, Henry?" Her smile froze when the last person she would have expected stumbled out. "Walt? You're in on this?"

"There's no way you could have known about us being here!" the young man snarled.

"Watch it," Jake warned.

Walt turned. The moment he saw Jake's shield, he roared his outrage and leaped at him. He was no

match for the older man as Jake punched him in the jaw.

“You got too greedy, Henry,” Tess said after Jake read them their rights. “That was your mistake.”

“Wilma was right. You don't look like a computer expert,” Walt said with a sneer, massaging his bruised jaw. He glared at Frank as he jerked his hands behind his back and handcuffed them. “We'll get off.”

“I wouldn't worry too much about it, junior,” Jake advised. “We feds like to make our cases stick.”

“You idiot!” Louise screamed at Henry. “You said no one would look out here. You made sure all sales were performed away from here so no one would connect us.”

“Shut up!” he told her.

Frank drove up in one of the trucks. “Amazing how they hide keys in easily accessible places,” He hopped out.

Tess looked at Jake. “Think Roger will be happy about this getting tied up so quickly?”

“I don't expect him to do any cartwheels, but he won't yell either.”

“He never does.”

They began herding their prisoners into the back of the truck.

The next twelve hours was a haze for Tess as she processed the prisoners. Then she waited for federal agents to show up in town to take custody of them..

Wilma was in her element, bustling around as she offered coffee and doughnuts to the men.

“I knew it!” she proclaimed to one and all, whether they listened or not. “I knew Henry was a crook. No moral man smiles that much. And to drag poor little Walt into it.” She clucked. “I hope he gets the electric chair.” No one bothered to inform her that counterfeiting wasn't an automatic death sentence.

When the feds showed up, Tess sat back and watched the Jake she remembered. He laughed, joked, and smoked with his colleagues as they shared stories. He was the hard-edged agent high with exhilaration from snagging a clean collar.

He's slipping away from me, she thought to herself, and turned away before she broke down. Instead she took a deep breath, pasted a smile on her lips, and acted her part.

“It's great seeing you again, Tess,” one of the men told her as he waited for her to sign some paperwork. “Hope your visitors didn't give you too much trouble.”

“Just the usual. Yelling for their attorneys and insisting they were railroaded,” she replied. “They couldn't keep up their fiction of a secret poker game for long. There wasn't a deck of cards anywhere down there.” She paused. “I understand you've already got a crew going over the cellar.”

“Yeah, Jake went out there with them. You know how he is about being right in the thick of things.”

Tess's smile froze. “Yes, he does enjoy it, doesn't he?” She folded the papers and handed them to the man. “They're all yours. Sorry I didn't have time to gift-wrap them for you.”

“That's okay,” he reassured her. “I don't plan on returning them.”

When they finally left the station, Tess collapsed in a chair.

“The doc has released me,” Frank announced, walking into the station. “In case it escaped anyone's notice, we're minus a deputy.”

Tess muttered a curse at the memory of discovering her deputy was a part of it. “I can't believe Wait was in on it.” She sighed, blowing a puff of air upward at her bangs. “Oh, well, I'm sure he'll make lots of new friends in prison.”

Frank cocked his head to one side. “You okay?”

“Fine.” She managed a smile. “It's that post-case letdown.”

“You going to stick around or take off with Jake?”

“Since I'm the sheriff, I think that's pretty self-explanatory.”

“Hey, look, why don't you go on home,” he suggested. “George and I can keep an eye on things here.”

“You don't work days.”

“No, but I figure I'm going to have to learn.” He suddenly grinned. “Should I put an ad in the paper for new deputies?”

“Good idea.” She pushed herself out of her chair. “You're right. I'm going to stand under a hot shower for the next couple of hours.”

Later, when Tess reached her house, she parked the truck in the driveway and stared out the windshield. The yellow Corvette was noticeably absent, and she was positive the house looked deserted.

When she finally got the nerve to go inside, she found it quiet. There was no sign of Jake's clothing lying around the bedroom as it had the past week.

She did what she told Frank she was going to do. She took a long hot shower. And cried. When she finished, she did what she normally did to work off excess energy. She cleaned house with a vengeance. She attacked every spot on the kitchen floor with the zeal of a fanatic.

“Miserable, slimy-”

“I wouldn't worry, hon, because I think Henry already knows how you feel.”

She spun around so fast, the mop almost struck Jake in the face.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been living here, remember?” He walked in and looked around. “Wow, I feel as if I walked in on a Mister Clean commercial.”

Tess looked at him warily. “Did you forget something, then?”

Jake grabbed a chair and swung it around, straddling the seat. “Yeah, I forgot you.”

“I already told you, Jake. I have no desire to go back to that life.” She set the mop in a corner and took the chair across from him.

“Good thing, because that’s two of us. Besides, you need a deputy,” he informed her. “I saw Frank and he told me about running an ad. I’m applying for the job.”

She felt a heavy weight in her chest that threatened to suffocate her. “It’s a small town. No action, no excitement.”

“I’m kind of getting old for that.”

She struggled to breathe normally. “Why here?”

“Because you’re here,” he said simply. “There aren’t any rules against the deputy marrying the sheriff, is there?”

“Marrying?” She suddenly felt light-headed. She was positive it was a figment of her imagination, “No.”

Jake’s grin instantly reassured her. “Hey, by the time all those developers show up out here, we’ll have this place whipped into shape.”

With a squeal of joy Tess leaped into Jake’s lap. By the time they came up for air, both were breathing hard.

“You’re hired,” Tess told him. “For both positions.”

EPILOGUE

Six Months Later

“Wilma, are you sure a Mr. Cottontail called me?” Jake shoved the pink message slip under the dispatcher's nose.

She picked up her reading glasses and reread the note. “Well,” she said doubtfully. “Maybe it was a Mr. Catheter.”

“She means Mr. Carson. He's with that electronics plant that wants to relocate out here,” Tess announced, breezing through the station. “Deputy Wilder, if you would be so kind as to see me in my office, please.”

“Your wish is my command, Sheriff Wilder” Jake followed his wife into her office, and as he watched her, he realized that close to six months of marriage hadn't diminished his hunger for her one bit. While the pace was slower, he wasn't bored. Not when Flo constantly threatened to shoot her husband and Nettie's goat refusing to stay home. The town had received a lot of attention because of the counterfeit ring and the upcoming trial. He hated having to wear a uniform. And there were times when the small-town politics made him nuts as the temporary mayor and city council tried to keep things together. But he still wouldn't trade it for anything.

As for Jake, he liked to joke that his idea of a perk was the chance to sleep with his boss.

“What's up?” He dropped into the visitor's chair after giving her a kiss. She had left after breakfast murmuring something about an appointment.

Tess smiled. Her own hunger for her husband hadn't lessened either.

“I wanted you to be the first to know that I'm resigning as sheriff and I'm recommending that you take my place.”

Jake shook his head. “Honey, no, don't. We get along fine, don't we?”

“Jake.”

He jumped up and began pacing the length of the small room. “We promised each other that we wouldn't let this get in the way.”

“Jake.”

“I'm not going to let you do this!”

By then her patience was dwindling. She stuck two fingers in her mouth and let out a shrill whistle. Jake stopped short and frowned at her.

“I'm not letting you resign.”

“That's sweet of you, but I have an excellent reason for vacating the office.”

“Such as?”

“Such as I don't want to have to go into Red's late one night and try that spin kick on Tiny when I'm eight months' pregnant.”

Jake's jaw dropped. Then he dropped into the chair.

“Preg-” He found he couldn't finish the word.

“Pregnant, with child, expecting, *enceinte*.” *She* suddenly looked worried. “I know we really didn't talk about babies and this is pretty unexpected.”

Jake leaped up as fast as he'd dropped and grabbed her around the waist, spinning her in a circle as he let out a whoop of joy.

“See, I told you she was pregnant!” Wilma's voice was easily heard from the outer room.

“Jake, I'm getting dizzy!” Tess laughed.

He stopped and carefully placed her on the edge of the desk. “You're okay? There's nothing to worry about?”

She shook her head. By now she couldn't stop smiling. “In fact, the doctor said I'm so disgustingly healthy that I can go ahead with my other plan.”

He looked confused. “What other plan?”

Tess straightened his collar and adjusted his shield. “I think we both know that I couldn't be your typical stay-at-home wife, so after I left the doctor's office, I stopped by the county clerk's office. I filed the papers to run for mayor. I admit the election is four months from now, which doesn't give me a lot of time, and we're going to get flack about conflict of interest, but I think I can do a good job. But you might as well be warned now that I'll bend over backward to make sure the sheriff's department doesn't get any preferential treatment.”

Jake was so stunned by her announcements he wasn't sure which one shocked him more. The image of a heavily pregnant Tess giving speeches or her presiding over the council meetings. Then he'd probably be battling her over department budgets.

“We're really going to create a sensation, then. The sheriff shouldn't be sleeping with the mayor.” Tess grabbed hold of his collar and pulled him forward for one of those sizzling kisses that always drove Jake crazy.

“Then I guess we'll have to set a new precedent, won't we?”